# GUIDELINES FOR PROMOTING A UNIFIED MUAY THAI STANDARD SYSTEM TOWARD INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION: A QUALITATIVE ANALYSIS OF EXPERT PERSPECTIVES

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## ABSTRACT

The global expansion of Muay Thai continues to face a persistent lack of unified standards. Although the researchers' earlier quantitative study found that the unified Muay Thai standard system and its promoting factors have a statistically significant influence on international recognition, an in-depth understanding of why and how these factors matter, from the perspective of practitioners actually working in the Muay Thai industry, has been lacking. This paper therefore aims to analyze and synthesize guidelines for promoting a unified Muay Thai standard system toward international recognition, drawing primarily on qualitative data from the perspectives of Muay Thai experts. The study employed a qualitative research design, collecting data through in-depth interviews with nine key informants purposively selected to represent diverse roles within the Muay Thai industry, including gym promoters/owners, a professional boxing association president, a ring announcer, a Sports Authority of Thailand officer, a gym manager, professional boxing association staff and treasurer, and a boxing referee/judge. The research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide validated for appropriateness by experts. Data were analyzed using content analysis and verified for trustworthiness through triangulation. The findings show that most experts agreed that all five dimensions of the unified Muay Thai standard system are necessary for the development of the Muay Thai industry, with competition management standards receiving the highest consensus with no dissenting views, while judging standards were seen as the area requiring the most urgent reform. Regarding promoting factors, experts prioritized continuous government policy above all else, and reached unanimous consensus that cultural heritage is the spirit that distinguishes Muay Thai from other martial arts. With respect to international recognition, experts identified the most serious structural problem as the conflict between global governing bodies such as the WMC and IFMA, which directly obstructs efforts to include Muay Thai in the Olympic Games. The findings led to the synthesis of three guideline areas: (1) accelerating the unification of professional standards within the industry, (2) building continuity of government policy and budgetary support that genuinely reaches communities and small gyms, and (3) unifying international Muay Thai governing bodies, a key precondition set by the International Olympic Committee for considering the inclusion of a new sport.

**Keywords:** Unified Muay Thai Standard System, International Recognition, Qualitative Analysis, Experts, Muay Thai

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## INTRODUCTION

Muay Thai is Thailand's national martial art, with a continuous history spanning more than 500 years, and stands as a symbol of cultural identity reflecting the wisdom and way of life of Thai society. Over the past two decades, Muay Thai has rapidly gained popularity at the international level. There are currently more than 50,000 Muay Thai training institutions worldwide, with over 3 million practitioners across 130 countries (IFMA, 2024), reflecting Muay Thai's role as a soft-power tool that the Thai government designated as the country's top soft-power asset since 2023 (Office of Creative Economy Promotion, 2023).

However, the global expansion of Muay Thai has brought with it a significant structural challenge: the lack of unified standards at the international level. To address this problem, the International Federation of Muaythai Associations (IFMA) initiated the *"International One Standard Muaythai"* system, or the 15-level Khan grading system, covering standards for instructors, judging, competition management, gym administration, and teaching, in order to create unity and preserve authentic Muay Thai culture sustainably (IFMA, 2024).

A quantitative study by the researchers within the same research project (Treepoka & Suradinthakorn, 2026), which surveyed 363 Muay Thai gym business operators, found that the unified Muay Thai standard system and the factors promoting Muay Thai standards have a statistically significant influence on international recognition of Muay Thai standards, with external promoting factors such as government policy and community participation explaining as much as 80.9% of the variance. However, these quantitative results can only answer *"which factors have influence,"* without being able to explain in depth *"why"* and *"how"* those factors matter from the perspective of practitioners actually working in the Muay Thai industry. This academic gap is the motivation for the qualitative study presented in this paper, which seeks to understand the reasoning, conditions, and debates behind the statistical figures, through in-depth interviews with experts holding diverse roles within the Muay Thai industry.

The recognition of Muay Thai as a cultural asset was further affirmed when the Ministry of Culture nominated Muay Thai to UNESCO for inscription on the Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity, reflecting that the cultural value of Muay Thai has already gained a degree of recognition on the international stage. However, this inscription process is a different dimension from recognition as an international sport with unified competition standards, which is the condition the International Olympic Committee (IOC) uses in considering the inclusion of new sports. The study of Muay Thai standards and international recognition must therefore be considered carefully as distinct from the cultural dimension.

Furthermore, a survey by Dolpanya and Igel (2022) found that approximately 60% of Muay Thai gyms in Europe and North America have not yet adopted international standard systems, resulting in inconsistencies in teaching, assessment, and certification. This indicates that the lack of unified standards is not confined to Thailand but is a structural problem affecting the global Muay Thai industry. Prior research has mostly focused on describing the historical development of Muay Thai (Green & Svinth, 2010) or analyzing the business dimension in overseas markets (Dolpanya & Igel, 2022), while in-depth studies giving weight to the voices and direct experiences of practitioners within the Muay Thai industry itself remain scarce.

This research therefore aims to analyze and synthesize guidelines for promoting a unified Muay Thai standard system toward international recognition, based on the perspectives and direct experiences of experts in the Muay Thai industry. The findings are expected to benefit IFMA, national Muay Thai associations, Muay Thai teaching institutions, trainers and Muay Thai athletes worldwide, as well as government agencies responsible for promoting Muay Thai as a national soft-power asset, leading to effective and sustainable policy-making and development guidelines for Muay Thai standards.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The Network Governance framework of Provan and Kenis (2008) proposes that success in setting standards within a context involving multiple levels of stakeholders depends on the effectiveness of coordination mechanisms, clarity of roles and responsibilities, and the participation of network partners at every level, from the central international body down to individual trainers and athletes. This aligns with the Collaborative Governance concept of Ansell and Gash (2008), which emphasizes trust among partners and clearly defined shared outcomes. This framework underpins the interpretation of the conflict between global Muay Thai governing bodies identified in this study's interviews.

Nye's (2004) concept of Soft Power indicates that cultural acceptance on the world stage requires both the quality of what is presented and policy-level support from the state acting together, and that this potential is maximized only when an internationally recognized standard system is in place (Houlihan & White, 2002). This concept is consistent with the view of experts in this study, who agreed that Muay Thai's cultural heritage is an important soft-power asset, but that it requires a standard system and proactive communication of identity together in order to build consistent recognition across all global markets.

In the area of international sport standards, Chappelet and Kubler-Mabbott (2008) found that the International Olympic Committee (IOC) uses international standardization and unity of the governing body as key criteria in considering the inclusion of new sports. The case of taekwondo, which adopted a single worldwide Poomsae system and instructor certification before successfully being included in the Olympics (Mangan & Ok, 2012), is an empirical example that experts in this study repeatedly cited as a model Muay Thai should study comparatively.

Regarding the enforceability of standards and the participation of operational-level stakeholders, Naraine (2021) and Misener and Doherty (2009) emphasize that the capacity to enforce standards and community participation are key determinants of the level of international recognition, which is consistent with Forster's (2006) observation that global sports organizations with overlapping or competing governance structures, where multiple bodies claim official representation, tend to face delays in gaining recognition from international sports organizations. This concept is highly relevant to interpreting this study's findings, as experts consistently identified the conflict between the WMC and IFMA over claims to be the world Muay Thai governing body as the most serious structural problem.

On the qualitative methodology side, content analysis following Mayring's (2022) approach, which allows analytical categories to emerge both from an initial theoretical framework and from new issues arising during analysis, was adopted as the primary approach for analyzing the interview data in this study, together with the mixed-methods design of Creswell (2014), which is the research framework of the overarching research project from which this paper extracts and presents the qualitative data in detail.

In summary, although theoretical frameworks on network governance and soft power already underscore the importance of unified standards, most prior research has focused predominantly on quantitative analysis or historical description. There remains a lack of qualitative studies that delve into the perspectives, reasoning, and debates of practitioners actually working within the Muay Thai industry regarding guidelines for promoting a unified Muay Thai standard system. This research therefore aims to fill that gap.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study is part of a mixed-methods research project following Creswell's (2014) approach, with this paper presenting only the findings from the qualitative data analysis, which used in-depth interviews to understand the experiences, opinions, and reasoning underlying the perspectives of

stakeholders in the Muay Thai industry regarding guidelines for promoting a unified Muay Thai standard system.

Key informants were purposively selected, totaling 9 persons, comprising 2 gym promoters/owners, 1 professional boxing association president, 1 ring announcer, 1 Sports Authority of Thailand officer, 1 gym manager, 1 professional boxing association staff member, 1 professional boxing association treasurer, and 1 boxing referee/judge, selected for their knowledge, competence, and extensive experience in Muay Thai development, so as to cover perspectives from every sector of the industry, namely the private sector/gyms, professional associations, the government sector, and the judging/competition-management sector.

The research instrument was a semi-structured interview guide covering the five dimensions of the unified Muay Thai standard system (instructor standards, judging, competition management, gym administration, and teaching), the five dimensions of factors promoting Muay Thai standards (government policy, support from sports organizations, cultural heritage, resources and budget, and community participation), the five dimensions of international recognition of Muay Thai standards (world-stage acceptance, athletes'/trainers' capacity to meet international criteria, internationalized management systems, sustainability of development, and Olympic inclusion), and overall recommendations. The interview guide was reviewed for content and language appropriateness by experts before actual use.

The researcher explained the study's objectives and obtained consent for interviews and audio recording, using codes in place of informants' names to preserve confidentiality. Data were analyzed using content analysis following Mayring's (2022) approach, beginning with transcription and verification against interview recordings, repeated reading, coding of key statements, and categorization guided initially by the research's conceptual framework while remaining open to new themes emerging from the data. Data were then compared within and across informants to identify consistencies, differences, and contextual conditions, before being synthesized into conclusions and promotion guidelines. Triangulation across data sources holding different roles was used to enhance the trustworthiness of the analysis.

Regarding research ethics, all key informants participated voluntarily, were informed of the study's objectives, and retained the right to decline or withdraw at any time without consequence. Data were kept confidential and presented in aggregate or under codes (e.g., "Informant 1-9") to prevent identification, particularly on issues that are policy-sensitive or could affect relationships between organizations.

Regarding methodological limitations, this study used purposive sampling of 9 informants, which is appropriate for gaining an in-depth understanding of complex issues involving specific stakeholder groups, but the findings therefore represent a synthesis of this particular sample's perspectives and are not intended to be statistically representative of the entire Muay Thai industry population. The interpretation of the findings should therefore be considered alongside the quantitative analysis from the same research project (Treepoka & Suradinthakorn, 2026) to obtain a complete picture in terms of both scale and meaning.

## RESULTS

The qualitative analysis of in-depth interviews with 9 experts can be synthesized into three main themes according to the research's conceptual framework: (1) the unified Muay Thai standard system, (2) factors promoting Muay Thai standards, and (3) international recognition of Muay Thai standards, detailed as follows.

**1. The Unified Muay Thai Standard System**

Instructor standards: All 9 experts agreed that instructor standards are the most fundamental dimension of a unified Muay Thai system, since trainers directly transmit both fighting skills and cultural values. Most experts felt that a common standard would help reduce variation in teaching

quality and elevate the profession's image, suggesting that trainers and sports-science specialists should participate jointly in setting the standard. However, a minority disagreed, noting that authentic Muay Thai already has an established curriculum within the Thai system, so a new standard may not be necessary. In summary, nearly all experts viewed instructor standards as indispensable for the industry's development.

Judging standards: Most experts considered judging standards critically important, since the credibility of judging is the heart of fairness in any sport. One expert stated unequivocally that the lack of credibility in judging is the single largest obstacle to pushing Muay Thai toward the Olympics, proposing that all levels of referees/judges hold a single internationally standardized license subject to periodic renewal, alongside regular world-class judging training conducted primarily in English. In summary, most experts viewed judging standards as the area requiring the most urgent reform among all five standard dimensions.

Competition management standards: This was the issue on which all experts agreed most strongly, with no dissenting views. They viewed a nationally unified competition management system as essential for safety, transparency, and accountability. One expert likened the competition management system to the most important infrastructure in transforming Muay Thai from a folk sporting activity into a global sports and cultural industry, one that would effectively support international-level competition.

Gym administration standards: Most experts felt that clear, unified standards would be highly beneficial, with some proposing that gyms be classified by size (small, medium, large) so that support and oversight could be matched appropriately to each gym's capacity. In summary, most experts supported making gym administration standards more systematic.

Teaching standards: Most experts viewed this as the key to sustainable development, since good teaching standards would deepen the world's understanding of Muay Thai's identity and value. They emphasized that the government should prioritize integrating Muay Thai into the education system alongside gyms. However, most experts stressed that standard-setting must not abandon local wisdom and Muay Thai's original identity.

**2. Factors Promoting Muay Thai Standards**

Government policy: Most experts ranked government policy as the single most important factor relative to all others, emphasizing above all that policy must remain continuous regardless of changes in government. A minority of experts, meanwhile, expressed concern that although the government allocates substantial budgets, actual outcomes have not yet matched the stated goals. In summary, government policy was the factor experts rated most important, but continuity was the key condition.

Support from sports organizations: Most experts viewed sports organizations, whether the Sports Authority of Thailand or professional boxing associations, as the frontline driving mechanism spanning from the policy level down to the gym and athlete level. A minority felt that the responsible body should be a genuine government agency, to ensure unity of authority. In summary, all experts agreed on the importance of sports organizations' role in promoting Muay Thai standards.

Cultural heritage: This was the issue on which all experts reached the highest, unanimous consensus, viewing it as the spirit and heart that makes Muay Thai distinct from other martial arts. One expert stated that cultural heritage is Muay Thai's number-one soft power asset, while another warned that developing standards and moving toward internationalization must not turn Muay Thai into a rootless sport, as has happened to other combat sports that lost their cultural identity.

Resources and budget: Most experts viewed resources and budget as the fuel that turns vision and policy on paper into reality on the ground, emphasizing equally that budgets must be continuous rather than one-off. A key criticism was that although substantial budgets are currently allocated to Muay Thai, they have not genuinely reached small gyms and grassroots communities. Some

experts therefore proposed a budget-allocation system that would enable these groups to access resources more fully.

Community participation: Most experts agreed strongly on the importance of community participation, proposing that communities be supported as centers for transmitting skills and organizing local competitions. A minority pointed to a systemic problem: although everyone recognizes the importance of community involvement, concrete support mechanisms remain limited.

Overall, all 9 experts placed the highest priority on cultural heritage, followed by government policy as the main mechanism for driving and setting direction, noting that the real problem is not the presence or absence of resources but the continuity of policy and the genuine distribution of resources down to the operational level.

**3. International Recognition of Muay Thai Standards**

One informant summarized the overall picture of international recognition with a vivid metaphor: *"International recognition is the 'outcome' of taking things seriously at home. Communicating value and keeping the rules fair is the key."* He described developing athletes/trainers as a shift from *"individual talent"* to "measurable competence against world standards," comparing athletes/trainers to "software" and the management system to *"hardware"* that allows Muay Thai to grow steadily on the world stage, and viewed sustainability as turning a *"temporary trend"* into a *"solid foundation,"* while Olympic inclusion is not merely about *"medals"* but is an *"engine driving standards"* that would compel everyone in the Muay Thai industry to develop themselves to international levels across every dimension. These metaphors reflect the shared view of most experts that international recognition is not an end goal in itself, but the consequence of serious and continuous development of internal infrastructure.

World-stage acceptance: Most experts were optimistic about Muay Thai's potential, noting that it is currently known and practiced in more than 160 countries and has received official recognition from the International Olympic Committee through IFMA. However, several experts acknowledged that world-stage acceptance remains uneven; some countries perceive Muay Thai merely as a fitness activity for health rather than a martial art with cultural roots, requiring proactive communication of identity alongside the building of unified standards. A minority of experts also expressed concern over cultural sovereignty, feeling that the Thai government must be able to ensure that foreign organizations cannot claim the right to set Muay Thai's direction.

Athletes'/trainers' capacity to meet international criteria: Most experts saw a clear gap between Thai boxers' fighting skills and international standards, particularly in sports science, nutrition, systematic physical recovery, and mental preparation, while trainers still lack an internationally recognized professional standard and foreign-language skills. Experts therefore proposed issuing an internationally recognized professional certification for Muay Thai trainers, alongside support for language-skill development.

Internationalized management systems: Most experts identified the existence of multiple organizations claiming to be the world governing body for Muay Thai, particularly the WMC and IFMA, as the single largest problem and the first structural obstacle requiring resolution, creating confusion that directly undermines efforts to push Muay Thai toward the Olympics, since the International Olympic Committee requires a single, unified governing body. Experts proposed that Thailand, as the origin and owner of Muay Thai, should take the lead in building reconciliation and unifying these organizations through sports diplomacy, while a minority felt the Thai government does not yet have sufficient strength to compel these organizations to merge.

Sustainability of development: All experts agreed that sustainability requires a comprehensive athlete welfare system, since many boxers begin their careers at a young age and have a peak career span of only 5-10 years, yet lack health welfare, social security, and educational opportunities after

retiring from competition. This calls for systematic youth development, standardized curricula in educational institutions, and long-term policy independent of political cycles.
Olympic inclusion: This was the issue on which experts held the most divergent views. The majority felt it was possible but difficult, requiring substantial effort, since Muay Thai has strong international potential and a unique cultural identity as a selling point, but the greatest obstacle is the conflict between the WMC and IFMA, along with competition from other combat sports with stronger organizational structures. A minority felt it was very difficult in practice, since the name *"Muay Thai"* carries high cultural specificity and several combat sports are already included in the Olympics. Both groups agreed that success would require first resolving the governing-body conflict and seriously and continuously developing standards across every dimension.

## DISCUSSION

First, the finding that all experts reached the highest consensus on cultural heritage and competition management standards aligns with Nye's (2004) concept of Soft Power, which holds that cultural acceptance on the world stage requires both the quality of what is offered (here, Muay Thai's cultural heritage) and a systematic structure to support its presentation (here, competition management standards). The fact that both issues achieved the highest consensus simultaneously confirms that soft power and standardization are conditions that must be developed together, not separately.
Second, experts' identification of the WMC-IFMA conflict as the most serious structural problem directly corresponds to Provan and Kenis's (2008) Network Governance framework, which proposes that the success of standards in a context with multiple levels of stakeholders depends on the effectiveness of coordination mechanisms and clarity of roles. When two major governing bodies simultaneously claim to be the official representative, the coordination mechanism fails from the very top of the network, confirming Forster's (2006) observation that overlapping governance structures are a significant barrier to gaining recognition from international sports organizations.
Third, when compared with the quantitative findings from the same research project (Treepoka & Suradinthakorn, 2026), which found that external promoting factors (government policy, community participation) explain as much as 80.9% of the variance in international recognition, compared with 56.3% for internal professional standards, the qualitative findings in this study provide a clearly consistent explanation: experts noted that no matter how good internal professional standards may be, without continuity of government policy, budgets that reach the operational level, and resolution of conflicts between governing bodies, internal standards cannot translate into international recognition. The two sets of findings therefore complement one another, with the quantitative data indicating the magnitude of influence while the qualitative data explains the mechanism behind those figures.
Fourth, the most divergent views concerned Olympic inclusion, reflecting the tension between pride in Muay Thai's Thai identity and the need to adapt to IOC's international criteria, an issue Chappelet and Kubler-Mabbott (2008) identify as a shared challenge for all sports rooted in nation-specific culture seeking a place on the world stage. This finding suggests that pushing Muay Thai toward the Olympics requires carefully communicating and managing this tension, rather than choosing one side over the other between Thai-ness and internationalization.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The qualitative analysis indicates that experts in the Muay Thai industry agree that a unified Muay Thai standard system is necessary and beneficial for Muay Thai's development across every dimension, from foundational levels such as instructors and teaching, up to the policy level and world-stage recognition. The issues with the highest consensus were cultural heritage and

competition management standards, while the issue with the most divergent views was the feasibility of pushing Muay Thai toward the Olympics. The findings led to the synthesis of three guideline areas, as follows.

**(1) Internal professional standards:** Muay Thai standards should be unified across the entire system as a matter of priority, with judging standards addressed first since experts agreed this is the area requiring the most urgent reform, alongside issuing an internationally recognized professional certification for Muay Thai trainers and developing sports-science and foreign-language skills for athletes and trainers, so as to elevate individual talent into measurable competence against world standards.

**(2) External supporting factors:** The government should set Muay Thai promotion policies that remain continuous regardless of changes in government, allocate transparent budgets that genuinely reach communities and small gyms rather than concentrating resources centrally, and promote community participation in organizing local competitions and preserving the cultural heritage that experts agreed is the spirit distinguishing Muay Thai from other martial arts.

**(3) Unity of the governing body:** The conflict between international Muay Thai governing bodies such as the WMC and IFMA should be resolved as a priority, with Thailand, as the origin and owner of Muay Thai, leading efforts to build reconciliation through sports diplomacy, a key precondition set by the International Olympic Committee before considering the inclusion of new sports, together with developing a central digital database linking athlete records, competition results, and safety standards to increase transparency and accountability.

In practical terms, the relevant authorities might proceed according to the urgency experts identified. In the short term (within 1-2 years), reforming judging standards and issuing a single internationally standardized referee/judge license should be prioritized, since experts agreed this is the most urgent issue and can proceed without waiting for other structural problems to be resolved. In the medium term (3-5 years), a sports-diplomacy mechanism should be established to resolve the conflict between global governing bodies, alongside developing a central digital database linking athlete records, competition results, and safety standards to build the transparency that international sports organizations value. In the long term (5 years and beyond), a comprehensive athlete and trainer welfare system should be put in place, spanning from youth level through post-retirement, alongside widely integrating standardized Muay Thai curricula into educational institutions, to build a stable and sustainable foundation for the Muay Thai industry over the long term.

For future research, qualitative studies should be extended to other stakeholder groups, such as representatives of international governing bodies (IFMA, WMC) and government agencies directly involved in policy-making, to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the constraints on unifying governing bodies. Comparative case studies of combat sports that have successfully achieved Olympic inclusion, such as taekwondo and judo, should also be conducted to draw concrete policy and management lessons applicable to Muay Thai. In addition, future research might employ Structural Equation Modeling to test mediating or moderating variables between external promoting factors and internal professional standards, which would help confirm, through more rigorous quantitative methods, the causal mechanisms proposed by this qualitative study.

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