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Review

CALM: Cultivating Awareness, Learning, and Mastery to Reduce Anger and Violence Through Combat Sports

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Abstract: Youth violence is a pressing social issue. Many well-informed interventions to reduce youth violence fail due to low uptake. Combat sports—such as boxing, judo, and mixed martial arts—appear to encourage aggression, making them appealing to individuals prone to violent behavior. However, rather than reinforcing violence, these sports instill discipline, goal-directed behavior, and self-control. This paper argues that combat sports align with the values of at-risk youth, increasing their participation, while simultaneously teaching them emotional regulation and resilience. I propose that structured combat training provides a sustainable intervention by fostering self-awareness, cognitive control, and respect within a rule-governed environment. Furthermore, training combat instructors in emotion regulation strategies could enhance these benefits. By providing motivation, capability, and opportunity, combat sports present a viable pathway to reducing violent behavior among youth.

Keywords: youth violence; combat sports; emotion regulation; self-control; behavioral intervention; resilience

1. Introduction

Youth violence remains a significant societal challenge, with profound consequences for individuals and communities (Bushman et al., 2016). In the UK, official statistics indicate that it is a persistent issue, with violent offenses among young people contributing substantially to crime rates. According to the Office for National Statistics (Office for National Statistics, 2022), youth-perpetrated violent crime accounted for a significant proportion of all violent offenses, with knife crime being particularly prevalent. The UK Government's Serious Violence Strategy (Home Office, 2018) identified young males aged 16–24 as the demographic most at risk of both committing and being victims of violent crime. Globally, youth violence is also a pressing issue. The World Health Organization (World Health Organization, 2021) reported that interpersonal violence is a leading cause of death among individuals aged 10–29, with homicide rates being highest in low- and middle-income countries. In nations with strict firearm regulations, such as the UK, youth violence tends to manifest in knife crime and gang-related physical altercations (Densley & Stevens, 2015). Socioeconomic deprivation, urbanization, and exposure to adverse childhood experiences have been identified as primary contributors to youth violence (Bellis et al., 2017). Given this backdrop, addressing youth violence through evidence-based interventions is critical. The proposed intervention targets young people aged 10 to 29 years, and so covers a comprehensive age range of individuals who are at increased risk of engaging in violent behavior due to factors such as poverty, community violence, and lack of access to positive role models. I propose encouraging their participation in combat sport, which might appear paradoxical, as at face value this appears to reinforce rather than reduce aggressive



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tendencies. The controlled aggression inherent in combat sports, such as boxing, judo, and mixed martial arts (MMA), presents an apparent contradiction: how can engaging in activities centered on physical dominance and confrontation lead to greater emotional regulation and reduced violence outside of sport? The answer lies in the structured and rule-governed nature of combat sports. Unlike street violence, which is unpredictable and fueled by emotional outbursts, combat sports operate within a clear framework of rules, discipline, and respect for opponents. Success in combat sports depends not on uncontrolled aggression but on strategic thinking, emotional control, and measured responses. Fighters are taught to anticipate emotional triggers—such as frustration or anger when struck by an opponent—and respond calmly and strategically rather than impulsively. I propose how an intervention might be rolled out in the target population.

There are multiple interrelated factors that contribute to youth violence, encompassing individual, social, and structural dimensions (Bushman et al., 2016). Firstly, evidence highlights a strong correlation between socioeconomic disadvantages and youth violence (Fagan & Catalano, 2013). Young people from lower income backgrounds face higher risks of engaging in violent behavior due to limited opportunities, social exclusion, and exposure to violent environments. Inequality, unemployment, and educational disengagement exacerbate these risks, leading to frustration and antisocial behaviors (Bushman et al., 2016). Secondly, peer relationships appear to play a critical role in shaping youth behavior. Social learning theory (Bandura, 1997) posits that violent behaviors are learned through observation and reinforcement within peer groups. Gang affiliation, in particular, has been shown to escalate violent tendencies, as group dynamics reinforce aggressive behaviors and criminal activity (Decker & Pyrooz, 2015). Thirdly, exposure to violence, whether through family environments, community settings, or media, significantly increases the risk of youth engagement in violent behavior. Adverse childhood experiences (ACEs), including physical abuse, neglect, and witnessing domestic violence, are strongly associated with later aggression and criminal activity (Bellis et al., 2017). Fourthly, youth violence is often linked to difficulties in emotion regulation, particularly in managing anger (Bushman et al., 2016). Young individuals who struggle with impulse control and emotion regulation are more likely to engage in reactive aggression, leading to violent behavior (Robertson et al., 2012). Studies indicate that poor emotional regulation skills are predictive of violent outbursts and increased involvement in violent crime (Cohen & Strayer, 1996). Effective mood and emotion regulation strategies could be useful in mitigating violent tendencies.

If the antecedents of violent behavior are complex, so are the interventions. Interventions designed to reduce violent behavior in youth vary widely, ranging from cognitive-behavioral therapy (CBT) and mentoring programs to social-emotional learning (SEL) and structured physical activities such as combat sport. Cognitive-behavioral approaches, which aim to improve impulse control and emotion regulation, have shown promise in reducing aggression (Lakes & Hoyt, 2004). Mentoring programs, such as Big Brothers Big Sisters, provide role models and structured support, which can foster prosocial behavior (Tolan et al., 2014). School-based SEL programs focus on emotional awareness and conflict resolution and have been linked to long-term reductions in aggressive behavior (Durlak et al., 2011). Many programs address anger management or social skills and consider aggression as a behavioral problem rather than a symptom of dysregulated mood and emotions (Eisen et al., 2003).

Regardless of effectiveness, these interventions face significant challenges. Scalability remains an issue, as many interventions require trained professionals, making it difficult to implement them widely (Fixsen et al., 2005; McCauley et al., 2018). Cost is another barrier, as extensive training for facilitators and ongoing program support can be expensive, limiting accessibility for disadvantaged communities (Fagan & Catalano, 2013). Additionally,

participation rates pose a challenge, as many at-risk youths do not voluntarily engage with traditional interventions, particularly those involving therapy, due to stigma, lack of interest, or cultural beliefs that discourage mental health treatment (Beelmann & Lösel, 2020). Put these issues together and you have an expensive intervention that is not popular with participants.

If targeting the motivation of participants is a goal, then some interventions have attempted to integrate activities that resonate with youth subcultures. However, these remain relatively underexplored compared to traditional approaches. Programs incorporating hip-hop, sports, and community-based activities have been used in violence prevention, with varying degrees of success. For example, the Hip-Hop Therapy (HHT) model uses rap and music as a medium for self-expression and emotional processing, engaging at-risk youth by leveraging an art form deeply embedded in their cultural identity (Travis & Deepak, 2011). Similarly, structured sports-based programs, such as Midnight Basketball, have aimed to provide alternative activities that deter youth from engaging in violence by fostering discipline, teamwork, and positive peer interactions (Hartmann & Depro, 2006). However, while these programs create engagement, they often fail to directly target the transdiagnostic causes of violence, such as emotion regulation difficulties. Interventions that target a single issue—such as anger management or impulse control—may not address the broader emotional and social challenges that contribute to violence. A more effective approach is to attempt to use transdiagnostic interventions, which address multiple underlying risk factors simultaneously. By targeting broad psychological and behavioral mechanisms rather than isolated symptoms, transdiagnostic approaches maximize their impact while remaining practical and scalable. An intervention becomes particularly attractive if it offers transdiagnostic benefits, meaning it can address multiple underlying risk factors across different psychological and behavioral domains. For example, interventions that enhance emotion regulation skills not only reduce violent tendencies but also improve mental health outcomes, social functioning, and academic performance. When looking at the many antecedent factors of violent behaviors, there are clear societal benefits to addressing many of them, making it difficult to argue for prioritizing one over another.

In the present paper, I propose focusing on reducing violent behavior via participation in combat sport. I define combat sport as competitive physical activities where two opponents engage in direct physical confrontation using specific techniques and strategies to defeat each other under established rules. These sports typically involve striking (e.g., punches and kicks), grappling (e.g., throws and joint locks), or a combination of both. Examples include boxing, judo, wrestling, karate, taekwondo, Brazilian jiu-jitsu, and mixed martial arts (MMA). I argue that participation in combat sport could provide structured opportunities for young people to develop self-awareness, process emotions constructively, and build resilience. While I acknowledge the diversity within combat sports, including striking-only (e.g., boxing, taekwondo), grappling-only (e.g., judo, wrestling), and mixed-modality formats (e.g., MMA), they are unified by a foundational structure in which one competitor aims to physically dominate another within codified rules. This definition centers not only on the physical techniques used but on an intention to overcome an opponent through bodily contest—typically involving the potential to injure or disable if uncontrolled. Although these sports differ in their techniques, I argue that they share key psychological demands and learning opportunities—such as emotional control under pressure, disciplined aggression, and respect for rules and opponents—that are relevant for emotion regulation interventions. Moreover, different combat sports attract different youth populations, with some forms—such as MMA and boxing—being particularly popular among at-risk youth (Blomqvist Mickelsson, 2020; Vertonghen et al., 2014). This is highly relevant for the intervention design, as these sports may naturally engage those most in

need of structured, supportive environments. While debates continue around which combat sport leads to which outcomes, the more practical concern is aligning the interventions with the interests of target populations. In terms of scalability, the intervention proposed does not claim to overcome these limitations entirely; it recognizes them and offers an alternative approach that builds on existing interests and infrastructures. By promoting greater participation in combat sports, this model leverages activities that many young people already find appealing, and in doing so, has the potential to deliver transdiagnostic benefits—supporting physical fitness, emotion regulation, aggression control, social connectedness, and resilience across a range of psychological and behavioral domains. The proposed intervention integrates insights from the 4Rs model of mood regulation (Beedie et al., 2022) and Gross's (1998, 2002) model of emotion regulation, which collectively provide a comprehensive framework for understanding how combat sports can reduce violent behavior. First, the 4Rs model emphasizes the importance of Recognizing, Resolving, Restoring, and Regulating mood states. Combat sports provide structured opportunities for participants to recognize negative emotions such as frustration or anger during training and competition. Second, Gross's emotion regulation model complements this by offering strategies such as attentional deployment and cognitive reappraisal to manage emotional responses during combat. Thirdly, the COM-B model (Michie et al., 2011) explains how behavior change can be facilitated through enhanced capabilities (learning emotional regulation skills), increased opportunities (consistent access to combat sports programs), and increased motivation (desire for self-improvement and success in combat sports). By combining these frameworks, the intervention ensures that emotional regulation skills are taught explicitly (through psychological techniques) and implicitly (through the experience of combat). Combat sports provide an ideal setting for this learning, as emotional control is necessary for success in competitive situations and can translate into improved self-regulation in everyday life. An acknowledged limitation of the present approach is that it does not fully address how factors such as gender, race, age, and culture shape experiences of violence and engagement with sport-based interventions, despite Flood's (2020) emphasis on the importance of accounting for these intersecting differences in effective violence prevention strategies.

2. Developing CALM: A Combat Sports-Based Approach to Reducing Anger and Violence

Sport has long been recognized as a valuable tool for promoting emotional and behavioral regulation among youth (Bailey et al., 2013). Exercise has been proposed as a transdiagnostic intervention for mental health (Solmi et al., 2025). While many forms of sport can promote self-regulation, discipline, and prosocial behavior, combat sports may offer distinct advantages due to their explicit focus on controlled aggression, respect for opponents, and ritualized confrontation. Unlike team-based sports that distribute responsibility across players, combat sports often require individuals to take sole accountability for their actions, decisions, and emotional responses in high-stakes, physically demanding environments. This intensity creates a unique context in which emotion regulation is not only practiced but is essential for success and safety. Moreover, combat sports explicitly teach de-escalation strategies, controlled breathing, and focused attention under pressure—elements that closely align with evidence-based techniques in cognitive-behavioral and emotion regulation therapies. While other sports also yield psychological benefits, the structured confrontation and individualized nature of combat sports may foster deeper engagement with personal growth and emotional mastery, making them a particularly compelling vehicle for violence prevention interventions. In terms of specific evidence, Lafuente et al. (2021) conducted a systematic review of nine studies on martial arts and com-

bat sports, concluding that participants exhibited reduced levels of aggression and anger following structured training. [Lakes and Hoyt \(2004\)](#) demonstrated that a school-based Tae Kwon Do program improved emotional and cognitive self-regulation among children, suggesting that combat sports can be successfully integrated into educational settings. [Ryan et al. \(2025\)](#) found that community-based boxing programs enhanced emotional control, discipline, and prosocial behavior among young people from disadvantaged backgrounds. [Vertonghen and Theeboom \(2010\)](#) highlighted that martial arts training promoted social learning and self-control, particularly in youth who had previously engaged in aggressive behavior. Additionally, research on self-efficacy ([Bandura, 1997](#)) suggested that increased competence in combat sports could improve confidence in managing emotional responses, which may generalize to other aspects of life. Combat sports, therefore, not only provide a structured environment for emotional learning but also an opportunity to develop a sense of mastery and self-belief.

However, the empirical evidence on the relationship between martial arts training and aggression is not entirely consistent. While several studies suggest beneficial effects, others indicate null or even adverse outcomes. [Moore et al.'s \(2020\)](#) systematic review and meta-analysis found inconsistent effects of martial arts on aggression, suggesting that the benefits may depend heavily on the structure, context, and population studied. [Harwood et al. \(2017\)](#) reported in their meta-analysis that some forms of martial arts training could elevate aggression among children and adolescents—although this finding has itself been contested on methodological grounds. Furthermore, [Lafuente et al.'s \(2021\)](#) conclusions, while optimistic, acknowledged that the observed effects were small in magnitude. It is therefore essential to frame martial arts interventions within a nuanced understanding of this complex and sometimes contradictory evidence base. Program content, coaching philosophy, participant background, and disciplinary emphasis (e.g., traditional vs. competitive sport) may all shape outcomes and must be considered when evaluating their impact.

Equally important is recognizing that different combat sports tend to attract different subgroups of young people, particularly those who may be underserved by traditional sport or education systems. Research by [Blomqvist Mickelsson \(2020\)](#) and [Vertonghen et al. \(2014\)](#) indicates that mixed martial arts (MMA), Brazilian jiu-jitsu, and boxing often appeal to youth from disadvantaged or marginalized backgrounds—groups who are frequently the target of violence prevention and mental health programs. While some debate persists about whether specific combat sports are more effective in shaping outcomes, the more pressing point may be that these sports offer a culturally resonant and motivating entry point for the very individuals most in need of structured psychosocial support. Understanding who these sports attract is critical to designing interventions that are both relevant and accessible.

In some communities, youth culture often legitimizes violence as a means of gaining respect and asserting dominance ([O'Hanlon et al., 2024](#)). As such, boxers and fighters gain social status in such communities. However, in combat sports, whilst the consequence of participation can be to strike and possibly cause harm to the opponent, contests are held with rules. It is argued that boxers earn respect through skill, discipline, and adherence to rules rather than through uncontrolled aggression ([Ryan et al., 2025](#)). Fighters learn to control their emotions, as emotional outbursts can undermine their performance. One of the distinctive features of combat sports is the establishment of mutual respect among participants. Many young individuals who resort to violence to gain respect within their communities find an alternative framework of authority within combat sports. Here, respect is earned through discipline, skill, and adherence to rules rather than through intimidation or aggression. Coaches and senior fighters often serve as authoritative yet relatable figures who command respect without resorting to violence. This provides young people with role models who demonstrate how to operate within a structured, respectful

environment. While the current paper rightly focuses on emotion and mood regulation frameworks and positions martial arts as a suitable context for psychological growth, it is worth acknowledging the emerging theoretical developments specific to martial arts themselves. For instance, [Clapton and Hiskey \(2020\)](#) argued that martial arts can cultivate interpersonal compassion, while [Blomqvist Mickelsson and Stylin \(2021\)](#) highlighted how combat sports foster both behavioral regulation and mutual care. These newer models, though still developing, extend beyond traditional perspectives and offer valuable insight into the psychosocial mechanisms at play.

2.1. Emotion Regulation and Competitive Contexts

A key benefit of combat sport participation is the development of emotion regulation. [Lafuente et al. \(2021\)](#) conducted a systematic review of nine studies on martial arts and combat sports (MA&CS) and found that training can significantly reduce anger and aggression, especially among young people with behavioral issues. Combat sports provide real-time practice at managing physiological and behavioral responses to intense emotions. Fighters are trained to control their breathing, lower their heart rate, and maintain composure even when experiencing fear, anger, or pain. Unlike emotional suppression (which involves ignoring anger and can have negative long-term effects), athletes are encouraged to develop adaptive regulation strategies—such as deep breathing, visualization, and controlled aggression—that channel emotional energy into productive actions rather than impulsive reactions.

Participation in combat sports requires a high level of emotional regulation. Fighters must manage nerves before competition, remain composed under pressure, and control their emotional responses when hit. The ability to regulate frustration and fear is essential in combat sports, as losing control can lead to poor decision-making and increased vulnerability in competition. Over time, athletes develop improved impulse control, resilience, and emotional stability, which can transfer to other aspects of life, reducing the likelihood of reactive aggression in social settings.

2.2. Addressing the Mechanism: The Case for Emotion and Mood

Emotion and mood are associated with violent behavior, as an intense negative states such as anger, frustration, or sadness—can impair self-regulation and lead to impulsive actions ([Denson et al., 2012](#)). Research shows that individuals with poor emotion regulation skills are more likely to resort to aggression when experiencing distress, as they lack adaptive coping strategies ([Robertson et al., 2012](#)). Furthermore, chronic negative mood states, such as irritability or resentment, can create a heightened baseline for aggression, making violent responses more likely when provoked ([Veenema, 2009](#)).

Individuals in poor environments often face chronic stressors—such as poverty, violence, and a lack of social support—that contribute to repeated bouts of intense emotional reactions, which in turn contribute to a persistent state of negative mood ([Evans & Kim, 2013](#)). This prolonged exposure to adversity can lead to heightened emotional reactivity, where frustration, hopelessness, or anger become ingrained as baseline emotional states ([McEwen & Gianaros, 2010](#)). As a result, even minor provocations can trigger intense emotional outbursts, as the individual operates from a constant state of psychological strain with limited capacity for self-regulation ([Beedie et al., 2022](#)). Therefore, understanding the nature of mood and emotion could be helpful when developing scalable, theory-led interventions.

Importantly, distinguishing between mood and emotion is necessary. Mood represents a sustained affective state that can influence behavior over time, whereas emotions are momentary responses to specific stimuli; recognizing this distinction allows for more targeted

interventions that address both immediate emotional triggers and underlying mood patterns. However, mood and emotions are often used interchangeably in everyday language and even in research, though they refer to distinct psychological constructs (Beedie et al., 2005; Meyers & Tamir, 2024). Beedie et al. went to great lengths to investigate definitions of mood used in the literature and those used in everyday language. A driving issue in their work (Beedie et al., 2022) was their argument that not only are the concepts different, but distinguishing them has practical value. Mood is a more diffuse and long-lasting affective state that is not necessarily tied to a specific stimulus and can influence overall perceptions and behavior over time. In contrast, emotion is typically a more intense, short-lived response to a particular event or situation, often accompanied by physiological changes and a clear expression (e.g., anger following an insult). A drawback to extending this work was the fact mood and emotions are measured in a similar way, making distinctions fuzzy. However, understanding these constructs is essential for designing effective interventions, especially those aimed at reducing aggressive or violent behavior (Yu et al., 2024). Mood and emotion, while related, operate on different temporal and functional levels. Emotions are short-lived, intense responses to specific stimuli, whereas mood represents a more prolonged and diffuse affective state. This distinction is crucial when designing interventions (Beedie et al., 2022). Addressing emotions may involve immediate coping strategies, such as deep breathing or cognitive reappraisal, while mood regulation requires a more systemic approach, including long-term behavioral and environmental changes. Recognizing this difference allows for tailored interventions that simultaneously manage immediate emotional responses and target the broader, underlying mood disturbances that contribute to chronic aggression. Understanding how risk factors for violence contribute to persistent mood disturbances highlights the need for interventions that address both emotional regulation and broader environmental influences.

In the present study, I use the 4Rs model of mood (Beedie et al., 2022) as the theoretical framework for understanding mood regulation in the context of combat sports and youth violence. It is important to note that the 4Rs model is relatively new and remains largely untested, meaning its application in this study contributes to the ongoing exploration of its validity and utility. Despite its emerging status, the model provides a structured approach to conceptualizing mood, making it a valuable tool for examining how combat sports may facilitate people to develop mood regulation and emotional resilience. By separating mood from emotion, the 4Rs model provides a framework for recognizing the prolonged impact of adverse experiences and developing strategies to mitigate their effects on behavior. Beedie et al.'s (2022) 4Rs model of mood regulation—Recognize, Resolve, Restore, and Regulate—provides a structured approach to understanding how individuals manage emotions.

The first step involves recognizing one's emotional state and understanding its impact on behavior. Recognizing mood disturbances such as frustration or hopelessness is critical for preventing maladaptive responses, including aggression. Youth exposed to chronic stressors, such as socioeconomic disadvantage, community violence, and family instability, may experience persistent negative moods (Mendes, 2025). There is a well-established link between poor mental health and poverty (Katoch et al., 2024) in which there will be brief emotional episodes where positive emotions are experienced.

Recognizing one's emotional state is a skill that can be developed through experience, reflection, and social learning (Pennebaker, 1997). Simple and scalable methods can help individuals become more aware of their feelings. Regular mood check-ins, where individuals pause at set times during the day to assess their emotional state using a simple scale (e.g., happy–neutral–sad or 1–10), can increase awareness and self-reflection. Another effective strategy is “Name It to Tame It”, where individuals explicitly label their emotions (e.g.,

“I feel frustrated” instead of just “bad”), a practice shown to reduce emotional intensity and enhance self-regulation (Lieberman et al., 2007). Additionally, breath and body awareness exercises—such as taking three deep breaths while noticing bodily sensations like heart rate, muscle tension, or breathing patterns—help individuals to recognize emotional cues through physical sensations. These methods are easy to implement, require minimal resources, and can be adapted for both individuals and groups.

Individuals must first learn to identify the difference between a general negative mood, which can persist over time, and a specific emotional reaction, which is often an immediate response to a particular event. In combat sports, athletes frequently experience emotional reactions such as anxiety before a fight, frustration when struggling against an opponent, or anger after being hurt. However, through structured training and observation, they learn to recognize these emotions without allowing them to escalate into uncontrolled aggression. Social learning theory suggests that individuals model their behavior on those they observe, particularly figures of authority or highly skilled peers. In combat sports, young fighters see that the most successful athletes—those they admire—do not respond to pain or provocation with rage, but instead channel their emotions productively. Over time, they come to recognize that while the impulse for anger may arise, effective fighters regulate this response rather than allowing it to dictate their actions. Psychological theories of anger suggest that while intense anger can lead to impulsive and maladaptive behaviors, a lower level affective state of controlled anger can enhance focus, determination, and persistence. This distinction is crucial, as it allows individuals to differentiate between destructive emotional reactions and those that can be harnessed for goal-directed behavior, such as maintaining composure under pressure and using frustration to fuel strategic thinking rather than uncontrolled aggression.

Resolve or Restore: This stage involves addressing the underlying issues contributing to mood disturbances. Social learning theory suggests that individuals model behavior observed in their environment. Exposure to violence in early life can reinforce aggression as an appropriate response to conflict. Unresolved mood disturbances, such as chronic frustration or anger, can create a cycle of aggression where violence becomes a habitual coping mechanism.

Resolving mood disturbances requires addressing their root causes, particularly those stemming from physiological imbalances and environmental influences. Social learning theory highlights how individuals adopt behavioral patterns from their surroundings, meaning that early exposure to violence can normalize aggression as a conflict resolution strategy. When mood disturbances such as chronic frustration or anger remain unaddressed, individuals may fall into a cycle where aggression becomes an automatic, habitual response. The 4Rs model suggests that mood can be effectively regulated through physiological adjustments, such as improving sleep, engaging in regular exercise, and maintaining a balanced diet—strategies that are widely supported by research as effective mood regulators. While these strategies are not novel, their accessibility and scalability make them particularly valuable for large-scale interventions aimed at reducing youth violence. Unlike traditional therapeutic approaches, which require cognitive effort, self-reflection, and often professional guidance, behavioral interventions like exercise and improved sleep demand minimal cognitive load from individuals. This makes them more practical, particularly for those who may be unwilling or unable to engage in therapy due to social, cultural, or religious constraints. Many individuals recommended for therapy do not attend, either due to stigma, financial barriers, or having underlying beliefs that conflict with psychological treatment. In contrast, promoting simple, actionable behaviors offers an alternative path to emotional regulation that aligns with existing lifestyles and is more likely to be widely adopted.

Restoring emotional balance is essential in preventing escalations in aggressive behavior. Factors such as poverty, discrimination, and a lack of social support contribute to prolonged negative moods, making it difficult for individuals to return to a neutral or positive state. Without effective restorative processes, individuals may become trapped in a cycle of negativity, further reinforcing violent tendencies.

Regulate: Regulation involves the ongoing management of emotions and moods to prevent maladaptive responses. Gross's (1998, 2002) emotion regulation model complements this stage, emphasizing strategies such as attentional deployment, cognitive reappraisal, and response modulation. The ability to regulate emotions effectively is often compromised in individuals exposed to chronic stressors, leading to impulsivity and poor decision-making in emotionally charged situations. Regulation aligns with traditional views of emotion regulation. Gross's (1998, 2002) process model of emotion regulation is a widely accepted framework for understanding how individuals manage their emotional responses. The model categorizes regulation strategies into two broad types: antecedent-focused and response-focused strategies. Antecedent-focused strategies occur before an emotional response is fully generated, whereas response-focused strategies occur after the emotion has been activated. This distinction provides insight into the timing and effectiveness of different regulatory mechanisms.

The model consists of five key strategies:

Situation Selection—This involves choosing environments or contexts that minimize the likelihood of experiencing negative emotions. For example, individuals who are prone to anger may avoid settings that provoke confrontation (Gross, 2015).

Combat sports provide a structured environment where athletes learn to anticipate emotional challenges and make strategic choices to manage them. For instance, individuals prone to anger might avoid unnecessarily aggressive sparring partners or high-conflict situations in training, instead selecting controlled, disciplined practice sessions that emphasize skill development over emotional intensity. Over time, this reinforces the habit of placing oneself in situations that promote self-regulation rather than emotional escalation.

Situation Modification—This strategy involves altering an existing environment to influence emotional responses. For instance, individuals might use humor or problem-solving to mitigate emotional distress.

Within combat sports, athletes are taught to adapt their environment to regulate emotional responses. A fighter who feels overwhelmed by frustration may use humor to diffuse tension in training or focus on technical problem-solving rather than dwelling on mistakes. Coaches and training partners also play a role in modifying the environment, fostering a culture of discipline and emotional control by emphasizing respect and composure over aggression.

Attentional Deployment—This refers to directing focus toward or away from emotional stimuli. Distraction and mindfulness techniques fall under this category, helping individuals to manage distressing emotions by shifting attention to neutral or positive aspects of a situation.

Combat sports inherently train athletes to control their focus under pressure. Fighters learn to shift their attention away from pain, fear, or frustration and instead concentrate on strategic movements, breathing techniques, or an opponent's patterns. By developing the ability to focus on neutral or task-relevant stimuli, athletes cultivate mindfulness and resilience, preventing emotional overreactions in both competition and everyday life.

Cognitive Reappraisal—Reappraisal involves changing the way one interprets a situation to alter its emotional impact. Studies suggest that cognitive reappraisal is highly effective in reducing negative emotions and promoting adaptive behavior.

Athletes in combat sports frequently engage in reappraisal by reframing challenges in a constructive way. Instead of viewing a tough opponent or a painful hit as a personal failure, they are taught to see these moments as learning opportunities that enhance skill and mental toughness. This perspective shift helps to reduce frustration and anxiety, replacing them with determination and a growth mindset.

Response Modulation—This strategy occurs after an emotional response has been generated and involves directly influencing physiological, behavioral, or experiential aspects of emotion. Common forms include suppression, deep breathing, and physical relaxation techniques (Gross, 2002). However, suppression is often linked to negative psychological outcomes, such as increased stress and reduced emotional well-being.

Implementing interventions to reduce youth violence through emotion regulation is not without challenges. While the 4Rs model (Recognize, Resolve, Restore, Regulate) and Gross's emotion regulation framework offer structured approaches to managing emotions, addressing the root causes of violence—such as socioeconomic deprivation, exposure to violence, and social learning—is equally critical. However, these structural factors are deeply entrenched and difficult to modify through short-term interventions. Economic disadvantage, for example, shapes stress responses and decision-making patterns from an early age, reinforcing cycles of aggression and impulsivity. Similarly, learned violent behaviors, often passed down through family and community environments, create entrenched patterns of aggression that are resistant to change. A purely individual-focused intervention risks ignoring these broader societal determinants, which may limit its effectiveness if the underlying causes remain unaddressed.

Additionally, emotion regulation interventions require active engagement from individuals. Young people who are at risk of violent behavior may not initially see the value in regulating their emotions, especially when aggression has been reinforced as an effective means of asserting control or gaining respect. Crucially, the benefits of emotion regulation are often recognized only after a violent act has been committed, when regret and negative consequences become apparent. This delayed realization makes proactive engagement in interventions difficult, particularly for individuals who do not perceive their emotional responses as problematic. Without motivation to change, even the most effective emotion regulation strategies may go unused, highlighting the importance of designing interventions that foster internal motivation and self-reflection.

Empirical studies have demonstrated that individuals who habitually use cognitive reappraisal exhibit greater psychological well-being and social functioning, while those who rely on suppression experience heightened stress and emotional dysregulation (Cutuli, 2014). The effectiveness of emotion regulation strategies depends on context, individual differences, and the nature of the emotional challenge faced. Gross's model has been applied to various domains, including clinical psychology, education, and behavioral interventions, reinforcing its relevance in addressing aggression and emotional dysregulation. By understanding and applying Gross's model, interventions can be designed to equip individuals with effective regulatory strategies, ultimately reducing impulsive emotional reactions and promoting adaptive social behavior.

While the primary theoretical grounding of CALM is in the psychological literature on emotion regulation and mood, it is important to acknowledge the emerging theoretical contributions within the field of martial arts itself. Recent work by Clapton and Hiskey (2020) has argued for the role of traditional martial arts in cultivating compassion through embodied practice, highlighting how the physical, interpersonal, and disciplined nature of training can foster prosocial emotional development. Similarly, Blomqvist Mickelsson and Stylin (2021) propose a practitioner model that frames combat sports as structured forms of rough-and-tumble play, facilitating behavioral regulation and mutual care among

participants. These contributions align with and enrich the foundations of CALM by demonstrating that martial arts can support both emotional control and interpersonal development in theoretically grounded ways. Although theoretical development in this area remains limited, integrating such models helps to locate CALM within an emerging scholarly discourse that moves beyond traditional assumptions of martial arts as merely structured leisure or discipline.

2.3. Model of Emotion Regulation, Combat Sport Participation, and Reduced Violent Behavior

1. Combat Sport Participation → Emotional Learning → Improved Emotion Regulation

Participation in combat sports creates a structured and controlled environment where individuals are repeatedly exposed to emotionally charged situations (e.g., frustration, fear, and anger).

Through social learning, participants observe skilled fighters managing their emotional responses (e.g., staying calm after being hit) and internalize these strategies.

Combat sport training encourages emotional processing and coping strategies (e.g., breathing control, cognitive reframing) that enhance emotional regulation skills.

2. Improved Emotion Regulation → Regulated Anger

Enhanced emotion regulation increases participants' ability to recognize and control anger responses.

Individuals develop the ability to distinguish between functional anger (e.g., determination, increased focus) and destructive anger (e.g., uncontrolled aggression).

Cognitive reappraisal and response modulation skills enable individuals to shift from impulsive aggression to strategic emotional control.

3. Regulated Anger → Reduced Incidence of Violent Behavior

When anger is regulated, individuals are less likely to resort to violent or aggressive behavior as a coping mechanism.

Increased emotional self-awareness allows participants to disengage from confrontation and resolve conflict through non-violent means.

The structured and respectful culture of combat sports reinforces prosocial values, discouraging aggressive responses outside of competition.

2.4. Summary of Model Flow

1. Combat sport participation provides emotional challenges in a controlled environment.
2. Social learning through the observation of skilled fighters teaches emotional regulation strategies.
3. Enhanced emotion regulation leads to regulated anger (i.e., using anger functionally rather than impulsively).
4. Regulated anger reduces the likelihood of violent responses to provocation or stress.

3. Applying the COM-B Model to Increase Participation in Combat Sports

To increase participation in combat sports, it is essential to address the key components of the COM-B model (Michie et al., 2011)—Capability, Opportunity, and Motivation—through targeted interventions and stakeholder engagement. A successful strategy will require buy-in from key stakeholders, capacity building, and an integrated approach to raising awareness about the benefits of combat sports for health, fitness, and emotional regulation.

In terms of opportunity, the British Martial Arts and Boxing Association (BMABA) supports over 100,000 participants across approximately 6500 clubs in the UK alone. Boxing

has demonstrated a unique ability to engage individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, particularly in areas where traditional middle-class sports like parkrun struggle to make inroads. Approximately 40% of England Boxing's member clubs are situated in the 20% most deprived areas of the country, underscoring boxing's ability to engage individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. This highlights boxing's role in providing not only physical activity but also community support, where other sports may face challenges in participation.

3.1. *Capability*

Developing capability involves equipping individuals with the physical, psychological, and emotional skills needed to engage in combat sports. This requires building the expertise and infrastructure within existing organizations and creating accessible opportunities for individuals to develop these skills. Combat sports clubs already have technical expertise and facilities, but there is a need for structured educational programs to raise awareness about how combat sports can improve emotional regulation and mental health.

Clubs—Combat sports clubs should be supported to increase their capacity through targeted funding and training. They could host taster sessions where individuals could try out combat sports in a controlled and supportive environment. These sessions should emphasize emotional regulation and the psychological benefits of participation alongside physical fitness.

Universities—Universities could partner with clubs to develop and deliver emotion regulation training targeted at coaches and participants. Academic input would help ground these programs in evidence-based approaches, ensuring that combat sports training includes psychological components such as cognitive reappraisal, attentional control, and emotional regulation. Universities should also be running research-based evaluation studies to assess the effectiveness of the programs. Universities offer a broad range of expertise and single-, multi-, and interdisciplinary studies could be run. Research should be co-constructed with key stakeholders.

National Governing Bodies (NGBs)—NGBs should act as hubs for best practices and training standards. They could establish centers of excellence where elite athletes and coaches are trained not only in combat skills but also in emotional regulation and social learning. These centers would serve as models of good practice, ensuring that the psychological benefits of combat sports are integrated into training at all levels.

3.2. *Opportunity*

Creating opportunities for individuals to engage in combat sports requires a multi-layered approach that includes social outreach, structured programming, and accessible pathways to participation. This means targeting various social and institutional settings where combat sports could have the most impact.

Social Media Presence—A strong social media campaign is essential to raise awareness and normalize combat sports as a tool for health and emotional regulation. Success stories, testimonials from participants, and evidence-based insights into the psychological benefits of combat sports should be widely shared. Engaging influencers and athletes with a large following could help increase visibility and shift perceptions.

Schools—Schools represent one of the most challenging but potentially impactful settings for introducing combat sports. Outreach programs should be developed where local clubs and universities partner with schools to provide structured training sessions. The focus should not be on encouraging aggression but on teaching emotion regulation, self-regulation, and respect. Schools could offer extracurricular programs or integrate

combat sports into physical education (PE) classes. Partnerships between schools and local clubs would create sustainable pathways for participation.

Community-Based Programs—Community-based boxing and martial arts programs have already shown success in engaging individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds. Expanding these programs, supported by NGBs and universities, would create more opportunities for young people to engage in structured combat sports. Financial barriers could be reduced by offering subsidized membership and free training sessions.

3.3. *Motivation*

Sustained motivation to participate in combat sports requires both intrinsic and extrinsic drivers. Success in combat sports is not solely defined by winning but by the development of self-control, emotional regulation, and mastery.

Role Models—Successful athletes who embody emotional control and respect should be used to inspire participants. NGBs and clubs could host public events, workshops, and social media campaigns where professional fighters share their personal journeys and the role of emotional regulation in their success.

Psychological Skills Training—Building motivation requires individuals to see tangible improvements in their emotional and physical health. Universities could partner with clubs to deliver workshops on psychological skills training, including goal setting, cognitive reappraisal, and self-talk.

Recognition and Reward—Structured reward systems within clubs and schools could reinforce participation and emotional control. For example, clubs could introduce progression systems where emotional mastery and self-control are recognized as key markers of success, alongside technical skills and competition results.

3.4. *Operationalizing the Strategy*

To operationalize this strategy, a phased implementation plan should be developed:

Phase 1—Capacity Building—Provide funding and resources to combat sports clubs and NGBs to increase their capacity and expertise in emotional regulation training. Develop partnerships with universities to create standardized programs.

Phase 2—Community and School Outreach—Launch social media campaigns, set up outreach programs in schools and communities, and create entry points for young people to try combat sports. Focus on building relationships between clubs, schools, and universities.

Phase 3—Sustained Engagement—Introduce structured reward systems and athlete role models to reinforce participation. Monitor program outcomes and adjust strategies based on feedback and participation rates.

Phase 4—Research and Evaluation—Partner with universities to evaluate the impact of these programs on emotional regulation, aggression reduction, and participant well-being. Use the findings to refine and scale the intervention.

This approach integrates the COM-B framework with evidence-based strategies for improving emotional regulation and reducing aggression. By engaging key stakeholders and creating structured opportunities for participation, combat sports can become a scalable and sustainable tool for improving emotional and social outcomes among youth.

I acknowledge that the CALM model, like many behavioral and therapeutic interventions, faces a number of implementation challenges. Delivering sport-based interventions with a focus on emotional regulation and violence reduction requires more than simply increasing access to combat sports. Coaches must be trained not only in the technical and tactical aspects of the sport, but also in emotional literacy, safeguarding practices, and the principles of trauma-informed care. This requires substantial investment in professional development and supervision, particularly if interventions are to be delivered safely

and consistently across diverse community settings. Here, I argue that there are multiple benefits in performing this, with enhanced physical fitness being the most apparent.

Cross-sector collaboration presents another significant challenge. The success of CALM depends on effective coordination between schools, local authorities, community sports organizations, and mental health services. Without a clear framework for partnership and shared goals, there is a risk of fragmented delivery, duplication of effort, or failure to embed the intervention into wider youth support networks. Moreover, ensuring accountability and monitoring outcomes will be essential, yet potentially resource-intensive.

Importantly, many of these obstacles are not unique to the CALM model. Conventional interventions in mental health, education, and youth development similarly struggle with issues of scalability, cost, and sustained engagement. However, CALM offers unique advantages by harnessing the cultural relevance and existing infrastructure of combat sports. In communities where traditional services are viewed with skepticism or are inaccessible due to stigma or cost, sport-based models may provide a more appealing and organic point of entry. By embedding behavioral change strategies into meaningful and familiar activities, CALM has the potential to overcome some of the very barriers that often limit the reach and impact of formal interventions.

4. Future Research

While the existing literature highlights the positive effects of combat sports on emotion regulation and aggression control, further research is needed to assess long-term behavioral outcomes. Studies employing longitudinal designs can help to determine whether participation in combat sports leads to sustained reductions in violent behavior. Additionally, comparative analyses between different sports may clarify whether combat sports offer unique advantages over other physical activities in emotion regulation development.

Beedie et al.'s (2022) 4Rs model provides a structured approach to recognizing and resolving emotional distress, restoring balance, and regulating responses, while Gross's (1998, 2002) emotion regulation model highlights mechanisms such as cognitive reappraisal and response modulation that are integral to controlling aggressive impulses. Combat sports serve as a unique intervention by embedding these regulatory strategies within structured training, fostering self-discipline, respect, and resilience. By providing an environment where individuals can safely experience, process, and regulate emotions, combat sports offer a compelling tool to reduce youth violence and promote emotional well-being.

In terms of the proposed way forwards, I suggest the co-construction of research with input from key stakeholders from the onset. Smith et al. (2023) highlight the importance of co-construction in sport, exercise, and health sciences by emphasizing that involving participants as active partners in the research process enhances the relevance, applicability, and impact of interventions. Co-construction, as outlined in their framework for co-production, ensures that the knowledge and experiences of participants are integrated into the development and delivery of behavioral change strategies. This collaborative process not only empowers individuals but also leads to more tailored and culturally sensitive interventions, increasing the likelihood of sustained behavioral change. Smith et al. argue that by fostering a sense of ownership and shared responsibility, co-construction enhances participant engagement and motivation, ultimately improving the effectiveness and long-term success of behavior change efforts. Their work underscores that meaningful partnerships between researchers and participants can address power imbalances and create more equitable and effective solutions in sport, exercise, and health contexts.

5. Limitations

Despite the theoretical promise of combat sports as a vehicle for reducing youth violence, there are considerable limitations that warrant discussion. First, the assumption that combat sports can deliver uniform psychosocial benefits such as emotional regulation, discipline, and respect overlooks the substantial differences between the sports themselves. Boxing, judo, MMA, wrestling, and taekwondo vary significantly in their rules, techniques, training cultures, and levels of contact. Judo, for example, is primarily grappling-based and prohibits striking, whereas boxing is entirely striking-focused. These distinctions matter because they may elicit different emotional and physiological responses, and thus, different opportunities for emotional learning. Even within a single sport, variations in club culture, coaching philosophy, and participant demographics can produce very different psychosocial outcomes. This complexity means that the findings from one setting or sport cannot be easily generalized to others without rigorous comparative analysis.

Second, sport—particularly at the grassroots and recreational level—is not a tightly regulated intervention setting. There is wide variability in how combat sports are taught, who delivers them, and the pedagogical values that underpin training. This model assumes that coaches are not only competent in the sport but also trained in psychological principles such as emotional regulation and trauma-informed practice. This is a substantial leap, particularly in resource-limited settings. While this lack of regulation presents a limitation from an implementation science perspective, it is also an opportunity: young people are drawn to these activities organically, without the coercion or stigma sometimes associated with formal interventions. That organic appeal is a strength that future research should harness, but only with the careful evaluation of safeguarding, pedagogy, and unintended consequences—particularly for vulnerable youth.

Third, gender is a critical consideration in the design and implementation of interventions to reduce violence. As Flood (2020) emphasizes, male violence—particularly against women—is both more prevalent and more severe, and it is closely linked to norms of masculinity that valorize dominance, control, and physical aggression. Effective violence prevention therefore requires interventions that actively challenge harmful gender norms while promoting alternative, prosocial forms of masculinity. Combat sports, traditionally male-dominated and associated with hypermasculine cultures, may seem counterintuitive in this context. However, many combat sports now offer male and female categories, with increasing participation from women and girls. Notably, women's boxing was only recently introduced to the Olympic Games in 2012, signaling a shift towards greater gender inclusivity and the redefinition of what these sports represent. Interventions like CALM must therefore be sensitive to these dynamics, ensuring that they do not reinforce gender stereotypes but instead promote respectful relationships, emotional regulation, and equity for all participants, regardless of gender.

Finally, it is important to acknowledge that much of this work remains highly conceptual, with many “ifs and buts” to resolve before a clear pathway to impact can be defined. There is currently insufficient empirical evidence to confirm the mechanisms proposed in the CALM model, nor is it clear whether combat sports are uniquely effective compared to other intense, emotionally demanding sports such as rugby or handball. However, these are not reasons to abandon the work. Rather, they highlight the need for a series of carefully designed studies, even if they appear simplistic at first glance. Undergraduate and early-career researchers are well-positioned to contribute to this agenda through manageable projects examining the mechanisms of change, pilot interventions, or comparative sport analyses. As with any emerging field, building a credible evidence base starts with answering foundational questions—and being transparent about the limitations of what we know so far.

6. Conclusions

Youth violence remains a significant societal concern, with anger playing a central role in aggressive behavior. Gross's emotion regulation model provides a useful framework for understanding how combat sports contribute to emotional regulation. By channeling aggression into structured and disciplined activities, combat sports provide young individuals with the tools to regulate emotions, develop self-discipline, and integrate into positive social networks. Future research should further explore the long-term impacts of combat sports on emotional regulation and youth violence prevention.

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