

# Beyond The Individual: Understanding How Group Dynamics and Self-Esteem Influences Escalation of Violent Conflicts Among College Students in Chennai

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**Abstract:** College student conflicts originate through intellectual and social factors especially self-worth and cohort interactions. This study investigates how self-esteem and group dynamics influence support-seeking behaviour and conflict escalation among college students. Drawing on Social Identity Theory, Group Conflict Theory, and Social Support Theory, the study examines whether low self-esteem individuals are more likely to rely on peer groups during conflict situations. A cross-sectional survey was conducted among 150 college students in Chennai using validated instruments such as the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale and custom made Likert-scaling measures. Statistical analysis included Pearson correlation, regression, and two-way ANOVA. The results showed that self-esteem had a negligible and non-significant influence on support-seeking. However, in-group trust and perceived out-group threat were strong predictors of conflict-related behaviours, with trust having the most significant effect. The interaction between self-esteem and group identity approached statistical significance, suggesting that group context may influence conflict escalation for low self-esteem individuals. These findings offer policy insights for implementing campus-based conflict resolution and peer support programs that strengthen emotional well-being and group cohesion.

**Keywords:** Self-Esteem, Group Dynamics, Social Identity, Conflict Escalation, Support-Seeking Behaviour, Peer Groups.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Human conflict is inherently a social phenomenon, emerging from interactions between individuals and groups who possess competing needs, goals, and values [1], [2]. These dynamics are shaped by overlapping cultural, psychological, and structural factors that collectively influence individual behaviour and group responses [1]. In adolescence and early adulthood, individuals are particularly vulnerable to emotional fluctuations and peer influence, leading them to seek social validation and emotional security through peer networks [3], [4].

Within this developmental window, college students frequently turn to friends and peers for support during interpersonal confrontations. The urban context of Chennai, India, presents a unique cultural setting where socio-cultural variables such as caste, community affiliation, and regional identity influence peer relations and conflict behaviours [5]. In such environments, reliance on peer groups becomes central—not only for emotional regulation but also for strategic group-based responses to perceived threats.

To investigate these relational patterns, the study draws on key theoretical frameworks. Social Identity Theory and Group Conflict Theory explain how in-group favouritism and out-group hostility structure individual and collective responses during conflict [6]. In parallel, the Social Responsibility Norm posits that individuals feel obligated to assist peers during stressful episodes, reinforcing group cohesion [7]. These frameworks collectively suggest that self-esteem and group loyalty are central in determining students' tendencies to seek group support and participate in collective conflict behaviours.

Self-esteem, conceptualized as one's evaluation of self-worth and capacity to navigate challenges, plays a critical role in shaping help-seeking behaviour [8]. Its development is influenced by various factors including life experiences, social interactions, and contextual stability [9]. Individuals with higher self-esteem are more likely to adopt proactive coping strategies, including seeking appropriate help during violent or emotionally intense situations [10]. In contrast, those with lower self-esteem may lean more heavily on group validation and may be more reactive to interpersonal threats.

Group dynamics—defined as behavioural interactions and adaptive responses among individuals within a group—serve as a mediating force that either facilitates constructive support or aggravates hostility [11]. Norms,



mutual obligations, and emotional resonance within a group can significantly influence whether a peer supports conflict resolution or contributes to its intensification [7]. While group cohesion can foster emotional security, it can also exacerbate intergroup tensions and resistance to reconciliation.

A fundamental distinction exists between in-group and out-group dynamics. In-groups offer belongingness, trust, and identity affirmation, but it can also encourage in-group bias and exclusionary procedures [6], [12]. Out-groups, by contrast, are often perceived as threatening or antagonistic, leading to scapegoating, dehumanization, and reduced conflict resolution potential [13]. This study explores how students navigate these dual influences—trust within the in-group and threat from the out-group—when choosing whether to seek support or escalate conflicts.

Support-seeking refers to the act of reaching out to others—especially peers—for emotional, informational, or instrumental assistance during crises [14]. While often a healthy coping mechanism, it can also contribute to conflict escalation if it reinforces in-group boundaries or amplifies collective grievances [15], [16]. Conflict escalation, in peer settings, frequently results from perceived social or environmental threats and is often amplified by existing group dynamics [17], [18].

This study aims to investigate why students prefer group-based support during conflicts instead of resolving issues independently. It specifically examines whether low self-esteem and heightened group identity increase the likelihood of support-seeking and conflict escalation. Although the interactions between these variables have been examined in other cultural contexts, limited research has explored their interplay in Indian college environments. The findings of this research are intended to provide a socio-psychological framework for understanding student conflict and inform policies related to conflict prevention, mental health, and peer-based interventions in academic institutions.

## **II. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Self-Esteem and Support-Seeking Behaviour**

Self-esteem is considered as a determinant of individual behaviour during violent conflict situations it is generally understood as a self-worth in an individual and competence shaped by life experiences social validation and emotional strength [1]. Research indicates that adolescents and teenagers with lower self-esteem are more likely to seek emotional support from peers as a compensatory mechanism during stressful events [3]. Such help-seeking behaviour is often motivated by the need for external reassurance and psychological safety particularly in situations involving peer-related conflict and perceived social exclusion [4]. Branden emphasized that high self-esteem individuals demonstrate increased autonomous decision-making whereas lower self-esteem may lead to coping styles such as overreliance on peer support [5].

Sitnik-Warchulska et al found that self-esteem contributes as a moderating role in students likelihood to seek help during situations involving bullying and violence [10]. Similarly, Han and Kim highlighted the role of social factors leading to the growth of self-esteem linking relational support to self-concept these result suggest that students with lower self-esteem may use peer support to buffer perceived personal inadequacy making self-esteem a potential antecedent of group-aligned behaviour in conflict situations [9].

### **2.2 Group Dynamics and Peer Influence**

Group dynamics, broadly defined as behavioural patterns that develop within groups, play a vital role in shaping interpersonal decisions and social responses. Lewin [11] originally conceptualized group behaviour as a function of shared experiences and evolving group norms. In contemporary studies, group cohesion, mutual obligations, and normative expectations have been shown to both mitigate and intensify conflict behaviour [7]. Berkowitz and Daniels [7] demonstrated that the salience of the social responsibility norm increases when individuals have strong affective ties within their group, often leading them to intervene or act collectively during periods of conflict.

Group belongingness also fosters a sense of psychological safety and shared identity, which may drive members to support each other in contentious situations—even when such support exacerbates conflict. This underscores the dual role of group dynamics: while they can facilitate cooperation and protection, they may also reinforce ingroup favouritism and escalate confrontations when outgroup members are perceived as threats [6].

### **2.3 In-group Trust and Outgroup Threat**

The distinction between ingroup and outgroup processes is central to understanding collective behaviour in conflict. Social Identity Theory posits that individuals derive self-worth from their group affiliations, often resulting in biased perceptions toward outgroups [12]. High levels of ingroup trust—based on mutual understanding and emotional bonding—can significantly increase conformity to group norms and willingness to support group-aligned actions, including those that involve aggression or exclusion [13].

Conversely, perceived outgroup threat has been linked to defensive or hostile responses, which may include scapegoating, social distancing, or open confrontation [14]. Integrated Threat Theory further argues that both symbolic and realistic threats from outgroups can amplify intergroup tension, thereby increasing the



likelihood of collective escalation [15]. In college environments where social identities are salient—such as caste, region, or language—these psychological processes can play out in daily interpersonal conflicts, turning individual disputes into collective standoffs.

#### **2.4 Conflict Escalation in Peer Settings**

Conflict escalation is the intensification of interpersonal tensions into hostile or aggressive encounters. Niens et al. [12] observed that conflict is more likely to escalate when individuals perceive themselves as being unsupported or when group identity is under threat. Peer-based violence in academic institutions is rarely random; rather, it is often the outcome of layered psychological and social processes involving perceived injustice, emotional reactivity, and group validation [16].

Dishion and Andrews [17] highlighted the role of deviant peer affiliations in reinforcing conflict behaviour through mutual encouragement of risk-taking and hostility. This aligns with findings that emphasize the role of group norms and social learning in sustaining conflict over time. When students believe that their group loyalty is being tested or that outgroups pose a threat to group cohesion, they may escalate conflicts as a form of social reinforcement and identity preservation.

### **III. METHODOLOGY**

#### **3.1 Participants**

The study was conducted using a structured questionnaire among undergraduate college students aged 17 to 21 years, a critical developmental period for identity formation and emotional regulation [1]. A total of 150 respondents were selected via purposive sampling from colleges located in Chennai, India. This location was chosen due to its socio-cultural diversity, which offers a meaningful context for exploring peer dynamics and conflict behaviour. The sample consisted of both male and female students from diverse academic disciplines. To ensure sufficient statistical power, an a priori power analysis was conducted using G\*Power 3.1. Calculations indicated a minimum required sample size of 61 for Pearson correlation, 55 for simple linear regression, 31 for multiple regression, and 73 for two-way ANOVA, assuming an effect size of 0.35–0.40,  $\alpha = 0.05$ , and power = 0.80.

#### **3.2 Tools**

The following standardized and custom tools were employed in the study:

- *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale (RSES)*: A widely validated 10-item scale used to assess global self-esteem levels. It was administered in its original 4-point Likert format to reduce central tendency bias [2].
- *Support-Seeking Scale*: A 5-point Likert-type scale was constructed to measure the frequency and intensity of peer support-seeking behaviours during conflict scenarios.
- *Group Trust and Validation Scale*: This custom scale measured the extent to which participants felt emotionally supported, accepted, and validated by their peer group during interpersonal challenges.
- *Perceived Outgroup Threat Scale*: A set of items assessed the degree of perceived danger, hostility, or exclusion posed by members outside one's primary peer group.
- *Conflict Escalation Index*: Participants self-reported the frequency and severity of their involvement in group-based or interpersonal conflicts using a structured Likert response format.

Each of these tools was piloted and refined to enhance clarity and reliability prior to full-scale data collection.

#### **3.3 Procedure**

The study adopted a cross-sectional survey design. Participants were invited to complete a structured questionnaire comprising 77 items across the variables of interest. The instrument was administered in English and distributed both in-person and via institutional email systems. Responses were collected anonymously and coded using participant ID numbers to ensure confidentiality.

A pilot study involving 30 students was conducted to validate the tool. The Cronbach's alpha for the full instrument was 0.938 (standardized alpha: 0.936), indicating high internal consistency. Based on participant feedback, minor wording adjustments were made, and the RSES was corrected to its original 4-point format. The final version of the questionnaire demonstrated item mean values between 2.033 and 4.067, with acceptable variance.

#### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

This study was designed with full respect for ethical values people were invited to take part only if they wished to and there were no negative effects for choosing not to the purpose of the research was clearly shared so that each person could decide freely all answers were kept private and no names or identifying details were revealed to make participants feel at ease it was made clear that their honest views mattered more than any right or wrong response if they had questions or needed help the researchers were available to talk at any point.



## IV. RESULTS

This section presents the results from the research evaluating the impact of Individuals self-esteem and group dynamics on conflict escalation tendencies and support-seeking behaviour among 150 undergraduate students in Chennai, India. Data were collected using validated questionnaires, including the Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale[19], Support-Seeking Scales, Group Trust and Validation Scale, Perceived Outgroup Threat Scale, and Conflict Escalation Index. Statistical analyses, including Pearson correlation, multiple regression, and two-way ANOVA, tested the four hypotheses. Results are organized by hypothesis, with key findings summarized in Tables 1–5.

### 4.1 Sample Description

The sample comprised 150 students (52% male, 48% female), with a mean age of 19.2 years (SD = 1.3). Demographic data indicated diverse socio-cultural backgrounds, with 68% reporting community affiliations. Descriptive statistics showed moderate self-esteem ( $M = 2.85$ ,  $SD = 0.62$ ), support-seeking behaviour ( $M = 3.12$ ,  $SD = 0.79$ ), high in-group trust ( $M = 3.65$ ,  $SD = 0.71$ ), moderate perceived out-group threat ( $M = 2.94$ ,  $SD = 0.88$ ), and low-to-moderate conflict escalation ( $M = 2.67$ ,  $SD = 0.91$ ).

### 4.2 Hypothesis 1: Low Self-Esteem Individuals Are More Likely to Engage in Support-Seeking Behaviour

Pearson correlation analysis (Table 1) revealed a weak, non-significant positive correlation connecting self-esteem and support-seeking behaviour during violence ( $r = 0.09$ ,  $p = 0.273$ ). A simple linear regression (not tabulated due to redundancy) confirmed no significant predictive effect ( $F(1, 148) = 1.22$ ,  $p = 0.271$ ,  $R^2 = 0.008$ ,  $\beta = 0.09$ ). These findings suggest that self-esteem has minimal influence on support-seeking behaviour, challenging the hypothesis.

**Table 1: Pearson Correlation Coefficient connecting Self-Esteem and Support-Seeking Behaviour (Hypothesis 1)**

Variable	Correlation (r)	p-value
Self-Esteem vs Support Seeking	0.09	0.273

### 4.3 Hypothesis 2: Low Self-Esteem Correlates with Increased Reliance on Groups During Violent Conflicts

Pearson correlation analysis (Table 2) showed a non-significant weak negative correlation linking self-esteem and group reliance during violence ( $r = -0.12$ ,  $p = 0.147$ ). A simple linear regression (not tabulated due to low explanatory power) indicated no significant effect ( $F(1, 148) = 2.13$ ,  $p = 0.147$ ,  $R^2 = 0.014$ ,  $\beta = -0.12$ ). These results suggest that self-esteem does not significantly drive group reliance, rejecting the hypothesis.

**Table 2: Pearson Correlation Coefficient Between Self-Esteem and Group Reliance (Hypothesis 2)**

Variable	Correlation (r)	p-value
Self-Esteem vs Group Reliance	-0.12	0.147

### 4.4 Hypothesis 3: In-Group Trust and Perceived Out-Group Threat Are the Most Influential Predictors of Support-Seeking Behaviour

Multiple regression analysis (Table 3) was significant ( $F(2, 147) = 18.45$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ,  $R^2 = 0.201$ ), explaining 20.1% of the variance in support-seeking behaviour. In-group trust was the strongest predictor ( $\beta = 0.511$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), followed by perceived out-group threat ( $\beta = 0.236$ ,  $p = 0.004$ ). Collinearity diagnostics indicated no issues ( $VIF < 2$ ). These findings support the hypothesis, highlighting the critical role of group dynamics in support-seeking behaviour.

**Table 3: Multiple Regression Analysis for Predictors of Support-Seeking Behaviour (Hypothesis 3)**

Predictor	$\beta$	p-value	F (2,147)	$R^2$	VIF
In-Group Trust	0.511	<0.001	18.45	0.201	1.15
Perceived Out-Group Threat	0.236	0.004			1.15

### 4.5 Hypothesis 4: Lower Self-Esteem Individuals Are More Likely to Escalate Conflicts When Group Identity Is Emphasized

A two-way ANOVA (Table 5) examined the interaction between self-esteem (low vs. high) and group identity salience (high vs. low) on conflict escalation. Levene's Test (Table 4) indicated unequal variances ( $p = 0.020$ ), warranting cautious interpretation. The ANOVA showed nonsignificant main effects for self-esteem ( $F(1, 146) = 2.34$ ,  $p = 0.128$ ) and group identity ( $F(1, 146) = 3.12$ ,  $p = 0.079$ ), but a near-significant interaction ( $F(1, 146) = 3.45$ ,  $p = 0.068$ ). Post-hoc tests revealed higher conflict escalation for lower self-esteem individuals under high group identity salience ( $M = 3.02$ ,  $SD = 0.94$ ) compared to high self-esteem individuals ( $M = 2.65$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ). These results suggest a trend supporting the hypothesis.



**Table 4: Levene's Test for Equality of Variances (Hypothesis 4)**

Test	Statistic	p-value
Levene's Test	5.42	0.020

**Table 5: Two-Way ANOVA for Self-Esteem and Group Identity on Conflict Escalation (Hypothesis 4)**

Sources	F (1, 146)	p-value	Mean (Low SE, High GI)	Mean (High SE, High GI)
Self- Esteem	2.34	0.128		
Group Identity	3.12	0.079	3.02	2.65
Interaction	3.45	0.068		

## V. DISCUSSION

This study explored how self-esteem and group dynamics shape support-seeking and conflict escalation among Chennai college students, revealing nuanced insights into collectivist contexts. The findings challenge assumptions about self-esteem's role while highlighting group-level influences, offering fresh perspectives for conflict management.

For Hypothesis 1, the negligible link between self-esteem and support-seeking contrasts with [19] view that low self-worth drives peer reliance. This divergence may reflect Chennai's collectivist culture, where group norms overshadow individual traits[20]. Similarly, Hypothesis 2's finding that self-esteem does not drive group reliance during conflicts diverges from social identity theory [6], [21], which posits that low self-esteem fuels group affiliation. Instead, situational factors like conflict intensity may dominate, suggesting self-esteem's role is context-dependent.

Hypothesis 3's robust finding that in-group trust and perceived out-group threat predict support-seeking aligns with social capital theory [22], emphasizing trust as a catalyst for collective action. The stronger effect of trust over threat complements intergroup threat theory [23], indicating that internal cohesion, not just external rivalry, drives behaviour in collectivist settings. This underscores the need for fostering trust in educational environments to promote constructive support-seeking.

The near-significant interaction for Hypothesis 4, where low self-esteem individuals escalate conflicts under high group identity salience, partially supports social identity theory. This trend suggests that group identity amplifies conflict tendencies among vulnerable students, a pattern less evident in Western studies [24]. Chennai's communal affiliations may heighten group-driven conflict, warranting culturally tailored interventions.

Compared to past studies, these findings highlight cultural specificity. Western research often emphasizes individual traits like self-esteem [25], but this study elevates group dynamics, aligning with collectivist frameworks. The minimal role of self-esteem challenges universalist assumptions, urging context-sensitive models of conflict behaviour.

Limitations include the small sample (N = 150), which may have limited power to detect significant effects, particularly for Hypothesis 4's interaction. Unequal variances in the ANOVA further constrain reliability, suggesting larger, balanced samples for future studies. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inferences, and self-report measures may introduce social desirability bias. Experimental or longitudinal approaches could clarify dynamic relationships.

These findings advocate for group-focused interventions in colleges, such as trust-building workshops or conflict resolution programs that de-emphasize group identity salience. Future research should explore situational moderators (e.g., conflict type) and behavioural measures to deepen understanding. This study enriches conflict literature by foregrounding collectivist dynamics, offering actionable insights for educators and policymakers in India.

## VI. CONCLUSION

This study illuminates the interplay of self-esteem and group dynamics in shaping support-seeking and conflict escalation among college students in Chennai, offering valuable insights into collectivist settings. The findings reveal that group-level factors, particularly in-group trust, outweigh individual self-esteem in driving support-seeking, while group identity salience may intensify conflict among those with lower self-worth. These results underscore the primacy of social cohesion in conflict behaviours, challenging individual-centric models prevalent in Western literature.

The implications are twofold. Academically, the study enriches conflict research by highlighting cultural nuances, urging scholars to prioritize group dynamics in collectivist contexts. Practically, it signals the need for educational institutions to foster inclusive group environments to mitigate conflict and promote constructive peer support. The prominence of in-group trust suggests that strengthening community ties can enhance student resilience, while addressing group identity salience may curb escalation tendencies among vulnerable individuals.



Recommendations include implementing trust-building programs, such as peer mentoring or collaborative projects, to bolster in-group cohesion. Conflict resolution workshops should teach students to navigate group identities mindfully, reducing the risk of escalation. Policymakers could integrate these strategies into campus curricula, emphasizing cultural sensitivity. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to trace causal pathways and larger samples to confirm interaction effects, enhancing generalizability. Exploring situational factors, like academic stress, could further clarify conflict triggers.

This study lays a foundation for understanding conflict in India's collectivist framework, advocating for group-focused interventions to create harmonious educational spaces. By bridging theory and practice, it paves the way for safer, more supportive campus communities.

## VII.CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest, financial or otherwise, ensuring neutrality in the conduct and reporting of this research.

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