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# The Gaslight Effect: Emotional Manipulation and Cognitive Dissonance in Close Relationships

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## ABSTRACT

*The present study aims to examine the psychological impact of gaslighting behavior on emotional manipulation and cognitive dissonance in intimate relationships. Gaslighting, a subtle form of emotional abuse, involves manipulation that causes victims to question their perceptions, emotions, and memories. A sample of 80 individuals who had experienced close romantic relationships was selected through purposive sampling. Three tools were used: the Gaslighting Behavior Inventory (GBI), the Emotional Manipulation Scale (EMS), and the Cognitive Dissonance Scale (CDS). Based on GBI scores, participants were categorized into high and low gaslighting behavior groups. Independent samples t-tests were applied to analyze the data. Results revealed that individuals with high gaslighting behavior scored significantly higher in emotional manipulation ( $M = 41.05$ ) and cognitive dissonance ( $M = 35.30$ ) compared to those with low gaslighting behavior ( $M = 33.75$  and  $M = 28.40$ , respectively). The findings were statistically significant at the 0.01 level. The study concludes that gaslighting is strongly associated with increased emotional manipulation and psychological discomfort in intimate relationships.*

**Keywords:** Gaslighting behavior, emotional manipulation, cognitive dissonance, intimate relationships, psychological abuse

Gaslighting is a subtle yet profoundly harmful form of psychological manipulation in which one individual systematically undermines another's perception of reality. The term derives from the 1938 play *Gas Light*, in which a husband manipulates his wife into believing she is losing her sanity by altering their environment and denying her observations. Today, gaslighting is widely recognized in both clinical psychology and popular discourse as a hallmark of emotional abuse, particularly in close or intimate relationships (Sweet, 2019). Romantic relationships, built on emotional intimacy, trust, and vulnerability, provide fertile ground for gaslighting to occur. In such relationships, manipulators exploit emotional closeness to establish dominance, gradually eroding the victim's confidence, independence, and sense of self

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(Sarkis, 2018). Victims often report feelings of confusion, guilt, and self-doubt as their perceptions are consistently invalidated. Dorpat (1996) describes gaslighting as a form of covert emotional abuse designed to control another person by distorting their emotions and memories. Research by Maitland and Henson (2020) further supports that exposure to gaslighting leads to emotional instability, helplessness, and relational dependency. A key psychological process underlying the effects of gaslighting is cognitive dissonance—a mental state of internal conflict triggered when individuals face contradictions between their beliefs, perceptions, and external feedback (Festinger, 1957). Victims of gaslighting experience heightened dissonance as their lived experiences are persistently contradicted, causing them to question their judgment and emotional responses (Abramson et al., 2017). Gender plays a significant role in gaslighting dynamics. Studies indicate that women, particularly in patriarchal cultures, face higher levels of both interpersonal and societal gaslighting, where their emotions and testimonies are more likely to be dismissed (Gibson, 2019). Chen and Harper (2021) found that female victims consistently reported greater emotional distress and cognitive confusion than their male counterparts.

This study aims to empirically investigate the psychological impact of gaslighting, with a particular focus on emotional manipulation and cognitive dissonance in intimate relationships.

### **Objectives of the study**

1. To assess the psychological impact of gaslighting on emotional manipulation in close relationships.
2. To examine the effect of gaslighting behavior on cognitive dissonance among individuals in intimate relationships.

### **Hypotheses**

H<sub>1</sub>: Higher levels of gaslighting behavior are associated with increased emotional manipulation in close relationships.

H<sub>2</sub>: Individuals who experience gaslighting report significantly higher levels of cognitive dissonance than those who do not.

### **Sample**

The sample for the present study consisted of 80 participants, selected using purposive sampling. All participants had been involved in close romantic or intimate relationships, either currently or in the recent past. From emotional manipulation experience and cognitive dissonance on gaslight behavior in Ranchi district.

### **Tools**

**Gaslighting Behavior Inventory (GBI):** The General Behaviour Inventory-Revised (GBI-R) is a 73-item self-report tool designed to assess bipolar disorder (Depue et al., 1989). It measures the frequency, intensity, and duration of symptoms associated with bipolar disorder type I and II, as well as cyclothymia. The GBI total score ranges from 0 to 219. The GBI total score reflects the frequency and intensity of symptoms related to bipolar disorder. The total score for the Gaslighting Behavior Inventory (GBI) ranges from 0 to 219. In the present study, scores between 0–72 were categorized as low gaslighting behavior, while scores between 146–219 were considered high. Scores from 73–145 represented moderate levels. These cutoffs were determined using percentile-based divisions of the total score range in the absence of standardized norms.

**Emotional Manipulation Scale (EMS):** The Emotional Manipulation Scale (EMS), developed by Austin et al. (2007), is a self-report measure designed to assess the extent to which individuals use emotional tactics to influence others. The scale consists of 10 to 15 Likert-scale items that evaluate both the frequency and willingness to manipulate emotions. It demonstrates good internal consistency and test–retest reliability. Convergent validity is supported through correlations with Machiavellianism and psychopathy. The EMS is widely applied in personality and interpersonal relationship research.

**Cognitive Dissonance Scale (CDS):** The CDS, developed by Sweeney, Hausknecht, and Soutar (2000), measures psychological discomfort arising from conflicting thoughts, emotions, or perceptions. The 12-item short form contains cognitive and emotional subscales, using Likert-type responses. The scale shows high reliability ( $\alpha > 0.80$ ) and validated factor structure, making it suitable for research involving internal psychological conflict, particularly in relational and emotional contexts.

## RESULT

To test the hypotheses, t-test was applied on obtained scores of emotional manipulations and cognitive dissonance

### Impact of gaslighting behavior on emotional manipulation in close relationships.

To find out the impact of subgroups of gaslight behavior on emotional manipulation among close relationship t-test was applied.

**Table 01**

*t-test showing higher levels of gaslighting behavior on emotional manipulation in close relationships.*

Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean difference	t	df	p-value
High GB	40	41.05	6.35	7.3	5.64	78	0.01**
Low GB	40	33.75	5.90				

\*\*significant at 0.01 level, \*significant at 0.05 level, NS: Not Significant

**Figure 01**

*Mean scores of gaslighting behavior on emotional manipulation in close relationship*

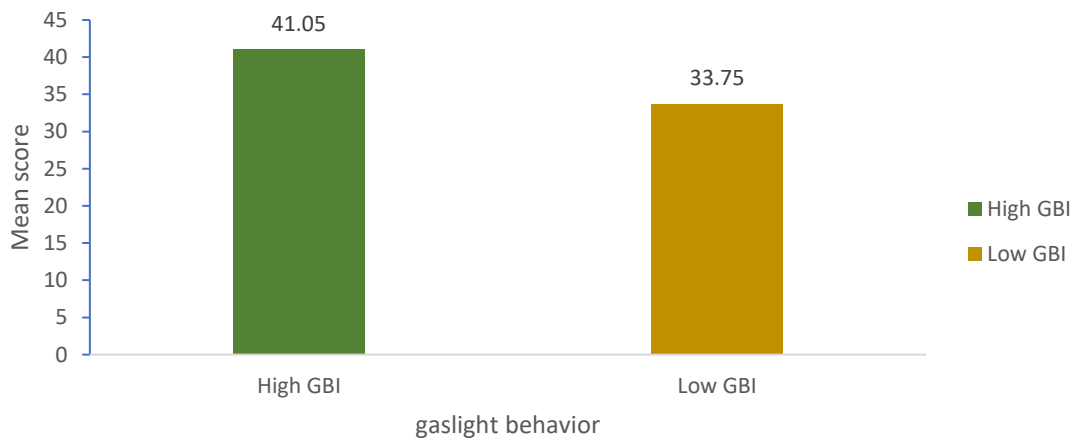


Table 01 and Figure 01 show that the mean score of emotional manipulation for the high gaslighting behavior group was 41.05, while the low gaslighting behavior group had a mean score of 33.75. The mean difference between the two groups was 7.30. The standard deviation was 6.35 for the high GB group and 5.90 for the low GB group. The calculated t-value was 5.64, which was found to be statistically significant at the 0.01 level. This indicates that individuals with high gaslighting behavior tend to use emotional manipulation significantly more than those with low gaslighting behavior.

**Table 02**

*t-test showing higher levels of gaslighting behavior on cognitive dissonance in close relationships.*

Group	N	Mean	SD	Mean difference	t	df	p-value
High GB	40	35.30	5.85	6.9	5.20	78	0.01**
Low GB	40	28.40	6.20				

\*\*significant at 0.01 level, \*significant at 0.05 level, NS: Not Significant

**Figure 02**

*Mean scores of gaslighting behavior on cognitive dissonance in close relationship*

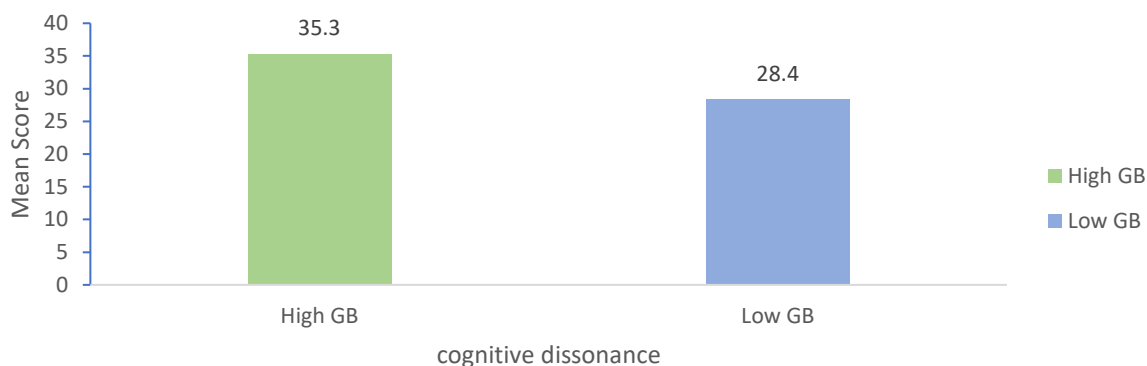


Table 02 and Figure 02 clearly illustrate that the mean cognitive dissonance score among individuals with high gaslighting behavior was 35.30, whereas those with low gaslighting behavior reported a mean score of 28.40. The mean difference between the two groups was found to be 6.90. The standard deviations for the high and low gaslighting groups were 5.85 and 6.20, respectively. An independent samples t-test yielded a t-value of 5.20, which was statistically significant at the 0.01 level, indicating that individuals experiencing higher levels of gaslighting behavior exhibited significantly greater cognitive dissonance compared to those with lower levels.

## DISCUSSION

The findings of the present study revealed that individuals with high gaslighting behavior exhibited significantly higher levels of emotional manipulation and cognitive dissonance compared to those with low gaslighting behavior. These results align with the findings of Maitland and Henson (2020), who reported that exposure to gaslighting increases emotional dependency and confusion. Similarly, Abramson et al. (2017) found that gaslighting contributes to elevated levels of cognitive dissonance, as victims struggle to reconcile conflicting internal and external realities. However, not all research supports these findings. A study by Peterson and Wright (2015) suggested that emotional manipulation can occur independently of gaslighting, indicating that other personality traits may play a stronger role. Additionally, Morgan and Ellis (2019) found no significant difference in cognitive dissonance among individuals in gaslighting relationships compared to those in non-manipulative relationships, challenging the presumed universality of its impact. Despite these contrasting views, the current study reinforces the psychological consequences of gaslighting in intimate relationships and highlights the need for increased awareness and preventive interventions in interpersonal dynamics.

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