


RESEARCH ARTICLE

Psychological and behavioral impacts of early adult women victims of gaslighting behavior in romantic relationships

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to identify and analyze the psychological and behavioral impact of early adult women who are victims of gaslighting in romantic relationships. Gaslighting is a behavior carried out by a gaslighter by intimidating, lying, dominating and manipulating victims where the goal is for the victims to doubt themselves, their memories, their own thoughts, and their own sanity. This study uses a qualitative research method with a case study approach. Subjects amounted to early adult woman who was a victim of gaslighting behavior in North Sulawesi, Indonesia. The data collection method used was observation and semi-structured interviews and then the data were analyzed using the data reduction process analysis method. The results showed that the psychological impacts experienced by victims of gaslighting behavior were confusion, frustration, anxiety, stress and low self-esteem. Meanwhile, the behavioral impact experienced by victims of gaslighting behavior is the emergence of argumentative behavior, desperate to convince the gaslighter, starting to doubt their own views, having difficulty making decisions, giving in and being silent to avoid conflict, and depending on the gaslighter.

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INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships are also called courtship, which involves an emotional bond between two committed individuals who have trust in their relationship. Romantic relationships have characteristics, namely intimacy, that will be achieved if both parties are open, support, understand, and speak without fear of rejection (Stenberg, 2022). However, if this romantic relationship or what is also called dating relationship violence (dating violence) occurs, of course, it will have an impact on the victim who experienced the violence. The results of previous research state that disruption of daily activities, depression, low levels of self-confidence and self-esteem, and a negative self-concept are the impacts that arise on victims who have experienced violence in a relationship (Astriani & Satiningsih, 2021).

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Additionally, based on the results of research regarding the acceptance of dating violence or acceptance made by victims who experience aggressive behavior by their partners in their relationship, the study stated that the first is the resistance that is carried out before giving rise to acceptance or acceptance of dating violence. The second is surrender, or the victim takes no action and immediately creates an attitude of acceptance or acceptance of dating violence (Pratiwi, 2020). Pratiwi explains that this second process is an acceptance process that is carried out without any resistance, occurs because of a feeling of helplessness, limitations in understanding a problem, trying to think positively about the behavior shown by the partner, such as the treatment the victim receives for love and affection, feelings of dependence on their partners, understanding because it has often happened, and dating relationships that have crossed reasonable limits.

The types of violence that occur in dating relationships are sexual violence, and physical violence, verbal and emotional violence (Murray, 2000). Sexual violence is violence committed by forcing sexual activity or contact without the consent of both parties. Physical violence is treatment received by one party in a relationship that causes that party to be physically injured. Furthermore, verbal and emotional violence is carried out through words and expressions or facial expressions. Murray states that forms of emotional violence are giving negative nicknames, intimidating, controlling through communication tools, monopolizing the partner's time, making the partner feel uncomfortable, blaming, threatening, and manipulating the partner so that they feel they are a different person. Unworthy of her boyfriend, interrogating and humiliating her partner in public. Of course, sexual violence and physical violence are often heard on TV news, social media, and articles. This is because the violence can be seen directly as a result or impact that arises after the occurrence of physical and sexual violence, such as bruising and bleeding, which can be seen and felt directly by the victim and can also be seen by other people.

However, verbal violence and emotional violence tend to be unnoticed because the impact that arises from verbal and emotional violence does not leave marks like physical bruises that are visible to other people (Paat et al., 2020). Likewise, victims who are too dependent on their partners and receive this treatment in the name of love and affection related to acceptance of dating violence accept this process without any resistance (Pereira, 2020). Emotional violence itself is violence that is carried out psychologically by controlling the thoughts, feelings, and desires of other people with verbal violence, such as criticism, which marks disapproval, intimidation, and humiliation, which makes the victim feel afraid (Rudy & Halgunseth, 2005). Furthermore, forms of emotional violence are domination, verbal aggressiveness, criticizing, blaming, wrong expectations, emotional blackmail, unexpected responses, always wanting to create conflict or crisis, character assassination, gaslighting, sexual harassment, intimidation, and isolating (Engel, 2023)

In this study, researchers focus on emotional violence that focuses on gaslighting or manipulating behavior. Because based on the previous research argued that the factor that causes gaslighting is social inequality. Furthermore, the result showed that women are more likely to be victims of gaslighting compared to men. Gaslighting is gendered because it is linked to the perception of femininity as being illogical, which increases women's susceptibility to this type of mistreatment (Sweet, 2019). Many victims especially women) do not realize that they are experiencing gaslighting (Cotter, 2021). This means that many victims are not aware of and persist in relationships where there is emotional violence, especially gaslighting behavior.

The phenomenon of gaslighting in Indonesia was booming among the young generation across the internet and social media, where there are many articles or news on the topic of gaslighting. For example, an article entitled "Getting to Know the 7 Stages of Gaslighting" (CNN Indonesia, 2020). Then gaslighting was also made into a film theme titled "Story of Kale: When Someone's in Love (Kale Story:

When Someone Falls in Love)." The film talks about how a romantic relationship is manipulative, and the characters are Dinda and two men, Kale and Argo. Dinda's character is described as trying to make her toxic relationship with Argo work, but their relationship still fails. Moreover, Dinda starts a new relationship with Kale, which ends up becoming toxic. Kale and Argo are characters who gaslighted Dinda.

An example of a gaslighting dialogue in the film by Laksamana is, "If you want our relationship to succeed, then quit your job (stop working)," Argo said to Dinda. Moreover, the impact of gaslighting behavior can be seen in Dinda's dialogue: "I am the one who cannot be a good girlfriend for him." From this, it can be understood that gaslighting results in low self-confidence and low self-esteem. The origin of the gaslighting phenomenon, according to an article written by, is that gaslighting is defined as a modern term that describes a toxic relationship in which violence occurs, not physical violence but emotional violence by disturbing the victim's psychology (Kurniawam & Limanta, 2021). Meanwhile, according to Oxford Language, gaslighting is defined as manipulating someone by psychological means into questioning their sanity. According to the journal *The Lancet Psychiatry*, gaslighting was initially known in the play *Patrick Hamilton* in 1938 (Thomas, 2018). It was later adapted by George Cukor in 1944 into a film named *Gaslighting* (Trächtler, 2022). In the film, a husband manipulates his wife by making her believe that she (his wife) has a mental disorder.

Some of the gaslighting behaviors that occur in dating relationships are usually words in the form of "you are too much" or "I am not angry. I am fine. What do you mean?" "I want to break up because of you!" I mean, because you are not like my friends who can be more open-minded", and "You always suspect me, so that makes me wonder if you love me." In the end, such words confuse the victim and even make him suspicious of whether he can trust his thoughts, memories, and perceptions because they often differ from what his partner or gaslighter says. Victims of gaslighting will always apologize, feel confused, do not understand why they feel unhappy and do not feel good enough.

The gaslighting case itself occurred in the researcher's friendship environment. One of the male members of the Community Service Program group (gaslighting practitioner) who was running for BEM chair at the time thought that he was higher than the subjects in this study (victims of gaslighting behavior), even group members who were not. This was clearly seen during the Community Service Program period, which researchers and other group members felt.

At the beginning of the courtship, the perpetrator's gaslighting behavior has not been seen. This is based on the story of the subject and the researcher. Then, when they were dating for several months, there were frequent arguments when they argued, and the perpetrator was proven guilty. You do not even want to understand that." Ultimately, the subject felt guilty even though the subject was not wrong.

The subject also often said that the subject felt that every time there was a fight, the subject would feel more guilty, persuade the victim, and apologize first. Then, an incident during the Community Service Program involved a fight between the perpetrator and the subject. The wrong party was the perpetrator, so the subject did not want to be invited to tell a story or chose to be indifferent and remain silent when the perpetrator asked to tell a story; the subject entered the room and left the perpetrator in the living room, ignoring message and telephone or call from the perpetrator. However, then the perpetrator was threatened with the sentence that the perpetrator would not eat until the subject agreed to talk to the perpetrator. Initially, the subject thought the perpetrator could not endure hunger for long. However, the perpetrators, who did not eat from noon, still chose not to eat until midnight. Finally, the subject persuaded the perpetrator to eat, even the subject, who finally apologized and felt guilty. This incident occurred at the beginning of their courtship. It occurred at the

accommodation of the researcher and the subject, which was also the gathering place for every Community Service Program group member. That is an example of a gaslighting case that the researcher encountered in the researcher's circle of friends.

Gaslighting certainly has an impact on a relationship. Abramson argues that clinically severe and severe depression is the final stage of gaslighting (Abramson, 2014). In line with Abramson's opinion, Dorpat states that depression, anxiety, and confusion are the effects of gaslighting (Dorpat, 1996). The British Government amended the Serious Crime Act to recognize gaslighting, now defined as coercive control (Thomas, 2018). The British government in 2015 renewed the law on domestic abuse or domestic violence, which recognizes gaslighting as a severe crime and is categorized as coercive control or coercive control over someone.

Meanwhile, in Indonesia, there is a lack of awareness about gaslighting, and in general, the victims of gaslighting are not aware that they have experienced emotional violence from their partner's gaslighting behavior and still consider the treatment received to be a form of love from the perpetrator. Moreover, the victim is very dependent on the perpetrator due to gaslighting behavior that is often accepted so that he continues to understand and accept gaslighting behavior from his partner.

The research results stated that individuals with low and high levels of dependence on power reported experiencing more gaslighting than individuals with moderate power (Graves & Samp, 2021). Individuals who have a high degree of dependency on their partner are more likely to experience gaslighting. This means that the more often an individual receives gaslighting treatment, the more the individual will depend on the perpetrator. Moreover, the higher the individual's dependence level, the more often the individual receives gaslighting treatment.

Even though Petric stated that gaslighting can be devastating, the consequences can be devastating (Petric, 2022). Spear argues that the impact of this gaslighting is the breaking of the relationship between the individual (the victim) and himself, the impact on the victim's feelings, the victim no longer knows what the victim wants and what he does not want. The victim will question his knowledge of himself and his surroundings (Spear, 2023). Moreover, as gaslighting is included as a form of emotional violence, the researchers also add to the results of the research, which states that the lower the individual's self-esteem, the higher the emotional violence treatment received will be (Bani, 2021). This is supported by the opinion of Fletcher that emotional violence can damage the victim's psychological condition and cause the victim to have feelings of low self-esteem (Fletcher, 2021).

Then, the results of Ismail et al.'s research on household conflict state that gaslighting has an impact on household harmony and is a factor in domestic conflict, which, if not handled or resolved correctly, will be a fact of the collapse of a household (Ismail et al. I, 2021). The impact that arises from gaslighting is often not realized because it does not show physical bruising, which victims and other people often misinterpret as the gaslighting treatment received is a form of love for their partner—making researchers interested in researching the impact received by victims of this gaslighting behavior, coupled with the lack of research that raises the topic of emotional violence in the form of gaslighting focus so that researchers feel the need to conduct this research in order to enrich research and benefit people who may be in a relationship that is experiencing the behavior gaslighting.

METHOD

This qualitative research is an "artistic method because the process is more artistic (less or slightly patterned) and is referred to as an interpretive method because the research data relates to the description or formulation of field data." Then, this research uses a type of case study in which the researcher explores one or more people's programs, events, processes, and activities. The subject in this study was an early adult woman aged 22 years who experienced gaslighting from her partner in Tomohon City, North Sulawesi, in 2022.

Qualitative research is characterized by observation because, in this study, the researcher is the party whose role is to determine the overall scenario used. So, in this study, the researcher acted as a critical instrument and a full participant in data collection, whereas other instruments served as support.

Table 1. Blueprint of research instrument

Variable	Aspect	Indicator
Psychological impact	<i>Disbelief</i> Here the victim is still quite sure of his own views so he doesn't really care about the wrong words of the gaslighter. But the gaslighter still tries to make the victim agree with him.	– Confused – Frustration
	Behavioral impact	– Denied
Psychological Impact	<i>Defense (pertahanan)</i> The victim argued with the gaslighter to make the gaslighter admit his guilt with the available evidence. But the gaslighter sticks to his own point of view and distorts the facts, and blames the victim. Until the victim begins to doubt his own views.	– Feeling anxious
	Behavioral impact	– Desperate to convince the gaslighter of the victim's own views – Begins to doubt his own views
Psychological impact	<i>Depression (depresi)</i> The victim begins to believe in the views of the gaslighter, which at first differ from him, then begins to try to prove that the views of the gaslighter are correct.	– Stress
	Behavioral impact	– Unable/difficult to make decisions independently – Often feels something is wrong

In this study, the researcher's chosen observation method was participant observation to more easily obtain data and information freely and be directly involved in the subject's life. The interview method used is semi-structured interviews to obtain more in-depth data because it does not rule out the possibility of unexpected answers appearing by researchers. However, it can still be controlled because the subject is only partially free to answer using the unstructured interview method. Moleong (2012) argues that triangulation is a technique for proving data validity using other things. There are source triangulation, data collection triangulation, and time triangulation. There are source triangulation, data collection triangulation, and time triangulation.

In this study, data analysis techniques were used in several steps. First, data reduction means summarizing, choosing things as the main thing, focusing on essential things, looking for topics and patterns so that you can get a clear picture and make it easier for researchers to collect further data, done to know that the measurement scale used is measurable, relevant, and by the objectives of the research or measurement. Second, data presentation, and lastly, conclusion drawing.

RESULT

The implementation of the research begins with interviews and observations during the interviews. The research was conducted for four weeks, during which two interviews were conducted, and observations were made three times because the subject's girlfriend, a campus organization member, was very busy with her organizational activities, so she only sometimes met with the subject.

The research subject was Esther (disguised), a female born in 2020. Esther is the second child of two siblings. She has an older brother who is three years apart from the subject and a biological mother and biological father. The subject comes from Amurang, Malenos Village. Currently, the subject lives in Tomohon to continue her education as a final-semester student.

The subject and her boyfriend have been dating for 13 months. They met for the first time in Kamanga Village because the subject and subject pair were in the same group in the Community Service Program activities carried out in the village. They became close because before meeting in person for Community Service Program activities, groups had been made in which the subject was the person who actively communicated in the group. Likewise with the subject pair. Then, the subject was appointed the group secretary, and the subject's partner as the group leader. This causes the subject to spend much time with the subject pair because they often report the daily and weekly activities of the Community Service Program group together.

The subject and his partner are in the same group for the Community Service Program fundraising group, so they meet more often. This is where the attraction between the two comes from. During the Community Service Program, subjects and subject partners often received input from group members in evaluation meetings and from some village youths who thought that the subjects and their partners were often alone even though other group members were doing other things together. Female friends of the same accommodation as the subject have reminded the subject personally, but the subject himself stated that the subject also often warns his partner; it is just that the partner does not hear and thinks that not all other people's opinions must be fulfilled.

After the Program was finished, the subject and her partner seemed more daring in showing closeness. The subject also looked seriously at their relationship because the subject had discussed marriage with his partner. The subject is quiet when she is not close, but when she is close, she cares about the people around her.

DISCUSSION

Gaslighting is an act that is often not realized by the victim. Basically, the act of gaslighting is to manipulate the victim. In line with that, DeJesus argues that many victims (women) do not realize that they are experiencing gaslighting (Yurko et al., 2021). Even though gaslighting has a harmful impact, the impact of this gaslighting is the breaking of the relationship between the individual (the victim) and himself; it has an impact on the victim's feelings, the victim no longer knows what the victim wants, and what he does not want, and the victim will question what he knows about himself and his surroundings.

According to Stern, the stages that gaslighting victims go through are disbelief (disbelief) with the effects of confusion, frustration, and denial; defense with the effect of despair convincing a partner or gaslighter about his views; starting to doubt his own views, and feeling anxious; and the third is depression (depression) with the impact of having difficulty making decisions, prioritizing the opinion of a partner, feeling stressed, and feeling something is wrong (Stern, 2007).

The Disbelief Dimension

Victims of gaslighting behavior begin with the effects of confusion. Where the victim feels confused by the different attitudes and views of the gaslighter from the victim. However, the victim is still quite sure of his views, does not care about the gaslighter's wrong words, tries to convince the gaslighter with his opinion, and finally gets frustrated convincing a gaslighter.

The subject himself admits that the subject needs clarification on the actions of the subject partner, requiring the subject to follow the will or opinion of the subject partner. In this case, the subject raises the behavior of arguing. When the gaslighter's opinion or behavior is wrong or inappropriate, the victim tends to correct it. However, a gaslighter will still feel pressured that he is right because Gaslighters think they are above social standards, decency, respect, and patience so that the victim will refute the gaslighter's opinion with the victim's views. Because the victim is still quite sure of his views and here the subject too.

With the victim's contradictory behavior, the gaslighter will increasingly look for ways to make the victim believe that the victim's opinion is wrong and that the gaslighter's opinion is correct. Of course, this frustrates the victim because the victim's views are always different from the gaslighter's, but the gaslighter still thinks that his views are always correct—until it requires the victim to agree with him.

Finally, the victim will prefer to give in to the gaslighter because he is tired of arguing and proving that he is right. Every conflict ends with the victim in the wrong position.

Dimension of Defense

The disbelief dimension ends with the gaslighting victim, who feels frustrated trying to convince the gaslighter about his views, so he chooses to give in and be silent. Then, in the defense dimension, it is followed by the emergence of doubts that the victim feels about his own views. The more frequent conflicts and differences of opinion between victims and gaslighters, the more often victims succumb to gaslighters, and the more often victims become the guilty party in every conflict and debate that occurs.

Therefore, victims will more often follow the gaslighter's opinion and begin to doubt their views. Thus, the subsequent impact is the victim's desperation to convince the gaslighter about his views. Judging from the observations and interviews, subjects more often succumb to their partners. Even though the subject has his own opinion, the subject still follows the opinion of the subject partner because the subject admits that his partner's words can convince him.

Moreover, the subject also admits to the end of the conflict. The subject also explains that the conflict often ends with the views or actions of the partner, so again, the subject will be the wrong party in the conflict.

Furthermore, it can be understood that a gaslighter uses mistakes or shortcomings that his victims have made to win and manipulate conflicts (Sarking, 2018: 15). This causes anxiety to be felt by the victim. The subject admitted that his partner had used his mistake to win the conflict, so he again placed the subject as guilty. The subject also admits to feeling afraid and anxious if the subject makes a mistake. Because the subject partner also said they would record or write down the subject's behavior.

Dimensions of Depression

The impact in this dimension is the victim's doubts about her views and the intensity of the victim giving in and following the opinion and will of the gaslighter. Coupled with feelings of anxiety and fear

of making mistakes, it becomes difficult for the victim to decide. This is because victims often follow gaslighter opinions and are careful in their behavior and opinions.

For the subject itself, when the subject is required to decide, the subject admits that he first asks his partner whether the decision he will make is based on his partner's views. It is hard to make decisions independently, and I feel stressed and often feel that something needs to be fixed. Moreover, when deciding to buy what the subject wants, the subject tends to buy according to the decision of the subject pair.

Apart from that, other impacts that arise on victims are stress and intimidation by gaslighters. The victim cannot express her feelings because the victim is already dependent on the gaslighter. So, the victim feels that she tells the gaslighter that she feels uncomfortable with some of the gaslighter's treatment; the victim is afraid the gaslighter will leave her. Moreover, when that happens, the victim will blame herself for what happened and feel unable to be a good partner. That is why the victim chooses to put aside the victim's feelings, accepts all the gaslighter's treatment, keeps silent, and gives in to the gaslighter in order to keep their relationship sound.

The subject also explained that he accepted the treatment of his partner, which, according to the subject, felt less pleasant, was to maintain a good relationship between the subject and his partner so that the subject surrendered and continued to give in to his partner. Putting aside her feelings, the victim must know something is missing or wrong from the victim's relationship with the gaslighter. In every conflict, the victim will be the guilty party, afraid of making mistakes, intimidated, and continuing to give in to the gaslighter. However, the victim takes no action to correct things that are felt wrong.

The subject admitted that she did not feel anything wrong with herself but felt something was wrong with her relationship. According to the subject, when a conflict occurs, the action taken by the partner to deal with the conflict is not to find a way out that is mutually beneficial to both parties but to find out who is right and who is wrong. However, the subject also follows it with the excuse that she is too lazy to argue. So there is no good solution for both parties. In this case, the subject also mentioned that the subject had felt inferior or inferior because their partners compared subjects who were not members of the organization with subject pairs who were very active in the organization and served as student executive council chairmen.

Based on the explanation above, the researcher can understand that the impact on victims of gaslighting behavior begins with confusion because the gaslighter forces the victim to follow an opinion different from the opinion or what the victim believes. Then, arguing arises because the victim is still quite sure of what the victim understands, even though it differs from that of a gaslighter. However, with the character of a gaslighter who feels that he is the most righteous person, the gaslighter will continue to argue with the victim and prove that he is correct so that the victim will experience the impact of frustration for not being able to convince the gaslighter and instead being the wrong party. Then, with the victim often being the guilty party, the victim will give up trying to convince the gaslighter. Finally, the victim gives in and follows the gaslighter's views and wishes. This causes the victim to go through the subsequent impact. Namely, the victim begins to doubt his views.

One way for a gaslighter to win a conflict with his victim is to make the mistakes made by the victim a weapon to win the conflict and make the victim the guilty party. So, it has an impact on victims who are anxious about their behavior and opinions because they are afraid to make mistakes. Furthermore, the gaslighting treatment that the victim received made it difficult for the victim to decide because he

depended on the gaslighter. It also causes stress and impact on the victim because the victim cannot honestly say what he feels in order to keep his relationship with the gaslighter good.

The final impact is the victim; the victim knows that something is wrong. However, they did not take action on it. Because the victim also feels intimidated by their partner and wants to maintain their relationship because the victim is already very dependent on the gaslighter. This is in line with Dorpat's opinion, which states that depression, anxiety, and confusion are the effects of gaslighting by what is experienced by the subject (Dorpat, 1996). Moreover, some of the causes of the subject experiencing gaslighting that were obtained during the study were because the subject was very dependent on his partner and the subject had low self-esteem. Because their partners often compare them.

Qinthara's findings state that the lower the individual's self-esteem, the higher the emotional violence treatment received (Qinthara, 2021). Gaslighting itself is included in emotional violence where, according to an article, gaslighting is defined as a modern term that describes a toxic relationship in which violence occurs but not physical violence but emotional violence by disturbing victim psychology (Kurniawan, Limanta, 2021). So, the more the subject or victim feels inferior, the higher the gaslighting behavior received will be. Moreover, by frequently receiving gaslighting and responding to these actions by giving in and being silent, over time, this will become a habit for the victim.

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis conducted by the researcher, it can be concluded that the psychological impacts experienced by victims of gaslighting behavior are confusion, frustration, anxiety, stress, and low self-esteem. Meanwhile, the behavioral impact experienced by victims of gaslighting behavior is arguing, despairing, starting to doubt their views, having difficulty making decisions, giving in and being silent to avoid conflict, and depending on the gaslighter. So, in order to get out of the gaslighting treatment that the victim has received, one must be able to have more faith in what the victim understands, be confident instead of feeling inferior, express the victim's feelings, dare to take action in relationships and conflicts that occur, as for some suggestions that the researcher wants to convey from the results of the research that has been done. Subjects are advised to have more confidence in themselves, to defend what they feel is right for themselves, and to be able to say or tell their partner how the subject feels when their partner does not care about the subject's opinion. For future researchers interested in gaslighting, it is recommended to explore the background of the perpetrator or gaslighter gaslighting their partner. To find out what factors are behind someone doing gaslighting, especially in Indonesia. For future researchers, it is advisable to research two or more subject victims of gaslighting to see a comparison of the effects experienced by each subject. Because each individual has a different character, the impact experienced may be different.

DECLARATION

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Author contribution statement

Marssel Michael Sengkey provided study conception and design, data collection, analysis and interpretation of results, and manuscript preparation. Shaima Banu Illahibaccus-Sona provided input related to the theoretical discussion, reviewed the results, and wrote the manuscript.

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The data described in this article can be accessed by contacting the first author.

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The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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