



Article

Gaslighting, Emotional Abuse, and Mental Health in Adults' Romantic Relationships

Anza Imtiaz¹, Aeman Javed¹, Amarah Qureshi¹¹ Department of Psychology, University of Management and Technology, Lahore, Pakistan**Correspondence**

amarah.qureshi@umt.edu.pk

Cite this Article

Received	2025-04-07
Revised	2025-04-26
Accepted	2025-04-28
Published	2025-05-01
Conflict of Interest	None declared
Ethical Approval	Respective Ethical Review Board
Informed Consent	Obtained from all participants
Data/supplements	Available on request.
Funding	None
Authors' Contributions	AI, AJ, and AQ contributed to concept, design, data collection, analysis, and manuscript drafting.

ABSTRACT

Background: Emotional abuse and gaslighting in romantic relationships are increasingly recognized as serious threats to young adults' mental health, yet limited empirical research has explored their independent and combined effects, particularly within non-Western cultural contexts. **Objective:** This study aimed to examine the relationships among gaslighting, emotional abuse, and mental well-being in young adults involved in romantic relationships, and to evaluate their predictive effects and potential gender differences. **Methods:** A cross-sectional correlational design was employed with a sample of university students (n = 204; 108 men, 96 women), aged 18-35, from the University of Management and Technology, Lahore. Participants currently or previously involved in a romantic relationship of at least four months were included. Standardized tools—the Gaslighting Relationship Exposure Inventory, the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire, and the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale—were administered. Ethical approval was obtained from the UMT Ethics Committee in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS v27, employing Pearson correlation, multiple linear regression, and independent t-tests. **Results:** Emotional abuse significantly predicted reduced mental well-being ($\beta = -0.30, p < .01$), while gaslighting, though correlated with both emotional abuse ($r = 0.49, p < .01$) and mental well-being ($r = -0.15, p < .01$), was not a significant predictor. No gender differences were observed across variables. **Conclusion:** Emotional abuse exerts a stronger negative impact on mental well-being than gaslighting, though both are harmful. These findings underscore the need for early psychosocial screening and gender-inclusive interventions targeting emotional abuse in young adult populations. **Keywords:** Emotional Abuse, Gaslighting, Mental Health, Romantic Relationships, Young Adults, Psychological Well-Being, Cross-Sectional Studies.

INTRODUCTION

Romantic relationships during young adulthood play a crucial role in shaping psychological development, identity formation, and emotional resilience. In this formative life stage, individuals seek validation, connection, and intimacy, making them more susceptible to both the positive and adverse impacts of relational experiences. While healthy romantic bonds can foster personal growth and psychological well-being, toxic relational patterns such as gaslighting and emotional abuse have been linked to serious mental health disturbances. These covert forms of abuse can undermine an individual's sense of reality, autonomy, and self-worth, leading to long-term emotional consequences (1). Despite growing scholarly attention to abusive dynamics in relationships, gaslighting remains an underexplored phenomenon, particularly in its operational mechanisms and psychological implications within young adult populations.

Gaslighting refers to a manipulative psychological tactic where the perpetrator systematically undermines the victim's

perception of reality, often through denial, contradiction, and misinformation, with the intent of controlling or destabilizing the victim (2). Within romantic relationships, gaslighting can manifest as persistent lying, belittling of concerns, or suggesting that the victim is irrational or overly sensitive. Over time, such behaviors erode the victim's confidence, induce self-doubt, and compromise their capacity to trust their own judgment (3). Empirical evidence suggests that individuals subjected to gaslighting experience heightened anxiety, confusion, and in severe cases, identity disintegration and emotional dependency on the abuser (4). Qualitative findings have consistently highlighted feelings of helplessness, cognitive dissonance, and detachment from one's sense of self among survivors of gaslighting (5).

In parallel, emotional abuse—though less visible than physical violence—has been extensively documented as a potent disruptor of psychological health. It encompasses a wide

spectrum of behaviors aimed at diminishing the victim's self-esteem and autonomy, including degradation, isolation, threats, and manipulation (6). Unlike episodic conflicts, emotional abuse often occurs in patterned, sustained cycles, gradually weakening the victim's emotional stability. Studies report strong associations between emotional abuse and outcomes such as depression, chronic anxiety, low self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress (7). Moreover, such abuse can have a compounded effect when it intersects with gaslighting, creating an environment of coercive control that entraps victims and hinders their ability to identify and exit abusive relationships (8). The nuanced interplay between these behaviors suggests that gaslighting may function as both a symptom and facilitator of broader emotionally abusive dynamics.

Although prior literature has illuminated the adverse outcomes of emotional maltreatment, the specific influence of gaslighting—particularly its role as an independent or co-occurring factor in emotional abuse—remains insufficiently quantified. Existing research tends to conflate gaslighting with generalized psychological abuse, limiting the understanding of its unique psychological impact (9). Additionally, most empirical studies have focused on Western populations, overlooking the cultural variations that may shape the experience, recognition, and reporting of such behaviors. In collectivist societies like Pakistan, socio-cultural norms often discourage individuals—especially women—from disclosing relationship abuse due to fears of stigma, familial shame, or disruption of social harmony (10). Consequently, a culturally sensitive investigation of gaslighting and emotional abuse is necessary to inform more inclusive and effective interventions.

Further complicating the picture is the inconsistent reporting on gender-based differences in the experience of emotional abuse and gaslighting. While literature predominantly highlights women as victims, emerging data suggest that men also encounter these dynamics, albeit often underreported due to social stigmas around male vulnerability (11). The psychological toll of these abuses may therefore be more universally distributed across gender lines than previously assumed, requiring empirical validation through balanced and demographically inclusive research.

Despite the recognition of these issues, there remains a lack of empirical data addressing how gaslighting and emotional abuse jointly influence mental well-being in young adults, especially within South Asian contexts. Moreover, limited studies have employed psychometrically validated tools specific to gaslighting, further narrowing the scope of reliable conclusions in this domain. These gaps hinder the development of evidence-based prevention and support strategies for young adults navigating unhealthy relationships. The present study seeks to address these gaps by examining the relationships between gaslighting, emotional abuse, and mental well-being among young adults involved in romantic relationships. Specifically, it investigates whether gaslighting and emotional abuse negatively correlate with mental well-being, whether gaslighting positively correlates with emotional abuse, and whether these forms of abuse can significantly predict mental well-being outcomes. Additionally, the study explores potential gender differences in

the experience of these variables. By focusing on these interrelated constructs, this research aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of relational abuse dynamics and support the development of more effective, culturally contextualized mental health interventions for young adults in romantic partnerships.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employed a cross-sectional correlational design to examine the relationships between gaslighting, emotional abuse, and mental well-being among young adults involved in romantic relationships. The target population included individuals aged 18 to 35 who were either currently in or had previously been in a romantic relationship lasting at least four months. This inclusion criterion ensured that participants had sufficient relational exposure to report meaningfully on their experiences. Individuals who had never been in a romantic relationship or whose relationships were shorter than four months were excluded. A total of 204 participants (108 men and 96 women) were recruited from the University of Management and Technology (UMT), Lahore, using convenience sampling. Participants were approached in classroom and campus settings by trained researchers. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and they were assured of confidentiality and the voluntary nature of participation.

Data were collected through printed self-administered questionnaires, including a demographic form and three standardized assessment tools. The demographic questionnaire collected details such as age, gender, family structure, education level, relationship status, and frequency of interaction during the romantic relationship. Gaslighting experiences were assessed using the Gaslighting Relationship Exposure Inventory (GREI), a 14-item instrument designed to evaluate the frequency of gaslighting behaviors across six key domains. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (never) to 5 (always), with higher scores indicating greater exposure to gaslighting behaviors (1). Emotional abuse was measured using the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire (EAQ) developed by Jacobson and Gottman, which contains 66 items divided into four subscales: Isolation (24 items, $\alpha = .92$), Degradation (28 items, $\alpha = .94$), Sexual Abuse (7 items, $\alpha = .72$), and Property Damage (7 items, $\alpha = .88$). Participants rated each item on a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (never) to 4 (very often), and the EAQ demonstrated high internal consistency in the current sample (2). Mental well-being was evaluated using the Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-being Scale (WEMWBS), a 14-item scale assessing positive aspects of mental health with items rated from 1 to 5. Total scores range from 14 to 70, with higher scores reflecting greater psychological well-being. This scale has shown high reliability in both student and general populations (3).

All ethical principles were strictly followed in accordance with the Declaration of Helsinki. Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Ethics Committee of the University of Management and Technology, Lahore. Informed consent was secured from all participants after a verbal and written explanation of the study's aims, voluntary nature, and confidentiality procedures. Participants' identities were

anonymized by using unique numeric identifiers during data entry, and they were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

Statistical analysis was conducted using IBM SPSS Statistics version 27. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic characteristics and scale variables. Reliability of the instruments was evaluated using Cronbach's alpha coefficients, which indicated strong internal consistency across all measures. Pearson product-moment correlation was used to analyze the relationships between gaslighting, emotional abuse, and mental well-being. Multiple linear regression analysis was performed to assess the predictive role of gaslighting and emotional abuse on mental well-being, using the enter method. The model accounted for 9% of the variance in mental well-being ($F(5,199) = 4.38, p < .001$), with emotional abuse emerging as a significant negative predictor ($\beta = -.30, p < .01$), while gaslighting was not a significant predictor. Independent sample t-tests were also conducted to evaluate gender differences in the study variables; no significant differences were found between men and women. The dataset was complete with no missing values,

and therefore, no imputation or missing data handling techniques were applied. Confounding variables and sensitivity analyses were not included, as the primary objective was to explore direct associations between psychological variables rather than establish causality.

RESULTS

A total of 204 participants (108 men and 96 women) completed the study questionnaires. The internal consistency of the scales was assessed using Cronbach's alpha, with all instruments demonstrating acceptable to high reliability ($\alpha > 0.70$), consistent with previously reported values in literature. Descriptive statistics, bivariate correlations, multiple regression analysis, and independent sample t-tests were used to examine the study hypotheses.

Table 1 presents the Pearson correlation coefficients among the three key variables: gaslighting, emotional abuse, and mental well-being. The mean gaslighting score was 30.83 ± 13.43 , while the emotional abuse score was 30.91 ± 13.42 . Mental well-being, measured using the WEMWBS, had a mean of 105.94 ± 38.41 .

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics and Pearson Correlations Between Gaslighting, Emotional Abuse, and Mental Well-Being (N = 204)

Variable	M	SD	1	2	3
1. Gaslighting	30.83	13.43	–	0.49**	-0.15**
2. Emotional Abuse	30.91	13.42		–	-0.30**
3. Mental Well-Being	105.94	38.41			–

Note. $p < .01$ (two-tailed).

There was a statistically significant positive correlation between gaslighting and emotional abuse ($r = 0.49, p < .01$), suggesting that higher experiences of gaslighting were associated with higher levels of emotional abuse. A statistically significant negative correlation was observed between emotional abuse and mental well-being ($r = -0.30, p < .01$), indicating that higher emotional abuse was associated with lower levels of mental well-being. A weaker, yet statistically significant, negative correlation was also found between gaslighting and mental well-being ($r = -0.15, p < .01$). To examine the predictive value of gaslighting and emotional abuse on mental well-being, a multiple

linear regression analysis was performed. The regression model was statistically significant, $F(5, 199) = 4.38, p < .001$, accounting for approximately 9% of the variance in mental well-being ($R^2 = 0.09$). Emotional abuse significantly predicted mental well-being ($\beta = -0.30, p < .01$), whereas gaslighting did not emerge as a significant predictor ($\beta = 0.00, p > .05$). The negative beta coefficient for emotional abuse indicates that as emotional abuse increased, mental well-being significantly decreased. Independent sample t-tests were conducted to assess gender differences in gaslighting, emotional abuse, and mental well-being.

Table 2. Multiple Linear Regression Predicting Mental Well-Being from Gaslighting and Emotional Abuse (N = 204)

Predictor	B	SE	β	t	p
Constant	53.45	6.51	–	–	–
Gaslighting	-0.00	0.08	0.00	–	> .05
Emotional Abuse	-0.11	0.03	-0.30	–	< .01

Model Summary: $R^2 = 0.09; F(5, 199) = 4.38; p < .001$.

Table 3. Independent Sample t-Tests Gender Differences in Gaslighting, Emotional Abuse, and Mental Well-Being (N = 204)

Variable	Men (n = 108) M ± SD	Women (n = 96) M ± SD	t(df)	p	Cohen's d
Gaslighting	31.17 ± 12.61	30.75 ± 14.38	0.22(204)	.82	0.02
Emotional Abuse	106.07 ± 36.79	105.76 ± 40.45	0.05(204)	.99	0.02
Mental Well-Being	45.93 ± 12.90	44.68 ± 14.74	0.64(204)	.51	0.21

No statistically significant gender differences were observed across any of the variables. Mean gaslighting scores for men ($M = 31.17 \pm 12.61$) and women ($M = 30.75 \pm 14.38$) were not significantly different ($t(204) = 0.22, p = .82, d = 0.02$). Emotional abuse scores for men ($M = 106.07 \pm 36.79$) and women ($M = 105.76 \pm 40.45$) were

also similar ($t(204) = 0.05, p = .99, d = 0.02$). Mental well-being scores did not significantly differ between men ($M = 45.93 \pm 12.90$) and women ($M = 44.68 \pm 14.74$), ($t(204) = 0.64, p = .51, d = 0.21$). All Cohen's d values indicated negligible effect sizes

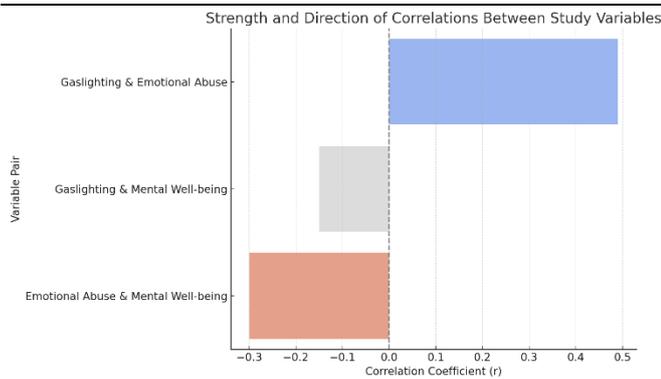


Figure 1 Strength and direction of Correlations

This horizontal bar chart illustrates the strength and direction of statistically significant correlations identified in the study. A moderate positive correlation ($r = 0.49$) was found between gaslighting and emotional abuse, indicating their co-occurrence in abusive romantic dynamics. Emotional abuse had a moderate negative correlation with mental well-being ($r = -0.30$), reflecting its strong detrimental impact, while gaslighting showed a weaker negative association with mental well-being ($r = -0.15$). These findings emphasize the clinical relevance of identifying emotional abuse as a more direct predictor of psychological distress among young adults.

DISCUSSION

The present study provides a comprehensive examination of how gaslighting and emotional abuse relate to mental well-being in the context of young adults' romantic relationships. The significant negative correlations observed between both gaslighting and emotional abuse with mental well-being underscore the detrimental impact of psychological manipulation and coercive behaviors on psychological health. These findings are consistent with prior research, which has documented that victims of emotional maltreatment often experience elevated levels of anxiety, depressive symptoms, and diminished self-esteem (6). The positive correlation between gaslighting and emotional abuse also supports the notion that gaslighting functions as an embedded tactic within broader emotionally abusive dynamics, as highlighted in recent theoretical frameworks of relational control and trauma bonding (8). This intersectionality not only reinforces the conceptual overlap between the two constructs but also validates their joint assessment in psychological and clinical research.

The regression analysis revealed that emotional abuse, but not gaslighting, significantly predicted reductions in mental well-being. This suggests that while both variables are individually harmful, the variance in well-being is more strongly accounted for by emotional abuse. This pattern may reflect the chronic and multidimensional nature of emotional abuse, which encompasses behaviors such as isolation, degradation, and threats that directly compromise an individual's autonomy and emotional security over time (2). On the other hand, gaslighting—though psychologically disruptive—may function more indirectly by distorting reality rather than targeting the self-worth of the victim in explicit ways. Previous literature supports this distinction, as gaslighting has been shown to mediate emotional dependence and confusion but is less frequently associated with

immediate clinical symptomatology when assessed independently (5). These results contribute to refining the theoretical boundaries between these forms of abuse and suggest that emotional abuse may exert a more direct psychological burden on victims than gaslighting alone.

Interestingly, no significant gender differences were identified in gaslighting, emotional abuse, or mental well-being, indicating that both men and women are comparably vulnerable to these relational harms. This challenges prevailing assumptions that emotional abuse and gaslighting disproportionately affect women and highlights the need to assess these behaviors in a gender-inclusive manner (11). While gender-specific expressions and experiences of abuse may still exist, the psychological consequences, as indicated by the present data, appear to be universally applicable. These findings align with emerging research that recognizes male vulnerability in abusive relationships and advocates for more inclusive screening practices in clinical and educational settings (9). However, cultural context remains a critical factor. In collectivist societies like Pakistan, where traditional norms often dictate relationship roles and discourage open emotional expression, both men and women may be reluctant to report relational abuse, potentially influencing the apparent absence of gender differences (10).

Clinically, the findings emphasize the urgent need for early identification and targeted intervention strategies aimed at young adults who exhibit or report symptoms of relational distress. Mental health practitioners should be vigilant about signs of both overt emotional abuse and covert gaslighting, integrating specific screening tools into therapeutic intake procedures. Interventions that focus on cognitive restructuring, boundary-setting, and empowerment may be particularly effective in restoring self-efficacy among victims. Furthermore, the moderate beta coefficient for emotional abuse suggests a clinically meaningful impact on well-being that warrants the development of tailored psychoeducational resources, especially within university counseling systems where young adults are most accessible.

This study's strengths include its use of validated measurement tools, focus on an underexplored population, and comprehensive statistical approach. However, several limitations warrant consideration. The cross-sectional design precludes causal inference and may obscure the temporal dynamics between abusive behavior and mental health deterioration. Longitudinal studies are needed to clarify whether gaslighting and emotional abuse exert compounding or fluctuating effects over time. Additionally, the convenience sampling from a single academic institution in Lahore limits the generalizability of findings. Participants were largely urban, educated, and within a narrow age range, which may not reflect the broader young adult population, particularly in rural or culturally diverse settings. Social desirability bias and underreporting due to stigma may have also influenced participants' responses, particularly in a cultural milieu where relational abuse is not openly discussed.

Future research should explore the mediating and moderating roles of variables such as social support, attachment style, and emotional intelligence in the relationship between psychological abuse and well-being. Investigating these dynamics across

different cultural and relational contexts—such as cohabiting versus long-distance relationships or dating versus marital status—could further refine clinical risk assessment. Qualitative investigations may also provide richer insight into the lived experiences of gaslighting victims, helping to contextualize quantitative patterns within narrative frameworks. Moreover, adapting the assessment tools for broader linguistic and cultural applicability will enhance inclusivity and data validity in cross-national studies.

In conclusion, this study reinforces the psychological threat posed by emotional abuse and gaslighting in romantic relationships and highlights the need for integrated, gender-neutral mental health interventions. While emotional abuse emerged as the stronger predictor of diminished mental well-being, the significant correlations involving gaslighting indicate that its impact should not be underestimated. These results contribute to the growing body of literature advocating for comprehensive relationship education and the inclusion of psychological abuse in mental health evaluations, with the ultimate goal of fostering safer, more equitable relational environments for young adults.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study reinforces the psychological threat posed by emotional abuse and gaslighting in romantic relationships and highlights the need for integrated, gender-neutral mental health interventions. While emotional abuse emerged as the stronger predictor of diminished mental well-being, the significant correlations involving gaslighting indicate that its impact should not be underestimated. These results contribute to the growing body of literature advocating for comprehensive relationship education and the inclusion of psychological abuse in mental health evaluations, with the ultimate goal of fostering safer, more equitable relational environments for young adults.

REFERENCES

Sarkis S. *Gaslighting: Recognize Manipulative and Emotionally Abusive People—and Break Free*. New York: Da Capo Lifelong Books; 2018.

Klein R. A Qualitative Analysis of Gaslighting in Romantic Relationships. *Pers Relatsh*. 2023;30(4):1316–40.

Dutton DG, Goodman LA. Coercion in Intimate Partner Violence: Toward a New Conceptualization. *Sex Roles*. 2005;52(11–12):743–56.

Follmer KB, Talbot DL, Kristof AL. Emotional Abuse and Psychological Distress Among College Students. *J Interpers Violence*. 2020;35(21–22):4264–86.

Stark E. *Coercive Control: How Men Entrap Women in Personal Life*. New York: Oxford University Press; 2007.

Walker LE. *The Battered Woman Syndrome*. 3rd ed. New York: Springer Publishing Company; 2017.

Royal College of Psychiatrists. *Mental Health of Women and Girls: The Impact of Abuse*. London: RCP; 2024.

Ahmed S, Nisar Q. Cultural Dynamics of Emotional Abuse: A Study of Female Survivors in South Asia. *Int J Intercult Relat*. 2020;77:112–20.

Jones A, Smith R, Daniels K. Gaslighting as a Predictor of Psychological Distress: A Cross-Cultural Perspective. *J Psychol Res*. 2022;46(3):257–70.

Shafirir T. Psychological Control in Romantic Relationships: Development of the Gaslighting Relationship Exposure Inventory. *J Soc Pers Relat*. 2024;41(10):3123–46.

Masood S. Intimate Partner Violence in South Asia: Prevalence and Impact. *South Asian Psychol J*. 2014;12(1):45–60.

D'Angelo T, Pieraccioni M, Ricciardi L. Social Support as a Moderator Between Emotional Abuse and Mental Health in Adolescents. *J Affect Disord*. 2023;320:35–43.

McLaughlin K, Malik M, Rehman U. Men's Experience of Emotional Abuse: A Neglected Issue in Domestic Violence Research. *Psychol Men Masc*. 2021;22(4):610–20.

Saleem A. Male Victims of Emotional Abuse in Patriarchal Societies. *J Men's Stud*. 2022;30(2):189–206.

Tager-Shafirir T, Szepsenwol O, Dvir M, Zamir O. The Gaslighting Relationship Exposure Inventory: Reliability and Validity in Two Cultures. *J Soc Pers Relat*. 2024;41(10):3123–46.

Jacobson NS, Gottman JM. *When Men Batter Women: New Insights Into Ending Abusive Relationships*. New York: Simon & Schuster; 1998.

Tennant R, Hiller L, Fishwick R, Platt S, Joseph S, Weich S, et al. The Warwick-Edinburgh Mental Well-Being Scale (WEMWBS): Development and UK Validation. *Health Qual Life Outcomes*. 2007;5(1):63.

Seher M, Manzoor S. Psychological Abuse and Mental Health Outcomes Among University Students. *Pak J Psychol Res*. 2024;39(2):145–60.

Sweet PL. Illuminating Gaslighting: A Comprehensive Interdisciplinary Review. *J Fam Violence*. 2019;34(2):95–104.

Lopes BC, Jaspal R. Exposure to Ghosting, Gaslighting, and Coercion and Mental Health Outcomes. *Partner Abuse*. 2025;In press.