



Gaslighting, Cognitive Flexibility and Self Concept Clarity in Young Adults

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Abstract

The present study explored the association between Gaslighting, Cognitive Flexibility and Self Concept clarity in young Adults. It was hypothesized that there is likely to be a relationship between Gaslighting, Cognitive Flexibility and Self Concept clarity. A Correlational Research design was employed and the data was gathered through Google form through random sampling. The sample comprised of 260 participants. Both genders with age range 18-30 were taken. Gaslighting was assessed by using Victim Gaslighting Questionnaire (Bhatt et al., 2021), Cognitive Flexibility through Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (Dennis & Vander, 2010) and Self-Concept Clarity with Self Concept Clarity Scale by



Campbell et al.(1996). The data was analyzed using Descriptive statistics, Pearson Product moment correlation, Independent sample t test and Multiple Linear Regression. Reliability Analysis was also done in order to check the internal consistency of scales. There was a significant negative relationship between gas lighting, cognitive flexibility and self-concept clarity. The subscale of peer disengagement and loss of trust was also significantly negatively correlated with self-concept clarity. Cognitive flexibility and one of its subscale controls was significant positive correlation with self-concept clarity. The results indicate that gaslighting and cognitive flexibility was significant predictors of Self-concept clarity in young adults. Also, significant gender differences were found in gaslighting, cognitive flexibility subscale of control and Self-concept clarity. The study would promote awareness and understanding of Gaslighting, cognitive, personal factors associated with it in Pakistani cultural context .The findings are expected to contribute towards psychological literature, enlighten the mental health professionals and will support development of educative programs which will maintain good health and wellbeing of Individuals as aligned with the Sustainable developmental goal of United nations organization.

Keywords: Gaslighting, Cognitive Flexibility, Self-Concept Clarity, Young adults.

Introduction

The term gaslighting has substantially emerged over the course of recent years in psychological and sociocultural framework, used in reference to a manipulative tactic in which one party to an association makes the other feel unsure about their thoughts, memories, or senses. First described in the context of clinical relations and abusive relationships, gaslighting is currently recognized by most of the population and is nowadays identified as a stealth means of emotional abuse that undermines autonomy and psychological integrity (Muller, 2022).

One of the cognitive areas most seemingly susceptible to gaslighting is the cognitive flexibility. This is one of the fundamental aspects of executive functioning in that problem-

solving, learning to respond to feedback, and emotional regulation are all based on it. Dysfunctions of this process may cause inflexible ways of thinking, ineffective decision-making abilities, and psychological weakness (Ciabatti et al., 2024).

Gaslighting

Gaslighting is described as a form of psychological control that instils doubt in a targeted individual or a group by resorting to questioning their rationality, memory and perception of a situation. It employs the application of consistent misdirection, denial, lying, and contradiction in order to confuse and discredit the belief of the victim (Petric, 2018). Gaslighting is a concept rapidly surrounding most corners of the world typically applied to refer to mind-manipulating tactics of an abusive individual, both in politics and interpersonal intimacy (Sweet, 2019; Toqeer et al., 2021).

Gaslighting usually includes an abuser or multiple abusers known as gas-lighter, a victim or multiple victims and consistent mental abuse which is gaslighting (Weintraub, 2021). Gaslighting may occur consciously or unconsciously, and most of it happens at the covert level to ensure that the emotional abuse are not expressed in an overt way (Dorpat, 2013). On this, it can be ascertained that gaslighting can be perpetrated by any peer, relative, partner/colleague and can be particularly dangerous when the gas lighter is an individual who holds a position of authority (Simon, 2011). Several possible linked traits which make a person more vulnerable to become a victim of gaslighting are proposed by researchers, such as Simon (2010), who proposes that traits that can lead to vulnerability to covert emotional abuse might include over-conscientiousness, neuroticism, low self-confidence, inexperience, emotional dependency and over intellectualization.

Gaslighting significantly undermines the self-understanding of a victim that makes him question his thoughts, feelings, and perceptions of the reality. The victim, therefore, often suffers confusion of identity, values, and confidence, becomes more and more dependent on the gaslighter as a source of correctness or mental clarity. The self-comprehension loss that subsequently occurs is not only a by-product of the act but is a calculated goal of the perpetrator because it enables him to maintain his control over the target (Bunch 2024).

Cognitive Flexibility

Cognitive Flexibility (CF) is the mental ability to shift thinking and adapt to changing demands, allowing individuals to regulate emotions, problem-solve, and view situations from multiple perspectives (Dennis & Vander Wal, 2010). High cognitive flexibility is associated with better coping strategies, less rumination, and improved psychological well-being (Martin & Rubin, 1995).

Gaslighting has a particularly profound impact on the development of cognitive flexibility, the ability to change the way of thinking, adjust to new rules, or change the environment, and concurrently consider various ideas, which is highly vulnerable to gaslighting as the development stage of young adults is focused on creating identity and finding independence to apply these rules (Guler & Aydin, 2023).

Self-Concept clarity

Self-Concept Clarity refers to the extent to which self-beliefs are clearly and confidently defined, internally consistent, and stable over time (Campbell et al., 1996). Low self-concept clarity has been linked to psychological distress, emotional instability, and vulnerability to manipulation. Emerging adults, who are in a stage of identity development, may be particularly susceptible to having unclear self-concepts due to social pressures and evolving roles (Arnett, 2000). Research suggests that chronic invalidation or manipulation, such as gaslighting, can erode SCC and make individuals overly dependent on external validation, further worsening self-doubt and emotional confusion (Tolpin & Gunnar, 2010).

In interpersonal encounters, people with unclear self-concepts frequently misread social cues and give them passive or negative interpretations (Butzer & Kuiper, 2006). Social anxiety, despair, and suicidal thoughts are just a few of the harmful psychological issues that can arise from self-doubt, ambivalence, and confusing self-perceptions (Li et al., 2022).

The psychological Constructs of Gaslighting, cognitive flexibility, and self-concept clarity have been investigated in this psychological research, although very little is known about their co-occurrence, which is the primary focus of the present research. Due to the nature of gaslighting as the experience of interpersonal manipulation aiming at the distortion of cognition, this mental phenomenon is supposed to have a direct effect on cognitive flexibility and clarity of

self-concept. Gaslighting is therefore likely to initiate degradable changes in cognitive flexibility as well as Self-concept clarity following sustained exposure. Notably, people with low self-concept clarity are associated with the higher levels of susceptibility to psychological dissonance with gaslighting owing to their inability to produce and make sense of intrinsic experience (Sinclair et al., 2020).

Significance of the study

This research possesses substantial practical, theoretical, and cultural impact, significantly enhancing psychological applied clinical practice. This study emphasizes on emerging adulthood, a pivotal stage for identity development, and elucidates how manipulative events might undermine identity coherence and cognitive functions, including adaptation and decision-making.

Theoretically, the study examines a significant gap in the current literature by exploring the cognitive implications of gaslighting. It specifically highlights the ability of manipulative abuse to disrupt cognitive flexibility, self-concept clarity, and adaptive decision-making, so providing a more refined perspective on the effects of gaslighting on psychological well-being. It underscores the necessity of teaching psychologists, counsellors, and educators to recognize early cognitive indicators of psychological abuse, facilitating prompt intervention and preventive measures.

This study contextualizes gaslighting within cultural contexts, so contributing to cross-cultural psychology and enhancing psychological literacy and empowerment among young adults. This culturally sensitive perspective is especially crucial in areas where gender roles, family dynamics, and standards of emotional expression may obstruct candid discourse about psychological abuse.

The study establishes a basis for future research, clinical understanding, and educational initiatives by emphasizing the interaction of cognitive flexibility, self-concept clarity and manipulative events throughout emerging adulthood. It acts as a measure to promote early prevention, resilience development, and psychological empowerment throughout a critical life stage.

Methodology

A correlation research design was employed. A total sample of 260 participants (Men: 56, Women: 204) aged between 18-30 years old ($M= 23.80$) was approached. This study included participants from both genders. The current study involved recruiting participants through social media platforms, specifically email and whatsapp, which are among the most commonly utilized applications in Pakistan at this time. The participants submitted their responses to the questionnaires provided via Google Forms.

Descriptive Statistics

Table 1

Showing Descriptive statistics of sample (N=260)

Variables	<i>f (%)</i>
Age	
Mean (S.D)	23.80 (3.66)
Gender	
Male	56 (21.5)
Female	204 (78.5)
Education	
12 Years of Education	20 (7.7)
14 Years of Education	50(19.2)
16 years of Education	119(45.8)
18 years of Education	71(27.3)

Note: *f* and % refers to frequency and percentage respectively.

Measuring Instruments

Demographic Sheet. A questionnaire was constructed to obtain demographic profile of the participant including age, gender and educational level.

Victim Gaslighting Questionnaire (Bhatt et al., 2021) was used to measure Gaslighting. This is self-report instrument which is used to assess the severity of gas lightning experience on the victim. A 5 point Likert scale was used, with higher scoring indicating higher

degree of gaslighting victimization. Instrument has been psychometrically developed and validated showing its reliability validity across Pakistani sample. The VGQ has indicated good psychometric characteristics, and the data attesting to validity and reliability, throughout female populations in Pakistan (Bhatti et al., 2021).

Cognitive Flexibility Inventory (Dennis & Vander, 2010) was measured used to measure cognitive flexibility. This self-report measure is used to assess a person's ability to think adaptively in stressful situations. The participant rated each statement on 7 point likert scale, with the higher score indicating greater cognitive flexibility. The internal consistency and test retest reliability with cronbach's alpha reaching .90 and .91 for the full scale and .91 for the alternative subscales.

Self-Concept Clarity Scale by Campbell et al.,(1996) was measured by using Self Concept Clarity. A 12 items self-report measure which is used to assess the extent to which a person perceive their self-belief as clearly and confidentially. It uses of 5 point likert scale ranging from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree". Internal consistency of the SCCS has also been high (Cronbach alpha in most samples is between .86 and .91)

Procedure

Permission was obtained from the Departmental Research Committee to conduct the research. Tools employed in the research study were granted online approval from the authors. Research participants were provided with a general document and an online Google form that contained informed consent. They were informed of the confidentiality of their data. The participant's voluntary participation was ensured. The data was statistically analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). Pearson Product Moment Correlation, independent sample t-test, and multiple hierarchical regression analysis were implemented.

Reliability Analysis

Table 1

Internal Consistency of the Scales

Scales	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Range	Cronbach's α
Gaslighting Victim Scale	40.37	12.55	14-67	.92

Subscale of Peer Disengagement	24.01	7.94	8-40	.91
Subscale of Loss of self-Trust	13.44	4.40	5-25	.76
Cognitive flexibility Scale	97.00	16.21	49-140	.84
Subscale of Alternatives	67.95	14.86	13-91	.92
Subscale of Control	29.05	8.33	7-49	.77
Self-concept Clarity Scale	38.46	8.89	15-60	.82

Psychometric properties of the gaslighting Victim Scale showed very high internal consistency and its Cronbach alpha was 0.92. Cognitive Flexibility Scale was highly reliable with Cronbach alpha of .84. Self-Concept Clarity Scale also demonstrated good internal consistency with Cronbach's alpha value of 0.82. Loss of Self-Trust subscale has been characterized by excellent reliability (alpha =.91) and Alternatives subscale showed high reliability (alpha =.92) as well. The two subscales; Control subscale (alpha = .77) and Peer Disengagement (alpha = .76) were both within the acceptable level of internal consistency. On the whole, all measures adopted in the present study demonstrated acceptable to high levels of reliability, which makes them suitable to be used in the research.

Correlation Analysis

Table 2

Showing correlation between study Variables

Variables	N	M	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Gaslighting	260	40.37	12.55	-						
2. Peer Disengagement	260	24.01	7.94	.96**	-					
3. Loss of self-trust	260	13.44	4.40	.88**	.72**	-				
4. Cognitive flexibility	260	97.00	16.21	-.18**	-.13*	-.24**	-			
5. Alternatives	260	67.95	14.6	.10	.15*	.01	.86**	-	-	
6. Control	260	29.05	8.33	-.55**	-.52**	-.48**	.41**	-	-	

									.11
7. Self-concept clarity	260	38.46	8.89	-.61**	-.56**	-.56**	.22**	-	.56**
									.07

The results of Pearson correlation analysis indicated that there was a significant negative correlation between gaslighting and cognitive flexibility ($r = -.18, p < .01$), which implies that the greater the gaslighting experience is, then the lesser the cognitive flexibility. Among the subscales, peer disengagement had a negative correlation with cognitive flexibility ($r = -.13, p < .05$), with stronger negative correlation indicated with loss of self-trust ($r = -.24, p < .01$). The same pattern was also observed with gaslighting which showed significant negative correlation with self-concept clarity ($r = -.61, p < .01$) such that greater exposure to gaslighting correlated with lesser clarity on self-concept. The loss of self-trust ($r = -.56, p < .01$) and peer disengagement ($r = -.61, p < .01$) were also significantly negatively correlated to self-concept clarity. Conversely, cognitive flexibility was positively associated with self-concept clarity ($r = .22, p < .01$). There was also a Significant positive correlation ($r = .56, p < .01$) between control subscale and self-concept clarity.

Independent Sample t test

Table 3

Showing results for independent sample t test

Variables	Male		Female		t(258)	p	Cohen's d
	M	SD	M	SD			
Gaslighting	34.67	12.74	41.93	12.07	3.93	.00	0.59
Subscale Peer Disengagement	20.43	7.93	24.99	7.68	3.9	.00	0.59
Subscale Loss of self-trust	11.77	4.58	13.90	4.25	3.2	.00	0.49
Cognitive Flexibility	96.89	20.59	97.03	14.84	.06	.95	0.01
Subscale Alternatives	64.87	19.50	68.79	13.25	1.7	.08	0.23
Subscale Control	32.01	8.01	28.24	8.25	3.04	.00	0.46
Self-concept clarity	41.10	8.15	37.73	8.97	2.53	.01	0.40



The results of the analysis showed that significant gender differences were found in gaslighting with females experiencing more gaslighting than males. There was also significant gender differences on cognitive flexibility subscale of Control. Males also differ significantly on scores on Self Concept clarity with females, showing more self-concept clarity.

Regression Analysis

Table 4

Showing Hierarchal Regression Analysis with predictors (Gaslighting, Cognitive Flexibility) and outcome (Self Concept Clarity)

Variables	B	95% CI		SEB	B	R ²	Δ R ²
		LL	UL				
Step 1						.37	.37***
Constant	55.97***	53.06	58.87	1.5			
Gaslighting	-.43***	-.50	-.36	0.03	-.61***		
Step 2						.38	.01*
Constant	49.33***	42.90	55.75	3.3			
Gaslighting	-.41***	-.48	-.34	0.03	-.60***		
Cognitive Flexibility	.62*	.008	.11	0.02	.11*		

In the first step, R² =.37, shows that gaslighting was a significant predictor with F(1, 258) = 154.63, p <.001 of self-concept clarity explaining 37 % of the variance in self-concept clarity. The second step, R² value of .38 showed that gaslighting and cognitive flexibility as a predictor had an explanation on 38 % variance in self-concept clarity with F (2, 257) = 81.16, p < .05. Results of the analysis showed that gaslighting (beta = -0.60, p < 0.001) and cognitive flexibility (beta = 0.11, p < .05) remained significant predictors. The model as a whole was statistically significant and explained variance rose to R² =.38, with an increase of .01. The variance of .01 showed 1% chance of model variance 1 and 2 with a change in F (1, 257) =5.18, p<.05. On the whole, the results show that more gaslighting experiences are associated with a decrease in clarity of self-concept in young adults, and those with high cognitive flexibility tends to have self-concept clarity .



Discussion

The findings of our research indicated that gaslighting was found to be negatively associated with cognitive flexibility and with self-concept clarity. It was further reported that, cognitive flexibility had positive correlation with self-concept clarity. The results were consistent with the available literature that the gaslighting has detrimental consequences on an individuals in terms of their perception of reality and self-concept to form fragmented self-concept (salmans, 2021). When regularly subjected to distorted narratives, a person becomes rigorously and broadly processed. The ability to change mental strategies is named cognitive flexibility (Schlosz, 2020).

The ability to respond adequately to environmental changes is important to ensure psychological resilience. (Canas et al.,2003). A study by Khan and Aslam (2021) identified that the Pakistani University students would have a higher level of emotional regulation and decision (Khan & aslam 2021). Thus the present results of correlation between gas ighting, cognitive flexibility and the Self-concept clarity aligns with the previous literature and confirms that Cognitive Flexibility can be used by the individuals to work out internal conflicts due to gaslighting. Female have reported higher level of gaslighting than males. The females were substantially higher on gaslighting and on the peer disengagement subscale and on Loss of self-trust Subscale. Our research result is in alignment with another study that women are more specifically targeted to be victims of manipulating relationships especially in Patriarchal or collective cultures (Baines et al., 2023). Women especially Pakistani women had a very high level of emotional invalidation and self-doubt inthe interpersonal relationships context level and this also

Gaslighting was also significantly negative predictor of self-concept clarity which means people who had been experiencing gaslighting were more prone to a weak, unstable, or unclear understanding of who they really are. This observation complements the currently existing theories of identity disturbance, stating that some form of manipulative behavior, including gaslighting, may disrupt the ability of an individual to create and sustain themselves into a stable sense of self-identity (Festinger, 1957; Fonagy et al., 2002). The victims tend to get confused by mixed messages of the abuser thus experiencing continual doubts about

themselves, guilt, and emotional imbalance. Ahmad and Asghar (2020) present a cultural dimension to the research problem as they report similar results in young Pakistani women. The results of their research showed that after the experience of a gaslight in both family and romantic relationships, emotional confusion and inability to define oneself became typical. They also noted how psychological control leads to identity crises, especially among the collectivist society.

Conclusion

This study's findings highlight the necessity to address emotional manipulation and identity instability in young people through culturally aware and trauma-sensitive practices and research. It presents us an extensive amount of useful information on the exacerbated psychological effects of gaslighting, especially when it happens to young adults. The results show that gaslighting is strongly linked to less cognitive flexibility and a less clear sense of self. These results demonstrate how gaslighting behaviour in relationships can affect a person's capacity to think and their sense of who they are. The study also shows that there are significant differences between men and women. Women reported greater instances of gaslighting and less clarity about their own sense of self, while men showed higher levels of control and sense of self-worth. The cognitive flexibility manifested as an essential protective mechanism, and it was important to focus on the value of resilience and adaptive cognitions, as well as psychological agility that helped against the consequences of gaslighting.

Practical implications

In practice, such results can help mental health specialists, educators, and policymakers understand why early identification and intervention are more than essential. Cognitive-behavioral and trauma-informed-based therapeutic approaches, in particular, can be useful in addressing gaslighting survivors by prioritizing rebuilding self-trust and increasing their cognitive flexibility. Moreover, the research focuses on the issues of cultural and developmental aspects, especially in collectivist cultures where power and emotional manipulation could be considered a norm.

In sum, the study not only adds to the theoretical knowledge of trauma, identity, and executive functioning, but also exposes a need to raise awareness, conduct preventive education and culturally adequate interventions to assist young adults in building a strong and healthy self-concept in the aftermath of psychological abuse.

Limitations and suggestions

The study was based on self-report measures and as such, some level of social desirability bias may occur. Future research on the topic might be assisted by the inclusion of a multi-informant assessment or observation parameters, which would provide an increased degree of objectivity.

Secondly, it focused on young adults with universities being the main body of the sample, and this may not be a proper representation of the general population. This limits the interpretation of the results generalizing them to other age groups or persons beyond studies in academic institutions. Future studies should undertake to sample diverse populations that are age, education and socioeconomic status wise.

Finally, although the cultural context was taken into account, no cross-cultural comparisons were examined in detail. Future studies are needed to investigate the meaning and perception of gaslighting regarding cultural norms, gender roles and societal expectations and how they determine the experience of gaslighting across various cultural contexts. To conclude, the upcoming research is also encouraged to be designed and executed longitudinally and in mixed-methods, to increase a participants diversity and to delve further by adding more psychological measures onto the research in order to simplify the research-based knowledge and reinforce the practical implications that can be applied based on a research finding.

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