

**Exploring the Link Between Attachment Styles and Gaslighting Acceptance: A Cross-  
Sectional Study on Romantic Relationships**

Bachelor's Thesis

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### Abstract

Gaslighting is a subtle but harmful form of psychological abuse used by individuals to manipulate other people into doubting their perceptions and memories. While attachment styles are known to influence the dynamics of romantic relationships, little research has examined how they relate to the acceptance of gaslighting behaviour. Therefore, this study investigates whether emotional aspects of attachment behaviour – Close, Depend and Anxiety – are associated with greater acceptance of gaslighting in romantic relationships.

To investigate this, a cross-sectional online survey was conducted in which data was collected from 167 adult participants. The survey study included the Gaslighting Questionnaire (GQ) and the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS). Correlation analysis, multiple regression analyses and moderation analyses were performed to examine relationships between attachment styles and gaslighting acceptance and interactions with socio-demographic variables (gender, educational level).

The analysis revealed no significant correlations between the RAAS subscales and the acceptance of gaslighting. With regard to the variables of gender and education, no moderating effect was found either. Participants' education levels (high school, bachelor's degree, master's degree or higher) were not significant predictors of gaslighting acceptance.

The results indicate that emotional attachment dimensions (Close, Depend, and Anxiety) alone cannot adequately explain the acceptance of gaslighting. Future studies should investigate other potential psychological and attachment-related factors, as the results did not reveal significant effects of attachment styles on gaslighting acceptance. Further examination of the scale used may also be necessary to assess its suitability for measuring this construct.

*Keywords:* gaslighting, gaslighting acceptance, attachment styles, romantic relationships, psychological abuse, cross-sectional study

## **Exploring the Link Between Attachment Styles and Gaslighting Acceptance: A Cross-Sectional Study on Romantic Relationships**

### **Understanding Gaslighting in Romantic Relationships**

The phenomenon ‘gaslighting’ has quickly gained public attention recently, particularly through (social) media and politics, and is now widely used. *Gaslighting* originally comes from a 1938 play by Patrick Hamilton entitled ‘Gas Light’. In the thriller, a man tries to trick his wife into believing that she is losing her mind by changing her beliefs and memory, creating a dependency on him (Thomas, 2018). In its current use, ‘gaslighting’ describes behaviours of psychological violence that are associated with long-term power structures and the exercise of control and are aimed at destabilising the self-image of the offerer (Sweet, 2019).

Although gaslighting has characteristics similar to other forms of psychological violence, such as emotional manipulation, deception or controlling behaviour, it differs in that it deliberately distorts the victim's understanding of reality (Stern, 2008; Sweet, 2019). The phenomenon of gaslighting can occur in different contexts such as politics, social or healthcare settings, parent-child relationships and romantic relationships (Akdeniz & Cihan, 2023). Stern (2007) argues that gaslighting often begins with a subtle distortion of reality, with this slow reduction of self-awareness leading to a repetitive cycle in which the abuser's tactics and the target's confusion reinforce each other. Typical tactics include denial of past events, blame reversal or the insinuation that the other person is ‘crazy’ (Sarkis, 2018; Stern, 2007). These patterns can have serious psychological long-term consequences, including confusion, anxiety, depression and severely diminished self-esteem (Dorpat, 1996).

Despite the increasing attention that gaslighting is receiving in the media and in public discourse, there have been few empirical studies on these phenomena to date. One reason for this is the difficult-to-measure nature of gaslighting, as it is often covert, subtle, and socially

undesirable. These factors make it difficult to collect valid data by means of self-reporting. Even the perpetrators themselves are often unaware of gaslighting behaviour, which increases the risk of biased or inaccurate data (Ferrer Perez et al., 2020). Another methodological problem arises from the inconsistent use of the term gaslighting, which makes it difficult to develop standardised measurement instruments. In a recent study by March et al. (2023), a questionnaire was therefore developed that does not directly measure the practice of gaslighting but rather the acceptance of it in intimate relationships. This indirect measurement approach via the concept of acceptance of typical gaslighting tactics reduces the risk of socially desirable response behaviour and allows deeper insights into individual attitudes towards emotional manipulation.

The most empirical attention so far has focused on the psychological effects of gaslighting (Sengkey & Illahibaccus-Sona, 2024) and its prevalence in various relationship dynamics (Muñoz-Rivas et al., 2007). Due to the potentially serious long-term consequences of gaslighting, however, it is essential to also investigate the underlying mechanisms and predictors that make such behaviours more likely in order to develop effective preventive interventions. Some previous studies have linked both interpersonal dynamics and psychological traits to gaslighting tendencies. For instance, power-seeking inclinations, tendencies toward emotional manipulation, and narcissistic traits have been associated with a greater likelihood of engaging in gaslighting behaviour (March et al., 2023; Stern, 2008). Additionally, research has shown that stereotypical gender roles and unequal power dynamics can foster manipulative behaviour (Sweet, 2019). One key interpersonal factor that has not received much attention and that may help explain vulnerability to gaslighting is attachment style, which shapes how individuals engage in close relationships and manage emotional dependency.

## Attachment Styles and Vulnerability to Gaslighting

Each individual's attachment style significantly influences the interpersonal dynamic in romantic relationships. Certain attachment styles may produce emotional power imbalances, which in turn can increase the potential for manipulation (Overall & Cross, 2019). The specific connection between gaslighting and attachment styles has not yet been empirically examined in detail. While several studies have shown a general link between insecure attachment and the tendency toward emotional manipulation (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2019), little is known about how attachment dimensions specifically relate to the acceptance of gaslighting behaviour. This gap highlights the need for further research into attachment-related predictors of gaslighting acceptance.

*Attachment style* describes the way in which people relate to significant attachment figures (e.g., caregivers, partners) in close emotional relationships (Bowlby, 1982). In general, a distinction can be made between *secure* and *insecure* attachment styles in intimate relationships. Attachment style patterns emerge in early childhood and are largely characterised by the quality, availability and reliability of parental care. Insecure attachment styles typically develop when caregivers are inconsistent, emotionally unavailable or rejecting (Bowlby, 1982). Although attachment styles are usually relatively stable, they are not completely fixed and can change over time through therapy, life experience and reflection of important relationships (Huang, 2024). Especially in later childhood and adolescence, cognitive development and social interactions with peers increasingly influence expectations of interpersonal relationships (Davis & Carnelly, 2023). Life stressors and important life events can activate attachment-related reactions and change attachment orientations.

In romantic relationships, early attachment experiences are often reflected in the way in which closeness, dependency and conflict are regulated. Such attachment experiences can either have a corrective effect or, in the case of problematic attachment patterns, reinforce

existing insecurities (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). Insecurely attached individuals have been shown to experience more negative emotions in close relationships, which can contribute to dysfunctional relationship dynamics, such as hostility or distrust (Mikulincer & Shaver, 2005). Attachment styles therefore potentially influence power relations within partnerships and how people react to or accept manipulative behaviour. Moreover, research suggests that insecure attachment is related to narcissistic traits, which are commonly linked to manipulative tendencies. For instance, anxious individuals may seek excessive approval and show emotional dependency, while avoidantly attached individuals often rely on emotional distancing and control strategies (Dickinson & Pincus, 2003; Mikulincer & Shaver, 2010). These attachment-related behaviours mirror the dynamics associated with narcissistic traits, where a need for external validation and a desire for control can foster manipulative relational patterns. These tendencies may contribute to greater vulnerability to acceptance of gaslighting.

### **The Role of Gender and Education**

In addition to individual attachment patterns, sociodemographic factors such as gender and level of education could influence the relationship between attachment style and the acceptance of gaslighting behaviour. Women tend to score higher on attachment anxiety than men, which may make them more emotionally reactive and vulnerable to manipulative dynamics (Del Giudice, 2011). Furthermore, women are more likely to be affected by psychological violence and may be more likely to internalise such experiences than men (Karakurt & Silver, 2013). This could increase acceptance or at least desensitisation towards gaslighting behaviours.

Education may also play a moderating role. Individuals with higher levels of education are more familiar with psychological concepts, more self-reflective, and more likely to apply critical thinking in interpersonal contexts (Anderson et al., 2001). These

competencies may reduce the likelihood of accepting emotionally manipulative behaviour. Conversely, lower educational attainment might limit emotional awareness or access to language and frameworks necessary to identify such dynamics. These considerations suggest that both gender and education could moderate the relationship between attachment style and the acceptance of gaslighting by shaping emotional vulnerability, awareness, and judgement.

### **Aims and Hypotheses of the Present Study**

Harfst (2024) is the only researcher who has empirically examined the relationship between attachment styles and the acceptance of gaslighting in intimate relationships. While that study found no significant correlation between attachment styles and gaslighting acceptance, it did reveal a strong negative association between insecure attachment and emotional intelligence. Based on these findings, the author concluded that individuals with higher emotional intelligence tend to have more secure attachment patterns.

In the study by Harfst (2024), the Adult Attachment Questionnaire (AAQ; Simpson et al., 1996) was used to assess attachment. The AAQ evaluates three dimensions – security, avoidance and anxiety – based on behavioural indicators. While the AAQ captures general patterns of attachment, it offers a relatively broad and objective measure of attachment styles. In contrast, the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS; Collins, 2008), which is used in the present study, focuses more explicitly on emotional aspects of romantic attachment. It distinguishes between Close, Depend, and Anxiety, and uses a scoring structure that enables a more nuanced analysis of affective relationship patterns.

Given that gaslighting is a form of emotional manipulation, instruments that emphasise the emotional dimensions of attachment may be better suited for identifying relevant predictors of gaslighting acceptance. For example, individuals with high levels of attachment anxiety may be more likely to doubt their perceptions and defer to their partner's version of reality – making them more vulnerable to gaslighting tactics. Therefore, the use of

the RAAS in this study provides a theoretically grounded and more differentiated lens through which the emotional underpinnings of gaslighting acceptance are examined.

This study investigates whether there is an association between gaslighting acceptance and emotional aspects of attachment in romantic relationships as measured by the RAAS. Specifically, it examines how gaslighting acceptance is related to the RAAS subscales Close, Depend and Anxiety.

The following research questions and hypotheses will be addressed:

**RQ1:** To what extent are insecure attachment styles – specifically higher scores on the Dependent or Anxious subscales of the RAAS – associated with greater acceptance of gaslighting in romantic relationships?

**Hypothesis 1:** Individuals with higher levels of dependent or anxious attachment are expected to show greater acceptance of gaslighting.

**RQ2:** Do gender and educational level moderate the relationship between attachment styles and the acceptance of gaslighting in romantic relationships?

**Hypothesis 2:** Stronger associations between insecure attachment and gaslighting acceptance are expected for female participants and those with lower levels of education.

## Methods

### Design and Participants

This study used a cross-sectional correlational survey design to investigate the possible associations between acceptance of gaslighting in romantic relationships and attachment styles. The anonymous survey study was created using the online platform Qualtrics and the survey was accessible from March 31<sup>st</sup> until April 27<sup>th</sup> in 2025. The study was approved by the BMS Ethics Committee of the Humanities and Social Sciences Division of the University of Twente (reference number: 250463).



The survey, consisting of various previously validated questionnaires, was subsequently published on the SONA platform of the University of Twente. SONA is a research participation platform through which students can participate in studies to earn mandatory research participation credits. In this study, student participants received 0.75 credits for their participation. In addition, social media platforms were used to recruit a more diverse sample. Inclusion criteria for participation were (1) age 18 or older, (2) sufficient English proficiency to understand the survey content, and (3) consent to participate voluntarily.

A priori power analysis was conducted using G\*Power 3.1 to determine the required sample size for the planned multiple linear regression analyses. Using a moderate effect size ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ), a significance level of  $\alpha = .05$ , a desired power of 0.95, and five predictors (including main effects and interactions), the analysis indicated a required minimum sample size of 138 participants.

## **Procedure**

After accessing the survey link, participants were first presented with an informed consent form (see Appendix A for the informed consent form, available online at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YW26C>). This explained the purpose of the study, its voluntary and anonymous nature, the potential risks associated with sensitive topics such as adverse childhood experiences, and the option to withdraw at any time without explanation. Participants were also informed that their partially completed data would still be retained unless they actively opted out after debriefing.

Upon providing consent by checking the required boxes, participants began the survey. The questionnaire was administered online via the Qualtrics platform and had a median completion time of approximately 14.6 minutes.

After completing the survey, participants were shown a debriefing page that explained the actual aim of the study – exploring the acceptance of gaslighting behaviour in relation to psychological characteristics. This page provided a definition of gaslighting and included resources for psychological support in case participants experienced distress. Finally, participants were asked to confirm whether they still agreed to the use of their data. If they responded "no", their data was automatically deleted.

## **Measures**

The entire survey contained six previously validated, standardized questionnaires to measure several constructs of interest potentially associated with the acceptance of gaslighting behaviour. These included the GQ (March et al., 2023), the Big Five Inventory–2 extra short form (Soto & John, 2017), the Borderline Symptom List–23 (Bohus et al., 2009), the Adverse Childhood Experiences Questionnaire (Felitti et al., 1998), the Revised Adult Attachment Scale (RAAS; Collins, 2008), and the Super Brief Pathological Narcissism Inventory (SB-PNI; Schoenleber et al., 2015). In addition to these questionnaires, demographics such as gender, age, nationality, and highest level of education were assessed. The questionnaire battery comprised a total of 90 items and 5 demographic questions (see Appendix B for the full questionnaire, available online at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YW26C> ).

To identify careless responding, the survey included an attention check item that required participants to select a specific answer. To minimise order effects and reduce response biases, the presentation order of all questionnaires was randomised across participants.

The questionnaires that are relevant for measuring the correlation between gaslighting acceptance and attachment styles in the current study are the GQ and the RAAS.

### ***Gaslighting acceptance***

To measure acceptance of gaslighting, the self-report questionnaire developed by March et al. (2023) was used. The 10-item scale assesses how much participants believe gaslighting behaviour in relationships is acceptable (e.g., "It's okay to deny an argument ever happened to avoid conflict."). Responses were rated on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree), with higher total scores indicating greater acceptance of gaslighting tactics. Total scores were calculated as the mean of all 10 items, and the present study, the scale showed high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .87$ ).

### ***Attachment styles***

Attachment styles in romantic relationships were evaluated using the RAAS (Collins, 2008). The 18-item scale measures three subscales: Close (the extent to which a person is comfortable with closeness and intimacy, e.g., "I find it relatively easy to get close to people"), Depend (the extent to which a person feels he/she can depend on others to be available when needed, e.g., "I am comfortable depending on others"), and Anxiety (the extent to which a person is worried about being abandoned or unloved, e.g., "I often worry that my partner doesn't really love me"). Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from 1 ("not at all characteristic of me") to 5 ("very characteristic of me"). Separate subscale scores were computed by averaging the relevant items, with higher scores indicating a stronger tendency toward the respective attachment dimension. In the current study, the subscales demonstrated acceptable to high internal consistency ( $\alpha = .78$  for Close,  $\alpha = .77$  for Dependent,  $\alpha = .87$  for Anxiety).

### **Data analysis**

All statistical analyses were conducted using R (version 2025.05.0+496), with packages including 'tidyverse', 'psych', 'car', 'lmtest', and 'interactions' (see Appendix C for full RStudio Code, available online at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YW26C>). Prior to

the analysis, the dataset was inspected for missing values and potential assumption violations. A total of 218 individuals started the online survey. After excluding incomplete or invalid cases (e.g. missing consent, failed attention checks, or missing debriefing agreement), the final sample for analysis comprised 167 participants (see Appendix D for the cleaned dataset, available online at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YW26C>).

Zero-order Pearson correlation coefficients were computed to assess the bivariate relationships between the three RAAS dimensions (Close, Depend, Anxiety) and gaslighting acceptance. Scatterplots were generated to visually inspect these associations and to screen for potential non-linear patterns or outliers.

Next, a multiple linear regression analysis was performed to examine the combined predictive value of the three RAAS subscales on gaslighting acceptance. The overall model and individual regression coefficients were evaluated for statistical significance. Key regression assumptions – linearity, normality, homoscedasticity, and multicollinearity – were checked using diagnostic residual plots and Variance Inflation Factors (VIF). Regression assumptions were tested and found to be largely met. The residuals vs. fitted plot indicated no major violations of linearity (see Appendix E for the Regression Diagnostic Plots, available online at <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YW26C>). The Q-Q showed that residuals were approximately normally distributed. The scale-location plot suggested homoscedasticity, and the residuals vs leverage plot revealed no influential outliers. All VIFs were below two, indicating no concerns regarding multicollinearity. Minor deviations from normality were observed in the Q-Q plot (slightly heavier tail) and slight heteroscedasticity was noted in the scale-location plot, but these were not serious enough to affect the results, as residuals were generally distributed and the model assumptions were met.

To explore whether gender or educational level moderated the relationship between attachment styles and gaslighting acceptance, moderation analyses were conducted using

linear regressions with interaction terms (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Gender was treated as a binary moderator (male vs. female), and education was grouped into two levels (low = high school, high = bachelor's or master's degree) and included as a moderator using dummy coding. Interaction effects were interpreted based on the significance of interaction terms and visualised using interaction plots.

To examine the robustness of the multiple regression analyses, a sensitivity analysis was conducted by excluding participants aged 60 years and older. The regression analyses were rerun on this subsample, and results were compared to the full sample to assess the stability of the model estimates.

To enhance transparency and replicability, all cleaned datasets, analysis scripts, and supplementary materials can be accessed at: <https://doi.org/10.17605/OSF.IO/YW26C>

## Results

### Participant Descriptives

The final sample consisted of 167 participants, including 120 women (71.9%) and 47 men (28.1%). Participants ranged in age from 18 to 78 years ( $M = 26.66$ ,  $SD = 12.00$ ). With regard to educational background, 53.9% had completed high school, 35.9% held a bachelor's degree, and 10.2% had obtained a master's degree or higher. Descriptive statistics were calculated for the key variables in the study. Participants reported relatively low levels of gaslighting acceptance, with a mean of 1.70 ( $SD = 0.61$ ). The mean scores on the RAAS subscales were 3.44 ( $SD = 0.82$ ) for the Close subscale, 3.02 ( $SD = 0.83$ ) for Depend, and 2.85 ( $SD = 1.02$ ) for Anxiety (see Table 1).

**Table 1***Descriptive Statistics for Gaslighting and RAAS Subscales*

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	Min	Max	$\alpha$
Gaslighting Acceptance	1.70	0.61	1.00	4.00	0.84
RAAS Close	3.44	0.82	1.00	5.00	0.78
RAAS Depend	3.02	0.83	1.00	5.00	0.77
RAAS Anxiety	2.85	1.02	1.00	5.00	0.87

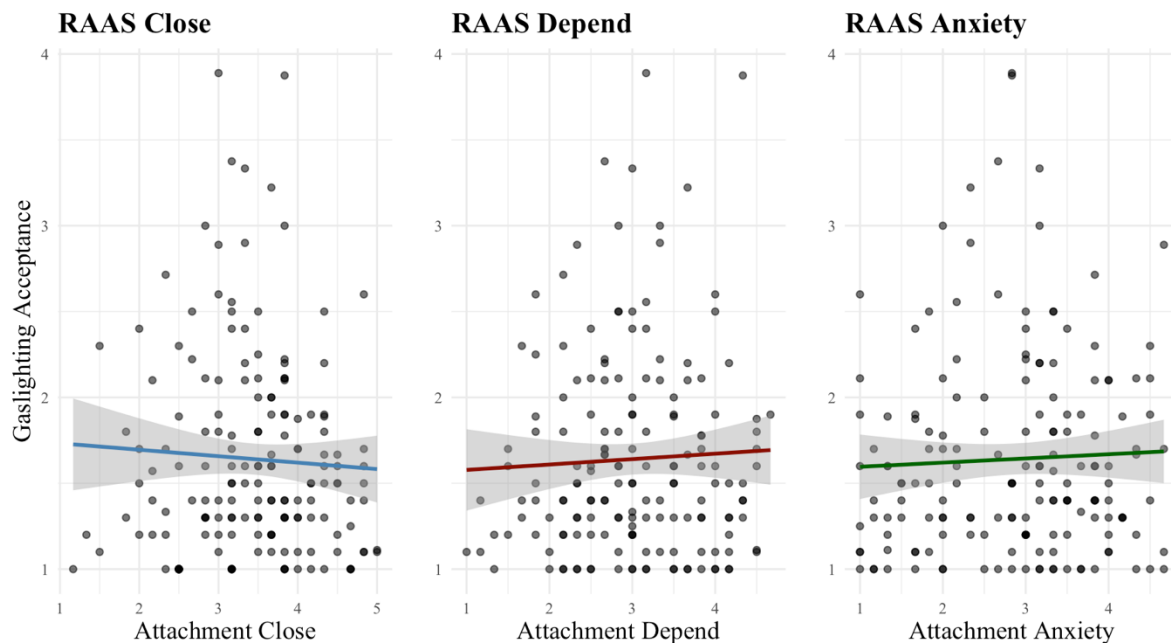
*Note.* Higher scores indicate stronger endorsement of each dimension. RAAS Close reflects comfort with intimacy; RAAS Depend reflects trust in others' availability; RAAS Anxiety reflects fear of abandonment.

**Bivariate associations between Attachment Styles and Gaslighting Acceptance**

In order to explore potential associations between attachment dimensions and the acceptance of gaslighting behaviour, Pearson correlation coefficients were calculated. The analysis revealed no statistically significant correlations between any of the RAAS subscales and gaslighting acceptance. Specifically, the correlation between RAAS Close and gaslighting acceptance was  $r(165) = -.05$  ( $p = .504$ ), between RAAS Depend and gaslighting acceptance  $r(165) = .044$  ( $p = .569$ ), and between RAAS Anxiety and gaslighting acceptance  $r(165) = 0.042$  ( $p = .589$ ). Visual inspection of scatterplots supported the absence of linear or clear non-linear associations (see Figure 1).

**Figure 1**

*Bivariate Scatterplots showing the Relationship between each RAAS Subscale (Close, Depend, Anxiety) and Gaslighting Acceptance*



*Note.* Each plot displays a linear regression line with 95% confidence intervals. The three attachment dimensions were assessed using the RAAS: Close (comfort with intimacy), Depend (trust in others' availability), and Anxiety (fear of rejection).

### Multivariate Analysis

To examine the combined predictive value of the RAAS dimensions on gaslighting acceptance, a multiple linear regression analysis was conducted. The overall model was not statistically significant ( $F(3, 163) = 0.99, p = .40$ ) and explained only 1.8% of the variance in GQ scores ( $R^2 = .018$ ). None of the individual RAAS subscales significantly predicted gaslighting acceptance (see Table 2).

**Table 2**

*Multiple Regression predicting Gaslighting Acceptance from RAAS Subscales.*

Predictor	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
RAAS Close	-0.08	0.07	-.11	-1.14	.26
RAAS Depend	0.13	0.08	.18	1.57	.12
RAAS Anxiety	0.06	0.06	.10	0.95	.34

*Note.* *B* = unstandardised regression coefficient; *SEB* = standard error;  $\beta$  = standardised coefficient; *p* = significance level

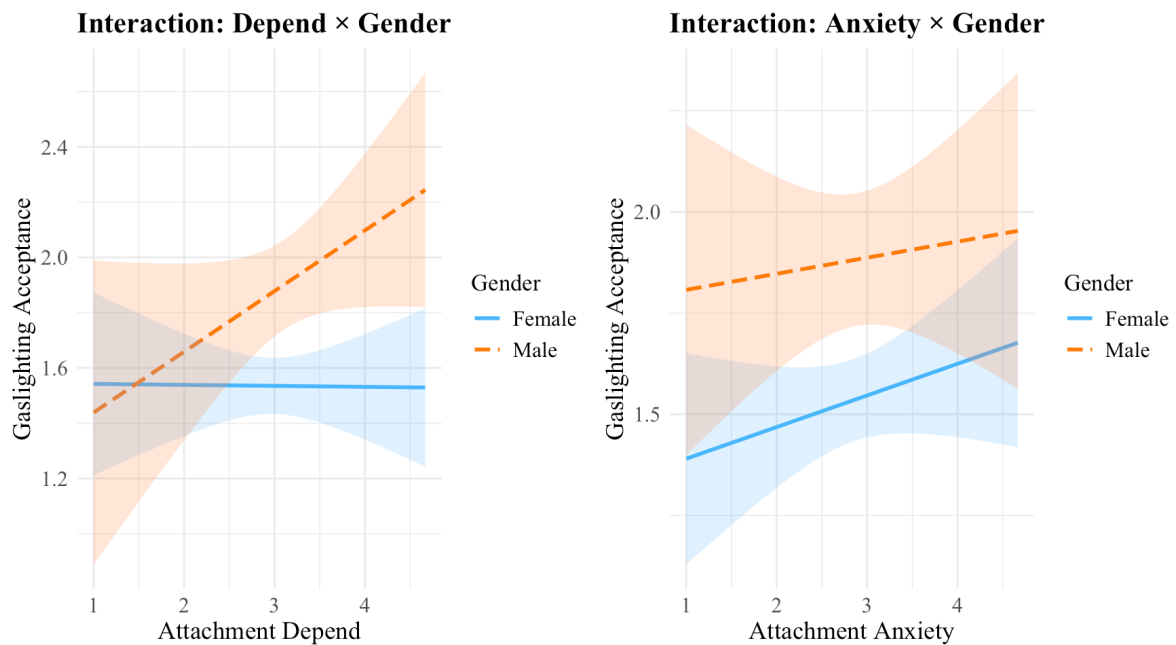
### **Moderation of the Relationship Between Attachment Style and Gaslighting Acceptance by Gender**

To examine whether the relationship between attachment style and gaslighting acceptance was moderated by gender or educational level, moderation analyses using linear regression were conducted. The overall moderation model for gender was significant,  $F(5,161) = 4.15$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $R^2 = .114$ , indicating that the variables together explained approximately 11.4% of the variance in gaslighting acceptance. No significant interaction was found between RAAS anxiety and gender ( $B = -0.04$ ,  $p = .75$ ; see Figure 2). Although the interaction effect between the RAAS Depend subscale and gender yielded a slightly larger coefficient than other interactions ( $B = 0.22$ ,  $p = .14$ ), but this was still not statistically significant (see Figure 2).



**Figure 2**

*Interaction Plots for the Moderation of Attachment Dimensions and Gender on Gaslighting Acceptance*



*Note.* Interaction plots showing the relationship between attachment-related dependence (left) and anxiety (right) and gaslighting acceptance, as moderated by gender. Shaded areas represent 95% confidence intervals.

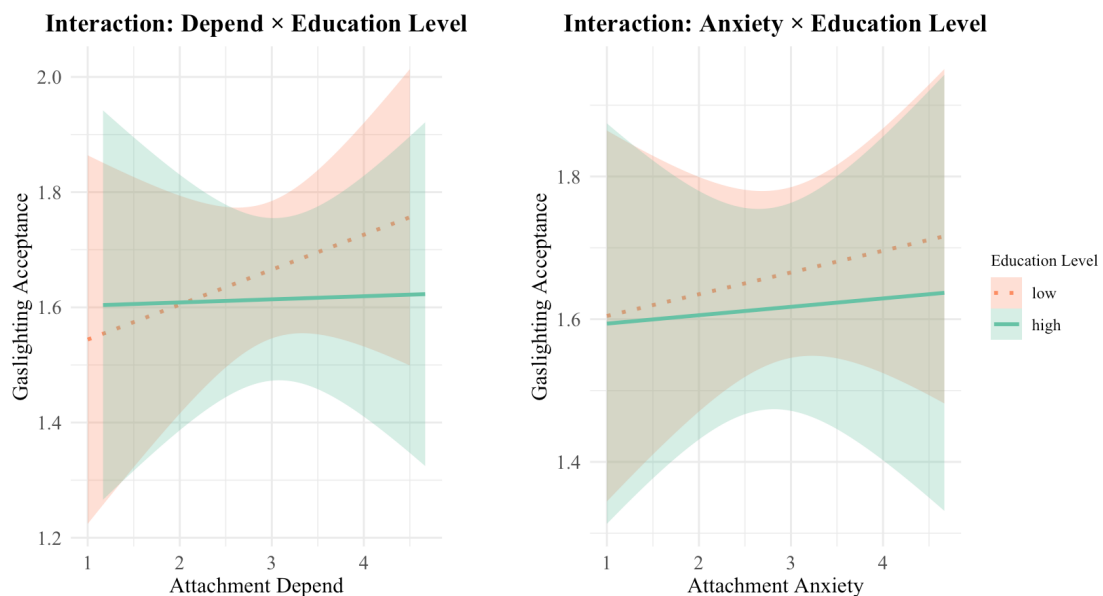
### **Moderation of the Relationship Between Attachment Style and Gaslighting Acceptance by Educational Level**

To further examine the role of education, participants were grouped into two categories: low education (high school) and high education (bachelor's or master's degree). A linear regression model tested whether education moderated the relationship between the RAAS dimensions (dependence, Anxiety) and gaslighting acceptance. The model was not statistically significant,  $F(5, 161) = 0.45, p = .812$ , and explained only 1.4% of the variance ( $R^2 = 0.14$ ). There was no significant main effect of education group on gaslighting acceptance ( $B = 0.39, p = .579$ ), nor were any interaction effects with RAAS Dependence ( $B = -0.09, p =$

.523) or RAAS Anxiety ( $B = -0.06, p = .644$ ) statistically significant. These findings indicate that education level, when dichotomized, does not moderate the relationship between attachment style and the acceptance of gaslighting.

**Figure 3**

*Interaction Plots for the Moderation of Attachment Dimensions and Education on Gaslighting Acceptance*



*Note.* Interaction plots showing the relationship between attachment-related dependence (left) and anxiety (right) and gaslighting acceptance, as moderated by education. Shaded areas represented 95% confidence intervals. The lines display two education groups: *low education* (high school) and *high education* (bachelor's or master's degree), differentiated by line type and color.

### Sensitivity analysis

To ensure that the results were not unduly influenced by older participants, a sensitivity analysis was conducted by excluding individuals over the age of 60. This led to the exclusion of 8 participants, reducing the sample from 167 to 159. The interaction model included attachment dimensions and education group (low vs. high) remained non-

significant,  $F(5, 153) = 0.35$ ,  $p = .880$ , explaining only 1.1% of the variance ( $R^2 = .011$ ). This suggests that the original findings are robust and not driven by outliers in the upper age range.

## **Discussion**

This study aimed to investigate how attachment styles relate to the acceptance of gaslighting in romantic relationships, and whether this relationship is moderated by gender or educational level. As such, the findings of the current study did not support any of the assumed relationships formulated in the hypotheses. Based on theoretical assumptions derived from attachment theory, it was hypothesised that individuals higher levels of anxious or dependent attachment would predict greater acceptance of gaslighting (Hypothesis 1), and that this relationship would be stronger among women and individuals with lower education (Hypothesis 2). Based on a cross-sectional survey of 167 adult participants, neither bivariate correlations nor multivariate regression analyses revealed significant associations between the three attachment dimensions (Close, Depend, and Anxiety) and gaslighting acceptance. In addition, no significant interaction effects emerged for the demographic variables gender or education. These findings suggest that individual differences in the acceptance of gaslighting cannot be adequately explained by attachment dimensions alone. Other psychological or social factors – such as emotional competencies, self-concept clarity, or exposure to manipulative norms – may play a more important role in shaping how individuals respond to emotionally abusive behaviour, like gaslighting, in relationships.

### **Theoretical Interpretation and Contextualisation**

The lack of significant correlations between attachment disorders and gaslighting acceptance seems to contradict the expectations derived from attachment theory. According to Mikulincer and Shaver's (2010) attachment theory, anxiously or dependently attached

individuals have a strong need for closeness and fear of rejection, which may increase their susceptibility to dysfunctional relationship dynamics. Based on this, it could be expected that individuals with higher levels of dependency or anxiety would show greater acceptance of gaslighting. However, this was refuted by the results of the study, as no significant effect was found in this context and the hypothesis could therefore not be confirmed. While neither gender nor educational level significantly moderated the relationship between attachment and gaslighting acceptance, the decision to include these moderations was grounded in existing research suggesting that gender socialisation and psychological literacy may shape responses to emotional abuse (Grieve et al., 2018; Wang, 2016). For instance, women may be more attuned to interpersonal dynamics due to traditional caregiving roles, while individuals with higher education may have more psychological knowledge or critical thinking skills. Given this lack of association, it remains important to explore which other psychological factors may be more strongly associated with acceptance of gaslighting.

One possible explanation is that gaslighting, as a form of emotional manipulation can be evaluated not in relation to one's attachment orientation, but also in relation to cognitive and emotional competences such as self-confidence, assertiveness and emotional intelligence (Austin et al., 2007). These factors were not considered in the present study, but may be associated with how people perceive and respond to manipulative behaviour.

In addition, the GQ used in this study assesses general attitudes toward gaslighting, rather than situational responses within one's own intimate relationship. It is possible that stronger associations within attachment styles would have emerged if participants had been asked to reflect on experiences within their own relationships.

Furthermore, social and cultural norms of society and the individual influence the perception of the acceptance of gaslighting (Klein et al., 2025). Gender roles significantly shape norm perceptions, whereby traditional role models can increase acceptance of

controlling or manipulative patterns (Grieve et al., 2018). For example, individuals who have internalised traditional gender roles may be less likely to identify or challenge controlling or emotionally abusive dynamics. These norms were not assessed in this study, but could be related to acceptance of gaslighting behaviour.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that gaslighting acceptance cannot be explained by attachment style. Instead, it may reflect a more complex interplay of personal, relational and cultural factors or just one predicting variable that has not yet been investigated in this context, that influence how individuals interpret and evaluate manipulation in close relationships.

### **Methodological Reflections: Strengths and Limitations**

In order to interpret the present findings appropriately and guide future investigations, it is essential to consider both the methodological strengths and potential limitations of the study. One limitation concerns the measurement instrument of the GQ (March et al., 2023). It does not prompt participants to evaluate gaslighting within their own romantic relationships, which could reduce its ecological validity and its ability to capture more nuanced individual differences. Besides that the questionnaire is relatively new and not yet validated across diverse populations.

The present study followed a cross-sectional design and relied exclusively on self-report questionnaires, which limits causal interpretations. Given the sensitive nature of the topic – emotional manipulation and psychological abuse – responses may have been influenced by social desirability bias or personal discomfort, potentially leading to underreporting of acceptance of gaslighting. Participants may have been unwilling to admit agreement with statements that could reflect tolerance of abusive behaviour even if such tolerance exists unconsciously or situationally (Wang et al., 2025). This may have attenuated observed effects and contributed to the absence of significant associations.

An additional limitation is presented in the sample composition. Participants were predominantly young, female, and highly educated, which may have restricted variance on key variables such as attachment style. This homogeneity reduces the generalisability of the results and limits the potential to detect associations that might emerge in more diverse or relationally experienced populations. Younger individuals may also lack the relational experience necessary to identify subtle forms of psychological abuse.

From an analytical standpoint, the study was adequately powered to detect moderate effects, as confirmed by post hoc power analysis. With 167 participants and three predictors, the study had 99% power to detect a moderate effect size ( $f^2 = 0.15$ ) at an alpha level of .05. However, the observed effect size in the current study was small ( $f^2 = 0.022$ ), yielding only 33% power to detect such an effect. These results suggest that the study was well powered to detect moderate effects but may have lacked sufficient power to identify more subtle associations between attachment styles and gaslighting acceptance and interaction effects.

Although the findings did not support the proposed hypotheses, this study contributes to the growing field of gaslighting research by showing that attachment style is not sufficient explanatory factor.

### **Implications for Future Research and Interventions**

Despite some limitations, the study provides valuable insights for the evidence base on correlates of gaslighting acceptance. The present findings suggest that attachment dimensions alone are insufficient to explain individual differences in gaslighting acceptance. Future research should therefore adopt broader conceptual models that integrate additional psychological, social and cognitive variables. Potential predictors for future investigation could include emotional intelligence, self-esteem, internalised gender norms, relationship scripts and experiences of psychological violence. In addition, socio-cultural influences such

as media use, socialisation conditions, gender roles and cultural context should be considered to obtain a more comprehensive understanding of the factors shaping gaslighting acceptance.

Methodologically, future research could benefit from implicit methods, qualitative designs, and experimental manipulations to gain insight into how gaslighting is perceived and evaluated. Although the present study did not identify a significant association between educational level and gaslighting acceptance, previous research suggests that education may play a critical role in shaping psychological resilience and awareness of emotionally manipulative behaviours (Wang, 2016; March et al., 2023). Educational attainment is often linked to psychological literacy, critical thinking skills and access to knowledge about healthy relationships dynamics. Thus even in the absence of significant effects in this sample, education remains a promising target for future research and prevention efforts. Interventions that strengthen recognition of psychological abuse – especially in educationally disadvantaged populations – could contribute to the early detection and reduction of gaslighting behaviours.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the study found no evidence for an association between attachment dimensions (Close, Depend, Anxiety) and the acceptance of gaslighting behaviour in romantic relationships. Neither gender nor education significantly moderated this relationship. These findings challenge theoretical assumptions drawn from attachment theory and underscore the need to consider alternative explanatory frameworks. Future research should explore a broader range of psychological, relational, and sociocultural factors to better understand what shapes individuals acceptance of gaslighting behaviour.

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### **Artificial Intelligence Statement**

During the preparation of this work, I used ChatGPT to assist with R Codes, Language Assistance and Cross-checking for logical consistency of arguments. After using this tool, I thoroughly reviewed and edited the content as needed, taking full responsibility for the final outcome.