

“Mad Woman”: Gaslighting Acceptance and Borderline Personality Traits

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Abstract

Introduction: Gaslighting is a manipulation tactic used in relationships where one person manipulates another's memories of the past, thus making the victim question their sanity. The current study explored the relationship between the acceptance of using gaslighting tactics in relationships and borderline personality traits, the potential moderating role of (low) level of self-esteem, and explored which gender is more accepting of using gaslighting tactics.

Methods: In a cross-sectional online survey ($N = 172$; 28% men, 70% women, 2% non-binary), participants completed the 10-item *Gaslighting Acceptance Scale*, the *Borderline Symptom List 23*, and the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale*. After screening for incomplete data and attention-check failures, a simple linear regression was conducted to test the relationship between borderline traits and gaslighting acceptance, a Mann–Whitney U test for gender differences in gaslighting acceptance, and a multiple regression for the interaction between borderline personality traits and self-esteem in relationship with gaslighting acceptance.

Results: Contrary to expectations, borderline traits did not significantly explain gaslighting acceptance ($\beta = .09$, $p = .24$). However, men reported significantly higher gaslighting acceptance ($Mdn = 2.04$) than women ($Mdn = 1.62$). The interaction between borderline traits and self-esteem did not reach significance ($b = .01$, $p = .95$).

Conclusion: These findings indicate that acceptance of gaslighting tactics is more closely linked to gendered differences than to borderline personality pathology or global self-esteem. The lack of borderline personality traits and self-esteem effects underscores the potential in refining the measurement of relationship-specific self-esteem and the usefulness of longitudinal designs to clarify causal mechanisms. Moreover, men's higher acceptance of gaslighting highlights the need for gender-sensitive prevention and intervention efforts targeting subtle psychological abuse in relationships.

Keywords: gaslighting, self-esteem, borderline personality traits, gender, manipulation

Introduction

Gaslighting, a word derived from a 1938 play called *Gas Light* about a husband who is trying to make his wife think she is insane by diminishing and increasing the light in their house (Hamilton, 1938), is defined as a form of psychological abuse in which a person attempts to manipulate another person's perception of reality, making them question their sanity (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023). This phenomenon can be observed in many types of relationships and interactions, such as workplace or intimate relationships and medical or societal interactions, with some examples being when one's symptoms and concerns are dismissed by their doctors (Moss et al., 2024) or when people of colour are made to doubt their sense of self through subtle racist messages from other people or societal structures (Wood & Harris, 2022). Because power imbalances and emotional dependence are present (Sweet, 2019), it can be quite difficult for a victim to distance themselves from such relationships, leading to long-lasting effects on the victim's mental health (Hailes & Goodman, 2023). Moreover, research has shown that gaslighting is often prevalent in the context of intimate partner violence, where psychological manipulation is often used as a tool for coercive control (Warshaw et al., 2014). Although the exact prevalence of gaslighting is not known, Karakurt and Silver (2013) surveyed 555 U.S. adults online and showed that 8% of the participants experienced emotional abuse in an intimate relationship within the previous year.

One of the reasons why gaslighting is hard to study is because it relies on subtle distortions of reality, making the victims not recognise that they are manipulated and thus making it difficult to quantify through self-reports (Tager-Shafir et al., 2024). Another factor is that gaslighting happens in private environments like homes, diminishing the chances of the victim to seek support, therefore leaving researchers and local authorities without a way to directly assess this behaviour. Lastly, victims themselves may search for excuses for the other person's behaviour, thus gaslighting themselves (Clayton, 2021). To overcome these issues in measuring gaslighting, March et al. (2023) developed a 10-item scale which measured how much the respondent would hypothetically accept examples of gaslighting behaviour towards another human being. This scale has been internally validated, with the exploratory factor analysis showing unidimensionality and high internal consistency. Measuring the acceptance of gaslighting tactics appeared to provide a useful proxy for understanding gaslighting tendencies within relationships. To further understand gaslighting behaviours, however, it is important to also explore the psychological traits that predispose individuals to accept or even engage in such behaviour.

One such example is borderline personality traits, which is a psychological impairment that manifests in the form of fear of abandonment, sudden changes in self-esteem, risky behaviour, and feelings of voidness, leading to mood swings, impulsive decisions, and unstable relationships (APA Dictionary of Psychology, 2023), with the prevalence rate for this trait being at 1.8% of the global population (Dahlenburg et al., 2024). Since it is often associated with interpersonal issues caused by social avoidance or lack of assertive communication (Salzer et al., 2013), researchers have shown that people who struggle with borderline personality disorder sometimes use manipulative behaviours to maintain the relationship and control their partner's behaviour due to fear of abandonment and emotional instability (Muñoz Centifanti et al., 2016). Therefore, people with higher scores on borderline personality traits might view gaslighting as a way to exercise power or deal with conflict and could be hypothesised to be more tolerant of gaslighting in relationships.

In addition, self-esteem may also play a crucial role in how much gaslighting is accepted in relationships. While healthy levels of self-esteem are useful in maintaining good relationships, lower levels of self-esteem, or exaggerated ones like those found in narcissistic people, damage interpersonal relationships (Byrne & O'Brien, 2014). In line with popular belief, research has shown that people who have low levels of self-esteem use manipulation more than those with higher levels (Grebin, 2020). One of the theories regarding the link between low self-esteem and the use of manipulation is that the perpetrator uses it to protect their fragile self-image (Blinkhorn, 2016). Therefore, while taking into account the shifting nature of self-esteem in people with borderline tendencies, it can be expected that the relationship between borderline traits and the acceptance of gaslighting is stronger for people lower in self-esteem.

Building on this, gender differences can further influence how gaslighting is expressed and tolerated in relationships. A study showed that women are more likely to engage in emotionally reactive aggression, like yelling or verbal assaults driven by heightened emotional responses, while men are more prone to coercive and controlling behaviours, aligning more with gaslighting strategies (Hamberger & Larsen, 2015). Moreover, the same study showed that men used sexual coercion and assault more often than women. It is also worth taking into consideration the fact that men tend to have more Dark Tetrad characteristics, including Machiavellianism and psychopathy, which are associated with emotional and psychological control in relationships, including gaslighting (March et al., 2023). Taking these findings

together, it can be expected for men to show more acceptance towards the use of gaslighting than women.

Despite growing awareness of gaslighting and its psychological consequences, there remains a significant gap in understanding how individual personality traits are associated with gaslighting behaviours in relationships. While prior research has linked gaslighting acceptance to Dark Tetrad traits (March et al., 2023), there is limited empirical evidence exploring the role of borderline personality traits in tolerating or engaging in gaslighting. Additionally, both the moderating effect of self-esteem and the effect of gender on gaslighting acceptance have remained unexplored until now. By addressing these gaps, public services can create better abuse prevention programmes, and also therapists could make more efficient interventions for people who experience manipulative dynamics in relationships. In the current study, the following hypotheses will be tested:

Hypothesis 1: Individuals with higher borderline personality traits will report higher acceptance of gaslighting.

Hypothesis 2: The relationship between borderline personality traits and the acceptance of gaslighting will be stronger for people lower in self-esteem.

Hypothesis 3: Men will have a higher level of gaslighting acceptance than women.

Methodology

Study Design

This online cross-sectional study had been ethically approved by the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management, and Social Sciences of the University of Twente, application number 250463. It consisted of participants recruited from the student network of the researchers between March and April of 2025. This design was well-suited for exploratory research on psychological traits and behaviours, as it allowed for the collection of large amounts of self-reported data efficiently.

Materials

In order to measure one's level of acceptance of gaslighting behaviour, the 10-item *Gaslighting Acceptance Scale* developed by March et al. (2023) was employed. Using this scale allowed for indirect measurement of gaslighting behaviour, as it did not ask participants directly whether they gaslighted their partner or not, thus reducing the potential social desirability bias

in responses. The scale has demonstrated strong internal consistency with a Cronbach's alpha of .97 in the original development study. Furthermore, an exploratory factor analysis confirmed that the scale captures a single underlying construct, explaining 75.9% of the variance, supporting its construct validity (March et al., 2023). Participants responded to each item using a 7-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (Unacceptable) to 7 (Acceptable), with higher scores indicating a greater acceptance of gaslighting behaviours. For example, one item reads: "Person A never admits to doing anything wrong, even when Person B has proof that Person A did do something wrong" (March et al., 2023, p. 262).

For assessing the participant's borderline personality traits, the *Borderline Symptom List 23* (BSL-23) was used (Bohus et al., 2008), which is a shorter version of BSL-95 that contains 95 items based on the *DSM-IV*. Responses varied from 0 (Not at all) to 4 (Very strong), assessing borderline personality symptomatology in adults throughout their entire lives. The scale has shown good internal reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of roughly .95, indicating an excellent level of internal consistency (Bohus et al., 2008). Moreover, it showed a test-retest reliability of 0.82 within 1 week, meaning that participants tend to provide consistent responses over time, thus indicating the scale's stability and reliability.

Lastly, the *Rosenberg Self-Esteem Scale* (RSES) was used to assess the participant's general self-esteem level (Rosenberg, 1965). The scale consisted of 10 statements related to self-worth, with participants responding on a 4-point Likert scale (1 = Strongly Disagree to 4 = Strongly Agree). The RSES has demonstrated strong psychometric properties, including a Cronbach's alpha of 0.82 (Schmitt & Allik, 2005) and test-retest reliability ranging from 0.85 to 0.88 over a two-week period.

In this study, the internal consistency of the scales used in this dataset appeared to be good to excellent. The *Gaslighting Acceptance Scale* yielded an alpha of 0.85, which indicates good reliability, showing that the items consistently measure the same underlying construct. The BSL-23 scale demonstrated excellent reliability with an alpha of 0.94, indicating very high internal consistency. And, similarly, the RSES scale showed strong reliability with an alpha of 0.88, supporting its use as a coherent measure.

Participants and Procedure

An *a priori* power analysis was conducted to determine the sample size required with a medium effect size ($f^2 = 0.15$), a significance level of .05, and power set at .80, indicating that a minimum total sample size of $N = 77$ participants would be required. Convenience sampling

was used by acquiring students through the University of Twente's SONA website, a system that rewards participants with credits after completing a study as a volunteer, but also people from the personal network of the researcher to obtain a broader range of backgrounds. The inclusion criteria for this online study were as follows: participants must have a device with a connection to the internet, such as a laptop or phone, be able to understand English, and have between 20 to 30 minutes to fill in the questionnaire. At the beginning they had to check and agree with the consent form (Appendix A) and fill in the demographic questions, like gender, before moving to the questionnaire, being reassured that their answers cannot be traced back to them specifically and that they can withdraw at any point. Moreover, one attention check question was placed in the study, asking the participants if they were paying attention to the study. If someone missed answering it, or responded with a "No", their answers were entirely excluded from the dataset. At the end of the survey, a debriefing statement was included, along with resources for psychological support if participants feel distressed. The study was conducted using Qualtrics as the main data collection tool, and the questions were randomised.

Data Analysis

Statistical analyses for this study were conducted using R Studio (Posit Team, 2023). Prior to analysis, the dataset was reviewed to ensure completeness and accuracy. Incomplete responses, participants who withdrew their consent or who failed attention checks were removed.

To examine the relationship between gaslighting acceptance and borderline personality traits, a simple linear regression analysis was conducted. Prior to analysis, assumptions of linearity, normality of residuals, and homoscedasticity were checked visually and with a Shapiro–Wilk test. For the second hypothesis, a multiple regression was used, where gaslighting acceptance was the dependent variable, with the self-esteem and borderline personality traits as independent variables. An interaction term (borderline personality traits * self-esteem) had been included to examine whether the association of borderline personality traits and gaslighting acceptance was moderated by self-esteem (Baron & Kenny, 1986). Moderation effects were visualised using a simple slots plot. All analyses used a significance threshold of $p < .05$. Lastly, for the third hypothesis, which states that men will have a higher level of gaslighting acceptance than women, a Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to compare mean gaslighting acceptance scores between men and women. Assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were evaluated before conducting the test. According to Cohen's (1988) conventions, r values of .10, .30, and .50 are considered small, medium, and large, respectively.

Results

A total of 218 participants started the survey. Out of them, 35 were excluded due to not finishing the form, 10 because of failing the attention check, and 1 due to withdrawing their consent for processing their data, totalling 46 people. Therefore, the final sample consisted of 172 participants, with 49 being men (28.49%), 120 women (69.77%), and 3 (1.74%) declaring themselves as being non-binary. The majority of participants were from Germany (128), followed by Dutch (39) with most of the subjects either being students (109), or having their bachelor's degree completed (77).

For the first hypothesis, assumptions of linearity, normality of residuals, and homoscedasticity have been checked on the mean score of gaslighting acceptance (Figure 1) and borderline personality traits, with borderline personality traits scores being skewed to the right. The normality of the residuals was violated, as shown by the Shapiro–Wilk test, $W(172) = 0.872, p < .001$. Therefore, log-transformed gaslighting acceptance scores were used in the simple linear regression which tested whether borderline personality traits predicted gaslighting acceptance. The results of the regression (Table 1) indicated that one's level of borderline personality traits was not a significant predictor of gaslighting acceptance ($b = 0.05, t(170) = 1.18, p = .24$). The overall model was not significant ($F(1, 170) = 1.40, p = .238$) and explained less than 1% of the variance in gaslighting acceptance ($R^2 = .008$).

Figure 1

Distribution of gaslighting acceptance scores

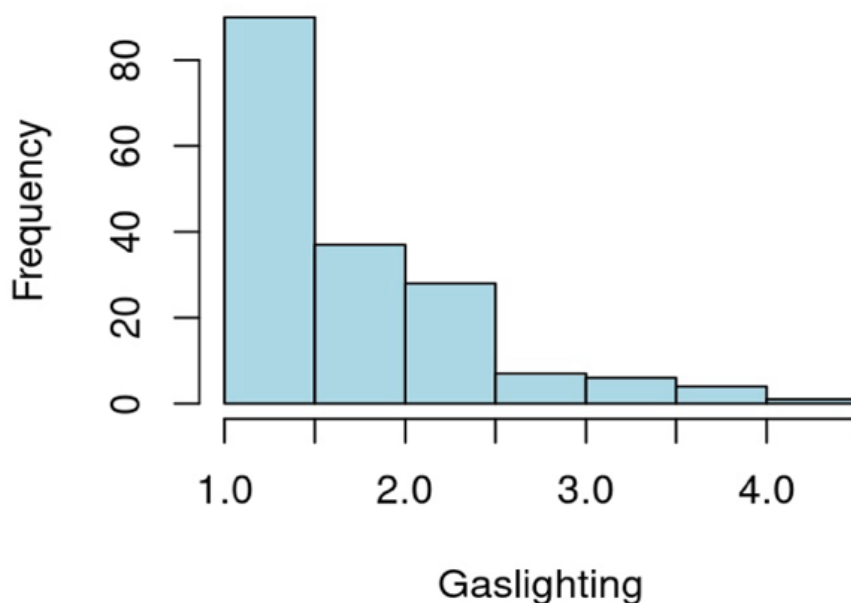


Table 1

Simple linear regression predicting log-transformed gaslighting acceptance from borderline traits

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	0.44	0.04	-	10.60	< .001
Borderline traits	0.05	0.04	0.09	1.18	.24

Note. $R^2 = .008$; $F(1, 170) = 1.40$, $p = .238$.

When it comes to the second hypothesis, a multiple regression was conducted to examine the extent to which borderline personality traits, low self-esteem, and their interaction predict acceptance of gaslighting (Table 2). Neither borderline personality traits ($b = 0.02$, $SE = 0.35$, $t(168) = 0.05$, $p = .96$, 95% *CI* [-0.67, 0.70]) nor low self-esteem ($b = -0.12$, $SE = 0.16$, $t(168) = -0.72$, $p = .47$, 95% *CI* [-0.44, 0.20]) emerged as significant predictors of gaslighting acceptance. The interaction term between borderline traits and self-esteem also failed to reach significance ($b = 0.01$, $SE = 0.13$, $t(168) = 0.06$, $p = .95$, 95% *CI* [-0.25, 0.26]). A moderation plot (Figure 2) was examined, displaying three approximately parallel lines across low, medium, and high levels of self-esteem, therefore suggesting no significant moderation effect.

Table 2

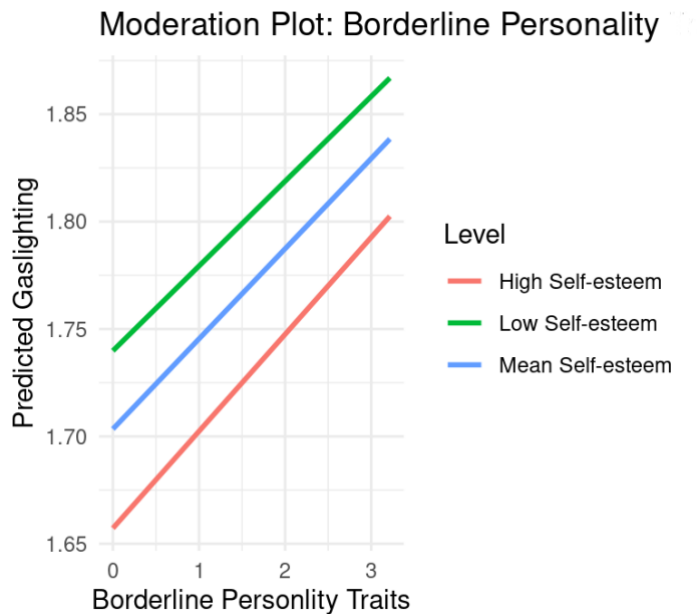
Multiple regression predicting gaslighting acceptance from borderline traits, self-esteem, and their interaction

Predictor	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	β	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Constant	2.06	0.53	-	3.85	< .001
Borderline traits	0.02	0.35	0.04	0.05	.96
Self-esteem	-0.12	0.16	-0.09	-0.72	.47
Interaction	0.01	0.13	0.06	0.06	.95

Note. $R^2 = .01$; $F(3, 168) = 0.77$, $p = .51$.

Figure 2

Moderation of the relationship between borderline personality traits and gaslighting by self-esteem. Predicted values of gaslighting are plotted across values of borderline personality at low (25th percentile), mean, and high (75th percentile) levels of self-esteem.



As for the third hypothesis, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were assessed before the t-test. Since the Shapiro–Wilk tests indicated non-normality for men ($W(49) = .885, p < .001$) and for women ($W(120) = .858, p < .001$), indicating a violation of the normality. Therefore, a non-parametric Mann-Whitney U test was conducted. Results showed that men scored higher ($Mdn = 2.04$) in gaslighting behaviours than women ($Mdn = 1.62$). This difference was significant ($U = 3967.50, z = 3.56, p < .001$), with a small-to-medium effect size ($r = .27$). Therefore, the third hypothesis is confirmed.

Discussion

The present study examined the acceptance of gaslighting in interpersonal relationships, focusing on the association with borderline personality traits and the moderating role of self-esteem and gender differences. Contrary to the first hypothesis, borderline personality traits did not significantly predict gaslighting acceptance. In line with the second hypothesis, men reported higher acceptance of gaslighting than women. Lastly, self-esteem neither directly predicted gaslighting acceptance nor moderated the relationship between borderline traits and gaslighting acceptance, failing to support the third hypothesis.

The lack of a significant association between borderline traits and gaslighting acceptance contradicts theoretical expectations and prior research linking borderline symptomatology to manipulative relationship behaviours (Muñoz Centifanti et al., 2016). One possible explanation could be that the *Gaslighting Acceptance Scale* assesses acceptance of gaslighting behaviours rather than actual engagement in such behaviours. Ergo, even though it is possible that individuals high in borderline traits view gaslighting as unacceptable in

principle, they may still sometimes use gaslighting under stress, possibly due to dissociative mechanisms (Bellomare et al., 2024). Another possible explanation would be that although people who score high in borderline symptomatology experience intense affective swings and interpersonal turmoil, they do not accept or engage in gaslighting but instead resort to more overt tactics such as begging or threatening to elicit care (Terzi et al., 2017), these behaviours being often more impulsive responses to emotional distress rather than calculated attempts to control others. To test this, future studies could devise a questionnaire aimed at borderline coping mechanisms.

Although prior studies have linked low self-esteem to broader manipulative behaviours (Grebin, 2020), the present findings did not support an interaction with borderline personality traits in the context of gaslighting acceptance, suggesting that low self-esteem does not amplify the relationship between borderline traits and the acceptance of gaslighting. A possible reason for this outcome might be that, while people with low self-esteem often feel unsure in relationships and need others to approve of them (Kimble & Helmreich, 1972), these traits don't make them more likely to accept manipulative tactics like gaslighting. Alternatively, while global self-esteem, as measured by the RSES, measures overall self-worth, prior research suggests that high relationship-contingent self-esteem is associated with emotional instability, low autonomy, and defensive behaviours, which could theoretically underlie manipulative tactics such as gaslighting (Knee et al., 2008). Future studies could thus employ relationship-contingent self-esteem as a better candidate to further explore this relationship.

The study did confirm the expected gender difference, with men endorsing greater acceptance of gaslighting tactics than women. This aligns with literature describing men's greater propensity for coercive and controlling behaviours in relationships (Hamberger & Larsen, 2015; March et al., 2023). The current study further explores this discrepancy, showing that men may not only engage more in manipulative behaviours but also show higher acceptance of them. One theory for this gender difference is that cultural narratives around masculinity and emotional expression may discourage men from acknowledging vulnerability, fostering a relational style that inhibits emotional openness which leads them to adopt alternative, less emotionally open strategies in conflict situations (Cleary, 2022). Furthermore, this discrepancy may stem from traditional gender roles which often encourage men to adopt dominance-orientated approaches in relationships, thus leading to the use of more manipulative techniques (Grieve et al., 2019). Therefore, men may hold beliefs minimising the severity or

wrongfulness of manipulation, potentially viewing it as a legitimate conflict-management tool (Connell & Messerschmidt, 2005).

The study's use of highly reliable, validated psychological scales and an adequately powered sample size enhances the credibility and generalisability of its findings. However, limitations have to be taken into account. Firstly, the self-report design is subject to social desirability bias, with participants potentially underreporting the behaviours that they think society sees as unacceptable, like gaslighting acceptance. Secondly, although the sample size exceeded a priori power estimates for medium direct effects, it was underpowered to detect small effect sizes, particularly for interaction effects. Thirdly, due to its convenience sampling method, with most of the participants being female students, the findings cannot be extrapolated to clinical or more diverse populations. Fourthly, because of its cross-sectional nature, the design limits conclusions about causality between the different studied traits. And lastly, the *Gaslighting Acceptance Scale*, while psychometrically sound, only captures acceptance in hypothetical scenarios rather than direct engagement in gaslighting, therefore lacking ecological validity.

Despite these limitations, the findings of this study carry important theoretical and practical implications for understanding manipulative behaviours in interpersonal relationships. On one hand, the lack of a significant relationship between borderline personality traits and gaslighting acceptance suggests that manipulative tactics may not be inherently linked to emotional dysregulation, challenging assumptions that individuals with borderline traits endorse or rationalise such behaviours. This suggests a need for more nuanced theoretical models that differentiate between the acceptance of manipulation and the actual engagement in it. On the other hand, couple and family therapists might screen for specific conflict patterns related to gender, with men being observed for subtle manipulative behaviours and educated about them, thus helping men in particular develop healthier conflict-resolution strategies and emotional literacy.

Future research should further explore the nuanced relationship between personality traits and manipulative behaviour by examining constructs like relationship-contingent self-esteem, which is used to capture whether someone's self-worth is dependent on the success of the relationship, which in turn may relate more closely to manipulative tendencies. Additionally, expanding the circle of participants beyond the student population would enhance the generalisability of findings. Moreover, employing tests aimed at evaluating one's beliefs in gender norms could clarify the causal mechanism between men and their acceptance of

gaslighting. Lastly, instead of relying on self-reported quantitative data on gaslighting acceptance, using qualitative observational methods like journals or semi-structured interviews with couples could provide more ecologically valid insights into how participants view and act upon gaslighting in everyday relationships.

In conclusion, this study provides novel insights into the acceptance of gaslighting tactics in relationships. Men demonstrated significantly higher acceptance of gaslighting than women, highlighting the importance of addressing gendered manipulation patterns in relationships. Although borderline personality traits and self-esteem did not significantly predict gaslighting acceptance, these findings prove the complexity of psychological factors involved in manipulation. Future research should further investigate more nuanced constructs, such as relationship-contingent self-esteem, and employ longitudinal and qualitative methods to capture the real-world gaslighting attitudes and behaviours over time. Such work is crucial for informing both theoretical frameworks and practical interventions aimed at promoting healthier relationships.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Welcome to our study!

We are a team of 5 students researching the relation between the attitude toward certain behaviors and personality traits as well as experiences via this online questionnaire. This research project is part of our Bachelor's thesis and has been approved by the BMS Ethics Committee/Domain Humanities & Social Sciences.

An important aspect is that you can withdraw at any point from the study without notifying us, the researchers, about the reason for doing it. If you stop halfway through the form, the answers will still be stored. Your data will be anonymised so the answers cannot be traced back to you specifically. Your data will only be used to conduct research on the aforementioned topics, and the results of it will be published and archived in the University of Twente's repositories until May 2027.

Warning: The survey asks about some sensitive topics such as abuse. If you feel uncomfortable, you can choose not to answer specific questions or stop the survey entirely at any point. Mental health resources will be provided at the end.

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant, or wish to obtain information, ask questions, or discuss any concerns about this study with someone other than the researcher(s), please contact the Secretary of the Ethics Committee/domain Humanities & Social Sciences of the Faculty of Behavioural, Management and Social Sciences at the University of Twente at: ethicscommittee-hss@utwente.nl

For any further questions regarding the study, please contact:

d.j.t.hindriksen@student.utwente.nl

By consenting to participate in this study, you confirm the following:

I have read and understood the study information.

I voluntarily take part in this research and understand that I can withdraw from this study at any time or refuse to answer a question, without having to give a reason.

I understand that the information collected will be used to write a report with the findings presented at the University of Twente.

I understand that any personal information collected that can identify me will not be shared with anyone beyond the study team and will be kept in a secure environment.