

THE INFLUENCE OF SELF-ESTEEM ON FEAR OF INTIMACY AMONG EMERGING ADULTS WHO HAVE EXPERIENCED GASLIGHTING IN DATING RELATIONSHIPS

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Abstract

Early adulthood is a crucial period in an individual's psychosocial development, where the ability to build intimate relationships is crucial. However, negative experiences in relationships, such as gaslighting, can impact an individual's psychological aspects, particularly self-esteem and fear of intimacy. Gaslighting is a manipulative form of psychological violence that can damage the victim's self-perception, lower self-esteem, and then cause anxiety about closer relationships in the future. This study aims to determine the effect of self-esteem on fear of intimacy in early adults who have experienced gaslighting in dating relationships. This study used a quantitative approach with a simple linear regression analysis technique. Respondents numbered 150 people who were early adults who had experienced gaslighting in dating relationships. The instruments used were the Self-Liking Self-Competence Scale Revised (SLCS-R) to measure self-esteem and the Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) to measure fear of intimacy. The results showed a significant negative effect between self-esteem and fear of intimacy, with a significance value of 0.000 ($p < 0.05$). The coefficient of determination of 0.238 indicates that self-esteem contributes 23.8% to fear of intimacy, with the remainder influenced by other factors. The higher an individual's self-esteem, the lower their likelihood of experiencing fear of intimacy. This finding confirms that gaslighting can undermine self-esteem and ultimately make it difficult for victims to form healthy emotional attachments in the future.

Keywords : gaslighting, self-esteem, fear of intimacy, emerging adulthood

Abstrak

Masa dewasa awal merupakan periode penting dalam perkembangan psikososial individu, dimana kemampuan membangun hubungan intim menjadi hal yang krusial. Namun, pengalaman negatif dalam hubungan seperti gaslighting dapat berdampak pada aspek psikologis individu, khususnya self-esteem dan fear of intimacy. Gaslighting merupakan bentuk kekerasan psikologis yang bersifat manipulatif, yang dapat merusak persepsi diri korban, menurunkan harga diri dan kemudian menimbulkan kecemasan terhadap hubungan yang lebih dekat di masa depan. Penelitian ini bertujuan untuk mengetahui pengaruh self-esteem terhadap fear of intimacy pada individu dewasa awal yang pernah mengalami gaslighting dalam hubungan berpacaran. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kuantitatif dengan teknik analisis regresi linear sederhana. Responden berjumlah 150 orang yang merupakan individu dewasa awal yang pernah mengalami gaslighting dalam hubungan berpacaran. Instrumen yang digunakan adalah skala Self Liking Self Competence Scale Revised (SLCS-R) untuk mengukur self-esteem dan Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) untuk mengukur fear of intimacy. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan adanya pengaruh negatif yang signifikan antara self-esteem terhadap fear of intimacy, dengan nilai signifikansi sebesar 0,000 ($p < 0,05$). Nilai koefisien determinasi sebesar 0,238 menunjukkan bahwa self-esteem berpengaruh sebesar 23,8% terhadap fear of intimacy, sementara sisanya dipengaruhi oleh faktor lain. Semakin tinggi self-esteem individu, semakin rendah kecenderungan individu mengalami fear of intimacy. Temuan ini menegaskan bahwa pengalaman gaslighting dapat melemahkan harga diri dan pada akhirnya mempersulit korban untuk membentuk kedekatan emosional yang sehat di masa depan.

Kata kunci : gaslighting, self-esteem, fear of intimacy, dewasa awal

1. Introduction

Early adulthood is experienced by individuals aged 18-25 (Santrock, 2012). Based on Erikson's psychosocial developmental stages, individuals in this early adulthood phase are in the intimacy versus isolation stage. Individuals are willing to establish meaningful social relationships with others and build intimacy. However, if individuals are unable to develop meaningful social relationships, they will become isolated and withdrawn (Qinthara, 2021). Dating during this early adulthood phase is considered a period of searching for a partner and exploration for individuals before establishing a relationship at a more advanced level, such as marriage (Angela & Hadiwirawan, 2022).

In general, individuals in dating relationships expect their love needs to be met, supported, and understood by their partner, leading to a healthy and happy relationship. However, in real life, dating relationships don't always live up to expectations (Maulida & Rifayanti, 2022). Gaslighting is a form of psychological violence in dating relationships, typically involving harsh words, threats, manipulation, demeaning behavior, and isolation from family and friends (Rini, in Ramadhatsani et al., 2024).

Gaslighting is a form of psychological violence in dating relationships that aims to make the victim feel guilty and create a confusing situation (Sweet, 2019). According to the 2024 National Commission on Violence Against Women (Komnas Perempuan) report, service agencies input 11,475 (26.94%) cases of psychological violence in Indonesia. The largest number of victims were in the 18-24 age range, and the number of cases of violence perpetrated by partners was second, at 1,039. Furthermore, SIMFONI-PPA collected data on psychological violence in Indonesia as of January 1, 2025, recording 5,207 cases. Of these, 2,054 victims were in the 18-24 age group, and 2,736 reported cases of psychological violence perpetrated by a partner. In UK, 74% of adult female survivors of intimate partner violence have experienced gaslighting. A qualitative study of 65 US participants (aged 18-69) found that gaslighting led to loss of self-esteem, distrust of others, poor relationship quality, and even depression (Tager-shafir, 2024). However, in these data indicate that psychological violence is the most common form of violence experienced by young people, and one form of psychological violence that often occurs in dating relationships is gaslighting.

Gaslighting differs from other forms of manipulation, such as blame shifting or emotional invalidation, it systematically targets the victim's perception of reality, causing deeper and more sustained decline in self-esteem (Klein et al., 2023). Individuals who are victims of gaslighting experience decreased self-esteem due to continuous emotional and psychological manipulation, leaving them feeling worthless, confused, and helpless (Pandey & Dangwal, 2025; Sengkey & Illahibaccus-Sona, 2024). Research by Astriani (2021) states that gaslighting disrupts daily activities, lowers self-confidence, leads to feelings of humiliation, negative self-concept, and low self-esteem. This statement aligns with Fletcher's (in Sengkey & Illahibaccus-Sona, 2024) opinion that gaslighting can damage the victim's psychological state and lead to low self-esteem. Gaslighting also reinforced by patriarchy through gender stereotypes when men as leaders, are perceived as having the authority to correct women's perceptions. Meanwhile, victims feel guilty if they defy authority. This results in a further decline in self-esteem (Anastasya, 2025).

Self-esteem is defined as an individual's subjective evaluation of themselves, whether they feel valuable, competent, and worthy of respect. Tafarodi & Swann (2001) divide self-esteem into two aspects: self-competence (an individual's belief in their own effectiveness) and self-liking (an assessment of whether or not an individual likes themselves). Victims of gaslighting generally show decreased self-esteem, with symptoms including feelings of worthlessness, loss of autonomy, and a negative self-concept (Astriani, 2021; Sengkey & Illahibaccus-Sona, 2024). Self-esteem affects communication and self-disclosure, which can lead to anxiety about building more intimate relationships, or a fear of intimacy. Low self-esteem hinders individuals' ability to open up and share feelings, and builds emotional barriers that exacerbate the fear of intimacy. Individuals who struggle to open up will struggle to build intimate relationships, further reinforcing the fear of intimacy (Nisaa, 2025). Furthermore, individuals with fear of intimacy also experience a fear of rejection if they open up too much to others. They lack emotional security to build closeness with others.

Fear of intimacy is the anxiety about sharing meaningful thoughts and feelings with others whom they value highly (Descutner & Thelen, 1991). Fear of intimacy encompasses three aspects: content (barriers to interpersonal communication), emotional valency (hesitation to share personal emotions), and vulnerability (fear of vulnerability). Individuals with high levels of fear of intimacy tend to exhibit avoidant, anxious, or inhibited behaviour in intimate relationships. They may tend to avoid talking about feelings or discussing personal matters with their partners. They can feel anxious or uncomfortable when having to show vulnerability. Individuals often maintain emotional distance, even in close relationships, and may appear indifferent or unresponsive to their partner's emotional needs. Individuals with a high fear of intimacy often have difficulty expressing their feelings, even when they feel love or affection (Lecheheb, 2020).

Previous research confirms a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and fear of intimacy (Fatah & Hartini, 2022; Obeid et al., 2020). However, most previous studies have focused on other variables such as parenting styles, attachment styles, or parental divorce (Kurniawan & Kusumaningrum, 2023), and few have linked these to experiences of gaslighting in dating relationships. Therefore, this study addresses this gap by examining the effect of self-esteem on fear of intimacy in young adults who have experienced gaslighting in dating relationships.

2. Research Method

Participants

The participants in this study were 150 individuals who met the criteria for having experienced gaslighting in a dating relationship. Individuals who met the research criteria were invited to participate in this study through a simple random sampling technique (convenience sampling). Respondent screening was conducted using the Victim Gaslighting Questionnaire (VGQ) developed by Bhatti et al. (2021). This instrument was used to identify respondents' experiences of gaslighting through 13 statements representing various forms of psychological manipulation in dating relationships. Respondents who reported experiencing gaslighting in one or more of the behaviours listed in the VGQ met the study's inclusion criteria. This approach was used to ensure that all respondents had experienced gaslighting, although the instrument was not used to quantitatively classify the severity of gaslighting. In this study, the population size was unknown (unlimited), so it was necessary to calculate the sample size to be used. The sample size calculation from an unknown population used the Lemeshow (1996) formula and the number of participants required was 96. Data collection was conducted online, resulting in 150 participants, 83.3% of whom were women.

Research Design

This study employed a quantitative design. Data collection was conducted online at specific times by participants who met the research criteria. The data obtained were statistically analyzed to prove the researcher's assumptions. The instrument used in this study was a questionnaire, while data analysis utilized simple linear regression.

Instruments

This study uses two psychological instruments that both have undergone a cross-cultural adaptation process carried out through translation into Indonesian, taking into account the equivalence of conceptual meaning and evaluation of the suitability of language and cultural context through expert judgment. The test results show that the items on both scales have adequate internal consistency so that they are declared suitable for use in the Indonesian population.

The Self-Liking Self-Competence Scale-Revised (SLCS-R) is a scale that measures self-esteem developed by Tafarodi & Swann (2001). The SLCS-R initially consisted of two 10-item aspects, which were revised in their research to clarify the differences between the two aspects of self-esteem. The scale was then revised to 8 items each to measure self-liking and self-competence aspects. The SLCS-R aims to measure an individual's level of self-esteem, which is classified into three categories: high, medium, and low. The measurement scale used is a Likert scale with five answer choices ranging from 1-5, namely strongly disagree to strongly agree. The SLCS-R consists of favourable and unfavourable items. Unfavourable items will later be scored in reverse to maintain consistency in the direction of the assessment. The SLCS-R has an alpha reliability value of 0.84.

The Fear of Intimacy Scale (FIS) is a scale used to measure an individual's anxiety regarding dating relationships. The FIS is a scale developed by Descutner & Thelen (1991) and has three aspects: content, emotional valency, and vulnerability. The FIS produces scores ranging from 35 to 175, with higher scores indicating higher levels of fear of intimacy. The construct validity of the FIS, as measured by Descutner & Thelen (1991), was measured using factor analysis with factor loading values ranging from 0.39 to 0.77. Convergent validity was compared with other measuring instruments that measure the same or related constructs (convergent validity) using the Pearson correlation test. Correlations with relevant scales support that the fear of intimacy measures the intended construct, and a sufficiently strong correlation indicates good construct validity. The FIS consists of favourable and unfavourable items. Response scores range from 1 to 5, from "very uncharacteristic of me" to "very characteristic of me." Unfavourable items are then reverse scored to maintain consistency in the assessment direction. The reliability of the FIS was measured using Cronbach's alpha and had an alpha reliability coefficient of 0.90, indicating that the FIS was proven to have high reliability.

Statistical analysis

A simple linear regression test was conducted to prove the hypothesis regarding the influence of self-esteem on fear of intimacy in young adults who had experienced gaslighting in dating relationships. The data obtained showed a normal distribution of residuals and a linear relationship. Thus, a simple linear regression test was conducted. The test was conducted using SPSS version 26.

3. Result and Discussion

Demographic Data

This study involved 150 young adults who had experienced gaslighting in dating relationships. The majority of respondents were female (83.3%). Relationship duration was predominantly 0-1 year (62.2%), followed by 1-2 years (22.7%) and >2 years (14.7%).

Table 1. Results of Demographic Data Analysis

Category	<i>n</i>	%
Gender		
Male	25	16,7
Female	125	83,3
Length of relationship		
0-1 year	94	62,7
1-2 years	34	22,7
>2 years	22	14,7

Table 2. Distribution of gaslighting experiences

Item statement	<i>n</i>	%
I often doubt my own sanity because of the statements he makes.	52	33,8
He was kind, but his words often put me down.	69	44,8
I doubt myself to make a decision because he doesn't agree with it.	50	32,5
He accused me of lying and manipulating, when in fact he was the one doing it.	65	42,2
He often denies things even when there is proof.	69	44,8
He judged my intentions negatively and did not match my true intentions.	46	29,9
I often doubt my personal beliefs and opinions because of their opposition.	61	39,6
He made me believe that nobody can be trusted except him.	38	24,7
I often change the content of my words or thoughts before expressing them to avoid conflict.	49	31,8
My opinion is often rejected or considered wrong by him	49	31,8
He often belittles my feelings	85	55,2
As time goes by, I feel inferior	56	36,4
I often apologize without understanding what I have done wrong	71	46,1

Next, variabel categorization is carried out with the aim of placing individuals into groups whose positions are hierarchically according to a continuum of variables to be measured. Categorization in this study refers to the categorization guidelines proposed by Azwar (2012) with score limits determined using the mean value (M) with the provision that $X \leq \text{Mean}$ is included in the low criteria and $X > \text{Mean}$ is included in the high criteria. Thus, the resulting variable criteria are as follows.

Table 3. Categorization of self-esteem and fear of intimacy

Category	Self-esteem		Fear of intimacy	
	<i>n</i>	%	<i>n</i>	%
Low	81	54	69	46
High	72	48	78	52

The table shows that a slightly higher proportion of participants have low self-esteem (81 individuals, 54%) compared to those with high self-esteem (72 individuals, 48%), indicating that more than half of the sample reports lower self-esteem. In contrast, fear of intimacy is more prevalent at the high level, with 78 participants

(52%) categorized as having high fear of intimacy, compared to 69 participants (46%) with low fear of intimacy. Overall, the distribution suggests a tendency toward lower self-esteem and higher fear of intimacy among the participants.

Hypotesis Testing

Table 4. Regression Analysis Results

Predictor	B	β	R ²	p
Constant	—	—	0.238	< .001
Self-esteem	—	-0.488		< .001

The results of simple linear regression analysis show that self-esteem has a significant effect on fear of intimacy ($p < 0.005$). The beta regression coefficient of -0.488 indicates a negative direction of influence, meaning that the higher the individual's self-esteem, the lower the fear of intimacy they have. The R² value = 0.238 indicates that Self-esteem explains 23.8% of the variation in fear of intimacy.

Table 5. Two-Variable Regression Test Results on Gender

Gender	N	β	R ²	p
Female	125	-0.518	0.268	< .001
Male	25	-0.345	0.119	0.092

In more detail, the analysis by gender shows that the effect of Self-esteem is significant in women ($\beta = -0.518$; R² = 0.268; $p < 0.05$), but not significant in men ($\beta = -0.345$; R² = 0.119; $p = 0.092$). In addition to analyzing gender, analysis of the length of the dating relationship was also conducted to see whether the duration of the gaslighting relationship affected the strength and significance of the influence of the two variables.

Table 6. Two-Variable Regression Test on Respondents' Relationship Duration

Length of relationship	N	β	R ²	p
0-1 year	94	-0,539	0,291	< .001
1-2 years	34	-0,443	0,196	0,009
>2 years	22	-0,433	0,188	0,044

In all groups of respondents who experienced gaslighting over different time periods, a p-value of <.05 was obtained, indicating a significant influence of self-esteem on fear of intimacy in all groups. The highest R-square value was found in the 0-1 year relationship group, at 29.1%, which is considered a strong influence, followed by 1-2 years of relationship at 19.6%, and 18.8% for the >2 years relationship group. Despite the different sample sizes that may affect the regression test results, the length of the relationship also influences the magnitude of the influence on the two variables. The table above shows that the longer the gaslighting relationship lasts, the smaller the influence.

4. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate a significant negative relationship between self-esteem and fear of intimacy among young adults who have experienced gaslighting in romantic relationships. Individuals with lower self-esteem tend to report higher levels of fear of intimacy. This result supports previous literature suggesting that self-esteem plays a central role in shaping how individuals perceive themselves and navigate close relationships. When self-esteem is compromised, individuals may experience self-doubt, feelings of unworthiness, and heightened sensitivity to rejection, which can hinder emotional openness and vulnerability in intimate relationships (Descutner & Thelen, 1991; Obeid et al., 2019). The Individual has high self-esteem, open communication with their partner will increase (Laurensia, Luqman, Ayun, 2022). On the other hand, someone who views himself positively has the belief that he will be accepted by others and has a greater possibility of being able to develop interpersonal relationships in a more intimate direction (Pribadi & Erdiansyah, 2019).

From a developmental perspective, young adulthood is characterized by the psychosocial task of intimacy versus isolation (Santrock, 2012). Successfully forming intimate relationships requires a stable and positive self-concept. Gaslighting experiences, which involve manipulation and distortion of reality, may weaken an individual's self-evaluation and internal sense of worth (Tafarodi & Swann, 2001; Salsabila et al., 2022). As a result, individuals who internalize negative messages from their partners may become more cautious, defensive, or emotionally withdrawn, thereby increasing their fear of intimacy (Thelen et al., 2000; Pandey & Dangwal, 2025; Shekhar & Tripathi, 2024; Walker et al., 2021).

Gender differences observed in this study showed that female participants reported higher levels of fear of intimacy compared to males. This finding may be understood in light of sociocultural expectations and

relational dynamics that influence how emotional experiences are processed. In certain cultural contexts, women may experience stronger relational pressures and emotional involvement in romantic relationships, which can intensify the psychological impact of manipulative behaviours (Sakina, 2017; Rossevelt et al., 2022). However, this interpretation should be approached cautiously, as gender differences may also be influenced by unmeasured contextual and individual factors.

Regarding relationship duration, individuals who had been in longer relationships tended to report higher fear of intimacy after experiencing gaslighting. Prolonged exposure to manipulative dynamics may gradually erode self-confidence and emotional security. Over time, repeated invalidation can shape maladaptive relational patterns, making individuals more hesitant to engage in future intimate relationships (Pratiwi, 2020). Nevertheless, relationship duration alone does not fully explain the psychological outcomes, as individual coping mechanisms and relational contexts may vary.

In addition to self-esteem, gender, and relationship duration, other factors may contribute to fear of intimacy following gaslighting experiences. Variables such as social support, attachment style, and psychological resilience may influence how individuals interpret and respond to relational manipulation. Individuals with stronger support systems or secure attachment patterns may be better equipped to maintain self-worth despite adverse relational experiences. Since these variables were not examined in the present study, future research should incorporate a broader range of psychosocial factors to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomenon.

Overall, the results highlight the importance of self-esteem as a protective factor in intimate relationships. Strengthening self-esteem may help individuals develop healthier relational boundaries and reduce fear of emotional closeness after experiencing psychological manipulation.

5. Conclusion

Baed on the results of a simple linear regression analysis, a significance value of 0.000 (<0.05) was obtained, indicating a significant effect of self-esteem on fear of intimacy in young adults who had experienced gaslighting in dating relationships. The beta regression coefficient of -0.488 indicates a negative effect, meaning that the higher an individual's self-esteem, the lower their fear of intimacy. Conversely, individuals with low self-esteem tend to have higher levels of fear of intimacy. Furthermore, self-esteem exerted a 23.8% influence ($R^2 = 0.238$) on fear of intimacy.

This study provide practical implications for psychologists and counsellors to develop interventions focused on restoring self-esteem and reducing fear of intimacy among victim's gaslighting, including through psychoeducation on healthy romantic relationships and the identification of manipulative behaviours. However, the findings should be interpreted with caution due to the use of convenience sampling, which limits sample representativeness and may overrepresent certain demographic groups. Therefore, future research is recommended to employ more representative sampling techniques to obtain more comprehensive findings.

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