

“Is It Me or You?”: Relationship Between Anxiety and Gaslighting in Peers Among College Students

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Abstract

Gaslighting has become a common form of psychological abuse in today's world, affecting many people regardless of their age or gender. The person who experiences gaslighting may experience difficulty making decisions, lack of confidence, and self-doubt. This study aimed to determine the correlation between anxiety and gaslighting in peers among college students. Using a correlational research design and random sampling, the researchers collected data from 101 respondents from the various colleges of St. Michael's College - Iligan. The findings of the study have shown that most of the respondents were experiencing high levels of gaslighting, which implies that it is very prevalent among students. Moreover, it is shown in the study that those who are being gaslighted are experiencing moderate anxiety, while there are only few who have minimal anxiety. Lastly, the findings have shown that there is a significant relationship between anxiety and gaslighting. People who are gaslighted are more likely to experience anxiety. Gaslighting can cause mental illness, and it also makes people more susceptible to anxious thoughts. As a result, an intervention program entitled *Reclaiming Your Trust: Breaking Free from Emotional Manipulation* is developed to help students understand, accept, and regulate their emotions, improve their self-awareness, and develop coping skills for dealing with anxiety.

Keywords: *Anxiety, Gaslighting, Psychological Manipulation*

1.0 Introduction

In today's modern world and generation, gaslighting is one of the several forms of psychological abuse. The 1938 play *Gas Light* is when the phrase "gaslighting" first appeared and although gaslighting may date all the way back to 1938, its use has just recently become more common and is now used in a range of contexts, including social media and the workplace as well as in situations related to healthcare and mental health (Durvasula, 2021). In addition, the person who experiences gaslighting or "gaslightee" experience difficulty making decisions, lack of confidence, and self-doubt. They experience stress, anxiety, and sadness as they internalize the belief that they are never good enough, and they develop low self-esteem (Shafir, 2021).

The primary intention of this research is to determine whether there is a significant correlation between gaslighting experiences among the college students with their peers and anxiety. To be precise, it aims to determine if gaslighting could lead to anxiety. Although the term 'gaslighting' is a relatively new and controversial topic that stirs the masses, in which it is said to be a social phenomenon, the areas of research that are being investigated are limited and prior studies have mainly concentrated on the gendered and racialized effects of gaslighting on those who experiences it (Sweet, 2019). Those prior researches did not go deeper into the numerous situations or settings where gaslighting could occur, such as the peer setting, to be particular, among teens or emerging adults, which is the place where gaslighting is frequent.

As a result of this observation, the researcher's main objective is to develop an intervention program, to be more specific, it is to aid those who experience it to cope up, identify if they are experiencing gaslighting, and help in mitigating the risk of being held captive if such certain situation arises. This study would be done over the course of two semesters in the school years 2022-2023 and 2023-2024.

1.1 Objectives of the Study

This research aims to determine if there is a correlation between gaslighting experiences and anxiety among college students. Specifically, this research attempts to answer the following questions: (1) What is the level of the gaslighting experiences among college students in terms of peer disagreement and loss of self-trust; (2) What is the level of anxiety among college students?; (3) Is there any significant relationship between anxiety and experience of gaslighting among college students?; and (4) What intervention could be made based on the findings of the study?

2.0 Methods

The research design that this study would use is the correlational research design. This method would be used to examine the degree of association between gaslighting and anxiety and can provide insights into the nature of the relationship between them.

The sample size for this study would be 101, with the respondents drawn from the various college departments of St. Michael's College, and would be limited to those students who passed the pre-survey, specifically those college students who are experiencing gaslighting. They are also not restricted to a specific demographic profile, age, or gender as long as they are qualified to partake in the study. Lastly, the respondents' availability and accessibility would also be taken into account.

In order to collect data for this study, the following research instruments are being utilized: Gaslight Questionnaire (GQ) and Generalized Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7). The Gaslight Questionnaire (GQ) was the first research tool used in this study. It is a 14-item scale divided into two subscales: items 6-14 measure peer disagreement and items 1-5 measure loss of self-trust. The scale's development was based on a thorough review of the literature on gaslighting, as well as extensive focus group discussions with victims of gaslighting. There were no reverse items on the current scale, and only one item was dropped due to double loading. The instrument is suitable for use in a variety of settings law enforcement, the clinical, and study settings, to expand the awareness and comprehension of the idea of gaslighting as well as its

prevalence in various groups and countries. Furthermore, the tool can be helpful for recognizing potential relations with other variables more effectively and may be employed in larger samples, which wasn't always possible previously (Bhatti et al., 2021). The overall goal of this scale is to determine and quantify the levels of general gaslighting experiences.

Several studies have examined the psychometric properties of the Gaslight Questionnaire (GQ). The GQ has strong reliability and validity for measuring gaslighting experiences, according to the results. Bhatti et al. (2021) discovered that the internal consistency of the GQ was high with Cronbach's $\alpha = .93$, indicating that the items measured the same construct of gaslighting experiences. Furthermore, the GQ has high convergent validity when compared to other measures of emotional abuse and mental health. The GQ was also found to be favorably linked with the Emotional Abuse Questionnaire and the Depression Anxiety Stress Scales-21 by Bhatti et al. (2021), and Sharifi Bastan et al. (2021) demonstrated high convergent validity with measures of psychological abuse and mental health.

The second research tool used in this study is the Generalized Anxiety Disorder Assessment (GAD-7). GAD-7 is a 7-item self-administered tool that utilizes a portion of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders, fifth edition criteria for GAD (General Anxiety Disorder) to detect and gauge the severity of generalized anxiety disorder (GAD) while also going to measure anxiety symptom severity. It may also be employed to screen for panic, social anxiety, as well as post-traumatic stress. This was designed to be utilized quickly and efficiently in a primary care environment, similar to the PHQ9.

The Generalized Anxiety Disorder-7 (GAD-7) is a reliable and valid anxiety assessment tool. The GAD-7 has a strong internal consistency, with a Cronbach's α coefficient ranging from 0.89 to 0.92, showing that the scale's questions consistently measure the same construct. The GAD-7 has a strong test-retest reliability, with a correlation coefficient of 0.83, indicating that the scale delivers consistent results over time. The GAD-7 also has a strong convergent validity, as it correlates well with other anxiety measures such as the Hamilton Anxiety Rating Scale and the Beck Anxiety Inventory, and good discriminant validity, as it differentiates well between people with and without GAD. The GAD-7 is successful in detecting GAD when employing a cut-off score of 10 or higher, with high sensitivity and specificity rates of 89% and 82%, respectively. Furthermore, the GAD-7 responds to change over time, making it an effective tool for monitoring therapy progress. Overall, the GAD-7 is a valid and reliable measure that may be used to assess and track an individual's anxiety levels.

Mean and Standard Deviation. These basic statistical tools were used to describe and measure the average location and variation of the respondents' self-assessment on their level of gaslighting experiences and level of anxiety. These descriptive statistics are appropriate to answer and analyze the research problems numbers one (1) and two (2) as posted since these variables are measurable quantitatively.

Spearman Rho Correlation. This non-parametric statistical tool was utilized to answer and analyze research problem number three (3). This tool is more appropriate since it does not require normality of distribution.

Shapiro-Wilk test yielded a significant result of Generalized Anxiety Order ($W=.974$, $p = .041$). This led the researcher to reject the null hypothesis stating that the

data sets are normally distributed. This means that the normality distributions are not satisfied. This warrants the researcher to utilize the Spearman Rho correlation test in testing significant relationship among two continuous variables.

3.0 Results and Discussion

The results and findings of this study are presented chronologically based on the objectives as presented herein.

Table 1.1

Level of Gaslighting Experiences of the Respondents in Terms of Peer Disagreement

Indicators	Mean	SD	Qualitative Interpretation
1. They assign motives to your actions that are opposite to your intentions.	3.41	.908	Very Often
2. You often feel that you have to defend your reality from them.	3.89	.811	Very Often
3. They make you believe that nobody can be trusted except them.	2.96	.969	Sometimes
4. You often find them denying things even when there is proof.	3.69	1.027	Very Often
5. You feel unsure of your decision-making abilities because of their disagreement.	3.73	1.067	Very Often
6. They accused you of lying and manipulation, when in reality they are the one doing it.	3.49	1.146	Very Often
7. Their positive actions don't complement their degrading words.	3.51	.966	Very Often
8. You find Yourself questioning your beliefs and opinions because of their opposition.	3.60	1.105	Very Often
9. You often find yourself questioning your own sanity because of their words.	3.51	1.154	Very Often

Table 1.1 presents the level of gaslighting experiences among respondents in terms of peer disagreement and it shows that the highest gaslighting experience that occurs very often is the indicator number two (2) "You often feel that you have to defend your reality from them" and it has the mean score of 3.89 (SD = .811; Very Often). Also, the result shows the lowest gaslighting experience which is the indicator number three (3) "They make you believe that nobody can be trusted except them." and it has the mean score of 2.96 (SD = .969; Sometimes).

These results imply that college students very often experience gaslighting in the form of their peers denying their reality or making them feel like they have to defend their own sanity. Gaslighting is a type of emotional abuse in which one person manipulates another into questioning their own views, recollections, and sanity. When a victim of gaslighting begins to question their own reality and perceptions, and their peers disagree, it can lead to peer disagreement. This can make the sufferer feel isolated and alone, intensifying the negative effects of gaslighting.

According to the study conducted by Spear (2019), gaslighting can lead to peer disagreement by creating a situation in which the victim's sense of reality differs from that of their peers. This can cause the person experiencing gaslighting to question their own judgment and lead to disagreements with their peers. The study also implies that gaslighting can result in epistemic injustice, which is when someone is injured especially in his or her capability to think and remember events that happened in the past.

Table 1.2

Level of Gaslighting Experiences of the Respondents in Terms of Loss of Self - Trust

Indicators	Mean	SD	Qualitative Interpretation
1. You constantly change your word or thoughts before speaking	3.70	.756	Very Often
2. Your point of view is dismissed or said to be "wrong" completely.	3.14	.895	Sometimes
3. You get accused for "overreacting" when you try to explain your feelings.	3.73	1.019	Sometimes
4. You apologize without knowing what you did wrong.	3.68	1.086	Very Often
5. Most interactions leave you feeling small or ashamed of yourself.	3.39	1.049	Sometimes

Table 1.2 presents the level of gaslighting experiences among respondents in terms of loss of self-trust and the result shows that the most common gaslighting experience in terms of loss of self-trust is indicator number three (3), "You get accused for "overreacting" when you try to explain your feelings", and it has a mean score of 3.73 (SD = 1.019; Sometimes). Also, it shows the least common gaslighting experience in terms of loss of self-trust which is indicator number two (2), "Your point of view is dismissed or said to be "wrong " completely" and it has a mean score of 3.14 (SD = .895; sometimes).

The findings of this table implies that college students are often gaslighted by their peers in the form of being accused of overreacting when they try to express their feelings. This can lead to loss of self-trust, which can have a significant negative impact on their mental health and relationships. People who have been gaslighted may participate in self-gaslighting, in which they internalize the gaslighter's tactics and begin to question their own reality even when the gaslighter is not there. This can lead to low self-esteem or self-worth over time, as well as a diagnosable mental health condition such as anxiety or depression.

One-way gaslighting might contribute to self-trust loss is by establishing a sense of bewilderment and ambiguity. Victims of gaslighting may feel as if they are constantly second-guessing themselves, and they may find it difficult to distinguish between what is true and what is untrue. It can be tough for individuals to trust their own judgment and make decisions that feel right for them as a result of gaslighting (Sarkis, 2018).

Table 1.3

Summary of the Respondents' Level of Gaslighting Experiences

Scoring Scale	f	%	M	SD	QI
15-28	1	1.0	25.0		Low
29-42	23	22.8	37.74	3.078	Average
43-56	52	51.5	50.12	3.954	High

57-70	25	24.8	59.80	2.533	<i>Very High</i>
Total	101	100.0	49.45	8.725	<i>High</i>

M – Mean; Qualitative Interpretation (QI)

Table 1.3 presents the summary of the respondents' level of gaslighting experiences in terms of their frequency, percent equivalent, and their mean scores. The results showed that 52 of the respondents' or 51.5 percent of the total sample with a mean score of 50.12 (SD = 3.954) were found to have high levels of gaslighting. Also, it shows that only 1 or 1.0 percent of the total sample with a mean score of 25.0 have low level of gaslighting. Furthermore, the result shows that the respondents' overall level of gaslighting was high, with a mean score of 49.45 (SD = 8.725; n = 101).

The overall result implies that gaslighting was prevalent and was a serious problem in peers among college students. Gaslighting can occur in various settings and relationships, but more commonly between peers. In peer relationships, gaslighting occurs when one person manipulates the other person into doubting their own vision of reality, memory, or sanity. Lying, rejecting something even when faced with proof, maintaining that an incident never happened, spreading rumors or gossip, and demeaning or dismissing someone's feelings are all instances of gaslighting behaviors (Hecht, 2022).

Problem 2: What are the levels of anxiety among college students?

Table 2.1

Level of Anxiety of the Respondents

Indicators	Mean	SD	<i>Qualitative Interpretation</i>
1. Feeling nervous, anxious, or on edge?	1.50	.808	<i>Sometimes</i>
2. Not being able to stop or control worrying?	1.66	.852	<i>Sometimes</i>
3. Worrying too much about different things?	1.97	.854	<i>Sometimes</i>
4. Trouble relaxing?	1.42	.863	<i>Rarely</i>
5. Being so restless that it is hard to sit still?	1.29	.898	<i>Rarely</i>
6. Becoming easily annoyed or irritable?	1.88	1.070	<i>Sometimes</i>
7. Feeling afraid as if something awful might happen?	1.91	.918	<i>Sometimes</i>

Table 2.1 presents the respondents' level of anxiety and the result shows that the highest anxiety symptom among respondents was the indicator number three (3), "Worrying too much about different things?", and it has a mean score of 1.97 (SD = .854; sometimes). Also, it shows the least common anxiety symptom among respondents' which is indicator number five (5), "Being so restless that it is hard to sit still?", and it has a mean score of 1.29 (SD = .898; rarely).

The fact that the least common anxiety symptom is being so restless that it is hard to sit still, (mean = 1.29) suggests that college students may be more likely to experience anxiety in the form of worry than in the form of physical symptoms. According to Freidman and Westphalen (2023), anxiety in college students is on the rise as a result of academic pressure, moving away from home, unfamiliar social circumstances, and financial concerns. While anxiety can be expressed in a variety of forms, it is more common for college students to experience anxiety in the form of worry rather than physical symptoms.

Table 2.2
Summary of Respondents' Level of Anxiety

Scoring Scale	<i>f</i>	%	<i>M</i>	SD	<i>QI</i>
0 – 4	5	5.0	2.40	1.140	<i>Minimal Anxiety</i>
5 – 9	26	25.7	7.50	1.241	<i>Mild Anxiety</i>
10 – 14	41	40.6	11.95	1.516	<i>Moderate Anxiety</i>
15 - 21	29	28.7	16.45	1.242	<i>Severe Anxiety</i>
Total	101	100.0	11.62	4.154	<i>Moderate Anxiety</i>

Table 2.2 presents the summary of the respondents' level of anxiety in terms of their frequency, percent equivalent, and their mean scores. The results showed that 29 of the respondents' or 28.7 percent of the total sample with a mean score of 16.45 (SD = 1.242) were found to have severe levels of anxiety. Also, it was presented in the table that only 5 or 5.0 percent of the total sample with a mean score of 2.40 (SD = 1.140) have minimal level of anxiety. Further, the table also shows that the total respondents' level of anxiety is moderate, with a mean score of 11.62 (SD = 4.154, n = 101).

The results of this study implies that anxiety was common among the respondents. Most of them have moderate anxiety and there are only a select few who have minimal anxiety. According to the World Health Organization (2021), The most frequent mental health disorder among teenagers and young adults is anxiety.

Problem 3. Is there any significant relationship between anxiety and experience of gaslighting among college students?

Table 3.

Relationship Between Anxiety and Experience of Gaslighting of the Respondent

Variable		Correlation Coefficient	p - value
Gaslighting	Anxiety	.250	.012*

*Significant at 0.05 level

Table 3 presents the relationship between anxiety and gaslighting experiences of the respondents and the result shows that there is a significant correlation between the two variables, gaslighting and anxiety. The p-value of .012* means that there is a statistically significant correlation between variables gaslighting and anxiety this implies that people who experience gaslighting are more likely to have anxiety.

In an instance, someone who experienced being gaslighted may lead to mental illness but leaves a person vulnerable to anxious thoughts and overtime they will begin to believe that there is really something wrong with their judgment. These findings are supported by the literature review, which suggests that gaslighting can lead to a number of negative psychological outcomes, including low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. The Knots Theory of Mind provides a possible explanation for the link between gaslighting and anxiety. This theory uses a physical knot as an analogy, it implies that a person's mind can be twisted in a similar way as physical knots. The more the gaslighter gaslights the gaslightee, it would create knots in the person's minds and if left unchecked, it would then

result in anxiety.

Also, In the psychodynamic theory, it is being stated there that anxiety was the result between the conflict of the id and the ego. It is also proposed under this theory that anxiety can be managed through defense mechanisms such as denial, projection, repression, etc. As denial and projection can be regarded as gaslighting examples or experiences, gaslighting can be viewed as a defense mechanism used by the gaslighter to avoid confronting their own anxiety, concerns, and insecurities. The gaslighter might use gaslighting to shift attention away from their own shortcomings while maintaining control over the individual who is subjected to it.

3.1 Career Sustainability Program

Reclaiming Your Trust: Breaking Free from Emotional Manipulation

Rationale

The intervention program was made to navigate, to sustain and give proper solutions to the gaslighting experiences and anxiety of the college students. With regard to the results of the study, we believe that the best suited intervention program is the one that we created, the “Reclaiming Your Trust: Breaking Free from Emotional Manipulation” Program. The activities include: video presentations, lecture course, recollection, consultation, culminating activities, guidance and counseling (emotion-focused therapy sessions). This is a helpful preventive measure for mental health conditions, including anxiety, gaslighting, trauma, and relationship problems. It is effective, short-term, holistic, and collaborative. It is a therapeutic approach that focuses on helping people to understand, accept, and regulate their emotions. Also, Emotion-Focused Treatment Therapy (EFTT) can offer a number of benefits to individuals, especially college students who are struggling with their mental health. This includes reducing symptoms, improving emotional regulation, increases self-awareness and it can improve relationships, resilience and enhance quality of life. This aims to give compelling reinforcement to the gaslighting victims’ view of themselves to improve their level of self-esteem, mental health and to abolish the stigma of victim blaming.

General Objectives

1. To aid the institution, especially to the guidance counselor and to the instructors of St. Michael’s College in order to help college students with their levels of anxiety and to aid the risk of mental illness associated with experience of gaslighting.
2. To process the trauma of gaslighting
3. To raise awareness to gaslighting victims
4. To understand and identify gaslighting behaviors and make a move to end such predicament such as rebuilding their self-esteem and sense of self-worth, develop coping skills for dealing with anxiety.

Table 4.
Reclaiming Your Trust: Breaking Free from Emotional Manipulation

Domain	Specific Objectives	Activities/Strategies	Target Client	Persons Involved	Performance Indicator
Gaslighting & Anxiety	To promote awareness on the importance of identifying emotional manipulation/gaslighting, Anxiety among their peers	Video Presentation/Talk about Gaslighting and Anxiety in the Graduate Students (may be integrated in the College Student Orientation)	College students	Administrators, Resource Speaker, Faculty, Staff	50 % -100 % attendance of the students; evaluation report of the activity
Gaslighting	To build a deeper understanding about gaslighting and Anxiety and how the	Lecture Course Gaslighting and Anxiety in College	College students	Faculty, Guidance Personnel	80%-100% attendance of the students

4.0 Conclusion

After analyzing the data and results, the researchers found that there is a correlation between anxiety and gaslighting in peers among college students. Almost half of the participants who experienced gaslighting reported moderate anxiety, while the rest reported mild or severe anxiety. These findings are supported by the literature review, which suggests that gaslighting can lead to a number of negative psychological outcomes, including low self-esteem, anxiety, and depression. The Knots Theory of Mind provides a possible explanation for the link between gaslighting and anxiety. This theory uses a physical knot as an analogy, it implies that a person's mind can be twisted in a similar way as physical knots. The more the gaslighter gaslights the gasligtee, it would create knots in the person's minds and if left unchecked, it would then result in anxiety.

Also, In the psychodynamic theory, it is being stated there that anxiety is the result between the conflict of the id and the ego. It is also proposed under this theory that anxiety can be managed through defense mechanisms such as denial, projection, repression, etc. As denial and projection can be regarded as gaslighting examples or experiences, gaslighting can be viewed as a defense mechanism used by the gaslighter to avoid confronting their own anxiety, concerns, and insecurities. The gaslighter might use gaslighting to shift attention away from their own shortcomings while maintaining control over the individual who is subjected to it.

If you are a college student who is experiencing anxiety or gaslighting from your peers, please reach out for help. There are many resources available to you, including student counseling services, support groups, and online resources. Remember, you are not alone.

5.0 Recommendations

School Administrators. They should promote a supportive school culture, implement policies to prevent and address gaslighting, and provide training for school staff on how to identify and respond to gaslighting.

School Guidance Personnel. They should conduct symposiums to educate students about gaslighting and its seriousness, encourage them to report and seek help when they experience it, and provide appropriate support.

Faculty. They should provide a secure and supportive learning environment in which students feel comfortable talking about their experiences with gaslighting and anxiety, and they should refer students who are concerned about gaslighting and anxiety to school guidance personnel.

Student. They should be aware of the effects of gaslighting on mental health and be able to recognize the indicators of gaslighting in themselves and their peers. If they are experiencing gaslighting or anxiety, they should reach out to a trusted adult, such as a school guidance counselor, teacher, or parent.

Future Researchers. They should conduct more research on the prevalence and impact of gaslighting among college students, as well as the role of social media and other online platforms in gaslighting.

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