ORIGINAL ARTICLE

A qualitative analysis of gaslighting in romantic relationships

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Abstract

Gaslighting is an understudied form of abuse wherein a sane and rational survivor is convinced of their own epistemic incompetence on false pretenses by a perpetrator. The current study aimed to characterize the features of gaslighting as well as test and verify common claims about gaslighting. We recruited participants ($N = 65$) who self-identified as having experienced gaslighting in romantic relationships to fill out a qualitative survey wherein they described instances of gaslighting, features of their relationships, and the consequences of gaslighting on their mental health. The age of participants in this study ranged from 18 to 69 (M = 29), most participants identified as female (48), and heterosexual (43). Gaslighting occurs within relationships that are typified by a combination of affectionate and abusive behaviors extended over the course of a relationship. Gaslighting victimization was associated with a diminished sense of self, mistrust of others, and on occasion, post-traumatic growth. Those who recovered from gaslighting often emphasized the importance of separation from the perpetrator, prioritization of healthier relationships, and engaging in meaningful and re-embodying activities.

Statement of Relevance: Despite long-standing recognition of gaslighting and recent increases in the use of the term, there have been few studies that have gathered data specific to the subject. The present work aids in the development of evidence-informed treatments for gaslighting survivors.

This study provides a basis for further research into gaslighting and recovery from gaslighting, which will contribute to the prevention and treatment for this type of abuse.

KEYWORDS

epistemic abuse, gaslighting, intimate partner violence, relationships

1 | INTRODUCTION

Gaslighting is an attempt to convince a survivor that they are not a trustworthy epistemic agent. Once the survivor has accepted their epistemic incompetence as "fact," the perpetrator is able to use this to their advantage, mainly by avoiding accountability for their own behavior and controlling their survivor's behavior. Although this phenomenon was first named in the 1940s (Corfield & Dickinson, 1940), the term gaslighting has only recently seen widespread usage. Today, the term is applied to a wide variety of contexts, from social media to the workplace (Durvasula, 2021), as well as healthcare and mental healthcare settings (Tormoen, 2019). Most prominently, the term has been applied to romantic relationships (e.g., Abramson, 2014; Graves & Samp, 2021; Stern, 2008).

2 | HISTORY AND BACKGROUND

The term gaslighting comes from Patrick Hamilton's screenplay Gas Light (known as Angel Street in the United States), which was adapted for a film for the first time in 1940, and then again in 1944. Hamilton's story features an abusive husband (known as Sergis Bauer in the 1944 American film, played by Charles Boyer) who tries to convince his new wife (Paula Anton, played by Ingrid Bergman) that she is insane, and thus at risk of being institutionalized. Sergis' goal is to control Paula's behavior long enough that he can locate precious jewels that, unbeknownst to Paula, are in the attic of her family home. At night, Sergis searches the attic, but his use of the attic gaslights causes the lighting throughout the house to dim and flicker, which ultimately alerts Paula to Sergis' deception. In homage to the various forms of abuse featured in Hamilton's story and the 1944 film, gaslighting has become a term used to denote trying to convince someone that they are insane or attempting to have someone institutionalized on false pretenses. The concept of gaslighting has recently gained widespread attention. Merriam-Webster reported that in 2022, lookups for gaslighting increased by 1740%, propelling it to the status of the 2022 Word of the Year.

The existing body of academic literature on gaslighting dates back to the 1960s and has primarily been the domain of philosophers and psychodynamic researchers. The philosophical literature focuses on ethics and epistemology, containing many empirical claims that remain largely untested. For example, the role of social power is often discussed in this literature, with some authors arguing that gaslighting primarily affects women, racial minorities, and LGBTQ individuals (Abramson, 2014; Stark, 2019; see Sweet, 2019, for a sociological perspective on the structural inequalities that underlie gaslighting). Others argue that while individuals with

marginalized identities may be more likely to experience gaslighting, this marginalization is not a necessary component (Roberts & Andrews, 2013; Spear, 2019). To the best of our knowledge, Graves and Samp (2021) are the first to publish empirical data on the relationship between power and gaslighting. Their findings indicate that those with either particularly high or particularly low interpersonal power were most likely to engage in gaslighting; that is, the tendency to engage in gaslighting behavior has a curvilinear relationship to interpersonal power.

Other empirical work has largely consisted of case studies by psychiatrists and other medical professionals (e.g., Barton & Whitehead, 1969; Bashford & Leschziner, 2015; a notable exception is the larger-scale empirical study by Miano et al., 2021). Older case studies (1960s–1980s) focused on perpetrators who gaslight their romantic partners to attain some tangible goal, such as acquiring their partner's assets. Contemporary case studies of non-romantic gaslighting relationships similarly tend to involve perpetrators with specific tangible goals (Ahern, 2018; Christensen & Evans-Murray, 2021; Dumitraşcu et al., 2015). In recent discussions, it is unclear how intentional and aware perpetrators are that they are gaslighting their survivors. Contemporary case studies of gaslighting in romantic relationships, including self-help literature written by accredited therapists (e.g., Sarkis, 2018; Stern, 2008), tend not to involve perpetrators manipulating their targets for some clear and singular purpose. These publications focus on perpetrators' general motivation to control their survivors, avoid accountability for poor behavior, or fulfill other egocentric desires.

The most detailed examinations of gaslighting tend to be self-help books written by accredited therapists (e.g., Sarkis, 2018; Stern, 2008). These self-help books describe a variety of gaslighting tactics. Aside from the characteristic accusations of being 'crazy', this literature also identifies less prototypical gaslighting behaviors, such as 'turning the tables', wherein the perpetrator will subtly turn critical conversations about their own behavior into critiques of their partner. These gaslighting tactics, along with other abusive behaviors such as insults and emotional punishments, can all be utilized to make survivors of gaslighting doubt their own perceptions and mental well-being (Sarkis, 2018; Stern, 2008). The time course of relationships in which gaslighting occurs is also discussed in this literature. For example, Sarkis (2018) suggests that relationships wherein gaslighting occurs begin with a period of 'love-bombing' that is characterized by excessive affection, attention, gifts, and charming behaviors. Love-bombing is distinguished as an 'exaggerated' form of typical relationship initiation behaviors (pg. 36). The experience of love-bombing from the survivor's perspective is described as enjoyable but also disorienting. Stern (2008) suggests that gaslighting starts with subtle twisting of the facts, and slowly progresses until survivors are helplessly trapped in a cycle of several interacting forms of abuse. The psychological consequences of gaslighting are also detailed in this literature; for example, depression, loss of self-esteem, and feelings of being 'crazy' are frequently described as signs of gaslighting victimization. Both Stern (2008) and Sarkis (2018) recommend that the best solution to gaslighting in romantic relationships is to end the relationship.

Gaslighting is considered a form of abuse, and, as such, is mentioned in the intimate partner violence (IPV) literature. Specifically, gaslighting is occasionally listed as an instance of coercive controlling violence (as opposed to situational couple violence). To the best of our knowledge, however, within the coercive control literature, gaslighting is rarely given extensive treatment and is often left undefined (e.g., Stark & Hester, 2019). That said, when gaslighting is given a more thorough treatment in the IPV and coercive control literature, definitions are largely consistent with contemporary self-help work. For example, in her study on men's experience of IPV and coercive control, Bates (2020) offers the following definition of gaslighting; "Gas-lighting is

a form of manipulation where a person seeks to sow seeds of doubt, hoping to make their partner question their own memory, perception, and sanity. It includes using persistent denial, misdirection, contradiction, and lying, in attempts to destabilize their partner and their beliefs" (p. 15). Within the IPV literature, it is not firmly established that all cases of gaslighting are best understood as coercive control. In her doctoral thesis studying gaslighting in IPV, Hailes (2022) suggests that all gaslighting is emotional abuse and thus a form of IPV, but only some cases of gaslighting qualify as coercive control. Specifically, gaslighting does not necessarily have to be motivated by control; Hailes suggests that gaslighting may also be motivated by vindictiveness.

Despite decades of scholarship and extensive discussions about the topic in popular media, empirical data on gaslighting consists almost entirely of idiosyncratic case studies. Thus, it is difficult to draw generalized conclusions from this body of literature. Empirical scholarly work on gaslighting in romantic relationships is desperately needed for both theoretical and practical reasons. Gaslighting is assumed to be widespread and extremely harmful, despite not being well understood. Recent research on 'shared-reality' has demonstrated the positive epistemic features of intimate relationships (e.g., Rossignac-Milon et al., 2020); the study of gaslighting will help to round out this area of research by demonstrating the presence of negative epistemic features, as well. Finally, a refined understanding of gaslighting will contribute to clinical treatments for survivors by allowing clinicians to better identify its occurrence and respond appropriately. Furthermore, studying the mechanisms underlying the psychological consequences of gaslighting, as well as the behaviors associated with recovery from gaslighting, will allow clinicians to apply treatments that are tuned to the resultant, specific epistemic harms.

3 | CURRENT STUDY

While gaslighting has been discussed in many relationship contexts, we chose to focus on gaslighting in romantic relationships. Focusing on only one type of gaslighting relationship simplified data analysis and synthesis of results while allowing the authors to draw on the extensive body of theoretical work on the topic in the development of our survey. Our aim was to gather in-depth narratives from individuals who had experienced gaslighting in romantic relationships in order to (1) examine whether or not gaslighters typically have more social power than their survivors, (2) determine whether or not gaslighters typically had a single clear goal or used the tactic for a more widespread set of motivations, (3) provide empirical evidence for or against the presence of the specific gaslighting tactics outlined in the self-help literature, and (4) provide empirical evidence for or against the specific stages of gaslighting relationships outlined in the self-help literature, including the presence of love-bombing and whether ending the relationship facilitates recovery. Addressing these four questions allowed us to (a) better characterize the features of gaslighting; and (b) empirically verify ubiquitous claims in the literature and test controversial ones. This study also allowed us to develop a preliminary model of gaslighting in romantic relationships that are rooted in both empirical evidence and prior theoretical knowledge.

While several qualitative methodologies exist, grounded theory was most appropriate for the present study for several reasons. Firstly, grounded theory aims to develop testable theories and models. Furthermore, grounded theory was developed as a means of constructing theories about interpersonal communication and interactions, specifically focusing on how meaning is co-constructed through interaction (Holloway & Todres, 2003), thereby making it an ideal approach for studying gaslighting. Finally, grounded theory relies on "theoretical sampling

based on previously occurring concepts" which "ensures coherence and consistency," which allows for the incorporation of the previous theoretical and philosophical development of the concept of gaslighting into the present attempt at empirically informed theory development (Holloway & Todres, 2003, pg. 352). Thus, we employed a grounded theory approach to accomplish the goals outlined above by using this data set to abduce a model of intimate relationships wherein gaslighting occurs (Gaslighting Experience in Romantic Relationships; GERR) that focuses on the motivations of perpetrators, high-level behavioral descriptions of the gaslighting and other related behaviors, psychological consequences for survivors, and recovery from these symptoms.

4 | METHOD

4.1 | Participants

We recruited an online convenience sample through platforms such as Reddit and Facebook. Respondents were required to be at least 18 years of age, fluent in English, and to identify as having experienced gaslighting in a romantic relationship that had lasted at least four months. Thus, participants self-identified as having experienced gaslighting prior to reading our definition of the term. We chose four months as a lower bound for relationship lengths in order to ensure that the relationships being discussed were not merely brief flings; this choice is consistent with research suggesting that the largest changes in the attachment system occur within the first one to two months of a romantic relationship (Hadden et al., 2013). As compensation, all respondents were entered into a prize draw for one of five $20 Amazon gift cards. Prior to filling out the questionnaire, participants were given the following definition of gaslighting: "Gaslighting is when one person causes another to doubt their own thoughts, feelings, memories, and beliefs. Gaslighting can take many forms from outright calling someone crazy/irrational/oversensitive, to twisting the facts, refusing to talk about issues, or saying one thing while doing another." This definition is consistent with several influential and recent publications pertaining to gaslighting (e.g., Abramson, 2014; Bates, 2020; Gass & Nichols, 1988; Stern, 2008; Sweet, 2019).

Overall, 65 participants completed the survey (see S1 in Supplementary Materials for a complete list of survey questions, S2 for participant demographic details, and S3 for perpetrator demographic details). While 130 participants began the survey, 65 participants were removed due to an inadequate level of responding. Participants were removed if they left all the open-ended questions blank (i.e., only responded to the questions about demographics), did not understand inclusion criteria (e.g., explicitly stated that they had not been gaslighted), or did not respond in earnest (i.e., filled in responses with non-sensical strings of letters). Participants' responses were included so long as they answered at least one open-ended question in a manner that demonstrated they understood the inclusion criteria and instructions. Participants may have dropped out because it was clear that they were entered into the prize draw even if they did not complete the study itself (for further details see the Procedure section). Also, some participants were unwilling to write detailed responses about their experiences. Regardless of these issues, we nonetheless achieved a large sample size for qualitative research. Respondents were asked to provide demographic information for themselves and their romantic partners (see Table 1). Most relationships exceeded two years in length and had ended more than two years before participants responded to this study (see Table 2). The majority of survivors were

TABLE 1 Participant and perpetrator demographics.

Variable	Participants (self-report)	Perpetrators (as reported by participants)
Age, mean in years (Range)	29 (18–69)	31 (16–71)
Gender		
Female	48	14
Male	14	51
Non-binary	3	0
Other	0	0
Sexual orientation		
Bisexual	19	5
Gay	1	3
Heterosexual	43	55
Lesbian	2	2
Other	0	0
Ethnicity		
Arab	0	1
Black/African American	2	1
Caucasian	44	48
East Asian	4	2
South Asian	2	1
Latino/Latina/Latinx	4	6
First Nations	0	0
Mixed ethnicity	7	4
Other	2	2
Political orientation		
Centrist	2	7
Conservative	6	12
Liberal	38	25
Unaffiliated	16	17
Other	3	4

heterosexual females who had been gaslighted by male perpetrators. Four of the 14 male survivors in this sample did not identify as heterosexual (either gay or bisexual); three of these four male participants had experienced gaslighting by a male partner.

4.2 | Procedure

Data for this study were collected online via Qualtrics from June 2020 – July 2020. After providing informed consent, participants were emailed a link to a second survey that contained

TABLE 2 Relationship length and time since relationship ended.

Relationship length		Time since relationship ended	
4 months	1	Less than 1 month	3
4–8 months	11	1–4 months	10
8–12 months	8	4–8 months	7
12–16 months	9	8–12 months	6
16–20 months	2	12–16 months	1
20–24 months	5	16–20 months	1
More than 2 years	29	20–24 months	6
		More than 2 years	19
		The relationship has not ended	12

questions pertaining to the experience of gaslighting, while not collecting any identifying information (e.g., IP address). This way, all participants were eligible for the prize draw regardless of the level of survey completion, and email addresses were not tied to responses.

Two key factors influenced the decision to run this study online (see Braun et al., 2020, for a discussion of the benefits of online surveys for qualitative research): (a) the sensitive nature of the questions being asked may lend the online format to more detailed and honest responses; and (b) the global pandemic made running in-person studies ethically unacceptable.

4.3 | Measures

Following an extensive review of the gaslighting literature we developed a series of 15 open-ended questions (see S4 in Supplementary Materials for a detailed list of questions and example answers) that would enable us to investigate the four research questions outlined above.

In the survey, participants were asked a series of demographic questions about themselves and their partners. Next, participants were asked 15 open-ended questions pertaining to their experiences of gaslighting, the trajectory of their relationship, specific instances of gaslighting in their relationship, personal consequences resulting from their relationship, how the relationship affected their self-concept and the degree to which they had recovered from their relationship. Participants also rated their feelings about their relationship and partner using sliding scales. All questions were answered as they applied to the relationship in which the respondents experienced that gaslighting. This study was approved by the University of Toronto Department of Psychology Ethics Review Committee.

4.4 | Data analysis

While total redundancy in qualitative data is an impossibility, theoretical redundancy is sufficient to indicate that theoretical saturation has been reached (Morrow, 2007). Thus, responses were reviewed as they were collected so that the research team could monitor for theoretical redundancy. Once new responses became sufficiently repetitive, the research team determined

that theoretical redundancy (and therefore data saturation) had been reached, at which point the authors, WK and SL, analyzed the data using a grounded theory approach.

The grounded theory approach was selected to (a) allow for themes and structures to arise organically from the data; and (b) develop a model of the findings, while keeping a long-term view of developing a testable theory (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Holloway & Todres, 2003). Coding schemes were primarily generated inductively from the data while referencing the definition and descriptions of gaslighting based on previous literature. The authors analyzed different subsets of the data in parallel and discussed coding schemes organized in NVivo 12 Pro (QSR International Pty Ltd, 2018). The initial coding procedure was descriptive in nature, staying extremely close to the text; these codes were most frequently small direct quotes from responses. By grouping these descriptive codes into larger categories and recoding the data, the coding scheme became more conceptual and emergent in nature, thereby allowing each code to account for more of the data. Throughout this iterative process the authors met to discuss the emergent codes, filtering any deemed redundant. Codes were deemed redundant if the coders agreed that the codes captured the same essential meaning with different words; in these cases, coders agreed on how to consolidate these codes under a single label. Similarly, coders developed conceptual and emergent codes through discussion, reaching a consensus about which descriptive codes could be grouped into larger categories. Thus, in earlier stages of coding, there were more discrepancies between coders, as codes were more idiosyncratic (i.e., tuned to the particular participant). As the final emergent coding strategy developed, coding became increasingly standardized and therefore consistent between coders. These frequent meetings allowed the authors to maintain reflexivity throughout the data analysis; the use of multiple coders at all stages of data analysis allowed for triangulation of the data. In this way, categorization started as broadly as possible and iteratively focused down to the structure which guided the final analysis and discussion of these data.

This method of data analysis allowed for the investigation of themes present in the existing literature as well as those not previously explored, resulting in the development of a hierarchical node structure. The most prominent themes that emerged from our results are discussed herein. While developing our theoretical model out of the hierarchical node structure we focused first on participants who both (a) were accused of epistemic incompetence (e.g., 'crazy', 'stupid', 'overly emotional') and (b) reported feeling as though they were losing their grip on reality; these participants were considered examples of gaslighting survivors *par excellence*. Wherever possible, quotes come from this subset of participants. In some cases, quotes are taken from participants whose experiences less closely resemble prototypical cases of gaslighting, but only when these quotes were best able to demonstrate experiences that participants in the *par excellence* group had also encountered.

5 | RESULTS

5.1 | Relationship dynamics

The four most common behavioral patterns that occurred in gaslighting relationships were love-bombing, isolating the survivor, perpetrator unpredictability, and cold shouldering. These patterns were frequently part of the overall relationship dynamics of gaslighting survivors but were not necessarily instances of gaslighting, themselves.

5.1.1 | Love-bombing

Love-bombing occurred in the majority of responses and was most common at the start of a relationship. Classifying love-bombing is difficult, as the early stages of healthy relationships are also often characterized by a period of increasingly rewarding and frequent contact, colloquially known as a *honeymoon period* (Tolhuizen, 1989). Nevertheless, there is a staggering number of participants from this sample who reported that their partners were particularly romantic at the start of their relationship. This suggests that the romanticism preceding gaslighting may be in excess of what is normally expected since a typical honeymoon period level of affection would not be as noteworthy. Participant 1 wrote, "The start of the relationship was intense in terms of emotional intimacy. We shared many details of our emotions and traumas very early, some even on the first date." A similar sentiment is expressed by Participant 28, who wrote "At the beginning of the relationship, both parties were 'bending-over-backward' [sic] for each other."

Love-bombing often involved inappropriate expressions of affection for the relationship stage. For example, Participant 10 wrote: "He said he loved me in three days, [t]hat was all a bit of a red flag to me but [I] was also swept up by him as he's quite charming." Occasionally, inappropriate displays of affection were material in nature, as demonstrated by Participant 9 stating that: "He continued to shower me with expensive gifts like jewelry, flowers and dinners."

Love-bombing served several functions. Primarily, it was associated with discounting perpetrators' current and future abusive behavior. It also served to make survivors feel indebted to perpetrators, as well as confused about the nature of their partner and relationship. Finally, it was one-way perpetrators began to isolate survivors.

5.1.2 | Survivor isolation

Perpetrators' attempts at survivor isolation often played out through the expression of negative opinions about members of survivors' social circles. For example, Participant 1's partner would express "his distaste of my friends' opinions and questioned my friendships," Participant 7 wrote that "[h]e made me dependent on him, talked poorly about or to all of my friends until I was left with really only him, and made me feel absolutely insane," and Participant 9 said "I'd cancel plans with friends constantly because he would get jealous. He did the same thing with my closest friends and family, until no one reached out to me anymore."

Survivor isolation appears to serve three functions. Firstly, it helped perpetrators avoid accountability, since survivors were unable to receive advice about their partner's behavior. Secondly, it resulted in survivors having fewer paths to fulfill other social needs once isolated. Finally, social isolation may have contributed to survivors' sense of "losing their grip" on reality or becoming a "shell of themselves":

> [A]bout a week in he had isolated me from my friends and that same week told me he loved me. He told me horrible things my friends were doing and saying behind my back. About a week later the only friend he had allowed me to see stayed over at his house in his bed and he called me insane and unreasonable. (Participant 49)

5.1.3 | Perpetrator unpredictability

The final recurring relationship dynamic was a pattern of perpetrators unpredictably changing their behavior from one emotional extreme to another, reminiscent of patterns of intermittent reinforcement observed in other IPV contexts (e.g., Millen et al., 2022). These fluctuations occurred either on a moment-to-moment time span, or over longer periods of time (i.e., days or weeks). Participant 56 wrote, "Arguments started for no reason switching rapidly to being extremely affectionate and sexual." Participant 2 gave an example of unpredictability on a larger temporal scale:

> She stopped talking to me out of no where [sic] with no explanation after we had spent a very intimate night/day together a couple months into the relationship... She would continuously pop in and out of my life, expecting me to be okay with this and serve her needs.

This erratic behavior would make it difficult for targets to predict their partner's behavior, which may contribute to target's experience of uncertainty and confusion.

5.1.4 | Cold shouldering

The absence of communication could itself play a role in gaslighting:

> He broke a promise he made and I was upset about it for the rest of the day and didn't want to talk to him. Then when I was finally ready to talk he told me "you already had your chance" and proceeded to ignore me. (Participant 18)

The gaslighting aspect in this scenario was the implication that the survivor was wrong for taking time to process the perpetrator's transgression. This form of punishment is demeaning and communicates to survivors that they are out of sync with what is reasonable.

Cold shouldering was also used to control survivors' behaviors. Participant 10 explains that when she broke her partner's "rules," fights occurred, resulting in:

> him glaring at me with these eyes totally devoid of emotion except hatred and almost shaking, [and] then giving me the silent treatment for a few hours. He says that the worst thing [I] can do in those situations is to give him space but it's honestly really hard to be around him.

Cold shouldering is not necessarily an example of gaslighting itself but instead is a pattern of problematic behavior that can contribute to and enable the overall relationship dynamic.

5.2 | Specific gaslighting behaviors

The most paradigmatic gaslighting behaviors were direct accusations of epistemic incompetence, such as being "crazy," "overly emotional," or having deficient cognitive abilities. These accusations could take the form of concern for survivors but were more often framed

as insults. It is possible for perpetrators to induce self-doubt by verbally implying or creating situations that imply that survivors are epistemically incompetent or behaving unreasonably. When confronted about their behavior, perpetrators may cause survivors to doubt themselves by *turning-the-tables*, defined as changing the topic of conversation toward some perceived bad behavior of the survivor. This led to situations in which survivors hoping to resolve points of relationship tension were left apologizing for unrelated or nonproblematic behavior.

5.2.1 | Insults and accusations

Insults and accusations were ubiquitous across all relationships, though they varied in frequency. Survivors were most frequently accused of being "crazy," "overly-reactive," "overly-emotional," or "overly-sensitive"; accusations of memory problems and infidelity also occurred. Perpetrators demeaned and insulted their targets by calling them "dumb," "stupid," "selfish," and criticizing their physical appearance. Consistent with previous literature (e.g., Gass & Nichols, 1988), misogynistic attitudes sometimes played a role in instances of gaslighting, for example, accusations of being a "slut" or a "whore" were frequent. Participant 10 explained that her partner would accuse her of being obsessed with money and that "all women are like this." It is clear how some of the above insults pertain to epistemic abilities (e.g., 'stupid' or 'crazy'), but other insults may only indirectly challenge survivors' sense of reality. For example, insults pertaining to survivors' physical appearance, virtues, and sexual activity may not obviously be challenges to their epistemic abilities; but if those survivors' experience themselves as attractive, unselfish, and chaste then accusations of being "ugly", "selfish" and "slutty" directly challenges the survivors' self-knowledge, and therefore their sense of reality. Thus, these insults all pertain to survivors' ability to comprehend and respond to reality in an accurate and rational way. Insults and accusations contributed to the degradation of survivors' faith in their perceptive abilities, leaving survivors vulnerable to accepting the accusations that most directly pertained to their epistemic abilities.

5.2.2 | Blaming

Perpetrators often blamed survivors for things that were not their fault. For example, Participant 29 wrote: "Everything was my fault. The microwave broke and it was my fault." Often, perpetrators blamed survivors for their own actions to try to avoid accountability. Examples include Participant 52: "Any time he had done something that [was] wrong, or disrespectful it would be my fault"; Participant 53: "She would make it out to be on me for her bad behavior;" and Participant 10: "[H]e told me that it was my fault that he cheated on me because [I] went on a work trip for 6 weeks." This behavior is like turning-the-tables but does not necessitate survivors calling out perpetrators first. Furthermore, whereas turning-the-tables usually involves distraction from the issue at hand, this type of blaming does not shy away from the issue but confuses who is responsible.

Unlike previous specific gaslighting behaviors, which stripped survivors of their own agency, blaming assigns undue agency to survivors. This implies that gaslighting also includes making survivors confused about what they can accomplish and what they are responsible for, resulting in the confusion and self-doubt that is characteristic of gaslighting.

5.3 | Motivations for gaslighting

Perpetrators' motivations for gaslighting tended to fall into two categories: avoiding accountability and trying to control survivors' behaviors. In many cases, both motivations were present, sometimes overlapping. It is important to note that perpetrators' motivations could not be assessed directly; thus, these results rely on either participants' own interpretations of the perpetrators' motivations, or motivations that were revealed through our data analysis.

5.3.1 | Avoiding accountability

The most common motivation for gaslighting was perpetrators' desire to avoid accountability for their actions, with infidelity being the most common transgression:

> My wife had an affair. I felt something was off, as she wanted nothing more to do with me, and [I] kept questioning what was wrong. She kept telling me I was paranoid, crazy, and anxious, and that everything was OK. (Participant 15)

Perpetrators also used gaslighting to avoid responsibility for duties that are a regular part of a healthy relationship:

> I would ask for more help with our kids and be met with anger because he felt working for money and providing were sufficient. I would be told I was insane, unorganized and didn't take my job as a mom serious enough since I needed help. Typically led to name calling and being told we need to switch places. (Participant 43)

The above example also makes use of gender-based differences in power. Participant 43's partner is able to avoid his parental duties by implying that the mere suggestion that he should assist with raising his own children indicates that Participant 43 is a failure as a mother. This is a typical example of how sexist attitudes play into the gaslighting dynamic.

In many cases, perpetrators attempted to avoid accountability for a more general pattern of insensitive, immature, or inappropriate behaviors:

> The gaslighting was done basically anytime I expressed something that I was unhappy about or [when I] wanted more of his participation around the house or with our children. I was "always crazy and imagining things." Any time he had done something that [was] wrong, or disrespectful it would be my fault. Never did he take accountability for his actions or words. He would always put the blame [on] me and basically would say that I imagined what had happened. I was crazy. (Participant 52)

Similarly, Participant 42 explained that her partner "would say he never did anything when there [was] evidence. When I reacted, I was labeled as crazy."

The pattern through which perpetrators used gaslighting to avoid accountability was consistent. Namely, the perpetrators behaved poorly, their survivors either hinted toward the issue or

explicitly raised it, and the perpetrators denied the problem existed. This denial often involved direct or implied accusations of epistemic incompetence.

5.3.2 | Control

The second most common motivation for gaslighting was a desire to control survivors' behaviors. When asked what sort of issues instigated gaslighting, Participant 3 listed, "When I didn't behave/say what he wanted me to say, [when] he wanted me to act a certain way, [or] when he disliked what came out of my mouth or what I did."

Perpetrators attempted to limit survivors' ability to accomplish goals external to the relationship. Participant 1 stated that her partner purposely sabotaged her attempts to get into medical school by spending "months telling me how I shouldn't pick this career path for multiple reasons, starting with money, ...then how I'm not cut out for it/not smart enough." After booking an MCAT exam, the participant's partner drove her to the exam but continued to belittle her. She reported performing poorly on the test:

> [He] picked fights the whole way while I tried to study (accusing me of bringing up medical scenarios that were similar to his family history, telling me I was insensitive and unempathetic). Before the test, he brought up career paths I was better suited for.

Participant 1 reported that her partner behaved in this manner anytime she acted autonomously. By questioning her abilities, doubting her rationality, and undermining her sense of self for months on end, the perpetrator created a situation wherein the cause of Participant 1's poor performance on the MCAT was ambiguous enough to be attributed to the characteristics he habitually assigned to her. Participant 1 reported that her relationship caused her to doubt her "opinions and perceptions," especially as they "pertained to boundaries with friends and family, or with school achievements." Notably, these are all domains where she was attempting to exert some independence from her partner.

5.3.3 | Mixed motivations

In most cases, both the motivation to control and to avoid accountability were simultaneously present and interrelated. A perpetrator may use gaslighting to avoid accountability for bad behavior that was initially intended to control their survivor's behaviors:

> Once he told me to come over to his house and to use the side door instead of the front door. I forgot and used the front door and when he opened the door he was so angry and said "well, that's such a piss-off, but whatever." Instead of addressing how his reaction was so rude, he tried to make it seem like I was the one who was in the wrong. (Participant 23)

This scenario illustrates gaslighting through the suggestion that the target was mistaken in believing that she was treated rudely, implying that she was unable to properly distinguish appropriate from inappropriate behavior. Furthermore, this incident was part of a larger pattern

of behavior in which the perpetrator repeatedly accused his partner of being "stupid," "forgetful," and "immature."

Perpetrators may try to control survivors' behaviors to avoid accountability. For example, Participant 36 reported that her partner was frequently "sexually pushy" but would react poorly when she brought up issues she had with his behavior:

> [H]e would get very sad about himself to the point where I would feel it was no longer about my issue but about making him feel better…He wouldn't like me to talk about our issues to my friends and would guilt me if I wrote in my journal negatively about him…He would do the same behaviours over and over, apologize, never change, and then get upset every time I brought it up. Eventually I decided to just stop bringing up issues because I was tired of making him feel better and making myself sadder.

The perpetrator in case 36 obtained control over his partner by policing what the survivor could talk about and to whom. He also employed the turning-the-tables technique, thereby avoiding accountability when the survivor brought up issues that were upsetting her. In this case, the survivor's epistemic incompetence was implied through repeated feedback that her attempts to discuss sexual boundaries and relationship satisfaction were inappropriate and should thus be avoided.

5.3.4 | Motivation and coercive control

Perpetrators' motivations for gaslighting appear to be related to the usage of coercive control tactics. Specifically, perpetrators who were uniquely motivated by a desire to avoid accountability did not generally engage in coercive control tactics. Perpetrators who were uniquely motivated by a desire to control their partners engaged in a wider variety of coercive control tactics, including setting rules, verbal abuse, property damage, and threats. Among perpetrators with mixed motivations the most common (and frequently the only) coercive control tactics were insults, including the accusations of epistemic incompetence that are characteristic of gaslighting, and attempts to isolate the survivor.

5.4 | Consequences for the survivor

The most notable consequences for survivors were feelings of diminished sense of self, increased guardedness, and increased mistrust of others.

5.4.1 | Diminished sense of self

One of the most robust consequences was survivors' reports of feeling as though their sense of self had been broken or diminished in some way. This often involved feelings of worthlessness and confusion. Some examples include Participant 2, "I felt very confused, worthless, unlovable and broken"; Participant 9, "I was broken. I felt like a shell of a woman. Lonely and desperate"; Participant 14, "I felt like my soul and life force was sucked out of me. I wasn't myself…I

completely lost myself. I was a shell of who I was"; and Participant 16, "[I] barely felt like a person anymore. I suppose it did get worse, but when your perception of the truth gets warped, it's hard to tell up from down." Additionally, Participant 7 wrote:

> At the end of our relationship, I felt absolutely destroyed. I felt like the world had gone black and that there was nothing left for me. Despite having a loving family, amazing friends, and a successful path forward, I didn't know what I would do without him.

5.4.2 | Guardedness and mistrust of future relationships

A second frequent consequence for survivors was an increase in guardedness or mistrust of future relationships, and in some cases, sustained isolation post break-up. For example, Participant 26 responded that she has remained relatively isolated for years since the end of her gaslighting relationship; "I prefer to avoid social contact...I prefer solitary hobbies and activities or with my immediate family." Participant 1 reported on how her experience with gaslighting had changed her views on other social interactions:

> It has affected every relationship I've had since. I'm still paranoid that people are trying to undermine me, that I can't express my own feelings or opinions because someone will try to change them or take them away from me, or make me feel less than myself. It definitely has made me more guarded and paranoid.

5.5 | Recovery and post-traumatic growth

A subset of participants reported that they had not recovered from their gaslighting relationships at all. For example, Participant 26 reported, "If I'm honest, I probably have never properly recovered from it. I just moved on." For those participants who did report some degree of recovery, a few key themes emerged in almost all the responses. First, ending the relationship with the perpetrator and spending time with others immediately caused relief from the effects of gaslighting for many survivors. Participant 84 wrote, "Right when things ended, I immediately regained my sense of self as well as confidence." While simply ending the relationship was associated with recovery for some, and was at least helpful for most, there were many other activities that seemed to play a role in recovery. These activities fell into two broad and sometimes overlapping categories: spending time with others and re-embodying activities.

5.5.1 | Time with others

Spending time with others was the activity most reported in response to questions about recovery. The way in which time was spent with others seemed to vary a great deal for participants, ranging from casual conversation, recreational drinking, or board games to more active hobbies like sports, dancing, or music. Thus, it seemed like any time spent with others who did not attempt to undermine survivors' epistemic agency was helpful for recovery.

5.5.2 | Re-embodying activities

Most participants who reported recovery from their gaslighting relationships focused on how engaging in various hobbies and activities, many of which were re-embodying in nature and served as a means of clarifying a sense of self. For example, yoga, meditation, and sports were listed by many participants. These activities seem well-suited for recovery from gaslighting: physical activities require cultivating interoceptive awareness, which has been shown to relate to self-concept clarity (Krol et al., 2020). In addition, many creative hobbies were listed such as writing, journaling, and creating art. These activities helped survivors express themselves and clarify aspects of their self-identity. Finally, some activities (e.g., performing music) bridged the gap between physical activities requiring heightened interoceptive awareness and creative activities that facilitate self-expression.

5.5.3 | Post-traumatic growth

Given that gaslighting is a form of emotional abuse, it is a traumatic experience; thus, it is unsurprising that some respondents reported a post-traumatic growth narrative (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 2004). These narratives usually focused on either establishing healthier boundaries or having a "clearer" and "stronger" sense of self. For example, Participant 60 wrote, "I am a much stronger person now and know when I am being used," this response demonstrates a feeling of having learned from this negative relationship experience. Participant 21 noted how their relationship resulted in being less dependent on others for happiness: "I am now comfortable with myself and being alone. I do not feel the need to be in a relationship to be happy and have found peace within myself," indicating healthier boundaries.

6 | DISCUSSION

The data collected and presented herein contribute to the development of a theoretical model (see below) of gaslighting in romantic relationships while also shedding light on our four main research questions; namely (1) what is the role of power and identity in gaslighting; (2) are gaslighters trying to attain a singular aim or do they have more general and varied motivations; (3) what are the specific tactics used by gaslighters?; and (4) what patterns exist in the development and conclusion of gaslighting relationships.

The demographics of our sample shed some light on the role of social power in gaslighting relationships. Perpetrators tended to be older, Caucasian, heterosexual males; this group is typically associated with social power and privilege. Survivors tended to be younger, Caucasian, heterosexual females. While survivors often had less social power than their perpetrators, such imbalances were not necessary for gaslighting to occur; however, cases in which the perpetrator belonged to a group associated with less social power than the survivor were far less common. This finding is consistent with Graves and Samp (2021) who found a curvilinear relationship between social power and the tendency to gaslight. We also found that power imbalances sometimes contributed to the content of gaslighting (e.g., stating that asking for help taking care of the children indicates that the survivor is a bad mother, accusing survivors of being avaricious "like all women" etc.). These findings are consistent with the view that perpetrators may capitalize upon the marginalized aspects of survivors' identity to enhance their own power, but that

gaslighting can also occur without such tactics. While the present study was able to shed some light on certain imbalances of social power between survivors and gaslighters (e.g., gender), the ability of this study to answer questions about the role of other aspects of personal identity in gaslighting is severely limited. Specifically, we are unable to draw strong conclusions about the interaction of ethnicity and gaslighting behaviors, as the majority of our sample was Caucasian. It is important to note that discussions of social power and gaslighting in the philosophical literature are not exclusive to romantic relationships, and it remains possible that people with marginalized identities experience gaslighting due to their identity more frequently outside of their romantic relationships (e.g., in the workplace) than within. Thus, while our findings are consistent with existing work on the role of social power in gaslighting (e.g., Graves & Samp, 2021), future studies should recruit samples of sufficient size and diversity to address questions pertaining to social power in gaslighting.

Unlike what is suggested in older psychiatric publications and contemporary work on gaslighting in the workplace (e.g., Ahern, 2018; Calef & Weinshel, 1981), our findings suggest that perpetrators rarely attempt to achieve some specific type of explicit or material goal. Our findings are in line with more recent discussions of gaslighting in a romantic context (e.g., Sarkis, 2018; Stern, 2008). Specifically, we found that perpetrators' motivations for gaslighting were rarely focused on attaining a specific outcome. The most singularly focused motivation for gaslighting was avoiding accountability for infidelity. Most perpetrators who engaged in gaslighting to avoid accountability were not using this strategy to avoid consequences for a single action (e.g., a single night of infidelity), but generally used gaslighting to avoid accountability for a wide variety of behaviors. Many of the perpetrators were motivated to engage in gaslighting in order to attain a general sense of control over their partners.

Several of the specific gaslighting tactics discussed in previous literature were also observed in our sample. Aside from the essential direct accusations of epistemic incompetence (such as being called "crazy" or "irrational") we also observed the presence of turning-the-tables, cold shouldering (referred to as stonewalling in previous literature), and undue blaming. Gaslighting is occasionally mentioned in the coercive control literature (e.g., Stark & Hester, 2019) but is also observed in relationships that are "not otherwise abusive" (Sweet, 2022). Our results are consistent with the view that gaslighting occurs in both coercively controlling relationships as well as relationships that are less typical of the IPV literature. Much of our sample did not describe relationships that were consistent with coercively controlling violence. Of the participants that did experience coercive control, the most common coercively controlling behaviors were verbal abuse and attempts to isolate the survivors. The relationship between verbal abuse and gaslighting is unsurprising, as many attempts to convince a survivor of their own epistemic incompetence would be considered verbally abusive (e.g., calling someone a "crazy bitch"). Isolation, which is common in coercively controlling relationships, has also been described as a tool that gaslighters use to increase the effectiveness of their abuse (e.g., Sweet, 2022). While most of our sample did not have partners who attempted to isolate them, it does seem that this coercively controlling behavior is present in extreme cases of gaslighting and does make this "crazy making" form of abuse more effective.

One novel feature of the present study was the focus on both the relationship initiation phase and post-relationship phase of gaslighting relationships. This broad focus allowed us to gain insight into the entire time course of gaslighting relationships. True to previous theory, our data indicate gaslighting occurs over a relatively large timespan wherein perpetrators cause their survivors to doubt their own epistemic competence. We did find evidence of the relationship initiation phase being characterized by love-bombing; we did not find that gaslighting

(always) starts small and gradually intensifies (this slow ramping up may occur or gaslighting may start all at once); while we did find that exiting the relationship often facilitates recovery, it does not necessarily do so in all cases. While post-traumatic growth narratives are, to the best of our knowledge, not mentioned in the previous literature, we did observe them frequently in our data. Thus, our findings provide evidence both for and against different claims proposed in previous literature, while offering new avenues for exploration.

6.1 | Gaslighting experience in romantic relationships (GERR)

Using a grounded theory approach, we synthesized the above results into a behavioral model of the romantic relationships in which gaslighting occurs and the psychological consequences for survivors (GERR; Figure 1). This model is a starting point for future research and should be revised as the study of gaslighting develops. The model focuses primarily on internal psychological and external behavioral processes that our respondents were able to report. The one
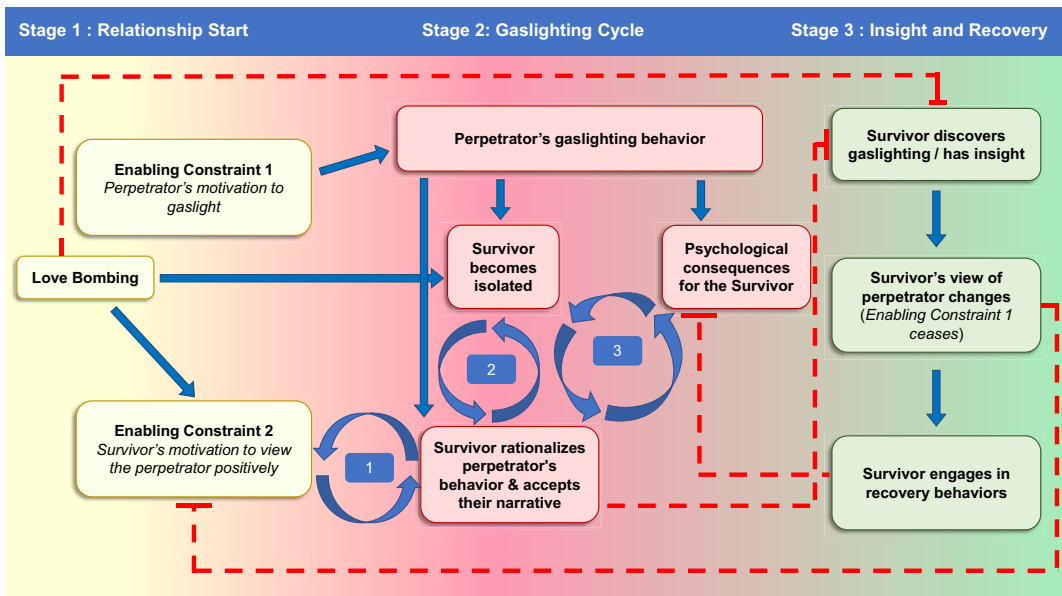

FIGURE 1 Gaslighting experience in romantic relationships (GERR). The above figure represents how the various behaviors, motivations, and cognitions of survivors and perpetrators interact throughout gaslighting relationships. Blue solid arrows represent excitatory connections, while red dotted lines represent inhibitory connections. Stage one describes the start of the relationship. Love-bombing simultaneously (a) contributes to the survivor's isolation, (b) motivates the survivor to view the perpetrator positively, and (c) inhibits the survivor's insight into the perpetrator's abusive behavior. Love-bombing therefore contributes to the initial conditions that enable gaslighting to occur. Once the perpetrator's motivation for gaslighting (i.e., motivation to avoid accountability and/or control the survivor) is activated, the gaslighting cycle will begin. The gaslighting cycle (i.e., stage two) is maintained by three interacting feedback loops that contribute to the psychological consequences a survivor experiences. So long as a survivor does not develop insight into the abusive nature of their relationship, this cycle is maintained. Insight into the perpetrator's abuse initiates the recovery process, leading to a change in the survivor's attitude toward their perpetrator. This insight may also eventually lead to recovery behaviors that counteract the negative psychological consequences of gaslighting.

exception is our addition of the perpetrators' motivations for gaslighting, about which our respondents could only speculate. Despite our respondents' lack of direct access to the motivations of their partners, we have parsed two broad recurring motivations of the perpetrators through our thematic analysis and respondents' assumptions about the motives of their abusers.

6.1.1 | Stage 1: Relationship start

Perpetrators typically initiate gaslighting relationships with some form of love-bombing. Love-bombing causes survivors to become emotionally attached to perpetrators, thereby motivating survivors to ignore red flags. We have characterized this attachment bond and associated positive view of perpetrators as an enabling constraint (Figure 1; Enabling Constraint 2) for future gaslighting behavior. From this perspective, if a survivor is motivated to view their perpetrator in a positive light and maintain the relationship, they will be susceptible to accepting their perpetrator's narrative and will subsequently rationalize their behavior. In the early stages of the relationship, perpetrators tend not to engage in severe gaslighting; love-bombing is sufficient for distracting survivors from any negative behaviors.

While love-bombing is most characteristic of the early stages of the relationship, perpetrators occasionally revert to love-bombing behaviors at later stages. This recurrent love-bombing acts as a relationship maintenance strategy, helping to offset some of the negative consequences of gaslighting for survivors, disorient survivors, and motivate survivors to view the perpetrators and relationship positively. This pattern of recurrent love-bombing is notably similar to Lenore Walker's cycle theory of violence. Walker observed that physically abusive relationships cycle through a stage of tension building, which involves "minor battering incidents," followed by a brief stage of acute battering, and finally a stage of kindness and contrite loving behavior, before the cycle restarts (Walker, 1979, pg. 56). The final stage of Walker's cycle resembles love-bombing in terms of "affection, attention, and gifts" (pg. 37), though there are some notable differences. Firstly, love-bombing most often precedes gaslighting, but does not necessarily follow gaslighting, whereas Walker's 3rd stage tends to be a response to acute battering. Secondly, in Walker's 3rd stage, batterers frequently take responsibility for their abuse, and swear to never behave abusively again, whereas we received no reports of gaslighters admitting to gaslighting their victims.

After survivors and perpetrators become emotionally attached, the perpetrators' motivations to avoid accountability and control survivors will instigate gaslighting behavior (Enabling Constraint 1). So long as these two enabling constraints are maintained the gaslighting cycle will continue.

6.1.2 | Stage 2: Gaslighting cycle

Survivors frequently blamed themselves for not realizing the perpetrator was a gaslighter sooner. We argue here that the gaslighting cycle is maintained via three interacting, powerful feedback loops that blind survivors to their partners' emotional abuse.

Gaslighting feedback loop 1: Rationalization and motivation
Theory suggests that for the gaslighting dynamic to be maintained, survivors must be concerned with how perpetrators perceive them (Stern, 2008). In our view, once a perpetrators' gaslighting

behavior begins, survivors will rationalize that behavior so long as the motivation to view the perpetrator positively is maintained (Figure 1; Enabling Constraint 2). Unfortunately, rationalization of perpetrators' gaslighting behavior also contributes to the maintenance of the survivors' motivation to view perpetrators positively, forming the first of the three feedback loops that underlie the gaslighting cycle.

Gaslighting feedback Loop 2: Rationalization and isolation

Survivors frequently will become isolated from friends and family as a direct result of the perpetrators' gaslighting behavior (e.g., a perpetrator may intentionally ruin social events and subsequently blame the survivor for the unpleasant experience). Once isolated, survivors will have fewer opportunities to gain an outside perspective on perpetrator's behavior, and thus will continue to rationalize their gaslighting behavior. Thus, a second feedback loop between rationalization and isolation underlies the gaslighting cycle. Consistent with previous work on IPV, perpetrators of emotional abuse tended to socially isolate survivors, and this social isolation facilitated further abuse (e.g., Walker, 1979).

Gaslighting feedback loop 3: Rationalization, isolation, and psychological consequences

Perpetrators' gaslighting behavior, survivors' rationalization of this behavior, and isolation all contribute to the various psychological consequences discussed above. The resulting guardedness, mistrust of others, and diminished sense of self will contribute to further isolation of the survivor, forming the third feedback loop.

6.1.3 | Stage 3: Insight and recovery

The path to recovery for survivors begins with the realization and acceptance that their partners are gaslighters. In cases in which gaslighting was motivated by the desire to avoid accountability for secretive behavior (e.g., infidelity), survivors' realization that their partner is a gaslighter can be quite sudden (e.g., going through the perpetrator's text message history). In cases that lacked a concrete, easily interpretable, singular motivation for gaslighting, the realization and acceptance of gaslighting occurred more slowly.

Survivors' recognition of perpetrators' gaslighting behavior allows survivors to reconceptualize much of their perpetrators' actions. This reframing undermines the survivors' motivation to view perpetrators positively, thereby disrupting the gaslighting feedback loops, discussed above, that constitute the gaslighting cycle. After this motivational change and disruption of the gaslighting cycle, survivors often begin engaging in the various recovery behaviors discussed above, including leaving their partner.

Whether survivors leave their partners, spending more time with others appears to be crucial to recovery. Social time is especially beneficial if it is spent engaging in activities that independently re-establish a sense of agency. We propose that time spent with others who have faith in survivors' epistemic trustworthiness helps to re-establish survivors' faith in themselves, thereby re-establishing a sense of self. Furthermore, a variety of activities seem to be helpful in re-establishing a healthy sense of self and trust in one's own epistemic abilities. These re-embodying activities often involve physical activity, such as exercise, sports, games, dancing, and playing music. Activities that require self-reflection, such as journaling or creating art, are also helpful.

6.2 | Limitations and future directions

The present work has several limitations. Firstly, due to the study being conducted online, combined with our strict measures for ensuring participants remained anonymous, we were unable to ask participants any follow-up questions. We could therefore not clarify any confusing responses or further pursue surprising and unexpected responses. Relatedly, because there are many negative relationship experiences that may occur either within or outside of the gaslighting context (e.g., avoiding conversation or changing the subject), it is possible that some participants may have misidentified generally negative relationship experiences as gaslighting. That said, this concern is partially mitigated by our focus not only on the participants' descriptions of perpetrators' behavior, but also on their own emotional and phenomenological experiences throughout the relationship. Secondly, 29% of our respondents indicated that their gaslighting relationship had been over for more than two years. Thus, for these participants, there may be issues regarding the reliability and accuracy of their memories of the events reported in the study. Thirdly, we did not have access to participant's partners. Thus, we could only infer the characteristics of the perpetrator's, including their mental health and motivations, from our participant's reports. Future studies may benefit from designs that allow for more insight into gaslighters' motivations and state of mind.

Currently, most work on gaslighting in romantic relationships advises survivors to exit the relationship (Sarkis, 2018; Stern, 2008). Survivors may be unable or unwilling to leave an abusive relationship due to issues such as the safety of children and pets, shared property, or insufficient financial resources. Thus, research should also investigate how survivors can overcome and stop abuse from within their relationships, as this may be the only viable option for many survivors (Anderson & Saunders, 2003). Such inquiries may help reveal strategies for how survivors can prevent bad actors from undermining their self-representation and modeling of the world, even in situations in which they are unable to cut off contact with the abuser. Notably, these studies would be applicable outside the domain of romantic relationships, such as in the workplaces (Ahern, 2018).

Work on racial gaslighting suggests that individuals who are visible members of marginalized social groups have their epistemic trustworthiness doubted daily (Davis & Ernst, 2019). We expected that survivors of gaslighting would frequently be members of marginalized social groups. This expectation was only partially confirmed; while the majority of our participants were female, we did not observe that those with marginalized ethnic and racial identities were more susceptible to gaslighting. It is possible that racial gaslighting is rarer in close-romantic relationships, which were the focus of the present study. Future research should investigate gaslighting and gaslighting-adjacent concepts in a broader social context to determine the extent to which individuals with marginalized identities experience gaslighting in all contexts, and how, if at all, this form of gaslighting differs from what is typical of gaslighting within romantic relationships.

While the observation that our sample was majority female is consistent with previous work on gaslighting, it is important to note that some scholars consider the current framework for conducting IPV research to be unable to fully capture the experience of male victimization (e.g., Walker et al., 2020). Furthermore, male IPV victims may have their experiences of abuse minimized; they may merely identify as having their boundaries crossed rather than as being survivors of abuse (Walker et al., 2020). Men are sometimes reluctant to report being survivors of abuse, as these experiences are inconsistent with social norms; men may struggle to admit, even to themselves, that they are being abused (Barber, 2008; Shuler, 2010). Thus, the fact that our sample is majority female may reflect societal norms around reporting abuse, rather than

actual gender differences in the experience of abuse. Given the complexity of studying male victims of abuse, it is important to be cautious when interpreting the role of gender in gaslighting.

In a similar vein, future studies should investigate how those with less social power, in general, engage in gaslighting. Our results indicate that the relationship between power and gaslighting is far from clear, whereas Graves and Samp (2021) observed a curvilinear relationship between dependence on power and gaslighting. Future studies should focus on developing validated measures of gaslighting and investigating how gaslighting relates to broader types of power. Furthermore, little has been done to examine the differences between the tactics used when gaslighting is perpetrated by those with low versus high social power.

Miano et al. (2021) found that perpetrators of gaslighting scored high on measures of detachment, disinhibition, and psychoticism, whereas survivors scored high on antagonism, as well as disinhibition and psychoticism. Our participants' descriptions of their partners' behaviors seem consistent with the personality profile suggested by this work, but our study did not allow for any direct measures of a perpetrator's personality or psychological profile. Furthermore, the profile of survivors described by Miano et al. is arguably consistent with our self-reported effects of gaslighting on survivors. Further research should expand on these findings by continuing to investigate what traits make individuals more vulnerable to gaslighting victimization or perpetration. Specifically, it should be elucidated whether the profile of survivors observed by Miano et al. is a consequence of gaslighting or a risk factor for victimization. Additionally, researchers should investigate both the characteristics of the survivor and of the relationship that predicts the personal growth outcomes that we observed in a minority of cases, as opposed to the typical or stunted recovery pattern.

While gaslighting is considered a form of psychological and emotional abuse, our findings are consistent with work that suggests that gaslighting is a unique form of abuse (Hailes, 2022; Sweet, 2022). The present work suggests that one factor that may differentiate gaslighting that occurs within an IPV situation (specifically coercive controlling violence) from abusive relationships characterized primarily by gaslighting is the gaslighter's motivation. Specifically, we found that perpetrators who were primarily motivated by a desire to avoid accountability engaged in less severely abusive behavior. Interestingly, even gaslighting survivors who experienced low levels of coercive control experienced some of the psychological consequences that are typical of coercive control, such as losing one's sense of personal identity or self-esteem (Crossman & Hardesty, 2017). Instances of physical violence were rare in our sample, occurring in only three cases. Future studies should further investigate the factors that differentiate relationships in which gaslighting is the primary form of abuse from relationships wherein multiple types of abuse are co-occurring. Future work should also investigate whether perpetrators whose gaslighting tactics originate as a means of avoiding accountability tend to escalate their abuse into coercive control over time.

Finally, more relationship researchers might consider the role romantic relationships play in the generation and acceptance of knowledge. Some researchers are already investigating the construct of shared-reality within romantic relationships (e.g., Rossignac-Milon et al., 2020), for example. While gaslighting represents one way in which romantic relationships can thwart our epistemic abilities, it also indicates that healthy relationships may fill a fundamental epistemic need in the same way they fulfill the need to belong and for relatedness (e.g., Baumeister & Leary, 1995; Deci & Ryan, 2014).

6.3 | Conclusion

Despite the age of the concept of gaslighting, data on the topic are sparse. Given the increasing recognition of this phenomenon, it is important to conduct empirical work on the dynamics

—WILEY 23

and effects of, as well as recovery from gaslighting. The current study has done much to verify previous theoretical accounts of gaslighting. Furthermore, we have developed what we hope will be a useful empirical model that we encourage other researchers to test and refine.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT
Due to the sensitive nature of the data and risk of being identified by the detailed qualitative responses research data are not shared. Corresponding Author: willis.klein@mail.mcgill.ca

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.