

Gaslighting as a Communication Strategy in Abusive Relationships: A Textual Analysis of the E-Book Broken Strings

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ABSTRACT

Gaslighting is a form of psychological abuse that operates through manipulative communication strategies in interpersonal relationships, particularly within abusive intimate relationships. This study aims to analyze gaslighting as a communication strategy in abusive relationships as represented in the ebook Broken Strings by Aurelie Moeremans. This research employs a qualitative approach using a descriptive-interpretative text analysis method. Data were collected through close reading of the ebook, focusing on narratives and textual excerpts that represent gaslighting practices. The data were analyzed using thematic analysis, drawing on theories of interpersonal communication, power relations, and symbolic violence. The findings reveal that gaslighting in Broken Strings manifests through the denial of reality, victim-blaming, normalization of abuse through the language of love, and emotional manipulation based on guilt and fear of abandonment. These practices function systematically and repetitively, constructing unequal power relations and undermining the victim's communicative autonomy. This study concludes that gaslighting is not merely an individual psychological phenomenon but a structured communicative practice rooted in relational dynamics and social constructions of love and intimacy. The findings contribute to the field of interpersonal communication studies and enhance public awareness of manipulative communication in abusive relationships.

Keywords: Gaslighting, Interpersonal Communication, Abusive Relationships, Symbolic Violence, Text Analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Interpersonal relationships within the context of intimate relationships are ideally understood as a space of communication grounded in trust, openness, and equality between the individuals involved. In communication studies, interpersonal communication plays a central role in constructing meaning, shaping self-identity, and maintaining individuals' emotional stability within a relationship (DeVito, 2016). However, in practice, interpersonal communication does not always occur within equal relationships. A number of studies indicate that intimate relationships can, in fact, become sites of symbolic and psychological violence, concealed through verbal and nonverbal messages that appear normal and are often framed as expressions of affection (Wood, 2013). This condition makes violence in intimate relationships frequently go unrecognized by victims, as it operates through gradual, persuasive, and repetitive communication processes.

One form of psychological abuse widely discussed in communication and social psychology literature is gaslighting. Gaslighting refers to a manipulative communication strategy aimed at causing individuals to doubt their own perceptions, memories, and sense of reality, thereby enabling the perpetrator to gain emotional and psychological control over the victim (Abramson, 2014). From a communication perspective, gaslighting is not merely

understood as an individual behavior, but as an interactional process involving message production, meaning construction, and the management of reality through language and symbols (Sweet, 2019). Gaslighting operates through systematic communication practices, such as denying the victim's experiences, shifting blame, minimizing acts of abuse, and continuously instilling guilt, ultimately causing the victim to gradually lose trust in their own judgment (Stark, 2007).

The phenomenon of gaslighting has become increasingly relevant to examine within the context of abusive relationships, particularly in intimate relationships characterized by power imbalances. Abusive relationships are not always marked by physical violence; rather, they often operate through symbolic violence legitimized by norms of love, ownership, and sacrifice (Bourdieu, 2001). In such relationships, communication functions as a tool of domination, in which the perpetrator uses language to control the victim's emotions, behavior, and identity (Johnson, 2008). Feminist communication studies emphasize that violence in intimate relationships is often normalized through romantic narratives that blur the boundaries between care and control, and between love and violence (Gill, 2007). As a result, victims frequently experience confusion of meaning, emotional ambivalence, and difficulty identifying themselves as individuals subjected to abuse.

In recent years, victim narratives in the form of memoirs, autobiographies, and personal texts have become important mediums for opening public discourse on psychological abuse in intimate relationships. Memoirs function not only as expressions of personal experience but also as communicative texts that represent power relations, trauma, and the process of meaning-making in experiences of violence (Smith & Watson, 2010). Through personal narratives, victims attempt to reclaim voices that were previously silenced by abusive relationships, while also inviting readers to understand the complexity of violence that is not always visible. In this context, memoir texts can be analyzed as spaces of meaning production that are rich in manipulative communication practices, including gaslighting.

Figure 1. The Cover Page of the Ebook *Broken Strings* by Aurelie Moeremans



The ebook *Broken Strings* by Aurelie Moeremans has become one example of a personal narrative that has gained widespread attention in the digital public sphere. The ebook recounts the author's experience of an abusive relationship since adolescence, with a strong emphasis on communication dynamics that are entrapping, manipulative, and psychologically damaging. The popularity of *Broken Strings* indicates a resonance between the author's narrative and the experiences of many readers, while also reflecting a growing public awareness of psychological violence in intimate relationships. From a communication studies perspective, *Broken Strings* is noteworthy not merely as a personal story, but as a text that represents the practice of gaslighting through the language of love, promises, emotional threats, and unequal framing of reality.

Previous studies have shown that gaslighting often occurs through everyday communication that appears trivial, such as jokes, subtle criticism, or conditional expressions of care, making it difficult to recognize as a form of abuse (Sweet, 2019). In abusive relationships, perpetrators exploit emotional closeness to build communicative dependency, in which victims feel the need for validation from the perpetrator in order to understand their own reality (Stark, 2007). As a result, communication no longer functions as a medium for equal exchange of meaning, but rather as an instrument of control and domination. Therefore, analyzing the text of *Broken Strings* becomes important to reveal how gaslighting operates as a structured and repetitive communication strategy within abusive relationships.

Based on this background, this study focuses on gaslighting as a communication strategy in abusive relationships as represented in the ebook *Broken Strings*. This research aims to identify the forms of gaslighting that emerge in the narrative, as well as to analyze how language, messages, and communication patterns are used to construct, maintain, and

legitimize power relations between the perpetrator and the victim. By employing a textual analysis approach from an interpersonal communication perspective, this study is expected to contribute theoretically to the study of communication in violence and relational communication, while also enriching public understanding of the dangers of manipulative communication that are often concealed behind narratives of love and care.

2. METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach within an interpretative paradigm, which views social reality as something constructed through processes of communication and symbolic interaction. The qualitative approach is chosen because this study does not aim to measure the frequency or quantity of gaslighting phenomena, but rather to understand the meanings, patterns, and communication strategies embedded in the narrative text of the ebook *Broken Strings*. Creswell (2014) emphasizes that qualitative research is particularly relevant when researchers seek to explore subjective meanings, personal experiences, and the construction of social reality that cannot be reduced to numerical data. In the context of abusive relationships, gaslighting is a complex and multilayered phenomenon, thus requiring an interpretative approach capable of capturing the nuances of language, emotion, and power relations articulated within the text (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

This research is descriptive-interpretative in nature, focusing on both the description of phenomena and the interpretation of the meanings behind them. The descriptive approach is used to identify and classify forms of gaslighting present in the text of *Broken Strings*, while the interpretative approach is used to analyze how these practices function as communication strategies within abusive relationships. According to Neuman (2014), descriptive-interpretative research enables researchers to explain social phenomena in depth while preserving their context and complexity. Thus, this study not only describes textual excerpts but also relates them to theoretical frameworks of interpersonal communication, power relations, and symbolic violence.

The object of this study is the text of the ebook *Broken Strings* by Aurelie Moeremans, which is positioned as both a communication text and a personal narrative. The selection of this ebook is based on its relevance as a memoir that represents experiences of abusive relationships and gaslighting practices, both explicitly and implicitly. In communication studies, personal texts such as memoirs can be analyzed as communication products that contain symbolic practices, meaning negotiations, and power relations articulated through language (Smith & Watson, 2010). The subject of the study is not understood as the author as an individual, but rather as the narrative position of the victim constructed within the text. This ensures that the study remains within the ethical boundaries of communication research and does not explore individual experiences beyond the published text.

Data collection is conducted through close reading of the text *Broken Strings*. Close reading is a technique commonly used in qualitative text analysis to identify linguistic patterns, narrative structures, and implicit meanings within a text (Fairclough, 1995). In this process, the researcher reads the text repeatedly to identify sections that represent gaslighting practices, such as denial of the victim's experience, reversal of blame, emotional manipulation, and normalization of abuse through the language of love. The data consist of narrative excerpts selected purposively, meaning excerpts that substantively reflect communication strategies of

gaslighting in abusive relationships. Purposive sampling in qualitative research is considered appropriate as it allows researchers to focus on data that are most meaningful and information-rich (Patton, 2015).

Data analysis in this study is conducted using thematic analysis. This method is chosen because it allows researchers to identify recurring patterns of meaning within qualitative data and to organize the data into conceptual themes relevant to the research objectives (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The stages of analysis include familiarization with the data, initial coding of textual excerpts, grouping codes into categories of gaslighting, and interpreting the main themes that emerge as communication strategies. In this context, gaslighting categories are determined based on existing literature, such as denial of reality, blaming the victim, trivialization, and emotional manipulation (Abramson, 2014; Sweet, 2019). The analysis is then directed toward understanding how these categories operate as systematic communication strategies within abusive relationships.

To ensure data validity, this study applies the principles of credibility and interpretative consistency. Credibility is achieved through prolonged engagement and repeated reading of the text, ensuring that the resulting interpretations are neither superficial nor partial (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). In addition, interpretative consistency is maintained by explicitly linking analytical findings to the theoretical framework used, preventing speculative interpretation. In qualitative text-based research, validity is not measured through statistical generalization, but through the depth of analysis and the coherence between data, theory, and interpretation (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018).

Overall, the methodology of this study is designed to reveal gaslighting as a communication strategy that operates symbolically and narratively within abusive relationships. By employing a descriptive-interpretative qualitative approach and textual analysis of the ebook *Broken Strings*, this study is expected to provide a deeper understanding of how language and communication function as tools of control and domination in intimate relationships. This methodological approach also reinforces the position of the study within communication scholarship, viewing psychological abuse not merely as an individual issue, but as a structured communication practice embedded in broader social meanings.

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The findings of this study indicate that gaslighting in the ebook *Broken Strings* does not appear as a single event or sporadic form of communication, but rather as a systematic, repetitive, and structured communication strategy within abusive relationships. Gaslighting operates through language, narrative, and interactions that consistently undermine the validity of the victim's experiences while reinforcing the perpetrator's dominant position in the relationship. This finding aligns with Sweet's (2019) argument that gaslighting is a communicative practice that functions gradually through everyday interactions, often leaving victims unaware that they are experiencing psychological abuse. In *Broken Strings*, gaslighting manifests in various interrelated forms that collectively create a pattern of communication that entraps victims both emotionally and cognitively.

Table: Textual Analysis of Gaslighting in the Ebook *Broken Strings*

NO	Narrative Excerpt from <i>Broken Strings</i>	Form of Gaslighting	Communication Analysis
1	‘Don’t be afraid,” he said softly, raising his hand and gesturing for me to come closer. “If you don’t want to kiss, just touch. I won’t bite.”	Denial of Reality	The victim’s emotional experience is framed as irrational, leading the victim to question their own perception and feelings (Abramson, 2014).
2	“You make me feel like a driver! How could you fall asleep while I’m driving you and your family? You should be massaging me, kissing me, thanking me, and encouraging me. I’m tired too, but I still drive all of you. And this is what I get?”	Blaming the Victim	The perpetrator shifts the responsibility for the conflict onto the victim through seemingly rational and persuasive messages (Stark, 2007).
3	As if nothing had happened, he kissed my forehead gently and whispered, “Relax, you’ll be my wife.”	Normalization of Abuse	Language of affection is used to legitimize control and emotional manipulation within the relationship (Wood, 2013).
4	Sometimes he would	Emotional	Fear of loss is exploited to

	sigh and say, “I’m just asking for something small, why are you making it such a big deal,” making me feel as if I were the one at fault.	Manipulation	silence the victim’s voice and maintain the perpetrator’s dominance (Sweet, 2019).
5	“It’s my fault, Mom. I made him angry.” And maybe I really believed it. Every argument seemed to prove it was true. He always found a way to twist everything, making me feel like I was the one who failed.	Internalization of Blame	Gaslighting leads the victim to internalize guilt as a form of self-regulation and control (Johnson, 2008).

The first dominant form of gaslighting identified in the text of *Broken Strings* is the denial of the victim’s reality and lived experience. This denial is manifested through messages that belittle the victim’s feelings, intuition, and memories, leading the victim to question the validity of their own emotions. Abramson (2014) argues that the essence of gaslighting lies in a systematic effort to make victims doubt their own judgment of reality. In the narrative of *Broken Strings*, the perpetrator frequently rejects accusations of emotional abuse by framing them as misunderstandings or as the victim’s overreactions. This denial not only serves to protect the perpetrator’s image but also creates cognitive confusion in the victim, ultimately weakening their capacity to make independent decisions.

The second prominent form is the reversal of blame, or blaming the victim. In this strategy, the perpetrator shifts responsibility for conflict and abusive behavior onto the victim through communication that appears rational and persuasive. Stark (2007) explains that in abusive relationships, perpetrators often employ language that positions the victim as the primary cause of the problem, leading the victim to feel guilty and to continuously attempt self-improvement in order to preserve the relationship. In *Broken Strings*, the victim is depicted as accepting the narrative that the perpetrator’s anger, jealousy, and controlling behavior arise from the victim’s perceived lack of understanding or loyalty. This communication pattern reinforces the victim’s

emotional dependence on the perpetrator, as the victim believes that changing their own behavior will resolve the conflict.

Furthermore, gaslighting also appears in the form of the normalization of abuse through the language of love. In *Broken Strings*, expressions of affection are used as tools to legitimize manipulative behaviors such as excessive control, social restriction, and extreme jealousy. Wood (2013) notes that the language of love in intimate relationships carries strong symbolic power due to its connection with emotional attachment and the need for acceptance. However, in abusive relationships, this language is exploited to conceal symbolic and psychological violence, causing controlling behaviors to be perceived as forms of care. In the text of *Broken Strings*, the victim illustrates how expressions of love and promises of a shared future are used to suppress doubt and discomfort arising from the perpetrator's behavior.

Another form of gaslighting identified is emotional manipulation through guilt and the fear of loss. Sweet (2019) emphasizes that gaslighting often operates by exploiting the victim's emotions, particularly the fear of abandonment and the need for validation. In *Broken Strings*, the perpetrator frequently employs implicit emotional threats, such as withdrawing affection or positioning themselves as the victim's sole source of support. This strategy narrows the victim's social space and reinforces emotional isolation, which is a key characteristic of communication-based abusive relationships (Johnson, 2008).

Overall, the findings indicate that gaslighting in *Broken Strings* does not function in isolation, but rather forms an interconnected network of manipulative communication practices. Denial of reality, blaming the victim, normalization of abuse, and emotional manipulation work together to create the victim's psychological dependence on the perpetrator. These findings support the argument that gaslighting is an effective communication strategy in maintaining unequal power relations, as it operates through language that appears normal and emotionally grounded, rather than through overt physical violence (Bourdieu, 2001).

4. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the analysis and discussion presented in the previous chapters, it can be concluded that gaslighting in the ebook *Broken Strings* constitutes a structured, systematic, and repetitive communication strategy used to construct and maintain abusive relationships. Gaslighting does not emerge as an incidental form of communication; rather, it appears as a consistent pattern of interaction that manipulates the victim's meanings, emotions, and perceptions of their own reality. These findings affirm that communication plays a central role in shaping unequal power relations, in which language and symbols function as effective tools of domination without the need for overt physical violence. This conclusion aligns with Sweet's (2019) perspective that positions gaslighting as a socio-communicative practice, as well as with Bourdieu's (2001) concept of symbolic violence, in which power operates through the acceptance and internalization of meaning by the dominated party.

This study also concludes that the forms of gaslighting identified in *Broken Strings*—including denial of reality, blaming the victim, normalization of abuse through the language of love, and emotional manipulation based on guilt and fear of loss—do not operate independently, but rather interact and reinforce one another. These communication patterns gradually erode the victim's self-confidence, create confusion in self-identity, and restrict the possibility of equal communication. From an interpersonal communication perspective, this

condition reflects a severe relational dysfunction, in which communication no longer serves as a dialogical exchange of meaning, but instead functions as an instrument of control and symbolic silencing (DeVito, 2016; Johnson, 2008). Thus, gaslighting can be understood as a form of psychological violence that primarily operates through language and everyday interactions.

Furthermore, this study emphasizes that personal narratives in the form of memoirs, such as *Broken Strings*, hold significant academic value within communication studies. Memoirs not only represent individual experiences but also open space for analyzing communicative practices that are often hidden and normalized within intimate relationships. Smith and Watson (2010) argue that personal narratives can function as a medium of symbolic resistance, through which victims reconstruct their experiences and reclaim authority over the meaning of their lives. In this context, *Broken Strings* serves not only as an object of study but also as an example of how communication can transform from a tool of domination into a medium of recovery and collective awareness.

From a theoretical perspective, this study contributes to the development of interpersonal communication and communication of violence by emphasizing that gaslighting should be positioned as a communicative phenomenon rather than merely an individual psychological issue. A communication-based approach enables a more comprehensive analysis of how language, symbols, and interaction shape power relations in intimate contexts. These findings support the arguments of Wood (2013) and Gill (2007) that intimate relationships cannot be separated from cultural contexts, ideologies of love, and social norms that influence how individuals communicate and interpret relationships. Therefore, examining gaslighting from a communication perspective is essential to broaden the understanding of psychological violence, which often remains invisible.

Based on these conclusions, this study offers several recommendations. First, there is a need to enhance communication literacy within society regarding manipulative communication in intimate relationships, particularly gaslighting, so that individuals are better able to recognize early signs of abusive dynamics. Adequate communication literacy can help individuals distinguish between healthy communication and communication characterized by control and domination (Wood, 2013). Second, future researchers are encouraged to expand the study of gaslighting by examining more diverse research objects, such as social media, films, television series, or interviews with survivors, in order to develop a more comprehensive and contextual understanding of gaslighting as a communicative practice. Third, further research may adopt audience analysis approaches to explore how readers interpret gaslighting narratives in texts such as *Broken Strings*, as suggested by Couldry (2012) in media and personal narrative studies.

Overall, this study affirms that gaslighting as a communication strategy in abusive relationships is a complex phenomenon with profound impacts on both individuals and society. By examining *Broken Strings* from a communication perspective, this research is expected to contribute to both academic and social efforts to uncover harmful communicative practices, while also promoting the development of more equitable, healthy, and ethical interpersonal relationships. This conclusion ultimately positions communication not only as an object of study but also as a means of social transformation with significant potential to prevent and challenge psychological violence.

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