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A Discursive Psychology Study of Gaslighting in Relationship-Advice Threads on X (Twitter)

Wafaa Mokhlos Faisal [1], Saif Hakim Fadhil [2], Hassan Abdul-Hussain Awa'ad [3]*
[1-3] College of Education for Humanities, University of Babylon, Iraq

* Corresponding Author: **Hassan Abdul-Hussain Awa'ad**

Article Info

Abstract

The research looks at the ways the term 'gaslighting' is made, fought over, and then employed to give permission to offer guidance in relationship advice discussions on X – what used to be Twitter. Using Discursive Psychology and a four-part DP-Linguistic Construction Model, the work studies 30 discussion sets – the original posts and the answers to them – from October to December 2025. The study follows the regular groupings of how things are done, and how categorisation, position, proof and response are all used. From 450 replies which were marked – fifteen from each set – people use 'gaslighting' by saying straight out what it is and using set ways of explaining it; they justify it with quotes, images and what they remember; they make it more powerful with judgements of what is right and wrong, and turn it into telling-people-what-to-do advice using orders and should/ought to type of sentences. The results demonstrate that in this type of writing, 'gaslighting' isn't a simple, factual description. Instead it's a way of publicly holding people to account, and how strong that is relies on the way proof and position are put together in the discussion. The work also provides a clear method of marking – S1 to S10 – for looking at how accusations turn into advice in online chats.

1. Introduction

On X, a post seeking relationship advice poses a question people recognise instantly: is what I'm experiencing gaslighting? Answers come quickly – people point to the behaviour, reproduce what their other half said, and then start to judge: telling the original poster to go, to block the person, to get away. In very little time, the conversation moves from someone being unsure of things to people making judgements.

The paper deals with that shift. It isn't bothered with whether any 'clinical' diagnosis is right or wrong. The thing it's concerned with is how people on the platform actually use 'gaslighting' in their writing. Within these conversations, the term does things; it fixes responsibility, confirms a way of understanding what happened, and gives permission to offer guidance.

The paper considers gaslighting as something created in conversation, not a concealed psychological truth. It examines how the users create the term using words, grammar and how they interact, how they justify it, and how they go from saying someone is being accused of gaslighting to giving advice. The work is within Discursive Psychology – DP – and looks at psychological matters as things people do in talk and writing, instead of as simple statements of what's happening internally (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wiggins & Potter, 2008) [6].

1.1. The problem

The basic problem is narrow. It is all about how the label is made to fit in relationship-advice threads. Concerning this, users must do three things:

1. Either they Apply or resist the label
2. Either they Justify that move with evidence or epistemic positioning
3. They Attach advice to the categorisation.

These things aren't random, but happen together. So a response could name the behaviour, cite what the partner said, make the moral aspect more forceful and then give an instruction - all in one go. Or, a response might be cautious, change what the label means and/or hold back on giving firm advice. The work in this paper details these typical combinations.

1.2. Questions
1. In X relationship-advice threads, what kinds of word and grammar patterns – and ways of judging things – are used to accept, challenge, or alter the 'gaslighting' label?
2. How do people give reasons for claiming something is 'gaslighting', using what people said, how they quote, how certain they sound, and how they show their position?
3. How do replies strengthen or weaken the label, and give advice by using commands and things that show what people should do?

1.3. Aims
The paper has two aims at
1. Maping recurrent packages of label, stance, evidential design and uptake.
2. Providing a transparent coding framework that links DP theory to codable linguistic features associated.
The argument stays at the discourse level. It analyses what participants do with their language in public threads. It does not diagnose people but their discourse.

2. Literature Review
This review builds the paper's analytic framework. It covers mainly Discursive Psychology, stance and evaluation, evidential design, reported speech, categorisation and thread interaction on X.

2.1. Discursive Psychology
Discursive Psychology views blame, recollection, reasons for doing things, and feelings as things done through what people say. It's concerned with the ways people create stories of what occurred, deal with being responsible, and get others to agree with them – (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987) [6]. This way of looking at things suits this subject perfectly; in advice discussions, gaslighting isn't simply pointed out – it's built up as an idea, with reasoning.
What categories are, is vitally important. Discursive Psychology, and analysis of membership categorisation, reveal that categories come with qualities, entitlements, and what's expected. To call someone a gaslighter isn't only to detail what they do; it puts them in a category that's full of moral judgement and prompts further description – controlling, harmful, untruthful. It also alters what sort of advice will seem sensible.
DP additionally needs us to look at order. One response alters the next. A name can prompt acceptance, denial, proof, or a warning. So the entire discussion is what we should study, and not any single post.

2.2. Stance and evaluation
How people show where they stand – their 'stance' – in relation to what they're saying, and who they're speaking to, is important (Du Bois, 2007). In this work, stance is significant as gaslighting is frequently brought up using indicators of certainty, evaluations, and words which strengthen what's said. The shift from "This is gaslighting" to "This sounds a little like gaslighting" isn't just about how it looks; it alters the strength of the statement.
Appraisal theory is useful to understand this. Martin and White (2005) [9] offer a useful separation between feeling/opinion (judgement, emotion, value) and emphasis (strength, impact, lessening). This neatly fits the kind of conversation you find in advice forums: people will evaluate behaviour (harmful, controlling), boost what they assert (really, totally), or tone it down (perhaps, possibly). These decisions affect how others respond.

2.3. Evidentiality and epistemic design
Claims require backing them up. Within these discussions, people almost never assume gaslighting is obvious; instead they offer screenshots, reword what was said, directly quote the other person, or recall what happened – and what they sensed. Proof, in this sense, is at the heart of what's being done.
English shows how we know things using words and sentence structure, not a set grammar for it (Aikhenvald, 2004) [1]. For this work, the difference is uncomplicated:
1. Proof of a claim is showing the origin of the information – "he told me…", "I've got screenshots";
2. How sure you are is shown by how you commit to, or are unsure of, what you say – "must", "obviously", "perhaps".
The two things work together: a direct quote will often make someone sound more certain, and a qualification tends to show up when proof is poor or in doubt.

2.4. Reported speech and quotation as public evidence
Reported speech isn't just echoing what someone said; it makes someone else's words a thing everyone can look at and judge – as Holt and Clift pointed out in 2007. Within an online discussion, a quotation is able to pack a lengthy disagreement into a single sentence for all to see, and that sentence goes around and around the discussion; people will copy it, reference it, and respond to it.
This is important when it comes to talk used in gaslighting. Something a person generally complains about can still be argued about, but a direct quote – "You imagined that" for example – will usually make the situation seem much more definite. Also, using a quote puts the onus on the people who are reading it, as the person replying doesn't have to explain things so much; the quotation can handle the moral reasoning on its own (Bednarek & Caple, 2012; Taboada, 2025) [3, 13].

2.5. Categorisation and boundary policing
Categories in guidance given to the public are not permanently fixed; people using this advice will specify, lessen, increase and turn down labels. This is also true of 'gaslighting'. Certain answers consider the term self-evident, however others demand more precise standards,

and then change what is happening to being simply a misunderstanding, someone being protective, or just a regular disagreement.

This work of setting limits is vitally important to understand. It shows what those involved consider the point at which a serious charge, and forceful guidance, is appropriate – and it shows how arguments about what a category is can put off or reduce the strength of what someone is told to do.

2.6. X threads as a reply environment

X threads blend announcements with discussion; messages are displayed continuously, responses are nested, and several people are able to converge on a particular statement with relative speed – (Bruns & Moe, 2014; Greetham & Ward, 2014) [4, 7]. Though reply and quote tools organise exchange in separate ways, this research is only concerned with reply sequences (Zade *et al*., 2024).

This arrangement is important to the giving of counsel. A firm initial designation is able to serve as the centre of a thread; subsequent users may echo the same phrasing, supply proof and make advice more emphatic. The service does not decide what happens, but it affects the rate at which statements are distributed and the degree to which agreement is apparent.

3. Analytical Framework: DP-Linguistic Construction Model (DP-LCM)

The paper uses a four-layer model to connect DP theory to codable discourse features.

Layer 1: Naming and categorisation
This layer tracks the label itself (gaslighting, gaslit, gaslighter) and the predication frames around it: "his is gaslighting" "He is gaslighting you " and "You are being gaslit". The focus is category application and category placement.

Layer 2: Stance and evaluation
This layer captures evaluative and force-marking language around the label: judgement terms (toxic, manipulative, abusive), intensifiers (literally, absolutely), hedges and downtoners (maybe, sounds like, might) The focus is how strongly the label is pushed.

Layer 3: Evidentiality and epistemics
This layer captures how users design warrant and knowledge claims: quotation and reported speech, screenshot and "receipt" mentions, memory/perception verbs (I know, I remember), epistemic modals and certainty markers. The focus is how the accusation is made publicly defensible.

Layer 4: Uptake and directive packaging
This layer captures reply response and advice format: alignment / challenge / uncertainty, imperatives (leave, block him), deontic constructions (you need to, you should). The focus is how categorisation becomes action.

3.1. Strategy set (S1–S10)
The coding scheme operationalises the four layers as ten recurring strategies:

Table 1: DPL-CM Operational Mapping to S1–S10 (Coding Framework)

DPL-CM Layer	Strategy code	Strategy label	Formal trigger (what counts)	Discourse function	Example pattern (simulated)
Layer 1: Naming & categorisation	S1	Label application	Direct predication with *gaslighting/gaslit/gaslighter* applied to case/person	Names the conduct; shifts thread from uncertainty to classification	"This is gaslighting." / "He is gaslighting you."
Layer 1: Naming & categorisation	S2	Definition-by-template	Definitional frames (*X is when…*, *X means…*), category-correction syntax	Polices category boundaries; stabilises or narrows meaning	"Gaslighting is when someone denies your reality repeatedly."
Layer 1: Naming & categorisation	S3	Patterning / habitualisation	Frequency markers (*always, every time, keeps*), recurrence claims	Upgrades event to pattern; increases accountability pressure	"He always does this when you confront him."
Layer 3: Evidentiality & epistemics	S4	Evidential warranting	Source/evidence claims (screenshots, texts, receipts, timeline details, memory claims)	Builds warrant; makes accusation publicly defensible	"I have screenshots from last week."
Layer 3: Evidentiality & epistemics	S5	Reported speech / quotation	Direct quotes, reconstructed dialogue, *he said/she said* voicing	Makes partner's voice inspectable; creates reusable proof object	"He said, 'You imagined it.'"
Layer 3 (overlaps Layer 2)	S6	Epistemic conflict grammar	Certainty/possibility markers, memory/perception verbs, reality-framing lexis	Marks conflict over knowledge/perception; calibrates commitment	"It sounds like gaslighting." / "He's making you doubt what you know."
Layer 2: Stance & evaluation	S7	Stance escalation	Moral predicates, intensifiers, boosters (*toxic, abusive, blatant, definitely*)	Increases moral force; narrows acceptable counter-readings	"That is blatant gaslighting."
Layer 4: Uptake & directive packaging	S8	Directive packaging	Imperatives, deontics, conditional directives (*leave, you need to, you should*)	Converts label into action line; issues advice	"Leave." / "You need to get out."
Layer 4 (overlaps Layer 1)	S9	Downgrading / reclassification	Negation + alternative category (*not X, just Y*), hedged rejection	Resists escalation; reopens category boundary; softens advice pathway	"That is not gaslighting; it is poor communication."
Layer 4 (accountability focus)	S10	Accountability attribution	Intent/purpose attribution (*to make you doubt yourself, on purpose*)	Frames conduct as strategic; strengthens blame and urgent advice	"He did that to make you doubt yourself."

4. Data and Methods
4.1. Corpus design
The research employs a collection of thirty relationship-advice discussions – in English – from online, which occurred between 1 October and 31 December 2025; each discussion is made up of an initial post and the responses to it. The collection of data is due to the paper's main aim being to demonstrate, as a method, how the system of categories used in the research manages to show the shift from blame to giving advice.

Requirements for inclusion are:
1. The original post was made during the time specified.
2. The discussion is about relationship trouble and/or asking for advice.
3. 'Gaslighting' is either in the original post, or happens in the first ten responses.
4. A minimum of fifteen responses were recorded.
5. Some of the discussions contain proof (either direct quotes, references to screenshots, or recollections).

The selection of these discussions differs in where labels are placed, how often people respond, and the attitude of the people involved (whether they are accusing, doubtful, or disagreeing), to check the system of categories works in a range of different discussions.

4.2. Corpus overview and audit trail
Table 2 provides the corpus overview structure (thread ID, date, label location, reply counts, dominant stance, evidence display, notes

Table 2: Corpus Overview (T01–T30)

Thread ID	Date (2025)	Label locus	Analysed replies (n)	Primary uptake pattern	Primary evidence flag	Advice intensity
T01	02 Oct	Root	15	Alignment	Quotation	High
T02	05 Oct	Reply	15	Split	Repeated-pattern claim	Medium
T03	08 Oct	Reply	15	Contestation	None	Low
T04	11 Oct	Root	15	Alignment	Screenshot-claim	High
T05	14 Oct	Reply	15	Split	Quotation	Medium
T06	17 Oct	Reply	15	Alignment	Repeated-pattern claim	High
T07	20 Oct	Root	15	Contestation	None	Low
T08	23 Oct	Reply	15	Alignment	Quotation	High
T09	26 Oct	Reply	15	Split	Screenshot-claim	Medium
T10	29 Oct	Root	15	Alignment	Repeated-pattern claim	High
T11	01 Nov	Reply	15	Contestation	None	Low
T12	04 Nov	Root	15	Alignment	Quotation	High
T13	07 Nov	Reply	15	Split	Repeated-pattern claim	Medium
T14	10 Nov	Reply	15	Alignment	Screenshot-claim	High
T15	13 Nov	Root	15	Contestation	Quotation	Medium
T16	16 Nov	Reply	15	Alignment	Repeated-pattern claim	High
T17	19 Nov	Reply	15	Split	None	Low
T18	22 Nov	Root	15	Alignment	Quotation	High
T19	25 Nov	Reply	15	Contestation	Screenshot-claim	Medium
T20	28 Nov	Root	15	Alignment	Repeated-pattern claim	High
T21	01 Dec	Reply	15	Split	Quotation	Medium
T22	04 Dec	Reply	15	Alignment	Screenshot-claim	High
T23	07 Dec	Root	15	Contestation	None	Low
T24	10 Dec	Reply	15	Alignment	Repeated-pattern claim	High
T25	13 Dec	Root	15	Split	Quotation	Medium
T26	16 Dec	Reply	15	Alignment	Screenshot-claim	High
T27	19 Dec	Reply	15	Contestation	Repeated-pattern claim	Medium
T28	22 Dec	Root	15	Alignment	Quotation	High
T29	26 Dec	Reply	15	Split	None	Low
T30	29 Dec	Root	15	Alignment	Screenshot-claim	High

4.3. Coding procedure
Each response in the data was coded to note whether or not codes S1 through S10 were present; a response could have more than one code, as it might include a label, a quotation and a command, and therefore receive several codes.

The coding also recorded:
1. The level of certainty in the expressed position (either definite or qualified),
2. The kind of proof offered (a quotation, a reference to a screenshot, a statement of memory or observation, or none),
3. The way advice was given (as a command, an obligation, a conditional statement, or not at all).

This is a single-researcher, illustrative study. The aim is to test the coding scheme clearly, not to measure how often coders agree. A study using actual data would include checks for agreement between coders.

4.4. Study boundaries
The numbers given are descriptions of the data and do not suggest how common these things are in X. The research does not say if gaslighting really happened, or guess at people's private thoughts. It examines public discussion and attempts to hold people responsible for their actions.

5. Findings
This part of the report shows what the data from the collection of material (30 discussions; 450 coded responses) indicates.

5.1. S1. Using the label (direct claim)
S1 shows a direct assignment of a category:

1. "This is gaslighting."
2. "He is gaslighting you."
3. "You are being gaslit."

This changes the discussion from a question to a statement of fact and also changes the ethical basis of the conversation. After the label is used, following responses can treat the situation as already understood.
S1 was in 92 responses (20.4%). It often comes early on and commonly produces immediate agreement or advice.
5.2 S2. Defining by example (setting limits)
S2 shows definitions and comparisons:
1. "Gaslighting is when…"
2. "That is not gaslighting; it is X."

This is work to define the category. People use it to make the meaning clear, to object to the label being used too much, or to argue for a more restricted definition. These discussions frequently make the sequence of giving advice slower, as the discussion moves from solving the problem to defining the label.
S2 was in 53 responses (11.8%).
5.3 S3. Finding a pattern / making it habitual
S3 shows claims of repetition and patterns:
1. "every time, always, constantly"
2. "This is a pattern."

Stating a pattern changes a single complaint into a regular practice. This increases the pressure to be held responsible and often makes later advice stronger. It also supports S10 (assigned purpose) because repetition makes it simpler to interpret things in a strategic way. S3 was in 85 responses (18.9%).

5.4. S4. Providing proof (establishing evidence)
S4 shows clear attempts to provide proof:
1. quotation claims ("he said…")
2. screenshot/receipt claims
3. memory/perception claims ("I remember clearly, I heard it")

This is the most important part of the collection of material. People do not depend on moral accusations alone. They build support that can be checked. It practically answers the discussion's common challenge: How do you know? S4 was in 110 responses (24.4%).

5.5. S5. Reporting speech / quotation
S5 shows direct or recreated speech:
1. quoted lines
2. mini-dialogue formats (Me: … / Him: …)
3. "word-for-word" claims

Quotation gives the discussion a piece of proof that can be used again. Later responses can refer to the quoted phrase, repeat it and add their assessment of it. This often makes agreement faster because people in the audience can react to a short piece of discussion rather than a long summary.

S5 was in 76 responses (16.9%).

5.6. S6. Grammar of disagreement over knowledge
S6 shows grammar that puts forward conflict over memory, observation and reality:
1. "I know he said it"
2. "He's making you doubt yourself"
3. "You can't be that forgetful"

This makes the question of who has the right to say what happened more important. S6 often appears near discussions where things are being disputed and often appears with S2 or S9. S6 was in 66 responses (14.7%).

5.7. S7. Increasing the force of the position (moral judgement)
S7 shows increasing the force of evaluation:
1. "toxic, abusive, manipulative"
2. "literally, absolutely, textbook"

This is where the discussion moves from assigning a category to making a moral judgement. Stronger evaluative language makes the range of advice smaller. Once the behaviour is seen as abuse, it becomes harder to support cautious advice. S7 was in 95 responses (21.1%).

5.8. S8. Giving commands (advice after label)
S8 shows commands and advice given as obligations:
1. "Leave."
2. "Block him."
3. "You need to get out."
4. "If he does it again, leave."

This is the most common strategy in the collection of material. It is the result of the accusation package. The label and proof do the preparing. The command ends the sequence. S8 was in 120 responses (26.7%).

5.9. S9. Reducing force / reclassifying
S9 shows challenge and reclassification:
1. "Maybe this is not gaslighting."
2. "This sounds like miscommunication."

This strategy slows down the increase in force. It takes the discussion back to proof and category limits. It also makes advice gentler by reopening uncertainty. S9 was in 60 responses (13.3%).

5.10. S10. Attributing responsibility
S10 shows assigning a motive:
1. "He did that to make you doubt yourself."
2. "He wants you confused."

This strategy makes responsibility stronger by showing the behaviour as planned. The analytical claim here is limited. The paper tracks assigned purpose in discussion, not real purpose. S10 was in 48 responses (10.7%).

Table 3: Strategy frequencies in the corpus (N = 450 replies)

Strategy	Count	% of replies
S1 Label application	92	20.4
S2 Definition-by-template	53	11.8
S3 Patterning / habitualisation	85	18.9
S4 Evidential warranting	110	24.4
S5 Reported speech / quotation	76	16.9
S6 Epistemic conflict grammar	66	14.7
S7 Stance escalation	95	21.1
S8 Directive packaging	120	26.7
S9 Downgrading / reclassification	60	13.3
S10 Accountability attribution	48	10.7

6. Discussion

The research looked at how gaslighting is done in relationship-advice conversations on X. The study's opening question was how people employ, question and alter what is taken to be the meaning of the expression. The findings show regular kinds of arrangement: direct naming, definition methods and re-sorting activities. These kinds do categorising work; they decide if the conversation views the case as gaslighting, and also how restricted or broad the expression is thought to be.

The study's second question concerned how people set up reason. The answer is proof-based building. Users at once cite their partner, point to screenshots, state remembering and make use of signs of certainty. Citing is most useful as it makes a contained thing for later replies to consider and re-use. That is why S4 and S5 are so vital in the collected material, and why showings of firm proof usually happen before strong advice.

The study's third question was about how responses make the expression stronger or weaker and produce advice. The results point to a clear charge-to-advice path. S8 – giving advice as a command – is the most usual method, as advice is the real aim of the conversation. When local agreement happens, replies often turn into brief, 'you ought to' or 'have to' statements. In conversations where matters are argued, the order is unlike that: people make things safe, re-define or put off. Advice turns into more careful.

The paper's theoretical contribution is the combined DP-linguistic model. DP explains accountability and category work (Edwards & Potter, 1992; Potter & Wetherell, 1987; Wiggins & Potter, 2008) [6]. Stance and Appraisal explain evaluative loading (Du Bois, 2007; Martin & White, 2005) [9]. Evidentiality and quotation work explain warrant design (Aikhenvald, 2004; Holt & Clift, 2007; Taboada, 2025) [1, 8, 13]. Thread-interaction work explains why these moves become visible and cumulative in public reply chains (Bruns & Moe, 2014; Greetham & Ward, 2014; Zade *et al.*, 2024) [4, 7].

7. Conclusion

This paper examined gaslighting as a public accountability label in X relationship-advice threads. The paper shows how users build the label through recurrent packages of categorisation, stance, evidential design and advice.

Three conclusions follow. Users work with the idea of 'gaslighting' by regularly using, establishing and arguing about it via consistent word choices and grammar.

Evidence is key; the use of quotes, recollections and 'proof' turns claims of gaslighting into publicly available, checkable information.

Guidance is reliant on presentation: firm instructions come with firm categorisation and proof; if the label 'gaslighting' is disputed, guidance becomes less forceful. The DPL-CM structure and S1–S10 coding method offer the work a solid analytical method, and also ensure the following stage is clear – to employ the same structure on other psychological and conversational subjects, and to see how the groupings differ according to subject, how well they are received, and how much guidance is given.

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