

# Effect of Gaslighting on Employees' Performance in Nigerian Private University

Adunola Mobolanle Ajayi<sup>1</sup>; Tinuke Moradeke Fapohunda<sup>2</sup>; and Rafiu Akanji Bankole<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>Dept. of Human Resource Management, Bells University of Technology, Ota, Ogun State, Nigeria.

<sup>2</sup>Dept. of Industrial Relations and Human Resource Management, Lagos State University, Ojo, Nigeria.

E-mail: [afolabiseyo@yahoo.com](mailto:afolabiseyo@yahoo.com)

## ABSTRACT

Employees' performance is a crucial factor that depicts how successful the journey of an organization will be. Several factors inhibit employees' performance and the most potent among these is gaslighting with dimensions such as abusive supervisor behavior and psychological abuse; all of which have attendant negative consequences on employees' delivery and their organizational citizenship behavior. This study takes a step further to examine performance from a very rare angle which is gaslighting and bringing onboard indicators such as abusive supervision and psychological abuse and their effects on task and adaptive performance respectively.

The study was underpinned by the leader-member theory and the social cognitive theory. The study was descriptive in nature and one hundred and thirty (130) selected employees from Bells University of Technology served as respondents for the study through the multi-stage sampling method. Findings from the study revealed that abusive supervision significantly affected task performance with ( $R^2= 0.878$ ;  $p= 0.000<0.05$ ); while psychological abuse also share significant relationship with adaptive performance with ( $0.972$ ;  $p= 0.000<0.05$ ). The study concluded that abusive supervision and psychological abuse as indicators of gaslighting are very harmful forms of abuse, which not only have devastating consequences for individual targets but also presents serious implications for wider academic society, limiting opportunities for optimal performance. It was recommended that policies should be developed and formulated by academic institutions towards recognizing these behavioral patterns and provide appropriate support for affected individuals.

(Keywords: *abusive supervision, psychological abuse, task performance, adaptive performance*)

## INTRODUCTION

Employees are the strength of any organization because institutional survival and continuity rests on in the measure their degree of performance. This helps to affirm that employees' performance is very vital to organizational advancement and pivotal to its growth (Pradhan and Jena, 2017). Several factors affect employees' performance and among them is gas lighting, which can manifest either through diverse dimensions such as abusive supervision, ghosting, stonewalling etc., with attendant consequences like psychological violence, which inhibits employees' performance (Fischer, Tian, Lee and Hughes, 2021).

Gaslighting which is a form of abuse that spans the realms of romantic relationships to the relationships at work, and despite the growing literature on abuse at work, the conceptualization and measurement of gas lighting at work have received scarce attention. The term gas lighting originated from the 1944 film *Gaslight*, in which a husband systematically tormented his wife by causing her to doubt herself and her sense of objective reality. Gaslighting is a form of persistent manipulation, marginalization, and invalidation that causes the victims to doubt themselves, and to ultimately lose one's own sense of objectivity in terms of perception, self-worth and identity.

Accusations and statements from gaslighters are often centered on intentional lies, deliberate falsehoods, negative judgments, personal attacks and unsubstantiated exaggerations (Johnson, Nadal, Sissoko, and King, 2021). To further express the degree of negativity inherent in gaslighting, the concept has been flagged in the United Kingdom's law on criminal domestic violence since 2015 (Francis, 2022). This expresses how dangerous the concept of gaslighting portends to the performance of

employees at work from the dimension of abusive supervision, which manifests in terms of psychological abuse among the target employees.

Owing to the increasing pervasiveness of the term in employment relationships, it becomes of utmost importance to note that not enough attention has been paid so far on gaslighting in work settings, where a supervisor acts as an authority figure over the subordinates thus causing them psychological trauma and limiting their performances. Another more striking evidence in the existing literature on the topic is more qualitative in nature and lacks quantitative inquiry, hence, this study. Moreover, most of these scholarly articles focus on gaslighting in marriages (Gass and Nichols, 1988), closely knit friendships, and intimate relationships. Some articles have also investigated gaslighting of children by their parents (Ahmad, Liu, and Butt, 2020). It should be noted that gaslighting may be perpetrated by any peer, family, spouse, or coworker and can be extremely damaging when the offender has a position of authority (Simon, 2011).

Studies have suggested that abusive supervision often impacts negatively on subordinate employees in areas such as knowledge sharing (Islam, Ahmad, Kaleem, and Mahmood, 2020); work attitude (Oh and Farh, 2017), job performance (Liao, Peng, Lim, and Schaubroeck, 2016) and job behaviors (Wang and Jiang, 2016), and there are even reductions in the tasks performance and deliverables of employees.

Abusive supervision has been recognized as negative behavior exhibited by a leader. However, its influence from the viewpoint of gas lighting and its significance on psychological consequence is rarely considered in relation to employee performance, hence, this study.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Gaslighting in academics has become an increasingly prevalent phenomenon and a problem that is pernicious in nature, as academic staff strive to secure a place in the field of academia. Gaslighting that manifests through abusive supervision can be damaging due to its capacity to impede career success and wellbeing of the academic staff (Churchwell, 2018). In particular, staff in the academic corridor are often faced with subtle but yet pervasive undermining behaviors from senior colleagues, department

heads, and institutions' leadership. This creates an insidious environment of implicit bias, which can lead to reduced trust, lowered self-esteem, disengagement from activities, and other damaging effects for the target individuals (Sue, Alsaidi, Awad, Glaeser, Calle, and Mendez, 2019).

In academia, gaslighting manifests in diverse forms through different tactics, which eventually sow doubt and confuse the individual involved (Churchwell, 2018). This ranges from micro-aggressions such as undermining of comments and dismissive body languages to more severe forms like denials of accomplishments or outright lies (Stark, 2019).

According to Kivak (2017) and Stark (2019), gaslighting most commonly occurs for example when heads of departments or senior colleagues try to undermine, discredit, and invalidate the knowledge, accomplishments, and expertise of their junior colleagues by making patronizing comments about their qualifications or experience. Gaslighting can also involve assigning the victim a lesser role in collaborative projects by a supervisor which is in a bid to demotivate such staff and ensure less productivity and thereby causing psychological abuse and trauma (Sue, Capodilupo, Nadal, and Torino, 2008).

One of the common tactics used in gaslighting is the deployment of condescending or dismissive language, which can make the victim feels belittled and invalidated and internalize imposter syndrome. A typical example of gaslighting is when a senior colleague constantly takes credit for the work done by their junior colleagues and downplay their contributions, leading to their work being undervalued and unrecognized. While this form of psychological abuse can happen in any setting, it is particularly prevalent in academic circles due to the hierarchical power structure present in these environments (Richie, 2018).

### **Literature Review**

A study by Lim, Koay, and Chong (2020) reported a significant influence of abusive supervision on emotional exhaustion among public sector employees in Malaysia and causes reduction in task performance of employees. Similarly, another recent study by Akram, Li, and Akram (2019) found abusive supervision as a

major workplace stressor causing emotional exhaustion among employees in China; thus, leading to reduction in task delivery. Accordingly, numerous other studies have also reported similar in the past (Peltokorpi, 2019). Taken together, the evidence mentioned above suggests that abusive supervision can trigger fatigue and thus result in emotional exhaustion.

A study by Wang, Hsieh, and Wang (2020) also reported the toxic effects of abusive peer behavior on employees' sense of security; as a work stressor, it can make employees develop concerns about their jobs, thus experiencing job insecurity.

A study by Alzyoud and Odhiabo (2019) provided insight that psychological abuse is one of the unethical practices that leads to dysfunctionality in organizations thus reducing employees adaptive rate. This is due to the fact that employees have bad impressions on the management and adversely affect the whole functioning of the organization.

Another study from the banking sector investigated by Xu, Martinez, Van Hoof, Tews, Torres, and Farfan (2018) provided that psychological abuse by either supervisors or senior colleagues can pose danger on how much employees adapt to organizational objectives. They further asserted that the same goes with the leader and peer abusive behavior.

Investigation by Xu, Loi, and Lam (2015) on psychological abusive behavior from the perspective of public criticism, humiliation, bad temper, sexual harassment, abuse, threatening, injustice, misuse of power, and assigning inappropriate blame; findings revealed that employees under such atmosphere will face what is referred to as work alienation and such withdrawal makes them less adaptive.

Whitman, Halbesleben, and Holmes (2014) published an investigation which provided that employees experiencing psychological abusive supervisor/leader behavior in organizations face vast hidden consequences such as decreased organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and increased counterproductive work behavior (CWB). This is because psychological abuse is sometimes equated with workplace aggression which has harmful psychological influences on the abused employees.

## METHODOLOGY

This section explains the methodological scope of the study. The research design adopted for this study was survey research design; this design was found appropriate because it explained the variables under study entitled "Effect of Gas Lighting on Employees Performance in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State, Nigeria"; in a succinct and sufficient manner.

The population for this study was two hundred and seven (207) academic staff of Bells University of Technology, Ogun State. This comprised of both male and female subjects. Drawing from the population of the study, which was obtained from the human resource department of the selected University, a sample size of one hundred thirty-six (136) was drawn at 95% level of confidence and 0.5 error rate.

This study employed the multi-stage sampling technique; this included purposive technique, which was used in selecting the study location. Afterwards, the stratified sampling techniques was employed as a means of ensuring that all academic staff from all cadres are well represented and from the identified groups, the simple random sampling technique was employed to selecting respondents who filled the questionnaires administered.

The simple random ensured an adequate form or representation of all cadres of staff in the selected institution. For this study, primary data were obtained using a structured questionnaire which was divided into various sections to cater adequately for the objectives of the study. The questionnaire was close-ended, on a 5 point Likert Scale ranging from =1 "Strongly Disagree" to =5 "Strongly Agree".

In measuring abusive supervision which was an indicator of gas lighting was measured using a 15 item scale by Mitchell and Ambrose (2007) with a reliability of 0.931, and psychological abuse was measured on a 6 point scale using a dimension by Porrúa-García, Rodríguez-Carballeira, Escartín, Gómez-Benito, Almendros, and Marting-Pena, (2015) with a reliability of 0.910 and employee performance was based on 13 item scale developed by Pradhan and Jena, (2017).

## RESULTS

**Table 1:** Result on Questionnaire Administration.

Detailed Response Rate	Distributed Copies	Retrieved Copies	Copies not Retrieved	Used Copies
Total	136	133	3	130

Source: Field Survey, (2023)

The above table reflected that 136 copies of questionnaire were administered, 133 copies were retrieved, and 130 copies were found usable; this showed 96.2% response rate; which was found to be positive and significant, so, it was accepted for the study.

Analysis of socio-demographic variable revealed that according to sex; result of the analysis showed that 77 (59.2%) of the respondents were male while 53 (40.8%) were female, the study revealed that majority of the respondents were male. This implies that the academic terrain is male dominated.

Analysis of socio-demographic variable revealed that the distribution of respondents by age reflected that: 30 (23.1%) of the respondents were

between the ages of 20-30 years of age, 52 (40.0%) of the respondents were between the ages of 31-40 years, 25 (19.2%) of the respondents were between the ages of 41-50 years and 23 (17.7%) were above 51 years of age, the study revealed that majority of the respondents were between the ages of 31-40.

Analysis of socio-demographic variable revealed that the distribution of respondents by marital status showed that: 12 (9.2%) of the respondents were single, 90 (69.2%) of the respondents were married, 5 (3.8%) of the respondents were divorced, 19 (14.6%) of the respondents were widows, and 4 (3.1%) of the respondents were separated from their spouses. Analysis and responses revealed that majority of the respondents were married with 90 (69.2%).

Analysis of socio-demographic variable revealed that the distribution of respondents by cadre of staff proved that: 55 (42.3%) of the respondents were on the Graduate Assistant and Lecturer 1 cadre, 43 (33.1%) of the respondents were on the Senior Lecturer cadre and 32 (24.6%) of the respondents were on the Associate Professor and Professorial cadre, respectively.

**Table 2:** Biographical Information of Respondents.

S/N	Variables	Responses	Frequency	%
1.	Sex	Male	77	59.2
		Female	53	40.8
	Total		<b>130</b>	<b>100</b>
2.	Age	20-30 years	30	23.1
		31-40 years	52	40.0
		41-50 years	25	19.2
		51years and above	23	17.7
	Total		<b>130</b>	<b>100</b>
3.	Marital Status	Single	12	9.2
		Married	90	69.2
		Divorced	5	3.8
		Separated	19	14.6
		Widowed	4	3.1
	Total		<b>130</b>	<b>100</b>
4.	Cadre of Staff	GA-L1	55	42.3
		Senior-Senior Lecturer	43	33.1
		Associate Prof and above	32	24.6
		Total	<b>130</b>	<b>100</b>
5.	Years in Service	Less than 2 years	22	16.9
		3-5 years	54	41.5
		6-10 years	31	23.8
		11 years and above	23	17.7
		Total	<b>130</b>	<b>100</b>

Source: Field Survey, (2023)

**Table 3:** Model Summary on the Effect of Abusive Supervision has No Significant Effect on Task Performance in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State Nigeria.

Model	R	R Square	Adjusted R Square	Std. Error of the Estimate
1	.937 <sup>a</sup>	.878	.877	.484

a. Predictors: (Constant), Abusive Supervision

**Table 4:** ANOVA on the Effect of Abusive Supervision on Task Performance in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Model	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	Sig.	
1	Regression	215.777	1	215.777	922.084	.000 <sup>b</sup>
	Residual	29.953	128	.234		
	Total	245.731	129			

a. Dependent Variable: Task Performance  
 b. Predictors: (Constant), Abusive Supervision

**Table 5:** Coefficients Table on the Effect of Abusive Supervision on Effect on Task Performance in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State, Nigeria.

Model		Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
		B	Std. Error	Beta		
1	(Constant)	.786	.101		7.764	.000
	Abusive Supervision	.903	.030	.937	30.366	.000

a. Dependent Variable: Task Performance

Findings revealed that majority of the respondents were Graduate Assistant and Lecturer 1, respectively, with 55 (42.3%).

Analysis of socio-demographic variable revealed that the distribution of respondents according to Length of Service delineated that: 22 (16.9%) of the respondents have spent less than 2 years in the organization, 54 (41.5%) of the respondents have spent between 3-5 years at work, 31 (23.8%) of the respondents have spent 6-10 years in the selected tertiary institution, and 23 (17.7%) of the respondents have spent above 11 years in the organization. The study revealed that majority of the respondents has spent between 3-5 years with 54 (41.5%) in Bells University of Technology.

### **Test of Hypotheses**

**H0<sub>1</sub>:** Abusive supervision has no significant effect on task performance in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State Nigeria.

From the analysis displayed under Table 3 above, result reflected that abusive supervision

has a huge significant effect on employees' compliance on green related issues with R=93.7; this implies that R square of = .878 which proved abusive supervision accounts for 87.8% of variations in task performance. Therefore, abusive supervision has strong and positive significant effect on task performance.

Table 4 showed that the F-value is the Mean Square Regression (215.777) divided by the Mean Square Residual (0.234), yielding F=922.084. The model in this table showed that the abusive supervision is statistically significant at (Sig =.000) and positively has an effect on task performance.

Tables 3, 4, and 5 presents the result of the linear regression that were calculated to predict abusive supervision and task performance. A significant regression coefficient was found (F (1,937)= 922.084, p=.000), with R<sup>2</sup> of .878. This presupposes that 87.8% variation in task performance was as a result of abusive supervision.



**Table 6:** Correlations Table on Psychological Abuse have No Significant Relationship with Adaptive Performance in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State, Nigeria.

		Psychological Abuse	Adaptive Performance
Psychological Abuse	Pearson Correlation	1	.972**
	Sig. (2-tailed)		.000
	N	130	130
Adaptive Performance	Pearson Correlation	.972**	1
	Sig. (2-tailed)	.000	
	N	130	130

\*\* . Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Evidence in Table 6, also is the beta value under the standardized coefficients which shows that abusive supervision equivalently contributes to the change in the dependent variable task performance ( $\beta=.937$ ,  $p=.000$ ). Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected because results proved that abusive supervision significantly has positive effect on task performance.

### **Hypothesis Two**

**H0<sub>2</sub>:** Psychological abuse has no significant relationship with adaptive performance in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State, Nigeria.

The above correlation table reflected that there exists a positive and significant relationship between inclusion and employee performance with ( $r=0.972$ ,  $p\text{-value}<0.05$ ). This implies that a significant relationship exists between psychological abuse and adaptive performance. Therefore, the null hypothesis was rejected because results proved that psychological abuse has significant relationship with adaptive performance.

### **DISCUSSION**

The thrust of this study examined the effect of gas lighting on employees' performance in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State Nigeria. Two hypotheses were stated and the first one stated that abusive supervision has no significant effect on task performance in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State Nigeria while the second hypothesis stated that psychological abuse has no significant relationship with adaptive performance

in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State, Nigeria.

For the first hypothesis, the outcome of the study proved that abusive supervision has no significant effect on task performance in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State Nigeria. This finding aligns with the position of Khalid, Bashir, Khan, and Abbas (2018) whose study conclusion provided that employees facing abusive supervision can make employees become weary and their delivery of tasks will be affected, they further stated that leaders or management should ensure a work terrain that has a culture which does not promote abusive supervision. The study also aligns with the submission of Pradhan, Srivastava and Mishra (2020), where their study concluded that an abusive management does not get the best from their employees and as such will continue to experience deviant behaviors. This finding also aligns with the social exchange theory where it was stated that a significant relationship of give and take exists and any iota of abuse from any of the partners in the employment process is an invitation to chaos.

The second hypothesis, which stated that psychological abuse, have no significant with adaptive performance in Bells University of Technology, Ogun State Nigeria, the outcome of the study provided that psychological abuse has significant relationship with adaptive performance. This outcome aligns with the study of Xu, Martinez, Van Hoof, Tews, Torres, and Farfan (2018) whose study provided that psychological abuse by either supervisors or senior colleagues can pose danger on how much employees adapt to organizational objectives; in the same manner, the finding is in agreement with the study of Alzyoud and Odhiabo (2019) which concluded that psychological abuse is one

of the unethical practices that leads to' dysfunctionality in organizations thus reducing employees adaptive capabilities. The finding also agrees with the leader-member exchange (LMX) theory which asserted that a two-way connection between leaders and their followers; such should such employees face abuse psychologically, it will result in negative outcomes such as work alienation and estrangement.

## CONCLUSION

From the outcome of this study, it can be concluded that gaslighting has become an all-too-common occurrence within academic circles and it manifests via abusive supervision and psychological means of abuse. Abusive supervision and psychological abuse as indicators of gaslighting are very harmful serve as insidious form of abuse, which not only have devastating consequences for individual targets but also presents serious implications for wider academic society, limiting opportunities and marginalizing abilities for optimal performance.

The outcome of the study concludes that academia must recognize and address supervision abuse and psychological abuse as components of gaslighting due to its negative consequences. This can assist to guarantee and foster the creation of a more inclusive and supportive environment for all researchers and scholars. Based on the outcome of this study, it can be concluded that it is only through a concerted efforts from all sides, meaningful progress will become evident and manifest towards fostering true inclusion within academia.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

- i. It was recommended based on the outcome of the study that management of Bells University should develop a policy to create a more inclusive and supportive environment for all researchers and scholars in the academic corridor.
- ii. It was recommended based on the outcome of the study that management of Bells University should ensure that essential preventative measures should be put in place such as anti-discriminatory policies targeted at victims and those at disadvantage; and
- iii. Finally, it was recommended based on the outcome of the study that educational initiatives aimed at raising awareness about issues like unconscious bias should be implemented for all academic staff from diverse backgrounds.

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