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University Students Leaving Relationships (USLR): Scale Development and Gender Differences in Decisions to Leave Romantic Relationships

Helen M. Hendy[1], S. Hakan Can[1], Lauren J. Joseph[1], and Cory R. Scherer[1]

Abstract

The University Students Leaving Relationships scale was developed to identify student concerns when contemplating dissolution of romantic relationships. Participants included 1,106 students who rated the importance of issues when deciding to leave relationships. Factor analysis produced three dimensions: Missing the Relationship, Social Embarrassment, and Fear of Harm.

Keywords

decision to leave, romantic relationships, dissolution, breakups

More than half of American university students fail to complete their chosen degrees, and 65% of them drop out of the university for nonacademic reasons that include problems in developing a "sense of belonging" such as with friends and romantic partners (Morrow & Ackermann, 2012; Tinto, 2001). Past research suggests that a high percentage of romantic relationships in young adults break up, which often results in sleep loss, anxiety, depression, intrusive thoughts, poor academic performance, and even violence (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2011; Locker, McIntosh, Hackney, Wilson, & Wiegand, 2010; Park, Sanchez, & Bryndildsen, 2011). Young university students may be particularly vulnerable to broken romantic relationships because they are often located away from their families and homes towns, living independently for the first time, and surrounded by many other single young adults. These new experiences provide young university adults with an opportunity for "differentiation of self" with a healthy balance of togetherness and independence (Jankowski & Hooper, 2012). Despite the prevalence of such changing romantic relationships and their importance for student self-discovery, well-being, and persistence in college goals, surprisingly little research has evaluated dimensions of concerns for young university students during the decision to stay in or leave romantic relationships.

Available measures focus primarily on concerns that university students have *before entering* relationships or *after breaking up* rather than concerns relevant to them *while deciding* to stay or leave. For example, the Relationship Deciding Scale (Vennum & Fincham, 2011) was developed with a sample of university students to examine concerns

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before entering into romantic relationships, which included the student's confidence to maintain a relationship and the student's awareness of any "warning signs" of trouble from the potential partner. Also, the Breakup Distress Scale was developed with samples of university students to examine their reactions *after breaking up* with their romantic partners (Field, Diego, Pelaez, Deeds, & Delgado, 2009, 2011), finding that distress was greatest when the breakup was recent, sudden, unexpected, initiated by the romantic partner, and with no new partner identified. Additionally, the Breakup Reasons Scale was developed with samples of high school and university students (Connelly & McIsaac, 2009; Field et al., 2011), finding that the "loss of intimacy" was the biggest distress *after breaking up*. Finally, the Decision to Leave Scale is one available measure of concerns experienced *while deciding* to stay in or leave a relationship (Hendy, Eggen, Gustitus, McLeod, & Ng, 2003): Fear of Loneliness, Child Concerns, Practical Financial Concerns, Social Embarrassment, Fear of Harm, No Social Support, and Hopes for Change. However, the DLS was developed with a sample of community and university women in their mid-20s, so some of these concerns may not be relevant to younger, single, childless university students (especially Child Concerns and Practical Financial Concerns).

Only a few studies have investigated gender differences in concerns associated with the dissolution of romantic relationships (Knox, Zusman, Kaluzny, & Cooper, 2000; Perilloux & Buss, 2008; Sabatelli & Cecil-Pigo, 1985; Sprecher, 1988; Strachman & Gable, 2006; VanderDrift, Agnew, & Wilson, 2009), with some research suggesting that *after breaking up*, men experience more distress than women (Knox et al., 2000), and with other research suggesting that women experience more distress than men (Perilloux & Buss, 2008). However, past theory and research on gender socialization suggest that men and women differ in the needs that romantic relationships serve in their lives (Cross & Madson, 1997; Maccoby, 1998), so they might be expected to differ in the specific concerns associated with ending such relationships.

For example, men are typically socialized to display emotional closeness only with their romantic partners and to expect homophobic social sanctions for displaying emotional bonds with other men (Connell, Hearn, & Kimmel, 2005; Gerstel, Riessman, & Rosenfield, 1985; Messner, 2002; Pascoe, 2007; Plummer, 1999), which may result in men being more worried than women about loneliness or missing the emotional intimacy of the relationship. Also, because many men are unaccustomed to sharing their emotional distress with others besides the romantic partner, they may experience social embarrassment when their romantic relationships end and they attempt to confide in others for the first time. Women may also be expected to feel social embarrassment when their romantic relationships end, but for different reasons than those experienced by men. Research suggests that college-aged women receive strong social pressure to be in romantic relationships, and they tend to view such relationships as a route to self-worth and social respect (Gilmartin, 2005; Holland & Eisenhart, 1992). Women are also typically socialized to define themselves in terms of the harmony of their relationships with family, friends, and romantic partners (Nolen-Hoeksema, Grayson, & Larson, 1999; Rudolph & Conley, 2005), which may give them the belief that they are "responsible" for the success of their romantic relationships and produce embarrassment when confiding "their failure" to others. Finally, because women are at greater risk for physical injury from partner violence than are men (Makepeace, 1986; Morse, 1995; Vivian & Langhinrichsen-Rohling, 1994), women may experience more concerns than men about being harmed if their romantic relationships end.

Purpose of the Present Study

The misery of troubled relationships may prompt young university students to seek counseling services to assist them *while deciding* to stay in or leave the relationship (Long

& Burnett, 2005; Walker & McCarthy, 2001). Therefore, one goal of the present study was to develop a psychometrically tested University Students Leaving Relationships (USLR) scale as a needs-assessment tool to help students identify their specific concerns about ending relationships so that counselors may guide them to individual actions or group workshops to reduce these concerns and move forward with their decisions. We hypothesized that the specific concerns identified by the new USLR scale might include loneliness, missing the relationship, lack of social support, social embarrassment, and/or fear of harm.

A second goal was to examine gender differences in which USLR concerns could significantly explain variance in simple decision-to-leave ratings (1 = *stay*, 2 = *don't know*, 3 = *leave*) that university men and women report for their present romantic relationships. We hypothesized that men would emphasize concerns about missing the relationship, lack of social support, and/or social embarrassment because of their tendency to rely primary on the romantic partner for emotional intimacy. We also hypothesized that women would emphasize concerns about social embarrassment because of their tendency to define themselves by their ability to have a successful romantic relationship and/or fear of harm because of the greater risk women face for physical injury if violence occurs at the end of their romantic relationships.

Past research suggests that individuals in same-sex relationships are generally similar to heterosexual individuals in the reasons they give for breaking up their romantic relationships (Kurdek, 2008), but research also indicates that they experience less social support from family and friends during such breakups (Dane & MacDonald, 2009; Mohr & Daly, 2008). Although future research should examine how sexual orientation is related to the most prominent concerns relevant to staying in or leaving romantic relationships, the present study focused on gender differences in breakup concerns for primarily heterosexual university students.

Method

Participants

Study participants included 1,106 young adult university students between the ages of 18 and 21 years from a university campus in south-central Pennsylvania serving students from the local small-town and rural communities, as well as students from the large metropolitan areas of Philadelphia and New York (392 men, 714 women; mean age = 19.4 years, *SD* = 1.1; 75.0% Caucasian, 12.1% African American, 4.5% Asian American, 3.1% Hispanic Latino; 99.5% unmarried; 97.7% childless; 97.3% heterosexual). They were selected from a larger sample of 1,551 university students with more varied ages from 18 to 63 years (548 men, 1,003 women; mean age = 21.6 years, *SD* = 5.7; 76.4% Caucasian, 11.5% African-American, 3.9% Asian American, 2.9% Hispanic-Latino) who were recruited from a variety of classes that included Business, Chemistry, Criminal Justice, Economics, English, Geology, German, History, Kinesiology, Mathematics, Music, Nursing, Psychology, and Theater.

The 1,106 young adult students were randomly divided into two subsets for statistical analyses of the present study, with 879 in one subset used to develop the USLR scale (313 men, 566 women; mean age = 19.4 years, *SD* = 1.1; 76% Caucasian, 11.9% African American, 4.6% Asian American, 3.3% Hispanic Latino; 94.9% unmarried; 97.6% childless) and with 227 in another subset used to examine reliability and validity of the USLR dimensions (79 men, 148 women; mean age = 19.1 years, *SD* = 1.1; 71.1% Caucasian, 12.9% African American, 4.0% Asian American, 2.2% Hispanic Latino; 92.0% unmarried; 98.3% childless). Of the total 1,106 students, 725 reported that they were presently in romantic relationships, and this subset was used to examine USLR dimensions most associated with the decision-to-leave those relationships (218 men, 507 women; mean age = 19.4 years, *SD* = 1.1; 74.2% Caucasian, 13.3% African American, 3.7% Asian American, 3.6% Hispanic Latino; 91.7% unmarried; 97.2% childless).

Procedures and Measures

Three recruitment procedures were used. For the 35 classes in which professors could allow use of class time for students to complete an anonymous questionnaire, the response rate was 94%. For the 16 classes in which professors could not allow class time, but for which questionnaires were completed outside class and dropped off later in designated locked boxes on campus, the response rate was 70%. For the third recruitment procedure using the university subject pool, posters were prepared that described the study, then interested students used a website to make appointments for one of 14 meetings set up with a research assistant who distributed the questionnaires and then collected them in a locked drop box, with 85% of the students making appointments completing their questionnaires. For all recruitment procedures, the study was described to participants as an investigation into predictors of the quality of romantic relationships in college students.

The anonymous questionnaires asked the students to provide demographic information (such as gender, age, ethnicity, marital status, number of children), to report whether or not they were presently in a romantic relationship, and to give a simple 3-point response for "Right now, what is your decision about the future of your current romantic relationship?" (1 = *stay*, 2 = *don't know*, 3 = *leave*). The students were also asked to provide 5-point ratings for "How important is each factor when making your decision to stay in or leave a relationship?" for 26 possible concerns (from 1 = *not at all* to 5 = *very*). The 26 items were selected based on past theory and research on issues of possible importance to young adult, mostly unmarried, and mostly childless university students (see Table 1).

Additionally, the students were asked to complete measures of variables we anticipated would be associated with their decision-to-leave responses. Family closeness was measured with the 20-item subscale from the Social Support from Family and Friends Scale (Procidano & Heller, 1983), for which participants used a 5-point rating for each item (from 1 = *almost never* to 5 = *almost always*), with appropriate items reversed, then with the sum of ratings used as the score. This measure of family closeness was developed with samples of university students with a mean age of 19 years, showing internal reliability of .90, convergent validity with "Social Competence" subscales from the California Psychological Inventory, and external validity with observed self-disclosure to siblings during conversations (Procidano & Heller, 1983). Self-esteem was measured with the 10-item Rosenberg (1965) Self-Esteem Scale, for which participants used a 4-point rating for each item (1 = *strongly disagree*, 2 = *disagree*, 3 = *agree*, and 4 = *strongly agree*), with appropriate items reversed, then with the sum of ratings used as the score for self-esteem. This measure of self-esteem provides the most widely used and validated measure of self-image used in research, with internal reliability of .83 or higher (Orth, Robins, & Widaman, 2012).

To increase the validity of the students' responses by reducing the risk that they were seated next to their romantic partners, we asked men and women in each class to relocate themselves so men sat in the front half of the room and women sat in the back half of the room. (Note: This procedure could not guarantee that no students in romantic relationships sat next to each other, but we believed that it would reduce any possible distortion to study results because small percentages of students tend to report being in gay and lesbian relationships, and only some fraction of these students would be taking the same classes sampled for the present study.) After completion of the anonymous questionnaires, students sealed them in large envelopes and dropped them in a locked box. The students received no class credit for completion of the questionnaires, but they were offered small "thank you" gifts for their participation (including pens, gum, candy, gold-colored dollar coins). For the randomly selected subset of 227 students (79 men, 148 women) used in psychometric evaluations, the students completed the questionnaire on two occasions at least 1 week apart, with a four-digit code of their choice to identify

Table 1. Exploratory Factor Analysis Results Showing Three Dimensions for the University Students Leaving Relationships (USLR) Scale Using Data From 879 Students.[a]

No.	USLR Dimension	Factor Loading
Missing the Relationship		
8	I would miss him/her.	.808
14	I would miss the affection.	.802
9	I would miss having somebody with whom to do things.	.783
5	I made a commitment to this relationship.	.596
4	I fear loneliness.	.563
11	I believe this is the best relationship I can get.	.542
Social Embarrassment		
17	I am too embarrassed to tell anybody.	.743
15	I fear making my own decisions.	.676
21	I fear that nobody would believe me.	.663
23	I do not know who I am if I am not in this relationship.	.634
12	I wonder if I am crazy.	.584
2	I fear what people would say.	.520
Fear of Harm		
7	I fear harm to my family.	.866
3	I fear harm to myself.	.819
18	I fear harm to my pets.	.610
Items eliminated		
1	I believe these problems occur in most relationships.	
6	I have little support from my friends.	
10	I would miss sex.	
13	I do not know how to leave.	
16	I wonder if the problems are my fault.	
19	I love him/her and believe I can change him/her.	
20	I would lose self-esteem.	
22	I have little support from my family.	
24	I fear loss of other relationships (in-laws, friends, etc.).	
25	I believe he/she loves me and wants to change.	
26	I fear I would not find another partner.	

Note. CFI = comparative fit index; IFI = incremental fit index; RMSEA = root mean square error of approximation.
[a]Goodness-of-fit was shown by relative $\chi^2 = 4.24$, CFI = .92, IFI = .92, and RMSEA = .06.

themselves and link their two responses across time.

Data Analysis

The first goal of data analysis was to produce the new USLR scale and evaluate its psychometric characteristics. We conducted an exploratory factor analysis with SPSS 19 software for the 26 items of concern rated by the 879 students randomly selected from the total sample of 1,106 (392 men, 714 women), using varimax rotation, with the requirement that each USLR dimension include at least three items that each showed factor loadings of .50+ on one dimensions only. (Note: Varimax rotation was chosen so that we would identify USLR dimensions that were as orthogonal to each other as possible, which would make these dimensions of reasons for staying/leaving relationships as conceptually clear and distinct as possible, making them more useful to university students for the purpose of self-discovery, and to university counselors for the purpose of initiating discussion with troubled students.) We then calculated three common goodness-of-fit values for the new USLR dimensions (Hu & Bentler, 1999; McDonald & Ho, 2002) with Amos 19 software and SPSS, again using the subset of 879 students. These goodness-of-fit values included relative χ^2 (with values of 5.00 or less suggesting acceptable fit), comparative fit index and incremental fit index (with values close to .90 or higher suggesting acceptable fit), and root mean square error of approximation (with values of .08 or less suggesting acceptable fit).

Psychometric examinations of reliability and validity for the new USLR dimensions were made using the subset of 227 students (79 men, 148 women) randomly selected from the total sample of 1,106. Internal reliability for items in each USLR dimension was calculated as Cronbach's alpha. Test–retest reliability for each USLR dimension was calculated as the Pearson correlation between scores from two occasions at least 1 week apart (with each score defined as the mean 5-point rating of importance for items in the dimension). Support for the validity of each USLR dimension for the sample of 227 students was calculated with Pearson correlation or *t* tests that examined expected associations between the dimension score and other variables (such as gender, family closeness, self-esteem). More specifically, we anticipated that any dimension measuring concerns about missing the romantic partner would show higher scores when family closeness was weak, we anticipated that any dimension measuring social embarrassment associated with the end of romantic relationships would show higher scores when self-esteem was weak, and we anticipated that any dimension measuring fear of harm would show higher scores for men than for women.

The second goal of data analysis was to examine gender differences in which USLR dimensions significantly explained variance in simple decision-to-leave ratings (1 = *stay*, 2 = *don't know*, 3 = *leave*) for the present romantic relationships, using the subset of 725 students now in such relationships (218 men, 501 women). Separately by gender, we used stepwise multiple regression analysis with the criterion variable defined as the 3-point decision-to-leave rating and with the predictor variables being the USLR dimension scores (again defined as the mean 5-point rating for items in the dimension).

Results

Exploratory factor analysis with the subset of 879 students produced a new 15-item USLR scale with three underlying dimensions: (a) Missing the Relationship (6 items), (b) Social Embarrassment (6 items), and (c) Fear of Harm (3 items). Of the 26 items considered, 11 were eliminated, and they included 7 items that failed to show factor loadings of .50+ on any dimension (Items 6, 13, 16, 20, 22, 24, 26) and 4 items with factor loadings on dimensions that had fewer than three items (Items 1, 10, 19, 25). The three USLR dimensions showed acceptable goodness-of-fit values with relative $\chi^2 = 4.24$, comparative fit index = .92, incremental fit index = .92, and root mean square error of approximation = .06 (see Table 1).

Table 2. Psychometric Characteristics for the Three Dimensions of the University Students Leaving Relationships (USLR) Scale, Separately for 79 Men and 148 Women.

USLR Dimension	Mean (*SD*)	Internal Reliability	Test–Retest Reliability
Men			
Missing the Relationship	3.22 (0.90)	.71	.59
Social Embarrassment	1.79 (0.73)	.70	.70
Fear of Harm**	2.00 (1.08)	.64	.51
Women			
Missing the Relationship	3.04 (0.95)	.79	.75
Social Embarrassment	1.60 (0.63)	.72	.78
Fear of Harm**	2.46 (1.28)	.71	.71

**p = .007.

Table 3. Bivariate Correlations for Study Variables for 79 Men (Above Diagonal) and 148 Women (Below Diagonal).

	Missing the Relationship	Social Embarrassment	Fear of Harm	Family Closeness	Self-Esteem
Missing the Relationship	—	.160	−.089	.000	.056
Social Embarrassment	.328***	—	.353**	−.009	−.302**
Fear of Harm	−.102	.281**	—	.215	.173
Family Closeness	−.182*	−.248**	−.062	—	.357**
Self-Esteem	−.143	−.416***	−.081	.244**	—

*p < .05. **p < .01. ***p < .001.

Psychometric examinations with the subset of 227 students (79 men, 148 women) revealed that the mean internal reliability for the three USLR dimensions was .68 for men and .74 for women. The mean test–retest reliability for the three USLR dimensions was .60 for men and .75 for women. Convergent validity for the Missing the Relationship dimension was supported by its negative correlation with family closeness in women, convergent validity for the Social Embarrassment dimension was supported by its negative correlation with self-esteem in both men and women, and validity of the Fear of Harm dimension was supported by its expected and significantly higher score for women than for men (t = 2.74, df = 225, p = .007; mean for men = 2.00, SD = 1.08; mean for women = 2.46, SD = 1.28; (see Tables 2 and 3).

Gender similarities and differences were found for which the USLR dimensions were most associated with decision-to-leave ratings (1 = *stay*, 2 = *don't know*, 3 = *leave*) for the subset of 725 students presently in romantic relationships (218 men, 507 women). More contemplation of leaving was associated with stronger concerns about Social Embarrassment in both men and women, but only in men was Missing the Relationship associated with less contemplation of leaving (see Table 4).

Discussion

As hypothesized, dimensions of the new USLR scale included concerns relevant to the present life circumstances of most young adult university students: Missing the Relationship, Social Embarrassment, and Fear of Harm. These three USLR dimensions demonstrated acceptable goodness-of-fit, internal reliability, test–retest reliability, and support

Table 4. Stepwise Multiple Regression Analyses to Examine Three USLR Dimensions as Predictors of Decision-to-Leave Ratings (1 = *Stay*, 2 = *Don't Know*, 3 = *Leave*) for the Present Romantic Relationship, Separately for 218 Men and 507 Women.

USLR Dimension	Beta	*t*	*p*
Men			
Missing the Relationship	−.285	4.35	.000
Social Embarrassment	.285	4.35	.000
Fear of Harm			
R^2 = .13, $F(2, 215)$ = 15.39, p = .000			
Women			
Missing the Relationship			
Social Embarrassment	.106	2.40	.017
Fear of Harm			
R^2 = .01, $F(1, 505)$ = 5.74, p = .017			

Note. USLR = University Students Leaving Relationships.

for validity in expected associations with gender, family closeness, and self-esteem. Results from the present study revealed both gender similarities and differences in USLR concerns associated with the decision-to-leave rating (1 = *stay*, 2 = *don't know*, 3 = *leave*) for the present romantic relationship, and these patterns were as hypothesized from past theory and research on gender role socialization (Cross & Madson, 1997; Maccoby, 1998).

For example, both men and women reported stronger concerns for Social Embarrassment when contemplating the end of their present romantic relationship. For men, one interpretation of this pattern would be that many men are unaccustomed to sharing their emotional distress with others besides the romantic partner (Connell et al., 2005; Gerstel et al., 1985; Messner, 2002; Pascoe, 2007; Plummer, 1999), so they experience social embarrassment when their romantic relationships end and they attempt to confide in others. For women, one interpretation of this pattern would be that many women define themselves in terms of their general ability to maintain harmony in their relationships and their specific ability to maintain a romantic relationship in college (Gilmartin, 2005; Holland & Eisenhart, 1992; Nolen-Hoeksema et al., 1999; Rudolph & Conley, 2005), so they experience social embarrassment when their romantic relationships fail. However, only for men were strong concerns about Missing the Relationship associated with fewer thoughts of leaving. One interpretation of this pattern would be that men tend to express emotional intimacy primarily with their romantic partners, leaving them with few emotional confidants when their romantic relationships end, whereas women are buffered somewhat from Missing the Relationship because they can share their distress with family and friends.

Another pattern of gender differences in the present results was that although internal reliability and test–retest reliability scores for the three USLR dimensions were all above the recommended .70 for women, some reliability scores for men were below .70 (see Table 2). For example, the internal reliability score for Fear of Harm in men was .64, the test–retest reliability score for Fear of Harm in men was .51, and the test–retest reliability score for Missing the Relationship in men was .59. One interpretation for these findings would be that the university men held gender role expectations that they should be physically and emotionally "tough," which influenced the consistency across items and across time in how willing they were to admit to Fear of Harm or Missing the Relationship when contemplating a breakup. Whatever the interpretation for these low reliability scores for USLR dimensions in men, results from the present study suggest that perceptions about

relationship breakups may be especially inconsistent and changeable in university men, which could limit the USLR's usefulness when used for "diagnosis" of their most prominent relationship concerns.

Nevertheless, the new USLR scale could be included in self-discovery measures for young university students. It could also be used as a needs-assessment tool by campus counselors to identify the biggest concerns students have about their troubled relationships for the purpose of directing them to appropriate resources that might reduce these concerns and help them move forward with their decisions to stay or leave. For example, if Missing the Relationship is a young man's biggest perceived barrier to ending an emotionally or physically destructive relationship, this concern could be addressed with social skills training for how to share more activities and emotional intimacy with others in his life, such as family and friends to ease loneliness, and how to find a new and more compatible romantic partner. If Social Embarrassment is the biggest perceived barrier to mending or ending a destructive relationship for a young man or woman, this concern could be addressed with social skills training for how to rely on the support of family and friends to ease social embarrassment and how to build a sense of self-worth that is independent of having a romantic relationship. If Fear of Harm is a young woman's biggest perceived barrier to mending or ending a destructive relationship, this concern could be addressed with couples counseling to develop more peaceful conflict resolution strategies, with workshops to learn skills of self-defense and legal protection, and/or cognitive behavior therapy to reduce beliefs that she is "defined" by her relationships and "responsible" for keeping them together regardless of the partner's harmful behaviors.

Because the new USLR scale was developed with samples of young, mostly Caucasian, and mostly heterosexual students, future research could determine whether similar concerns and gender differences are found in older and more diverse samples of university adults. Available research with individuals in same-sex relationships suggests that they have similar reasons for breaking up as do heterosexual individuals (Kurkek, 2008), except that they may experience less social support from family and peers when their relationships end (Dane & MacDonald, 2009; Mohr & Daly, 2008). Also, individuals in same-sex relationships may have concerns that their sexual orientation would be revealed by an angry ex-partner, or fear of harmful actions from homophobic students who learn of their sexual orientation.

Another limitation of the present study is that the measure of the decision-to-leave the present romantic relationship used a simple 3-point rating (1 = *stay*, 2 = *don't know*, 3 = *leave*). Perhaps future research could ask study participants to estimate the probability (from 0% to 100%) that they will leave their present relationship or that their partner will leave. The relative importance of the USLR concerns (Missing the Relationship, Social Embarrassment, Fear of Harm) may vary according to who has initiated the breakup. Also, the correlational data from the present study cannot determine the *temporal or causal direction* of the associations found between decision-to-leave ratings and the USLR concerns. Future research could examine the USLR concerns and the present decision-to-leave ratings *longitudinally* to determine which comes first—the thoughts of leaving, or the concerns about Missing the Relationship, Social Embarrassment, Fear of Harm. Future research might also examine this causal direction question more experimentally, with interventions designed to reduce particular USLR concerns to determine whether they can modify the decision-to-leave ratings made by young university men and women.

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