

Meaningful Social Interaction and Well-Being in Young Adults: The Moderating Role of Micro and Macro Contexts

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Extended Abstract

A rich social life has been linked with positive well-being outcomes in daily life (Quoidbach et al., 2019; Kroencke et al., 2022). A strong social support network and social interactions with both strong and weak ties have been associated with greater social and affective well-being (e.g., Sandstrom & Dunn, 2014), but the subjective experience of these interactions can vary between individuals as some social interactions may be perceived as meaningful than others. For example, some studies have found that engaging in substantive conversations has been associated with greater well-being (e.g., life satisfaction), as compared to small talk (e.g., Milek et al., 2018). Thus, the quality-related aspects of the interactions may have a different impact on each individual's well-being. Moreover, past studies have shown that the places people spend time in (e.g., Müller et al., 2020) and activities they engage in (e.g., Brajša-Žganec et al., 2011), and events such as the COVID-19 pandemic (e.g., Zacher & Rudolph, 2021) are all independently associated with various well-being outcomes. Given the fact that social interactions naturally occur in contexts, it seems likely that these contextual factors, both at the micro and macro levels, can modulate the relationship between meaningful social interactions and momentary well-being. At the micro-level, social interactions occur in different places (e.g. home, public places) or while engaging in different activities (e.g., resting, exercising). At the macro-level, social interactions occur within communities that experience shared societal events (e.g., years before or during the COVID-19 pandemic). In this study, we examine RQ1) whether meaningful social interactions can impact individuals' well-being, and RQ2) how these relations can be moderated by certain micro and RQ3) macro contexts.

In this study, we used three large-scale intensive longitudinal datasets collected over three years (2019, 2020, and 2021) from partially overlapping samples of undergraduate students at a university on the West Coast of the United States (total N = 4,432). The data collected during the Fall quarters included one-time self-report surveys collected through Qualtrics (e.g., demographic background, personality traits) and repeated ecological momentary assessments (EMAs) collected through a custom mobile app, called WellPing. Participants who participated in EMA study, received four pings per day for three weeks from 9:00 AM till 11:00 PM. Participants reported their momentary well-being (e.g., stress, loneliness, happy), their locations (e.g., dorm), activities (e.g., studying) and their social interactions. Participants were asked to nominate up to three college peers that they had the most meaningful social interactions (MSI) with within the past hour. Affective well-being was calculated based on an average of four items: Happy, and Sad, Angry, Anxious (reverse coded). Due to the nested structure of our data, we used frequentist multilevel models, using the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2015). We included a number of control variables in our models, including lagged well-being (the standardized average of the participant's well-being the previous day), and the time of day (morning [9:00 AM-12:00 PM], afternoon [12:00 PM-6:00 PM], evening [6:00 PM-9:00 PM], night [9:00 PM-1:00 AM] at Level 1, and the number of observations (the total number of EMAs completed by each participant) and gender at Level 2. All predictor variables (including dummy variables) were centered and standardized as recommended for multilevel models.

Our findings indicate less momentary stress, loneliness, and greater affective well-being after engaging in MSI; but less benefits for *socializing* in social and public places (vs home), see Figure 1. Similarly, *socializing* while studying or working, and dining were associated with weaker decreases in stress and weaker increases in affective well-being, compared to *socializing* while resting. Given the present research was conducted from 2019-2021, the pattern of results might be driven to some degree by pandemic-induced changes to the places and activities that people encountered in their daily lives. Regarding the macro context of the COVID-19 pandemic years, we found that MSI conferred the greatest benefit to well-being outcomes when people enacted them at home, and while they were resting in 2019. However, these relationships reversed during 2020, such that engaging in MSI was beneficial for well-being outcomes, especially when people enacted them at social or public places, and while engaging in various activities (e.g., dining, consuming media), see Figure 2.

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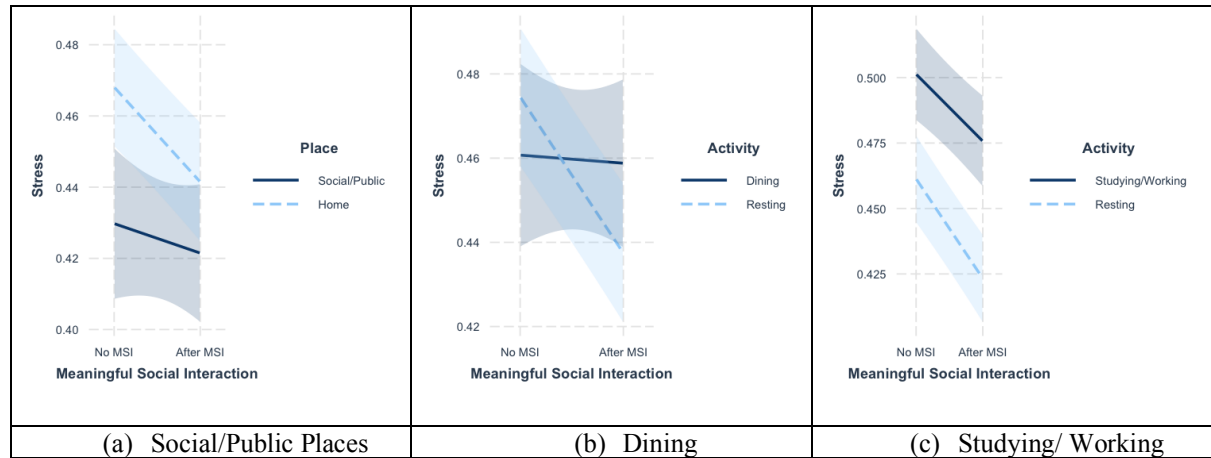


Figure 1. Moderation Effect of Micro Contexts for MSI and Stress

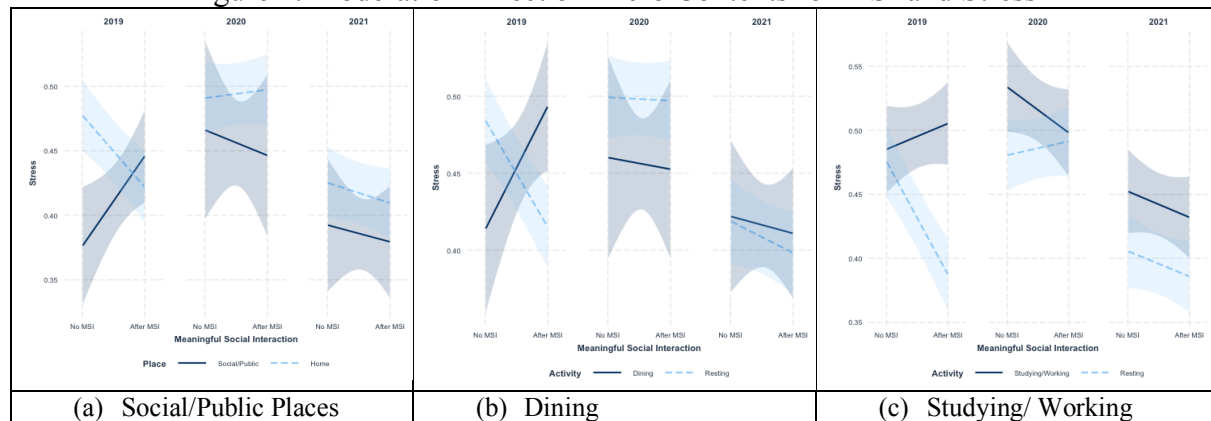


Figure 2. Three-way Interactions of MSI × Micro Context × Macro Context for Stress