

# Psychological and Social Effects of Context Collapse in Readers' Interactions with Content Published on Social Media Sites: A Comparative Field Study

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## Abstract

Social media has brought about a fundamental shift in the nature of user interaction, as online content increasingly faces the challenge of context collapse—the convergence of multiple audiences with diverse backgrounds and interests within a single communicative space. Against this backdrop, the present study investigates the psychological and social effects of context collapse on young people's engagement with digital content across four Arab countries: Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates. The study is based on a field sample of 634 participants. The findings indicate high levels of social media use among youth, with YouTube emerging as the most widely used platform. Entertainment and news consumption were identified as the primary motivations for use. Approximately half of the participants rely on a single account for multiple purposes, increasing the likelihood of content misinterpretation and unexpected audience reactions. The study reports substantial psychological effects ( $M = 3.62$ ), including efforts to maintain consistency between personal values and shared content, as well as heightened sensitivity to potential criticism. Significant social effects were also observed ( $M = 3.58$ ), particularly in the form of awkward situations and misunderstandings across different audience groups. Statistical analyses reveal significant positive correlations between users' awareness of context collapse and the level of psychological and social impact. Demographic variables also play a role, with stronger effects observed among males, individuals with higher education, users managing multiple accounts, and participants from Egypt, who were the most affected group. The study underscores the importance of developing digital identity management skills, fostering awareness of cultural differences among audiences, and adopting account-segmentation strategies to mitigate the effects of context collapse. These measures can contribute to safer and more effective engagement on social media platforms, while also offering a theoretical contribution to understanding user behavior in multi-audience digital environments.

**Keywords:** context collapse, social media, audience engagement, psychological effects, social effects, self-monitoring, digital social anxiety

## 1. Introduction

Social media platforms have brought about a significant transformation in the public sphere by bringing diverse audience groups together in a single communicative space. This transformation is closely associated with the concept of context collapse, which refers to the erosion of boundaries between different social spheres, such as family, work, and friends, within the same platform. As a result, users are confronted with a complex and overlapping audience whose characteristics are often difficult to clearly define (Marwick, 2011). This theoretical perspective was later expanded to suggest that context collapse is not solely a product of platform architecture but is also shaped by users' perceptions of this blended audience and how they imagine it (Davis, 2014).

Within this context of audience convergence, interaction, particularly in comment spaces, becomes a continuous process of negotiating identity and managing social impressions. Research indicates that the presence of multiple audiences prompts users to engage in varying degrees of self-monitoring, carefully curating their expressions to avoid negative judgment or misinterpretation (Vitak, 2018). Studies on political expression on social media further show that the visibility of opinions across overlapping social circles can heighten levels of stress and social anxiety, a phenomenon often linked to what is known as the digital spiral of silence (Hampton, 2014). In addition to its psychological implications, context collapse is also associated with shifts in patterns of social interaction on digital platforms. Some studies suggest that exposure to diverse viewpoints on social media does not necessarily reduce disagreement; in some cases, it may even intensify it (Bail, 2018). Large-scale analyses have also identified the presence of so-called echo chambers—environments in which individuals primarily interact with others who share similar beliefs and orientations—thereby exacerbating divergence in public discourse (Cinelli, 2021).

Despite the growing body of research on this topic, most studies have focused either on posting behavior or on network-level analyses, with limited attention to the relationship between users' subjective perception of context collapse and the psychological and social effects arising from their participation as audiences. Moreover, existing research has rarely examined, in an integrated and comparative manner, how platform characteristics and the degree of audience diversity shape this relationship. Accordingly, the present study seeks to address this gap through an empirical investigation of the relationships among perceived context collapse, digital social anxiety, self-monitoring, and interactional polarization, while also examining the role of platform features as a moderating factor in these relationships.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 Context Collapse Research: Trends, Directions, and the Research Gap

Social media has become a primary arena for the circulation of news, opinions, and public debate. The role of the user is no longer limited to passive consumption; it now extends to commenting, interacting, reinterpreting, and engaging in argumentation. Within this landscape, the concept of context collapse emerges as a critical lens for understanding interactions in comment spaces. Users are no longer addressing a single, clearly defined social circle, but rather a composite audience that simultaneously includes friends, family, colleagues, and strangers. This convergence of diverse audiences within a single space renders interaction more sensitive, particularly when the content is political, value-laden, or controversial (Marwick, 2011; Vitak, 2018; Davis, 2014).

Context collapse is a defining feature of contemporary social media environments, where heterogeneous audiences coexist within the same communicative space, imposing cognitive and psychological pressures on users (Ijaz, 2022). This phenomenon is closely linked to impression management theory, as individuals attempt to regulate their communicative behavior to avoid negative evaluations from diverse and potentially conflicting audiences (Loh, 2021). International scholarship shows that the concept of context collapse has evolved from a purely technical description of platform architecture into a complex social and psychological experience encountered by users during posting and commenting. Early studies demonstrated that the presence of large and diverse audiences influences self-disclosure decisions, shaping how much individuals reveal about their thoughts and positions. Users often resort to privacy settings or adjust their language and tone to avoid embarrassment or misinterpretation (Marwick, 2011). Subsequent theoretical developments introduced a distinction between context collision and context convergence, emphasizing that the issue lies not only in the aggregation of audiences but also in the clash of their expectations and norms within the same interactional setting (Loh, 2021; Hassan et al., 2024).

This line of research is further connected to the concept of the imagined audience—the mental representation users construct of those who may view their posts or comments. This imagined audience directly shapes expressive choices, including linguistic style, tone, and degrees of openness (Litt, 2021; Bayer, 2020). More recent work has added a temporal dimension to the phenomenon, highlighting that context collapse is not only about overlapping audiences but also about overlapping timeframes, as past content remains accessible and subject to reinterpretation in new contexts, thereby intensifying pressures on digital identity management (Brandtzaeg, 2018). Recent studies also suggest that users do not merely adapt passively; they actively attempt to reconstruct or reestablish contextual boundaries through selective sharing and interaction strategies (Li, 2024).

From a psychological perspective, research consistently indicates that context collapse is associated with increased caution and self-monitoring during interaction. When individuals recognize that their comments may be interpreted by diverse and unpredictable audiences, they tend to moderate their opinions, soften their tone, or refrain from expressing themselves altogether. Vitak (2012) found that audience diversity and privacy concerns significantly influence self-disclosure and communicative behavior on social media. Later studies showed that context collapse may lead to loss of face and heightened emotional vulnerability, as users perceive their social image to be at risk within a mixed public space (Loh, 2021). This aligns with more recent findings in the domain of political expression, which indicate that exposure to

politically diverse networks increases fear of social or professional repercussions, thereby reducing willingness to engage (e.g., commenting, liking, or posting) and reinforcing patterns akin to self-censorship and the *digital spiral of silence* (Weeks, 2024).

At the social level, the implications of context collapse extend beyond individual users to shape relational dynamics and the structure of the digital public sphere. Exposure to opposing viewpoints does not necessarily foster more open dialogue; in some cases, it may intensify polarization. For instance, a large-scale field experiment on Twitter found that systematic exposure to opposing political views could increase ideological rigidity rather than reduce it (Bail, 2018). Similarly, large-scale analyses of news consumption on Facebook reveal that selective exposure often leads users to follow a limited set of ideologically aligned sources, reinforcing the formation of *echo chambers* (Cinelli et al., 2021). From another perspective, research on political use of social media in Hong Kong shows that exposure to political disagreement may prompt users to sever ties or unfriend others, resulting in more homogeneous and less tolerant digital networks (Zhu, 2021). Nonetheless, literature does not present a uniform picture. Some studies suggest that social media expression can enhance, rather than inhibit, political and social participation, particularly when users perceive their audience as supportive or when they feel embedded in a strong network.

In the Arab research context, based on accessible peer-reviewed and open-access studies, scholarly attention has largely followed three main trajectories. First, studies addressing the *spiral of silence* and expression in digital environments, such as Al-Abdi (2023), found that while online environments may weaken some traditional conditions of the spiral of silence, due to reference groups and anonymity, they do not eliminate it entirely, as fear of isolation, criticism, or rejection persists. Second, studies focusing on the analysis of reader comments and argumentative discourse in digital news environments, such as Al-Makhzoomy (2026), which examined reader comments on Egyptian newspaper Facebook pages. Third, studies addressing the broader social impacts of social media use, including Khalil (2021), found that context collapse not only erodes boundaries between audiences but also reshapes digital self-performance and interaction patterns. Users may become more inclined to form virtual relationships with strangers at the expense of real-life relationships, leading to weakened offline social interaction and shifts in family and community communication dynamics. Other studies have examined the impact of social media on family and social relationships more broadly (e.g., Ezz El-Din, 2018; Moussa, 2021). While these strands of research are valuable, they do not, within the scope of the reviewed Arab studies, offer a direct and integrated examination of the relationship between readers' perception of context collapse and its psychological and social consequences within comment spaces themselves.

Accordingly, the present study aimed to address this gap. It does not treat commenting merely as a linguistic act, nor the platform solely as a technical structure; rather, it conceptualizes reader interaction as a socio-psychological experience unfolding within a multi-audience environment. The study aims to examine the relationships among perceived context collapse, digital social anxiety, self-monitoring, and interactional polarization, and to compare platforms or environments to assess how platform characteristics and audience diversity shape these relationships.

#### *Research Gap and Positioning:*

The foregoing review highlights a clear gap in comparative empirical studies that link users' perceptions of context collapse to its psychological and social effects, while also accounting for platform-specific dynamics, particularly in multilingual, multicultural, multi-audience environments. This gap provides a strong rationale for the present study, which seeks to examine the interplay between social impression management, digital anxiety, and self-monitoring within real-world digital interactions.

#### *2.2 Psychological and Social Effects of Context Collapse*

The concept of context collapse represents one of the most significant structural shifts in contemporary digital communication environments, where diverse audiences and social contexts converge within a single communicative space. This convergence erodes the traditional boundaries that once regulated interpersonal interaction within clearly defined social frameworks (Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Al Adwan et al., 2026). As a result, users no longer communicate within a well-defined social circle; instead, they address a hybrid, multi-layered audience that includes friends, acquaintances, colleagues, and strangers, creating a condition of contextual ambiguity and communicative uncertainty.

This transformation has direct implications for the individual's psychological structure. Context collapse is associated with heightened pressures to manage impressions, as explained by Self-Presentation Theory, in which individuals strive to present themselves in socially acceptable ways. However, the multiplicity of audiences and the diversity of their expectations make it difficult to control communicative messages, leading to psychological tension driven by fear of misinterpretation or negative evaluation. This anxiety is further intensified by the absence of traditional contextual cues, giving rise to what can be termed digital social anxiety, where users become more cautious and hesitant in expressing their views (Vitak, 2012).

Moreover, context collapse contributes to increased cognitive load, as individuals attempt to reconcile the expectations of multiple audiences simultaneously. This aligns with challenges highlighted in Social Perception literature, where individuals interpret messages based on incomplete or fragmented cues. In such conditions, the likelihood of misinterpretation increases, often resulting in misunderstandings and amplified reactions. These dynamics may manifest as emotional strain, heightened psychological tension, and, in some cases, digital aggression or withdrawal from interaction (Loh & Walsh, 2021). From another perspective, context collapse is associated with a diminished sense of psychological safety in digital environments. Users may feel they are under constant observation by an invisible and undefined audience, creating a state of ongoing *communicative vigilance*. This condition encourages self-censorship and reduces spontaneity in interaction, which may ultimately undermine both the quality and depth of communication (Fayez et al., 2026a).

At the social level, the implications of context collapse extend beyond the individual to reshape the very structure of social relationships. The blending of contexts contributes to the erosion of boundaries between the public and private spheres, fundamentally altering patterns of social interaction within digital spaces. This often leads to increased misunderstandings among users, driven by differences in cultural and social backgrounds, thereby heightening the potential for conflict and tension within online communities.

These dynamics can also be interpreted within the framework of Social Identity Theory, as overlapping audiences may generate conflicts among multiple social identities and intensify polarization, particularly on contentious issues. Individuals may increasingly align themselves with virtual groups, reinforcing social divisions and contributing to the formation of so-called opinion bubbles, where interactions occur within closed circles that reaffirm pre-existing beliefs (Fayez et al., 2026b).

In the context of audience engagement with social media content, the effects of context collapse become even more pronounced. Content is often consumed outside its original context and interpreted by diverse audiences who do not necessarily share the same cultural or cognitive frameworks. This frequently produces interaction patterns characterized by rapid, emotionally charged responses that lack analytical depth, transforming discussion spaces into arenas of contention and polarization rather than constructive dialogue (Al Adwan et al., 2025).

The significance of these dynamics becomes even more evident when examined in a comparative context across multiple Arab societies, such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, and the United Arab Emirates. Variations in cultural norms, social structures, and levels of digital openness may shape how individuals respond to context collapse. Differences in value systems and media literacy, for instance, can influence users' sensitivity to contextual ambiguity and their resulting interaction patterns.

In light of the above, context collapse can be understood as a central explanatory factor in the reconfiguration of digital interactions. It operates through intertwined cognitive, psychological, and social mechanisms, beginning with perceptual ambiguity and culminating in the emergence of new communicative patterns characterized by tension and polarization. Accordingly, examining this phenomenon through a socio-psychological lens is essential for understanding transformations in digital communication, particularly within Arab contexts, where social media usage is rapidly expanding and interaction patterns are increasingly diverse.

### **3. Methodology**

#### **3.1 Research Design**

The study adopted a field-based survey design with a comparative dimension, aimed at examining the relationship between users' perceptions of context collapse on digital platforms and its psychological and social effects among individuals engaging with content shared on social media. Data were collected through a self-administered online questionnaire specifically designed to measure patterns of platform use, the degree of differentiation between personal and professional audiences, experiences of context collapse, and their associated psychological and social impacts, as well as related behavioral responses. The study also incorporates a comparative component by analyzing differences in the main variables across selected demographic characteristics, as well as variations in how users manage their audiences on social media platforms.

#### **3.2 Participants**

The population sample consisted of young social media users who actively engage with or respond to content shared on digital platforms. Data collection took place between June 2025 and January 2026. The final sample size reached ( $n = 634$ ) participants drawn from several Arab countries, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen. The study relied on a convenience sampling approach, including individuals who met the participation criteria, namely, using one or more social media platforms and engaging with diverse digital audiences. The questionnaire also captured key demographic variables, including gender, age, educational level, and country. Research data was also collected during the period from July 2025 to January 2026. Table (1) presents the distribution of the sample.

Table (1). Characteristics of the respondents

| Variables         | Category                                                  | Frequency | %    |
|-------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------|-----------|------|
| Sex               | Male                                                      | 451       | 71.1 |
|                   | Female                                                    | 183       | 28.9 |
| Age               | Under 18                                                  | 20        | 3.2  |
|                   | 18 to under 25                                            | 456       | 71.9 |
|                   | 25 to under 36                                            | 158       | 24.9 |
| Educational level | Pre-university                                            | 26        | 4.1  |
|                   | University degree                                         | 547       | 86.3 |
|                   | Postgraduate qualification (diploma, master's, doctorate) | 61        | 9.6  |
| Country           | Egypt                                                     | 347       | 54.7 |
|                   | UAE                                                       | 67        | 10.6 |
|                   | Saudi Arabia                                              | 130       | 20.5 |
|                   | Yemen                                                     | 90        | 14.2 |
|                   | Total                                                     | 634       | 100% |

### 3.3 Measures

The research instrument was developed as a multi-dimensional questionnaire designed to capture the study's key variables. It consisted of four main sections.

The first section included descriptive items about social media use, covering the types of platforms used, the purposes of use, the daily duration of interaction or posting, the types of content engaged with, and strategies for managing personal and professional audiences.

The second section focused on measuring the psychological effects of context collapse and comprised three subdimensions: psychological anxiety and stress, fragmentation of digital identity, and emotional exhaustion. Each subdimension included 6 items, yielding a total of 18.

The third section measured the social effects of context collapse and similarly consisted of three subdimensions: impact on social relationships, societal pressure and self-censorship, and social belonging versus marginalization. Each subdimension included 6 items, yielding a total of 18. Both sections employed five-point Likert scales. The instrument included both positively and negatively worded items; scores for positively worded items were reverse-coded prior to computing total and subscale scores, so that higher values indicate greater negative effects associated with context collapse.

The fourth section addressed participants' behavioral responses to context collapse, including actions such as clarifying posts, modifying content, deleting posts, or avoiding posting on the same topic or platform. It also included an open-ended question about proposed strategies to mitigate the effects of context collapse, such as audience segmentation, restricting comments, or providing additional contextual framing.

To ensure validity and reliability, the questionnaire was initially reviewed by a panel of experts in digital media and psychosocial measurement to establish content validity. Internal consistency was subsequently assessed after data collection using Cronbach's alpha coefficients for each subscale and for the overall measures.

Following the development of the preliminary instrument, a pilot study was conducted with 50 participants outside the main study sample to evaluate validity and reliability. Internal consistency validity was assessed using Pearson's correlation coefficient. Correlation values between individual items and the overall questionnaire score ranged from 0.895 to 0.966. For the psychological effects scale, item-total correlations ranged from 0.880 to 0.931, and for the social effects scale, they ranged from 0.919 to 0.955, indicating high validity.

Reliability was further confirmed using Cronbach's alpha. The reliability coefficients for the questionnaire items were 0.899, while the overall reliability coefficients were 0.910 for the psychological effects scale and 0.929 for the social effects scale.

### 3.4 Research Hypotheses

- H1: There is a statistically significant relationship between higher levels of perceived context collapse and increased psychological effects among users interacting on social media.
- H2: There is a statistically significant relationship between higher levels of perceived context collapse and increased social effects among users interacting on social media.
- H3: There are statistically significant differences in levels of perceived context collapse based on the degree to which users differentiate between their personal and professional audiences.
- H4: There are statistically significant differences in the psychological and social effects of context collapse across demographic variables (gender, educational level, and country).

### 3.5 Statistical Analysis

Statistical analyses were conducted using SPSS version 28. Descriptive statistics were employed to summarize sample characteristics and study variables, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. Cronbach's alpha coefficients were calculated to assess the reliability of the psychological and social scales, alongside tests of internal consistency among items.

To test the study hypotheses, appropriate correlation coefficients were used to examine the relationships between perceived context collapse and both psychological and social effects. Group differences were analyzed using non-parametric tests, including the Mann–Whitney U test and the Kruskal–Wallis test, to assess variations across demographic variables.

## 4. Results

This section presents the findings of the statistical analysis of the questionnaire items and the psychological and social effects scales, along with hypothesis testing, as illustrated in the following tables.

Table (2). Mean and standard deviation of social media use

| Items       | Mean | S.D  | ranking | Degree of satisfaction |
|-------------|------|------|---------|------------------------|
| Facebook    | 2.77 | 1.22 | 4       | High                   |
| Twitter (x) | 2.12 | 1.07 | 6       | Moderate               |
| Instagram   | 2.81 | 1.02 | 3       | High                   |
| TikTok      | 2.84 | 1.13 | 2       | High                   |
| YouTube     | 2.95 | 0.80 | 1       | High                   |
| Quai        | 1.37 | 0.75 | 9       | Low                    |
| Linked in   | 1.71 | 0.92 | 8       | Moderate               |
| Snapchat    | 2.63 | 1.20 | 5       | Moderate               |
| Pinterest   | 1.90 | 1.10 | 7       | Moderate               |
| Total       | 2.34 | 0.78 |         | High                   |

Mean was calculated according to a three-point Likert scale ( $n=634$ )

Table (2) shows that the mean scores for the extent of social media use among the study sample ranged from 1.37 to 2.95. YouTube ranked first in terms of usage, while Quai ranked last. The overall mean score of 2.34 indicates a high level of social media use among the participants.

Table (3). Purposes of using social media platforms among the study sample

| Alternatives                                | Frequency | Percent | Ranking |
|---------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Content Creation                            | 189       | 29.8    | 5       |
| Entertainment                               | 429       | 67.6    | 1       |
| Building a Professional Network             | 122       | 19.2    | 6       |
| Sharing Personal Opinions                   | 192       | 30.3    | 4       |
| Promoting Content/Products                  | 78        | 12.3    | 7       |
| Building and Strengthening Social Relations | 223       | 35.2    | 3       |
| Following News                              | 382       | 60.3    | 2       |

(\*) The respondent can write more than one alternative ( $N: 634$ )

Table (3) indicates that the primary purpose for which the study sample uses social media platforms is entertainment, reported by 67.6% of participants, followed by news consumption at 60.3%. In contrast, promoting content or products ranked last, with only 12.3% of participants indicating this as a primary use.

Table (4). Duration of posting/interacting on social media platforms daily

| Alternatives       | Frequency | Percent | Ranking |
|--------------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Less than one hour | 113       | 17.8    | 4       |
| 1-3 hours          | 212       | 33.4    | 1       |
| 3-5 hours          | 157       | 24.8    | 2       |
| More than 5 hours  | 152       | 24      | 3       |
| Total              | 634       | 100%    |         |

Table (4) shows that 33.4% of the respondents engage with social media daily for 1 to 3 hours, followed by 24.8% for 3 to 5 hours, 24% for more than 5 hours, and 17.8% for less than 1 hour.

Table (5). Type of content produced, shared, or followed by the study sample on social media platforms

| Alternatives | Frequency | Percent | Ranking |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Political    | 133       | 21      | 6       |
| Sport        | 233       | 36.8    | 3       |
| Religious    | 225       | 35.5    | 4       |
| Economic     | 129       | 20.3    | 7       |
| Educational  | 243       | 38.3    | 2       |
| Technology   | 180       | 28.4    | 5       |
| Diverse      | 425       | 67      | 1       |

(\*) The respondent can write more than one alternative (N: 634)

Table (5) shows that the type of content produced, shared, or followed by the study sample on social media was primarily diverse content at 67%, followed by educational content at 38.3%, while economic content ranked last at 20.3%.

Table (6). Extent to which the study sample differentiates between their personal and professional audience on social media platforms

| Alternatives                           | Frequency | Percent | Ranking |
|----------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Yes, through using separate accounts   | 185       | 29.2    | 1       |
| Yes, through privacy settings          | 142       | 22.4    | 3       |
| No, I use one account for all purposes | 307       | 48.4    | 2       |
| Total                                  | 634       | 100%    |         |

Table (4) shows that 48.4% of the study sample uses a single account for all purposes, addressing both their personal and professional audiences with the same account. Meanwhile, 29.2% use separate accounts, some for personal audiences and others for professional audiences. The third category, “Yes, through privacy settings,” accounted for 22.4%.

Table (7). Frequency of receiving unexpected reactions to a post due to misinterpretation by followers

| alternatives | Frequency | Percent | ranking |
|--------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Frequently   | 74        | 11.7    | 4       |
| Sometimes    | 231       | 36.4    | 1       |
| Rarely       | 141       | 22.2    | 3       |
| Never        | 188       | 29.7    | 2       |
| Total        | 634       | 100%    |         |

Table (7) shows that 36.4% of respondents sometimes received unexpected reactions to a post because some followers interpreted it differently than intended. Meanwhile, 29.7% never experienced this, 22.2% experienced it rarely, and 11.7% reported frequent unexpected reactions to their posts due to misinterpretation by followers.

Table (8). Most common situations experienced by the respondents due to having multiple audiences on social media

| Alternatives                                                                                 | Frequency | Percent | Ranking |
|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Embarrassing situations when unintended people (e.g., family or employers) saw their content | 233       | 36.8    | 1       |
| Misunderstanding of content due to different follower cultures or expectations               | 232       | 36.6    | 2       |
| Pressure to change style to suit different audience                                          | 119       | 18.8    | 4       |
| Resharing old content in a new context                                                       | 82        | 12.9    | 5       |
| Challenge to maintain one personality due to having different audiences                      | 148       | 23.3    | 3       |

(\*) The respondent can write more than one alternative (N: 634)

Table (8) indicates that the most common situations experienced by the respondents due to having multiple audiences on social media were: embarrassing situations when unintended people (e.g., family or employers) saw their content at 36.8%, followed closely by misunderstanding of content due to different follower cultures or expectations at 36.6%, while the least reported situation was problems arising from resharing old content in a new context at 12.9%.

Table (9). Mean and standard deviation of the psychological effects of context collapse in digital platforms

| Items                                                                                                      | Mean | S.D  | Rank | Degree of Satisfaction |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------------------------|
| I feel that having multiple followers on social media platforms makes my interactions more superficial.    | 3.48 | 1.05 | 11   | High                   |
| I avoid discussing sensitive topics for fear of negative reactions.                                        | 3.65 | 1.13 | 9    | High                   |
| I find myself thinking a lot about followers' comments before posting.                                     | 3.38 | 1.15 | 12   | High                   |
| I feel comfortable sharing my content without fear of being judged.                                        | 3.93 | 0.98 | 4    | High                   |
| I deal confidently with differing opinions from followers about my content.                                | 4.02 | 0.91 | 2    | High                   |
| I am able to express my opinion freely even if it contradicts audience expectations.                       | 3.90 | 0.98 | 6    | High                   |
| I change my style depending on the platform to avoid controversy.                                          | 3.36 | 1.16 | 13   | Moderate               |
| I feel that my digital identity is unclear due to the diversity of content.                                | 3.26 | 1.15 | 15   | Moderate               |
| I find it difficult to balance my real personality with what followers expect.                             | 3.17 | 1.21 | 17   | Moderate               |
| I maintain a consistent digital identity across all platforms.                                             | 3.79 | 0.97 | 8    | High                   |
| I feel that I express myself honestly without distortion.                                                  | 4.03 | 0.94 | 3    | High                   |
| I maintain consistency between my principles and what I post, regardless of the diversity of my followers. | 4.07 | 0.90 | 1    | High                   |
| I feel exhausted from trying to please all followers.                                                      | 3.28 | 1.17 | 15   | Moderate               |
| Thinking about reactions drains my psychological energy.                                                   | 3.30 | 1.17 | 14   | Moderate               |
| I lose my enthusiasm for creativity due to fear of criticism.                                              | 3.13 | 1.23 | 18   | Moderate               |
| I enjoy followers' engagement despite their differing opinions.                                            | 3.91 | 0.95 | 5    | High                   |
| I deal with criticism constructively without it affecting my productivity.                                 | 3.88 | 0.92 | 7    | High                   |
| I feel that sharing content enriches my life rather than drains it.                                        | 3.61 | 1.00 | 10   | High                   |
| Total                                                                                                      | 3.62 | 1.05 |      | High                   |

Mean was calculated according to a five-point Likert scale (n=634)

Table (9) indicates that the mean scores for the psychological effects of context collapse on digital platforms ranged from 3.13 to 4.03. The highest-scoring item was: “*I maintain consistency between my principles and what I post, regardless of the diversity of my followers*”, whereas the lowest-scoring item was: “*I lose my enthusiasm for creativity due to fear of criticism*”. The overall mean of 3.62 reflects a high level of psychological impact associated with context collapse.

Table (10). Mean and standard deviation of the social effects of context collapse on digital platforms

| Items                                                                                                            | Mean | S.D  | Rank | Degree of Satisfaction |
|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------|------|------|------------------------|
| I feel that my interactions on social media platforms have become superficial due to the diversity of audiences. | 3.53 | 1.11 | 11   | High                   |
| I notice that some of my real-life acquaintances misunderstand my content because of contextual differences.     | 3.39 | 1.10 | 12   | High                   |
| I fear that my online opinions may affect my personal relationships.                                             | 3.39 | 1.14 | 13   | High                   |
| I am able to build meaningful relationships with my followers despite their differences.                         | 3.75 | 0.96 | 6    | High                   |
| The diversity of the audience helps me positively expand my social network.                                      | 3.90 | 0.93 | 2    | High                   |
| I find a balance between my digital identity and my real-life relationships without contradiction.               | 3.84 | 0.93 | 4    | High                   |
| I feel that I am forced to adjust my content to avoid controversy.                                               | 3.35 | 1.11 | 14   | Moderate               |
| I avoid expressing my true opinions for fear of losing followers.                                                | 3.05 | 1.20 | 18   | Moderate               |
| I notice that platforms have become an unsafe space for free expression.                                         | 3.68 | 1.06 | 8    | High                   |
| I do not allow audience pressure to prevent me from saying what I believe in.                                    | 3.84 | 1.03 | 5    | High                   |
| I deal flexibly with differing opinions from followers without fear.                                             | 3.88 | 0.93 | 3    | High                   |
| I feel that I am able to balance honesty with respecting audience expectations.                                  | 3.96 | 0.93 | 1    | High                   |
| I sometimes feel like a stranger in my community because of my opinions on platforms.                            | 3.34 | 1.17 | 15   | Moderate               |
| I face harsh criticism when discussing topics that contradict my audience's expectations.                        | 3.31 | 1.11 | 16   | Moderate               |
| I feel that some followers try to isolate me when I disagree with them.                                          | 3.26 | 1.18 | 17   | Moderate               |
| I find support from my followers even when expressing unpopular opinions.                                        | 3.61 | 0.97 | 10   | High                   |
| I feel that I am part of a digital community that respects diversity of opinions.                                | 3.63 | 0.99 | 9    | High                   |
| Platforms give me space to express myself without fear of marginalization.                                       | 3.68 | 1.00 | 7    | High                   |
| Total                                                                                                            | 3.58 | 1.04 |      | High                   |

Mean was calculated according to a five-point Likert scale (n=634)



Table (10) shows that the mean scores for the social effects of context collapse on digital platforms ranged from 3.05 to 3.96. The highest-rated item was: “*I feel that I am able to balance honesty with respecting audience expectations*”, while the lowest-rated item was: “*I avoid expressing my true opinions for fear of losing followers.*”. The overall mean of 3.58 indicates a high level of social impact of context collapse on social media users.

Table (11). Behavior of the study sample when exposed to context collapse

| Alternatives                                                  | Frequency | Percent | ranking |
|---------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Commenting on and replying to clarify the post                | 296       | 46.7    | 1       |
| Clarifying that the post reflects a personal opinion          | 243       | 38.3    | 2       |
| Creating another post to clarify the previous post            | 159       | 25.1    | 4       |
| Correcting incorrect information with an apology if necessary | 213       | 33.6    | 3       |
| Adjusting strategies according to feedback                    | 107       | 16.9    | 7       |
| Leaving the post without any response, comment, or follow-up  | 105       | 16.6    | 8       |
| Editing the post                                              | 143       | 22.6    | 5       |
| Deleting the post                                             | 113       | 17.8    | 6       |
| Avoiding posting on the same topic again                      | 101       | 15.9    | 9       |
|                                                               | 70        | 11      | 10      |

(\*) *The respondent can write more than one alternative (N: 634)*

Table (11) shows that the participants’ responses to experiencing context collapse were as follows: 46.7% chose to *comment or reply to clarify their post*, 38.3% indicated they would *clarify that the post reflects a personal opinion*, while the least common response was *avoiding posting on the same platform*, at 11%.

Table (12). Future suggestions proposed by the study sample to mitigate the effects of context collapse

| Alternatives                                                                   | Frequency | Percent | Ranking |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------|---------|---------|
| Separating audiences by creating a personal account and a professional account | 303       | 47.8    | 1       |
| Separating audiences by creating dedicated groups for each category            | 155       | 24.4    | 4       |
| Adding an introduction or background to the posted content                     | 236       | 37.2    | 2       |
| Restricting who can comment on or share the content                            | 119       | 18.8    | 5       |
| Moving to platforms with a more specialized audience                           | 162       | 25.6    | 3       |
| Using live streaming for direct communication and greater transparency         | 107       | 16.9    | 6       |

(\*) *The respondent can write more than one alternative (N: 634)*

Table (12) shows that the participants’ suggested strategies to reduce the effects of context collapse were: 47.8% recommended separating audiences by creating a personal account and a professional account, 37.2% suggested adding an introduction or background to the content posted, while the least cited option was using live streaming for direct communication and transparency, at 16.9%.

### Testing the Research Hypotheses:

- Hypothesis 1: There is a statistically significant relationship between users’ heightened awareness of context collapse and the level of psychological effects they experience when interacting on social media.

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to measure the relationship between the two variables, as follows:

Table (13). Correlation analysis for the relationship between increased user awareness of context collapse and the level of psychological impact on them when interacting via social media

| Variables        | Psychological Impact  |          |                           |
|------------------|-----------------------|----------|---------------------------|
|                  | Correlation Value (R) | Sig. (P) | Type of Sig               |
| Context Collapse | 0.263**               | 0.00     | statistically significant |

(\*\*) *Significant at the 0.01 level*

Table (13) shows a statistically significant positive correlation between users’ heightened awareness of context collapse and the level of psychological effects they experience when interacting on social media. This means that the more aware users are of context collapse, the greater the psychological impact they experience during social media interactions.

- Hypothesis 2: There is a statistically significant relationship between users’ heightened awareness of context collapse and the level of social effects they experience when interacting on social media.

Pearson's correlation coefficient was used to measure the relationship between the two variables, as follows:

Table (14). Correlation analysis for the relationship between increased user awareness of context collapse and the level of social impact on them when interacting via social media

| Variables        | Social Impact         |          |                           |
|------------------|-----------------------|----------|---------------------------|
|                  | Correlation Value (R) | Sig. (P) | Type of Sig               |
| Context Collapse | 0.269**               | 0.00     | statistically significant |

(\*\*) Significant at the 0.01 level

Table (14) shows a statistically significant positive correlation between users' heightened awareness of context collapse and the level of social effects they experience when interacting on social media. This means that the more aware users are of context collapse, the greater the social impact they experience during social media interactions.

- Hypothesis 3: There are statistically significant differences in the level of awareness of context collapse among the study sample according to the degree to which they separate their personal and professional audiences.

Kruskal-Wallis coefficient was used to calculate the differences between the groups, as follows:

Table (15). Results of the Kruskal-Wallis test for differences in the level of perception of context collapse among the research sample according to the degree to which they differentiate between their audience, their personal and professional audiences

| Variables        | age                                    | Number | Rank mean | $\chi^2$ | Significance Level |
|------------------|----------------------------------------|--------|-----------|----------|--------------------|
| Context Collapse | No, I use one account for all purposes | 307    | 273.69    | 38.19    | 0.00               |
|                  | Yes, via privacy settings.             | 142    | 348.21    |          |                    |
|                  | Yes, using separate accounts.          | 185    | 366.63    |          |                    |

Table 15 shows statistically significant differences in the level of awareness of context collapse among the study sample, according to the degree to which they separate their personal and professional audiences, with participants who use multiple accounts showing higher levels of awareness. This indicates that participants who maintain separate accounts for personal and professional audiences have the highest awareness of context collapse. In other words, young users who dedicate specific accounts to personal interactions and others to professional interactions show a higher level of awareness of context collapse than those who do not.

- Hypothesis 4: There are statistically significant differences in the psychological and social effects of context collapse on readers' interactions according to variables such as gender, educational level, and country.

(a) Differences by Gender:

Mann-Whitney U coefficient was used to calculate the differences between the groups, as follows:

Table (16). Differences in the psychological and social effects of context collapse on readers' interactions by gender

|                      | Gender | N   | Mean Rank | Sum of Ranks | Z      | Sig  |
|----------------------|--------|-----|-----------|--------------|--------|------|
| Psychological effect | Male   | 451 | 327.25    | 147591.50    | -2.106 | 0.03 |
|                      | Female | 183 | 293.46    | 53703.50     |        |      |
|                      | Total  | 634 |           |              |        |      |
| Social effects       | Male   | 451 | 332.08    | 149766.00    | -3.14  | 0.00 |
|                      | Female | 183 | 281.58    | 51529.00     |        |      |
|                      | Total  | 634 |           |              |        |      |

From the table 16, it is evident that there are statistically significant differences in the psychological and social effects of context collapse on readers' interactions according to gender, favoring males. This means that male participants were more psychologically and socially affected by context collapse in reader interactions.

(b) Differences by Educational Level:

Kruskal-Wallis coefficient was used to calculate the differences between the groups, as follows:

Table (17). Differences in the psychological and social effects of context collapse on readers' interactions according to participants' educational level

| Variables             | age               | Number | Rank mean | $\chi^2$ | Significance Level |
|-----------------------|-------------------|--------|-----------|----------|--------------------|
| Psychological effects | Pre-university    | 26     | 251.17    | 6.21     | 0.04               |
|                       | University degree | 547    | 324.37    |          |                    |
|                       | Postgraduate      | 61     | 284.15    |          |                    |
| Social effects        | Pre-university    | 26     | 281.50    | 10.95    | 0.00               |
|                       | University degree | 547    | 326.84    |          |                    |
|                       | Postgraduate      | 61     | 249.11    |          |                    |

Table 17 indicates that there are statistically significant differences in the psychological and social effects of context collapse on readers' interactions according to educational level, favoring participants with a university education. This indicates that university-educated participants were most psychologically and socially affected by context collapse in reader interactions.

(c) Differences by Country:

Mann-Whitney U coefficient was used to calculate the differences between the groups, as follows:

Table (18). Differences in the psychological and social effects of context collapse on readers' interactions according to the participants' country

| Variables             | Age          | Number | Rank Mean | $\chi^2$ | Significance Level |
|-----------------------|--------------|--------|-----------|----------|--------------------|
| Psychological effects | Egypt        | 347    | 344.83    | **25.83  | 0.00               |
|                       | UAE          | 67     | 266.51    |          |                    |
|                       | Saudi Arabia | 130    | 281.13    |          |                    |
|                       | Yemen        | 80     | 261.74    |          |                    |
|                       | Egypt        | 347    | 347.02    |          |                    |
| Social effects        | UAE          | 67     | 268.57    | **30.41  | 0.00               |
|                       | Saudi Arabia | 130    | 282.13    |          |                    |
|                       | Yemen        | 80     | 248.92    |          |                    |

Table 18 shows that there are statistically significant differences in the psychological and social effects of context collapse on readers' interactions according to country, favoring participants from Egypt. This indicates that Egyptian youth were the most psychologically and socially affected by context collapse in reader interactions compared to participants from other countries.

## 5. Discussion

The study's findings reflect a qualitative shift in the nature of digital interaction. Social media use is no longer merely a routine communication practice; it has become a complex space where roles and identities intersect, under the phenomenon known as context collapse. The data reveal that high usage intensity, as indicated by the elevated overall mean, does not merely signal widespread use but rather deep immersion in a multi-layered communicative environment. This, in turn, increases the likelihood of encountering context collapse as a structural rather than incidental condition.

In this framework, the prominence of entertainment content as a primary motive for social media use should not be seen merely as functional gratification but as a mechanism to cope with the complexities of digital social interaction. Recent literature suggests that entertainment in digital environments is no longer separate from stress; rather, it is embedded within it, as users consume content in an open interactive context that continually exposes them to unexpected evaluations (Khalifa et al., 2026; Abdelhay et al., 2025). Thus, the combination of entertainment and news-following reflects a form of functional overlap, further complicating the communicative context due to varying audience expectations for the same content.

The practice of using a single account to engage multiple audiences also holds particular analytical significance. Nearly half of the participants integrate personal and professional audiences through a single account, which can be seen as a practical manifestation of context collapse at its most acute. However, this finding goes beyond a descriptive explanation, highlighting a notable paradox: while individuals aim to simplify digital identity management through a single account, they are in fact exposing themselves to greater communicative complexity and pressure. This underscores that context collapse is not merely a result of user choices but rather emerges from platforms' architectures, which encourage audience integration rather than separation.

The findings on exposure to unexpected reactions further support this interpretation. Digital interaction is increasingly governed by interpretative possibilities rather than by clarity of meaning (Alquaary et al., 2026; Hermida et al., 2014; Al-Ababneh et al., 2026). Here, the cognitive dimension is crucial: the problem does not lie in the message itself but in the multiplicity of interpretive frames applied by audiences. This explains the high incidence of embarrassing situations or misinterpretations, confirming that context collapse reshapes meaning-making processes, making them more prone to divergence from the sender's intent.

On the psychological level, the results provide empirical evidence that interacting in multi-audience environments imposes continuous pressure on individuals—not only in terms of impression management, as explained by Self-Presentation Theory—but also in the constant negotiation of conflicting identities, as argued by Faye (2024). This is reflected in elevated psychological effects, which extend beyond anxiety or fear of judgment to a form of chronic communicative stress stemming from the perpetual need to align messages with an undefined audience. Notably, maintaining value consistency ranked highest among psychological effects, suggesting that individuals adopt a defensive strategy to manage contextual ambiguity. Rather than adapting messages to each audience, users stabilize their value

framework to regulate interaction. This represents a significant theoretical contribution, highlighting a shift in self-management strategies from “adapting to the audience” to “enforcing self-consistency,” an aspect underexplored in traditional literature.

At the social level, the high degree of impact indicates that context collapse does not merely reshape individual interactions but also affects the structure of social relationships. Viewed through the lens of Social Identity Theory, audience overlap can redefine group boundaries, increasing the potential for polarization. This study adds an important nuance: polarization arises not only from ideological differences but also from misinterpretation caused by contextual ambiguity.

The correlation between awareness of context collapse and its psychological and social effects carries deep interpretive significance. Awareness does not neutralize the phenomenon; rather, it may amplify it. This can be understood through the concept of “cognitive overload”, whereby heightened awareness of interactional complexity increases sensitivity to it, thereby magnifying its effects. This challenges the implicit assumption in some literature that awareness serves as a coping mechanism, suggesting instead that it may become an additional source of pressure.

Differences in the use of multiple accounts suggest that audience separation is a conscious strategy to manage context collapse, yet it also reflects a deeper awareness of the complexities of the digital environment. Users who are most aware are simultaneously those most exposed to pressure, reinforcing the paradoxical relationship between perception and impact, consistent with Al Adwan et al. (2024) and Fayeze (2022).

Regarding demographic variables, the greater effect among university-educated participants can be attributed to their superior analytical and critical thinking skills, which make them better able to recognize contextual contradictions. The greater impact on males may reflect more immersive usage patterns or exposure to public discussions, increasing their likelihood of encountering context collapse. The prominence of Egyptian participants may indicate a denser, more diverse communicative environment, increasing the likelihood of contextual overlap and underscoring the need for comparative research to understand the cultural dimensions of these differences.

In sum, this study not only confirms the psychological and social effects of context collapse but also contributes to reframing our understanding of the phenomenon as a dynamic process shaped by the interaction of platform architecture, user strategies, and cultural contexts. It provides evidence that digital interaction is no longer merely a message exchange but a continuous negotiation of meaning and identity within an environment characterized by ambiguity and multiplicity.

## 6. Conclusion

This study examined the psychological and social effects of context collapse among social media users across four Arab countries. The findings demonstrate that context collapse has become a defining characteristic of contemporary digital interaction, where diverse audiences converge within a single communicative environment, creating new challenges for identity management, self-presentation, and social engagement.

The results indicate that awareness of context collapse is positively associated with both psychological and social impacts. Users who are more conscious of audience convergence tend to experience greater communicative pressure, increased sensitivity to audience reactions, and higher levels of social discomfort arising from contextual ambiguity. The findings also highlight the importance of audience-management strategies, particularly the use of multiple accounts, in mitigating some of the challenges associated with interacting before heterogeneous audiences. From a theoretical perspective, the study extends existing discussions of context collapse by emphasizing the dynamic relationship between platform architecture, audience diversity, and users’ self-management strategies. The findings suggest that context collapse should be understood not merely as a technological consequence of social media platforms, but as an ongoing process of negotiating identity, meaning, and social expectations in digitally networked environments.

Despite its contributions, the study has several limitations. First, the findings rely on self-reported survey data, which may be influenced by subjective perceptions and social desirability bias. Second, the cross-sectional nature of the study limits the ability to examine changes in users’ experiences over time. Third, although the study included participants from four Arab countries, caution should be exercised when generalizing the findings to other cultural and social contexts.

Future research may benefit from employing longitudinal designs to investigate how context collapse evolves over time, as well as comparative studies involving broader cultural settings. Additional research could also explore the role of emerging platform features, artificial intelligence-driven content environments, and digital identity-management practices in shaping users’ experiences of context collapse.

## Institutional Review Board Statement

The study received a letter of exemption, since this study did not involve any clinical experiments or the collection of biological or human samples. The research relied exclusively on theoretical and survey-based instruments, which were

administered with informed consent from all participants. As the procedures posed no physical or psychological risk, ethical committee approval was not required under the regulations of the countries where the study was conducted.

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### **Author contributions**

Dr. Hany Nady Abdelmaksoud and Dr. Hossam Fayeze were responsible for study design and revising. Prof. Mohammad Ali Alquaary and was responsible for data collection. Prof. Shaimaa Ezzat Basha drafted the manuscript and Prof. Muhammad Noor Al Adwan revised it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript. In this paragraph, also explain any special agreements concerning authorship, such as if authors contributed equally to the study.

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### **Data availability statement**

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

### **Data sharing statement**

No additional data are available.

### **Open access**

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