Retheorizing Context Collapse for Social Media

STEVIE CHANCELLOR*, University of Minnesota, USA
HARMANPREET KAUR*, University of Minnesota, USA
LOREN TERVEEN, University of Minnesota, USA
ASHLEE MILTON, University of Minnesota, USA

Context collapse—the flattening of multiple audience types into one on social media platforms—has been a crucial concept in social computing for over 15 years. It has been instrumental in informing and framing research, driving empirical experimentation, and shaping platform design interventions. However, the concept has not evolved alongside rapidly changing social media platforms and new forms of user engagement, and is itself conceptually ambiguous. In this paper, we retheorize context collapse by developing a grammar of its dimensions and potential applications for modern platforms. We introduce three dimensions of context for social media: the user, the platform, and the data/interaction. We then review well-known context collapses using our grammar and propose three novel examples of collapses on social media platforms. Our retheorization provides a necessary refresh of the concept of context collapse, aligning it with today's social media platforms and offering a context grammar to enable more robust theorization and generative design potential.

CCS Concepts: • **Human-centered computing → Collaborative and social computing theory, concepts and paradigms**; **Social media**.

Additional Key Words and Phrases: context collapse, social media, social networking, social theory

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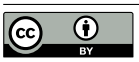
1 Introduction

Social media platforms are central to digital life. They help in maintaining relationships [46, 74, 101, 141], locating content that supports physical and mental health [24, 108], and engaging in political discourse [68, 136]. What began as a networked public for socializing with offline connections has evolved to include consumption-driven platforms for browsing and recommendations [16, 80]. The research and practice of CSCW and computer-mediated communication (CMC) continues to capture these shifting dynamics using analytical frameworks, theories, and design paradigms.

Context collapse is one of CSCW and CMC's most durable and impactful frameworks. As instantiated by scholars like boyd, Marwick, and Vitak, it describes how users reason about self-presentation and posting across multiple audiences, and the risks of unintended and embarrassing disclosures when these audiences blur [15, 101, 145]. The concept was conceived for Facebook and Twitter, but its audience-oriented approach still shapes our thinking about self-presentation

*Both authors contributed equally to this paper.

Authors' Contact Information: Stevie Chancellor, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA, steviec@umn.edu; Harmanpreet Kaur, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA, harmank@umn.edu; Loren Terveen, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA, terveen@cs.umn.edu; Ashlee Milton, University of Minnesota, Minneapolis, MN, USA, milto064@umn.edu.



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on newer platforms [77, 108, 127]. Context collapse has also driven design innovations, such as audience segmentation tools and privacy controls [37, 83, 146, 151].

Nearly two decades in, however, social media ecosystems and users have shifted since context collapse was first theorized. Today's platforms expand far beyond boyd's networked public [16]. They have become expansive ecosystems where content networks, interface design, and algorithmic systems deeply affect user experiences [3, 5, 39]. Moreover, algorithms and recommender systems now mediate interactions between users and multimodal content [21, 40, 84, 91]. Some even argue that consumption (not social engagement) has emerged as a primary activity [48, 79].

Context collapse continues to influence social media research nearly 15 years after its introduction, a testament to its enduring value. However, as platforms and user practices have evolved, so too has the term's scope in ways that creates conceptual ambiguity. Sometimes, context collapse narrowly represents the original concern from the late 2000s of audience disclosures. Yet other times, it is a catch-all for any problems with people, norms, context, and social media [35]. This is the paradox of a narrow concept that became durable and field-setting: useful because it is flexible, and at risk of losing its meaning for the same reason [104, 125]. We believe context collapse is a valuable concept for social computing, CSCW, and CMC – but how can it be adapted to a modern understanding of social media users and platform ecosystems?

In this paper, we retheorize what we mean when we talk about context collapse in social media [44]. Drawing on the broader scholarship of "context" [42, 44], we propose a structural grammar for context on social media comprising three primary dimensions: the user, the social media platform, and the data/interaction between them. These dimensions are conceptual units with empirical sub-dimensions that improve precision, specificity, and flexibility of what context can mean in the modern social media landscape [104]. To demonstrate the usefulness of this context grammar for social media, we work through two sets of case studies. First, we translate well-studied instances of context collapse into our dimensions and give them names: audience collapse, time collapse, and interaction collapse. Second, we propose three novel context collapses that capture current social media experiences: identity collapse, algorithmic collapse, and situational collapse. Finally, we close with analytical and generative takeaways and consider the tradeoffs of imposing structure onto a concept that has benefited from prior flexibility.

We believe our retheorization of context collapse serves multiple purposes. It serves as scaffolding for scholars, uniting work on the topic in new ways, and maintains the productive flexibility of the framework. Our work also realigns context collapse to modern social media uses, platform features, and algorithms, and the overall social media ecosystem. Our context grammar also affords more precise analytical frameworks for CSCW and CMC; predictive power for empirical investigations of social media platforms; and generative power for design.

2 Context Collapse: History, Evolution, and Opportunities

2.1 A Brief History and Evolution of Context Collapse

Context collapse emerged in the late 2000s to theorize the unique self-presentation challenges on early social media platforms. As people started using platforms to communicate with their networks, scholars identified tensions in managing self-presentation across diverse audiences [15, 43, 149]. The most influential definition came from Marwick and boyd, based on their study of Twitter users:

> "Twitter flattens multiple audiences into one – a phenomenon known as 'context collapse'. The requirement to present a verifiable, singular identity makes it impossible to differ self-presentation strategies, creating tension as diverse groups of people flock to social network sites." [101]

This audience-oriented conceptualization is built on boyd's dissertation [15] that extended Meyrowitz [106]'s theory about how mass media collapses formerly distinct situations into one. Concurrently, Vitak [145] also examined the merging of multiple, different contexts into a "singular group of message recipients" on social media. Essential to these definitions was an awareness of the user as a multifaceted individual who needed to negotiate contradictory social demands when communicating on social media [16].

Subsequent scholars have elaborated on this theoretical foundation. Davis and Jurgenson [35] theorized the difference between context collusions, the intended intermixing of audiences for posting, and context collisions, the unintended exposure of content to new audiences. Later, Wexler et al. [150] identified other collapse distinctions, like leaps/lags (describing younger vs. older social media users) and publicity/privacy (describing user intentions). Similarly, Brandtzaeg and Lüders [18] theorized context collapse along temporal dimensions, where old posts on social media affect users' self-presentation and self-concept. Other scholars like Costa [31] recognized context collapse's cultural situatedness, arguing that it was not deterministic for all users.

Context collapse has also influenced platform design and contemporary research. Notable innovations include Google+'s Circles feature [83] and Instagram's Close Friends lists, "Friends Only" sharing options for content like Reels, and user-driven solutions like "finstas" (secondary, private Instagram accounts) [77, 151]. Researchers apply context collapse when studying sharing practices, such as trolling [54], adult content creation [14], and LGBTQ+ identity management [41, 152]. Context collapse has also inspired adjacent work on folk theories of algorithmic systems [40, 52], privacy management [145, 152], and social VR [55]. This rich scholarship demonstrates the enduring value of context collapse as an analytical framework for understanding social media dynamics.

2.2 The Case for Retheorizing Context Collapse

Context collapse is foundational within social computing and CMC. However, we argue that its success has trapped it in a paradox: the concept is a grand catch-all theory of social media and also a hyper-specific explanation of audience management. We call this tension conceptual ambiguity—where a concept is simultaneously stretched to be both philosophically generalizable and narrow and inconsistent for empirical operationalization. This ambiguity is undermining the utility of context collapse in the modern social media ecosystem.[1]

When context collapse was introduced, its grand definitions rhetorically and conceptually established the unique sociality of social media. These original definitions present context collapse broadly as "the lack of spatial, social, and temporal boundaries" [15] where context problems seep into each other [35]. This openness invited scholars and practitioners to investigate context collapse across digital social life, creating a useful high-level concept.

However, as the field matured and embraced context collapse, subsequent work split into camps with ambiguous, conflicting meanings. Some relied on the high-level framing and reinterpreted it to describe related phenomena; others focused on the audience-specific reading. This split persists in recent work (e.g., [94] vs. [55]), and carries intellectual risks [125]. First, conceptual ambiguity means that researchers and practitioners must do extra work to discern the meaning of context collapse in a given study. Simultaneously, the concept risks losing its ability to define the actual context at play (e.g., audience, platform design, algorithm, something else entirely) if there are no agreed-upon dimensions for it. Finally, when context collapse is both narrow and fuzzy, it becomes challenging to build systematic theory, longitudinal insights, or design interventions that generalize beyond one specific study.

[1]Conceptual ambiguity is similar to Sartori [125]'s idea of conceptual stretching and straining from comparative politics.

This strain has only grown because social media has transformed in the last two decades. Social media participation has exploded and globalized, and content volume has grown with it. Interaction modalities have diversified beyond simple text to include videos, photos, documents, and memes. User behaviors have expanded well beyond posting to encompass many consumption practices. Engagement behaviors have developed far greater nuance, moving scholarly understanding beyond simplistic "active/passive" user dichotomies [48]. Behind all of this, algorithmic systems have grown more sophisticated, with black-box models now directing personalized content feeds rather than users curating their own follower networks. Platforms are now general-purpose media ecosystems spanning nearly every topic. Finally, platform design features have converged across services, further blurring contextual boundaries.

This challenge of ambiguity and evolution is neither unique to context collapse nor fatal to its value. Foundational concepts routinely require reconceptualization as research and technologies evolve. The theory of *affordances* is an excellent example. Affordances were originally from ecological psychology [60] and initially theorized for any human-computer interaction [115]. It was then translated for social media using a specific grammar (e.g., affordances of visibility, persistence, editability, and association [142]), and was re-theorized more recently when that grammar grew too fuzzy [53]. Indeed, this cycle of theoretical updates and operationalizations is common in social science and HCI research broadly [69, 75, 104, 125]. While formalizing concepts risks rigidity and overspecification, such formalizations are often key to renewing evergreen concepts in the field.

We celebrate the value that context collapse has brought to social computing and believe that it now needs updates to distinguish between the sources of contextual frictions occurring on social media. In this work, we provide this update by first adding a grammar delineating different (sub-)dimensions of relevant context on social media, and then isolating possible types of collapses based on this grammar.

3 Dimensions of Context for Social Media Platforms

In this section, we propose our dimensions of context relevant for social media, drawing on the history of computing research on this concept.

3.1 Defining Context for Social Computing

Before we can define context collapse, we need a working definition of context itself. Context has long been relevant in social computing, but is also challenging to define and often philosophically (rather than pragmatically) operationalized [25]. The term "context" captures the flexibility, nuance, and situatedness of the interaction between a user and technology [44, 114, 138]; yet, as we have argued, this can be anything and everything. Other scholars, like Dourish [44] and Suchman [138], argue that context forms from relationships of people to practice. Without an anchor for what context is, we miss a way to systematically reason about context collapse.

This absence of an anchoring definition of context for social computing leaves a gap between what technical systems can capture and what social context actually requires [2]. Rather than resolve the gap, social computing papers circumvent it: they often define specific categories of context that their work captures, rather than connecting to one unifying definition. Location information as context is perhaps the most popularly and clearly operationalized context in social computing applications [72, 130]. For instance, Jones et al. [80] consider the relationship between geographic location and social behavior. Similarly, Erickson and Kellogg [49] focus on contextual signals of visibility, awareness, and accountability in collaborative settings. These definitions are useful, yet they are highly specific. Each study's meaning of context cannot generalize out of its own scope – precisely the problem we are trying to avoid for context collapse itself.

Foundational work in ubiquitous and context-aware computing offers a reusable definition for context. Dey et al. [42] describe context as "any information that can be used to characterize the situation of an entity. An entity is a person, place, or object considered relevant to the interaction between a user and an application, including the user and applications themselves." Adaptive and context-aware systems rely on these specifications in designing novel techniques and systems for capturing relevant context for a user in a situated setting (e.g., [71, 76, 121, 128, 148]). We take this definition as a starting point and adapt it to our focus.

A Definition of Context for Social Computing. Building on this background, we define context in social computing systems as *relevant situational, personal, environment, and social information that characterizes the interactions between a user and a social media platform.* This definition is inspired by Dey et al. [42] but operationalized for social media platforms. It allows us to organize much social media scholarship along relevant context dimensions.[2]

Using this definition, we delineate three relevant *dimensions of context* for social media: the user, the platform, and the mediating data/interaction that connects the user to the platform. These conceptual dimensions are further categorized into sub-dimensions with specific examples from prior work (Sections 3.2–3.4 below). Figure 1 presents our full grammar of context for social media: the main dimensions, their breakdown into relevant sub-dimensions, and the context collapses that occur between them. We generated these sub-dimensions through a bottom-up review of the research on context collapse. We also include some cross-cutting influences that shape the context grammar across all dimensions (Section 3.5). Collectively, this grammar provides operational clarity while remaining open enough for others to extend.

3.2 Sub-Dimensions of the User

Social media platforms are built around users, but they cannot always be defined as a single entity. Inspired by the separation of a user and their environmental context in ubiquitous computing [1, 42], we categorize the user's context along two sub-dimensions: (1) their *state*, which is any relevant information in-the-moment; and (2) their *self-concept*, encompassing both well-formed identities and emergent aspects of self.

3.2.1 State. The user's state describes contextual factors that are situationally relevant during interaction. As captured by Dey et al. [42]'s breakdown of context, this includes: "the who's, where's, when's and what's (that is, what the user is doing)". Thus, we define state as:

(1) *Situational Identity*, or who the user is as it relates to the situation at hand. This includes biographical information and demographics, as well as relevant roles a person is engaging in at the time. It also includes transient feelings, like mood.
(2) *Location*, or where the user is while using social media platforms. This can be geographically situated (such as cities and countries) or also environmentally situated (at work surrounded by colleagues vs. working from a cafe surrounded by other customers) [80].
(3) *Time*, or the when [134]. This includes time of day, recency of content, and temporal context.
(4) *Activity*, or what is going on. This includes what is occurring in the situation directly, what may be sensed ambiently, and who else may be nearby [82].

3.2.2 Self-Concept. Self-concept includes the roles, beliefs, values, and traits that someone holds about themselves. We use the term self-concept (rather than other terms like identity or self)

[2]We recognize that this definition is imperfect—for example, by proposing "the user" as the human who interacts with a system, we already have to contend with work that problematizes the notion of a "user" in HCI [7, 8, 126] and whether it is a single, individual actor [78, 102].

because of its grounding to symbolic interactionism [89, 137], the dramaturgical tradition [66, 74], and its established role in social computing [84, 91].

Our notion of self-concept draws from numerous sources [58, 89], categorized into:

(1) *Role Identities*, or the identities people hold about themselves and the social groups they belong to [57]. Some roles are consciously managed, while others remain nebulous or are emerging. Other role identities evolve through ongoing social interactions.
(2) *Historical Narrative*, or the construction of one's past and how it relates to identity.
(3) *Beliefs and values* a person holds.
(4) *Traits* about a person and their impacts on behavior, personality, and disposition.

We recognize that self-concept is a richly explored area of research in sociology, psychology, and philosophy. Our breakdown does not capture every relevant aspect of self-concept, and we encourage others to build on this idea and offer alternate framings.

3.3 Sub-Dimensions of the Platform: its DNA

Platforms are not neutral containers that merely document user activity. We characterize a platform's context using three facets: (1) its design, (2) its network and content, and (3) its algorithmic systems, or what we call its DNA.

3.3.1 Design. Design represents aspects of a platform that users interface with most directly. As such, we are influenced by HCI classics on interface design (e.g., Norman [115], Gibson [60]) in our categorization:

(1) *Features*, or tools and functionality that facilitate interactions with the platform. Features can be broadly theorized, such as the ability to leave comments or show more/less recommendations. However, sometimes features are their constituent design components, such as the specific way a "Like" button is designed.
(2) *Affordances*, or the user's perceptions of actions and interactions possible on a social media platform. Affordances are a relational property which can be grounded in real features or "imagined affordances" [113]. Prior work has amply theorized many affordances of social media, including persistence, scalability, visibility, and ephemerality [11, 16, 108, 142].
(3) *Design, Layout, and Interface Behavior*, or the structural and visual elements that affect presentation and interaction behavior. This includes design elements, such as color schemes, layout selection, and typography. We also include static interface elements, like menus and buttons, and dynamic interface behaviors, such as swipe-based acceptance/rejection and infinite scroll.

3.3.2 Network and Content. Content was traditionally framed as the social media "network" of friends, but platforms have since expanded to include the "invisible audience" and broader content recommendations [96]. We identify six sources of content and networks that are important context for what and who the user sees and interacts with:

(1) *Network*, or a user's deliberate connections or friends maintained on the social media platform. This includes LinkedIn connections and Facebook friends. This network was the focus of the audience in the original theorization of context collapse [15].
(2) *Expanded Network*, or the second and third degree networks that exist. These networks do not have direct connections between users and content creators. Interface elements can make these connections more visible, such as recommending friends to encourage triadic closure ("people you may know").
(3) *Online Communities*, or formal groups that a user belongs to that share a common goal, interest, or purpose. Classically theorized through forums or bulletin boards like Usenet,

these communities are delineated from one another, and membership is required to join, post, or engage. Examples of this include Reddit subreddits, private forums for a health condition (e.g., CaringBridge), Facebook Groups, Discord servers, and Slack workspaces.
(4) *Suggested Content*, or content that the user sees independent of explicit or expanded networks or community participation. Suggested content is surfaced almost entirely by recommendation systems. On platforms like TikTok and Instagram, this is public content from the whole platform that is recommended to users based on their interests, or content that goes viral.
(5) *Diffracted Communities*, or online communities that a person believes they are part of, but not formally connected to. This is a newer theorized kind of community, based on the work of Lee et al. [91] and Milton et al. [108]. Diffracted communities are accessed through algorithmic recommendations that present content from the entire platform, such as the TikTok For You Page, Instagram Reels, or YouTube Shorts.
(6) *Ads and Promotional Content*, which is paid content to promote or encourage consumption. This includes advertisements, sponsored content promoted by creators, shops, and other commerce features on the platform.

3.3.3 Algorithm. Finally, we turn to the algorithm, the computer-mediated procedures to organize and display information in a platform [64]. Here, we extend the computational architecture to the context of social media:

(1) *Algorithmic Task*, which covers the many tasks that social media algorithms can do. The most common task is content recommendation, i.e., algorithms for identifying content relevant to the user and ranking it (e.g., Facebook News Feed, TikTok FYP). However, algorithms now permeate platforms and can handle other tasks, such as search, social matching, predicting the strength and role of social ties [93], and content moderation [29].
(2) *Complexity* of an algorithm, which varies in both how it infers user preferences and how outputs of these preferences are communicated to the user. For example, reverse chronological sorting is a straightforward algorithm in both inference and presentation. Social media platforms employ algorithms of varying complexity, such as rule-based algorithms, recommender systems, or ensemble models. More complex algorithms can also handle multimodal data, such as text, videos, and images, as a single stream (e.g., r/popular on Reddit and Twitter suggested content).
(3) *Saliency* refers to the centrality of an algorithm or suite of algorithms in affecting user experiences on the platform. For example, an algorithm that mediates the main experience of a platform, like TikTok's FYP, will be more salient than algorithms that support other experiences, such as search on TikTok. On other platforms, network- or friend-matching algorithms may be more salient (e.g., LinkedIn, Bumble).
(4) *Transparency and Control* considers how well the algorithm communicates its reasoning (glass-box vs. black-box), and the extent to which the platform allows for algorithmic outputs to be changed, modified, or given feedback.

3.4 Sub-Dimensions of User Data & Computationally-Mediated Information

Next, we consider the intermediate connection between user and platform: the user data/interactions that are sensed and communicated to the platform. Data and interaction bridge the user (as the rightful owner or creator) and the platform (where the data lives). Data cannot be interpreted without the context of the user [17, 86]; yet pragmatically, data is anchored to infrastructure and cannot be separated from it. By treating data as its own dimension, rather than mapping it to either the user or the platform, we can better theorize its mediating role with the following sub-dimensions:

(1) *Profiles*, or places that construct and maintain user information and personal data. Classically, the user profile had a display name, a photo, and sometimes the user's specified location [72]. Other personal information could appear here depending on the platform, such as gender, age, marital status, and employment history.
(2) *Personal Data and Settings*, or a user's privately-held information and specified configurations. Users have private email addresses and phone numbers, as well as settings, such as privacy, advertisements, and recommendations. Some platforms permit the users to choose if this information will be public or private (e.g., sharing marital status to some connections but not others).
(3) *First-order Produced Content*, or the "primary" content on social media platforms, such as posts on Facebook, TikTok videos, Instagram posts and reels, and logged workouts on Strava. First-order produced content also includes content shared privately or ephemerally, often to much smaller audiences [124]. Thus, we include messaging (both direct and private); sharing to private group chats, like on Whatsapp; and ephemeral sharing, like on Snapchat [11].[3] We also include remixed content, such as duets, stitches, and reaction videos.
(4) *"Active" Interactions*, or interactions beyond first-order content creation where users directly engage with content on the platform. These include reciprocal actions (liking, commenting, reacting), content amplification (sharing, retweeting), evaluation mechanisms (upvoting/downvoting and rating), and commercial activities (clicking/browsing external links, purchasing).
(5) *"Passive" Interaction and Consumption Interaction*, or interactions where users are not directly engaging with the platform, such as viewing, deliberate non-clicking, and selective exposure. Across social media platforms, content consumers outnumber the users who post or create content [79]. Therefore, we consider the legitimate role of consumers and "lurkers" in social media and collaborative contexts [48, 62, 90].
(6) *Metadata about Interactions*, or the metadata of all kinds of interactions. For first-order produced content, metadata can include the date, time, and geo-location of the post, or music/audio associated with a video. Metadata can also be associated with interactions, such as when a specific video was viewed or a comment was posted. Posts may have metadata, such as the number of reactions, comments, views, and shares. However, those reactions, comments, and views can also have associated metadata, including the time and location.

3.5 Cross-Cutting Influences

While the dimensions in Sections 3.2–3.4 describe the user-platform-data relationship, social media platforms operate within broader ecosystems of stakeholders with competing interests that can shape context. We identify two cross-cutting influences that create systemic pressures on all of our context dimensions: business model ecosystems and governance ecosystems. These influences come from stakeholders beyond the user-platform dyad (the common unit of analysis for context collapse), whose competing interests shape the design decisions that produce context collapses.

3.5.1 Business Model Ecosystems. Social media platforms exist within complex economic systems that incentivize different design choices [63]:

(1) *Platform Revenue Models* determine content targets. Ad-supported platforms (Facebook, TikTok, Instagram) maximize engagement and broad reach, whereas subscription models (LinkedIn Premium) may prioritize best-case audiences. Hybrid models (YouTube, Twitch) often balance creator revenue sharing with platform revenue via designs like audience boosts.

[3]There is a fine line between large-scale groups and small group chats on social media. We leave this to future work.

(2) *User Business Models* include professional content creators, influencers with talent management companies, and brand partnerships. These users optimize for goals different from those of everyday end users, affecting content production and interaction patterns.
(3) *Data Business Models* include data brokers, third-party tracking networks, and cross-platform advertising systems. A user's "data audience" (platforms, brokers, advertisers) often far exceeds their "social network" and influences algorithmically-curated feeds.

3.5.2 Governance Ecosystems. Multiple layers user governance shape platform operations and the availability of relevant context:

(1) *Regulatory Governance* includes laws like the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the United States's Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA), and other regional content regulations. These laws and policies affect user privacy controls, shape user perceptions of these controls, and transform data handling practices.
(2) *Platform Governance* considers community standards on content moderation, approaches to moderation (automated, human, hybrid), control mechanisms, and appeals processes [65]. These collectively influence the design of platforms, people's content production, and what remains available for others to see and interact with.
(3) *Community Governance* encompasses groups of moderators on platforms (e.g. subreddits, Discord server admins); and instance-level policies and norms in federated platforms (Mastodon, Bluesky). These create variations in collapse experiences and consequences across communities – and even for the same user across federated instances.

These cross-cutting influences drive and constrain the collapses we describe in Sections 4–5, and we return to their implications in Section 6.3.

We note some caveats for our dimensions. First, specific platform contexts may reorient certain sub-dimensions. For example, sharing others' content can be a first-order contribution on some platforms, as is link-sharing on Reddit and the now-defunct Digg. Second, actions can be categorized depending on the user under consideration for collapse—comments appear on one user's post as metadata, yet commenting is an active interaction for the person adding the comment. This flexibility captures a more complete spectrum of production and consumption behaviors on social media platforms. Finally, social media interactions cannot always be neatly separated as active or passive. Recent work shows that non-use can be an active choice on the part of a user, and calls for delineating these behaviors are becoming more popular [48]. Our breakdown aims to capture these nuances on a spectrum of possible behaviors, but we encourage future work to continue refining this grammar.

3.6 Definition of Collapse

In the original framing of context collapse, the item of interest was the collapse between a user's identities and their perceived/imagined audiences. Therefore, a collapse was described as a "flattening" of multiple, sometimes conflicting, audiences [101, 145]. To realign context collapse to our new dimensions, flattening must occur across two or more dimensions of our theory, not just the audience and the user. Thus, we define collapse as *a flattening of contextual information between any relevant (sub-)dimensions of the user, the platform, and the data/interaction.* Flattening inherently reduces a nuanced dimension of context to something simpler. Moreover, collapses can occur within a dimension; for example, a collapse between the platform's network and algorithm, or within the competing intentions of multiple algorithms. Finally, we note that collapses are distinct from other concepts in social computing, like attention and context switching/fatigue; contextual manipulation, where content is placed in misleading or malicious contexts; or dark patterns.

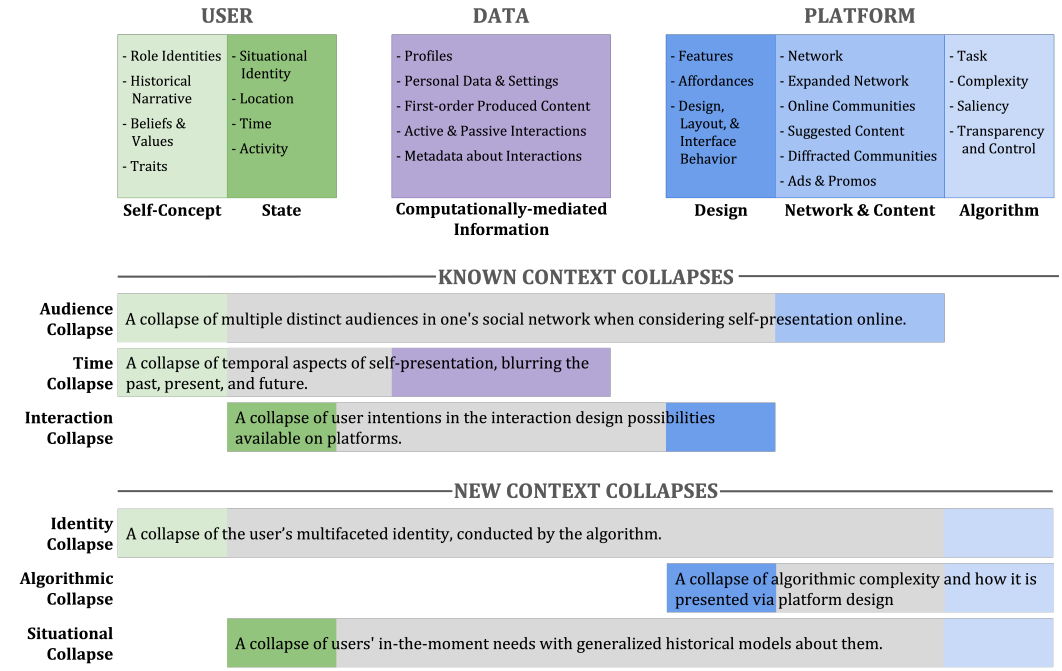


Fig. 1. Known and new context collapses retheorized based on the dimensions of context identified in this work. The collapses occur between the dimensions highlighted in color, with the dimensions in grey serving as mediators.

4 Retheorizing Known Examples of Context Collapse

In this section, we present three popular context collapses as case studies for applying our dimensions to well-studied phenomena. Here, we showcase how our dimension clarify these examples and open new conceptual opportunities through this reframing.

4.1 Audience collapse

Audience collapse is the most well-theorized category of context collapse, as the original definition focuses on self-presentation for different audiences [101, 145]. In this collapse, a disconnect occurs between the imagined, intended audience, or "a person's mental conceptualization of the people with whom he or she is communicating" [96] and the actual audience that will see their interactions on a social media platform. Audience collapse can facilitate social bridging [46, 47] and better information-seeking behaviors [112, 116] through connection to a more diverse audience. On the other hand, it creates problems with self-presentation and privacy, such as embarrassing disclosures, feelings of surveillance, and lack of control [19, 101, 146].

In our retheorization, audience collapse is represented between a user's self-concept and the network and content available to them on a platform (Figure 1). Specifically, this occurs when a person's role identities (like their personal vs. professional ones) misaligns to the network they intended as their audience. The interaction between self-concept and network/content is mediated through the current state of the user (e.g., their role identity foregrounded in a given post), the content and metadata of the post (e.g., current location), and the design of the platform (e.g., the ephemerality of the post).

Conceptual Opportunities. Our retheorization presents design as a significant causal factor in audience collapse. Audience collapse occurs when content reaches networks beyond a user's intended audience. Current platform design exacerbates this when providing suggested content from these expanded networks, which flattens the original sharing context and introduces risks of unintended virality and decontextualization.

We also consider the shift of audience from expanded to diffracted communities and more consumption-oriented use of social media. Audience collapse has been traditionally linked to production behaviors like posting; however, misalignment between self-concept and network/content can arise through consumption. For example, someone might inadvertently reveal personal information about a friend during an in-person work setting, potentially embarrassing said friend and hurting the relationship. This collapse can be jarring to boundary and privacy management [117].

4.2 Time collapse

Brandtzaeg and Lüders [18] argue that social media platforms blur past and present, creating a flattened temporal context that affects self-presentation, identity, and reflection. Time collapse can create positive experiences with cherished memories, such as anniversaries, birthdays, and memory recollection [81, 107]. Several platform designs facilitate this, such as "On This Day" or "Memories". However, time collapse can also cause "bittersweet" recollection of sensitive events like breakups, death [20, 99, 118], and the death of a child [105].

Using our dimensions, we reframe time collapse as the flattening of the temporal dimensions between a user's current self-concept and their data/interactions on a platform. Time-shifted content does not always align with users' current self-concept. Public user data is a primary consideration for time collapse, including profiles, first-order production activities like posts, and active interactions such as tags in photos. However, consumption interactions can also cause time collapse, as when algorithmic recommendations surface content for outdated interests [91].

Conceptual Opportunities. Thus far, there has been limited work aligning context collapse with one's future self and how it affects identity. Before the advent of social networking sites, Markus and Nurius [100] theorized that social roles can be organized into past, present, and future selves. The future self carries our significant and specific hopes, fears, and wishes. These insights suggest potential for examining how temporal collapses may happen due to "anticipated future interaction" [147] with others in social media.

We are also curious about the application of time collapse to other forms of social media, like online dating platforms, not often considered under the umbrella of context collapses: dating social networks, like Bumble, Hinge, Grindr, and Tinder. This future focus was theorized by [59] and [45] in online dating profiles. Prior work on dating profiles shows that a social media profile is a "promise" made to future users [45]—does this notion of asynchronous honesty apply to these platforms, and if not, where does a collapse occur?

4.3 Interaction collapse

Interaction collapse occurs when platform design flattens the range of user intentions into a limited set of interactions. The original Facebook "Like" button exemplifies interaction collapse by flattening different reactions—agreement, acknowledgment, sympathy, or even disagreement—into a single, ambiguous signal [23]. Prior work also reports confusion about innuendo and Facebook "pokes" leading to accusations of marital infidelity [34] and TikTok's use of watch time as a proxy interaction for "positive engagement" [108, 111].

In our retheorization, interaction collapse can be represented as a collapse of a user's state and the platform's design, mediated by the data between these two dimensions (Figure 1). Different types of user states (e.g., situational identity, current activity) and platform design aspects (e.g.,

features, affordances) can define these potential interaction collapses. The example of the Facebook "Like" is a collapse of a user's situational identity when provided a limited design affordance of liking something.

Conceptual Opportunities. This reframe opens new ways to reason about context collapse caused by platform design issues. Researchers can pick concrete aspects of relevant design dimensions and situations to explore. For example, consider how viewing behavior gets aggregated and fed into platform design decisions, such as what to show next in an auto-played list of "Stories" or ephemeral status updates. Here, all viewed content is treated equally. This consumer-centric version of interaction collapse extends existing examples beyond click, like, and comment behaviors and speaks to non-clicks/non-use [48]. We are also interested in increasing the scope of interaction collapse to implicitly sensed "interaction" using new modalities, such as tracking consumption behaviors with eye tracking [48], and what that would mean for understanding relevance.

5 Theorizing New Examples of Context Collapse

Next, we present new examples of context collapse using our context grammar. We do so by retheorizing known user experiences from prior work as examples of different context collapses. Then, we draw on existing literature to identify the outcomes of these collapses and consider coping mechanisms used by social media users. This captures the power of our dimensions in reframing known behaviors as context collapse.

5.1 Identity Collapse

Identity collapse happens when platform algorithms compress a user's multifaceted self-concept into a single signal. This phenomenon is well-studied in the recommendation systems and social computing literature under personalization [30]. We argue that current personalization is itself a collapse—algorithms intermix content related to users' different identities, such as their sexuality, ethnicity, interests, and hobbies, etc.. A collapse occurs when people cannot control which and when different aspects of themselves appear in their feeds, across different instances in federated platforms, or other social media features.

User Experiences. There are positive user experiences related to this collapse when the algorithms serve as "oracles" [32, 33], and can lead to serendipitous connections with under-explored facets of one's self. Recently, this has been termed as the prevalence of an "algorithmized self" [13], compared to the "networked self" of previous social media literature. This algorithmized self emerges through reflexive engagement with personalized content shown by social media algorithms, like TikTok's For You Page. Content here can range from delightful content about one's role identities, hobby communities that resonate with latent interests [108], and resources on managing mental health diagnosis [103, 110]. Identity collapse can facilitate self-discovery through de-stigmatization of mental illnesses and taboo topics, through what one paper calls "biographical illumination" [4]. Finally, identity collapse has facilitated important self-discoveries for historically underdiagnosed populations. People report that serendipitous personalized content led to ADHD or autism diagnoses, addressing longstanding diagnostic disparities and destigmatization [87].

However, identity collapse also produces problematic frictions when algorithms collapse important distinctions within users' self-concepts or readiness to confront certain identity facets. Users report discomfort with systems that appear to "know too much," creating surveillance anxieties when algorithms surface personal content without explicit disclosure from the user [21]. Further, users become upset when particular marginalized identities they may hold are systematically ignored or removed from platforms [84]. More distressingly, identity collapse can force users toward confronting identities they do not hold or are not yet ready to explore. The relentless amplification

of singular identity markers can overwhelm users navigating trauma or sensitive self-discovery processes, such as with mental illness [110, 120].

Coping Mechanisms. Prior work has developed sophisticated frameworks that explain how users conceptualize and navigate what we call identity collapse. The "algorithmic crystal framework" represents one folk theory that captures how algorithms reflect users' multifaceted self-concept, helping users recognize refractions of their identities in their network and showing their diffracted connections with more ephemeral groups [91]. Another folk theory represents the algorithm as a "strainer" to describe the parts of one's identity it can suppress or filter out [84]. These folk theories attempt to restore user agency within systems designed to collapse complex identities into actionable data points.

Conceptual Opportunities. Framing the relationship between algorithms and self-concept as identity collapse opens two conceptual opportunities. First, our framing highlights the richness of prior work on users' self-concept in how we think about algorithmic personalization as an umbrella term. This collapse explains both what happens when a user's different role identities are flattened and how changing role identities shape these experiences. For example, self-concept can be hierarchical [57], like different content targeted at the overall LBGTQ+ community, while specific role identities like "ally" or "bisexual" may also be of interest. Similarly, self-concept can be decentralized, managed either as individual identities akin to traditional social media platforms or using a custodial identity for fine-grained management on federated platforms [6]. Second, as shown in Figure 1, this collapse spans all dimensions of both the user and the platform, allowing new conceptualizations about these important mediators. For example, outcomes of identity collapse are heightened because of platform design (singular, linear feeds with limited user control; federated models with decentralized identity management), and the growing complexity and saliency of algorithms on social media platforms [4, 40, 108].

5.2 Algorithmic Collapse

Algorithmic collapse occurs when the complexity and nuance of algorithms and their decisions are flattened through the design and features of social media platforms. Although algorithms are often powered by sophisticated machine architectures (e.g., recommender systems), interface and design decisions often oversimplify or erase algorithmic output. Using our grammar, we represent algorithmic collapse as the flattening of the dimensions of the algorithm to the design space. This is distinct from identity collapse; identity collapse concerns how users handle their self-concept, wheres algorithmic collapse concerns how interfaces narrow the richness of algorithmic inference itself.

Algorithmic collapse often occurs when algorithms present their results to users. Interface design decisions about content organization can collapse the context of ranked information. Consider a comparison of linearized feeds that display a single piece of content at a time and thus collapse order, rank, and choice (as on TikTok and Instagram Reels) with grid displays of content (like on Pinterest) [110, 111]. Collapses can also occur in presenting the results of multiple algorithms with distinct tasks in a single user feed with little or no explanation. Platforms such as Instagram and LinkedIn combine friend recommendations, content from the direct network, suggested content, and ads into one stream. Finally, algorithmic context can be made opaque by minimizing or erasing interface indicators that indicate that algorithmic decision-making or content selection is at play [22].

User Experiences. Early studies on algorithmic collapse and user experiences considered the adoption of black-box algorithms into social media platforms, like Facebook's Original News Feed [38, 119] and the Twitter algorithm [40]. Users contrasted these algorithms with other content sorting systems, like reverse chronological feeds. In this work, algorithms were framed by users as invisible or opaque, users did not understand why they missed posts from their friends, and content was perceived to be out of sequence [52, 119].

Algorithms have changed, and so too have people's understanding, familiarity, and expectations with these systems. There are several benefits when considering algorithmic collapse and its effects on the user experience. Users report that algorithms reduce decision fatigue about the type of content one wants to consume [52, 153]. Moreover, collapsed algorithms can surface new, serendipitous, and intriguing content [21, 108]. However, these benefits can give way to significant drawbacks; people experience cognitive whiplash from jarring content transitions, develop compulsive scrolling behaviors seeking dopamine-triggering content, and report sensory overwhelm from the interface elements that prompt content engagement [109–111]. This is worsened when coupled with autoplay features that take away user agency, lack of transparency about the content included in these feeds, and absence of explicit design features/controls [98, 111].

Coping Mechanisms. In response, users have developed coping strategies for algorithmic collapse. Users develop complex mental models of algorithms and metaphors to make sense of opaque processes. For example, some users conceptualize Instagram and TikTok as "dopamine slot machines" [110]) On TikTok, users engage in "domestication" practices [131] that seek to customize or "tame" algorithmic feeds in creative, adversarial ways. Users also develop folk theories about how algorithms work [50, 111], use information-seeking strategies to mitigate algorithmic effects [110], and periodically abandon platforms altogether when overwhelmed by the collapsed algorithmic experience [7, 10].

Users can also respond adversarially to algorithmic collapse. User experiences with adversarial reverse engineering have been studied, where users avoid censorship on Weibo [73], manage dangerous mental health content on Instagram [27, 28], and adopt algospeak on TikTok [135]. In a similar vein, users can engage in data leverage strategies when they believe algorithms harm them, such as content deletion and poisoning [144].

Conceptual Opportunities. Algorithmic collapse and its reframing open new directions. First, we consider how social platforms ought to support algorithmic transparency through interfaces. This creates a trade-off between communicating what information is situationally relevant, and overloading users with too much or too complex information [51]. Some platforms, like Instagram, attempt to communicate why certain content was displayed with plain language explanations. Supporting algorithmic transparency and explanations is one promising approach to communicating the algorithmic context more reasonably to users [88]. Simultaneously, designing interface features that let users contest algorithmic decisions based is an open challenge [143]. It will be important to bring in relevant theories about sensemaking [85] and human-centered artificial intelligence [26] here. Our grammar helps to systematically reason about challenges that are specific to the algorithm and design as a separate unit from the identity collapse that is a consequence of how both the algorithm and design handle user identities.

5.3 Situational Collapse

Situational collapse occurs when algorithms override user's immediate, situational needs with aggregated generalized models of their behavior. HCI research often focuses on these signals—situational identity, activity, location, and time—when designing context-aware systems [42]. However, social media platforms are not designed to capture all relevant signals and miss important context [44]. While location and time are easily included, situational identity facets like mood and activity information are not well-captured, leading to collapses of situational use. Even when these signals are captured, algorithms often default to historical user patterns that conflict with in-the-moment needs.

User Experiences. While situational collapse typically creates problematic experiences, it sometimes generates surprise benefits when algorithms inadvertently disrupt negative emotional states, like offering valuable mood shifts from negative rabbit-holes or stress-loops [56, 95]. However,

these benefits are overshadowed by negative consequences, especially in important uses of social media, like mental health and well-being. Mental health content can appear during professional meetings (a collapse of location context), or clinical mental health information is recommended when looking for relaxing content (a collapse of situational identity). Furthermore, emotionally intense material can be surfaced immediately upon application opening (a collapse of time and mood), or socially inappropriate recommendations emerge while sharing one's social media feed with someone (a collapse of activity context) [108, 109, 111]. Situational collapse is, in effect, the outcome of designing systems without contextual awareness, a gap that is harder to ignore [5, 139].

Coping Mechanisms. With no control over the design of social media platforms and how features become signals to the algorithm, mechanisms for user coping with situational collapse are limited to explicit state indicators. For example, when the algorithm is not recommending content users want to engage with in-the-moment, people can use explicit search queries or hashtag-based searches [36, 110]. Another mechanism is to use status messages to request information/opinions/recommendations [112, 116]. Similarly, federated platforms might be used with unique instances for known situational contexts (e.g., work vs. personal), but do not resolve the problem of more emergent states. Under more critical circumstances, consequences of situational collapse also result in non-use of the platform for periods of time [7, 9, 10].

Conceptual Opportunities. By describing the above user experiences and coping mechanisms as situational collapse, our retheorization connects them to the broader need for context-aware platform design. Resolving situational collapse has both theoretical and practical challenges. On the theoretical front, defining what counts as relevant situational context is a key, open question. We present our breakdown of a user's state inspired by the work on defining context in ubiquitous and embodied computing [1, 44]. We are also interested in another area of situational collapse that CSCW has not extensively explored—how advertisements and promotional content affect it. Compared to its extensive interest in media studies, promotional content, ads, and influencers are understudied (notable exceptions include [129]). On the practical side, user experiences noted above highlight the balancing act needed between being too much or too little context-aware. Prior work on algorithmic experiences has proposed ways in which transparency and user control can support this balance [5]. We similarly argue that design is a strong lever for resolving situational collapse.

6 Discussion

Context collapse has been a central concept in social computing, appealing in its intuitiveness, application to important social processes, and relevance to design. We retheorize context for social media with our dimensions—the user, the platform, and the data/interaction—and elaborate on where collapses happen, incorporating past work from CSCW, CMC, and HCI more broadly.

We contribute a grammar for context, allowing the field to better understand context collapses in evolving social media platforms and improving the theory's descriptive and rhetorical power [69]. For example, our retheorization of time collapse allows us to consider work on death and grief [20], the self-management of outdated profile data [67], and the future promise of dating profiles [45, 59] within a single conceptual frame of temporal distortions against the self-concept. Similarly, we can now name new kinds of context collapse and unite scholarship in complementary topic areas. Identity collapse is a strong example of bringing together the scholarship on algorithmic curation and its effects on identity (e.g., [32, 91, 108, 132]). Next, we consider the potential of our framework to support future research and application goals.

6.1 Inferential Potential

A significant benefit of a precise context grammar is more rigorous operationalization, measurement, and empirical investigation of context collapse.

Operationalization. Our context grammar includes (sub-)dimensions of the user, the platform, and the data/interaction. By formalizing this grammar, we enable better scrutiny of relevant signals in context collapse situations. For instance, in situational collapse (Section 5.3), context sub-dimensions like location and time describe a situation, but critical frictions are driven by situational identities like mood and activity [108]. Our grammar can help distinguish more precise facets of social media context causing harmful collapses rather than assuming that an entire dimension, including all its sub-dimensions, is equally at play.

Measurement. Our work facilitates more precise measurement in empirical studies of context collapse. By clarifying what we mean by "context", we can clearly measure facets of context and connect them to experimental components, such as independent and dependent variables and potential confounds. For example, audience collapse is often measured with individual metrics such as social network size and diversity [61, 145, 152]. However, if researchers want to reason about audience collapse to a diffracted network, individual metrics cannot sufficiently capture this collapse. Measurement would need to include expected sizes of the potential diffracted networks, factors of virality on that platform [12], or the nature of the content itself, like how emotionally evocative it is. This level of precision in measurement affords better construct validity when comparing outcomes of collapses.

Our grammar also clarifies relationships between collapse types for better measurement. For example, identity collapse and algorithmic collapse are intertwined. Algorithms create identity collapse by flattening a user's self-concept, while the design opacity from algorithmic collapse prevents users from contesting this flattening. Similarly, business models amplify multiple collapses simultaneously, with ad-supported platforms benefiting from audience collapse (maximizing reach), identity collapse (enabling targeting), and algorithmic collapse (hiding recommendation logic). By explicitly measuring and modeling these relationships, we can investigate whether interventions targeting one collapse type inadvertently worsen others, or whether certain collapse combinations create multiplicative friction.

Empirical Investigations. The benefits of operationalization and measurement will also enable better empirical investigations. Separating collapses from each other helps with understanding their unique effects. Moreover, our mediators for each collapse (Figure 1) can serve as possible points of solution. For example, designing controls for current mood could alleviate situational collapse. At the same time, mood is also a mediator for time collapse—while understanding mood may not resolve time collapse, it may serve as a useful lever for people to have to not experience time collapse as a context collision [35]. We hope future work can rely on our grammar to identify and test these hypotheses.

Collectively, improved operationalization, measurement, and empirical inference of context collapse enable three novel capabilities for research, design, and practice. First, we can have a more systematic comparison across studies. When researchers studying algorithmic personalization [84, 91], privacy concerns [145, 152], and content moderation [29] use different terminology, findings cannot be integrated. Our grammar reveals these as related manifestations of identity and algorithmic collapse, enabling meta-analyses and knowledge synthesis. Second, our framework also enables cross-platform comparisons. For instance, we can now ask whether TikTok's identity collapse operates differently than Instagram's due to specific platform dimensions (e.g. algorithm saliency, network type, business model). Third, this promotes design scaffolding: rather than ad-hoc solutions to "context problems," designers can systematically identify which collapse type they are addressing and evaluate interventions accordingly.

6.2 Application Potential

We present the value of our retheorization for future applications via two high-level design ideas that cross-cut context collapses. Social media is a place where user agency shapes experiences [5], uses

and gratifications [122], and even the social processes themselves [66]. Thus, our proposed solutions explore how to give users more agency. To improve agency, we consider design implications for the most contextually ambiguous and least transparent sub-dimensions of our retheorization (the user's self-concept and the platform's algorithm).

6.2.1 Identity Control.

Algorithmic Understanding of User Identity. A frequent pain point in our collapses is that users cannot control how algorithms perceive their information, as both content producers and consumers. We imagine new ways that platforms could present and change algorithmic profiles (i.e., what they understand about the user and their preferences). This might include communicating algorithmic understanding of user identities via graphics, text, or dialogic formats supported by foundation models (e.g., [140]). Users could then change which parts of their identity are correctly (or incorrectly) captured, or which they wish to remain isolated from their content recommendations. We could also apply the same transparency to temporal details, such as an AI-generated yearbook that a user curates to highlight relevant aspects of their past identity. This would allow users to capture the memories they want to preserve, cull historical narratives that no longer apply, and communicate the parts of their identity they want reflected in future content.

Design Presentations of User Identity. Identity control can also be improved via design levers for self-presentation. Platform design could afford more nuanced control over who sees content based on the affinity groups that content producers target. This is particularly relevant when content leaves a user's immediate network and can propagate through suggested content and diffracted communities. For example, if a user opts into wider content sharing, they would also have the controls to specify inclusion/exclusion criteria for others with certain content affinities. Reddit has a similar feature at the community level, allowing subreddits to control whether their community posts can appear on r/popular. When someone's content is made visible to a broader audience, platforms could also present situational and identity context for appropriate interpretation. For example, old content could be visualized with the poster's old profile photo or age at posting time (with consent). Taking inspiration from musical playlists for content consumption, algorithmically curated content could separate interests into threads, topics, or moods, affording users more choice in consuming content about different identities and situations [111].

6.2.2 Algorithmic Control.

User Understanding of Algorithms. Despite the centrality and complexity of algorithms in social media, users have limited insights into how they shape experiences. Explanations on social media platforms are generic, stating that the algorithm internalizes social media usage signals to recommend content. This algorithmic opacity has led people to develop folk theories and lay explanations. We believe that more nuanced, contextual explanations offer rich design opportunities. For example, users might benefit from richer information about the network from which content shown to them is sourced (e.g., someone in their two-hop vs. diffracted network) or if it is based on topical interest connections (e.g., a post they liked before). A technical challenge is that social media algorithms can be too complex to generate these simple explanations. Platforms could also offer a selection of more "glass-box" models for which explanations can be easily generated, letting users choose between glass-box and black-box models for their social media experience.

Design Presentations of Algorithms. Algorithm presentations have prioritized seamless experiences with minimal insight into backend complexity. Often, all users see is a linear feed of content recommended to them. We hypothesize that control, in the form of selecting different exploration pathways provided by the algorithm, might lead to richer social media experiences than linear feeds. For example, similar to prior work in recommender systems (e.g., [70]), we propose adding levers that users can control (e.g., selecting different network types or topics) to

observe real-time changes in their platform experience. These levers could be reversible, so users can experiment with content on their feeds and signal when they disagree with the explanations. Radically different presentation options like graphical methods (e.g.., similar to conceptual maps and knowledge graphs in information retrieval) might also be interesting design experiences to explore.

6.3 Future Theoretical Work: Other Stakeholders and Actors in Context Collapse

We conclude with opportunities for further expanding our context grammar to include other relevant influences and actors in context collapse. Our grammar focused on the user-platform dyad as the primary unit of analysis. However, the cross-cutting influences introduced in Section 3.5 involve additional stakeholders whose competing interests may shape collapses. Additionally, emerging actors such as AI agents complicate our framework in ways that require theoretical attention. We invite scholars to reflect on, develop, and evaluate potential collapses in these areas.

6.3.1 Cross-Cutting Collapses. The cross-cutting influences introduced in Section 3.5 provide opportunities for theorizing new forms of collapses that span all categories of our context grammar. We describe two that emerge from business model ecosystems to highlight how cross-cutting systemic pressures cannot be fully addressed by individual design interventions. Rather than attempting to resolve these tensions, which would be out of scope for this work, we propose that future work should explicitly theorize and design for these.

Stakeholder Intention Collapse occurs when different stakeholder motivations are flattened within the same technological infrastructure. Users seeking social connection and content encounter systems simultaneously optimized for advertiser targeting, creator monetization, and platform revenue models. These competing intentions create compound collapses. Consider a user posting in a private family group about buying a baby shower gift. This bounded interaction is amplified through data broker aggregation (the user's "data audience" vastly exceeding their "social audience"). Then, it is tied to their identity through cross-platform tracking, and surfaced as childcare advertisements in professional networks—all without regard for situational relevance. Here, audience collapse, identity collapse, algorithmic collapse, and situational collapse occur simultaneously, driven by the meta-collapse of business models for effective ad targeting.

Cross-Platform Data Collapse occurs when corporate entities owning multiple platforms aggregate user data across distinct social contexts. For example, Meta's ownership of Facebook, Instagram, Threads, and WhatsApp, and Google's control of YouTube and Gmail, create invisible data flows between platforms that users treat as separate. This can result in accidental content sharing across platforms (causing audience frictions); leakage of different identities (e.g., Finstas tied to the same email being broadly recommended as follow suggestions); and automatic importing of networks and content (hurting separation of identities). Users cannot see or control this cross-platform aggregation, and the business model's effectiveness depends on users remaining unaware of how their data flows between contexts. This represents a structural collapse built into corporate ownership patterns rather than individual platform design choices.

6.3.2 Emerging Actors. We are also curious about AI agents and AI-generated content as potential dimensions, "stakeholders," or actors in context collapse. AI-powered systems are increasingly embedded in social media beyond the algorithmic curation we have discussed: chatbots masquerade as conversational partners [133]; virtual influencers convey marketing content through AI-controlled personas [123]; and AI-generated content appears on platforms like Reddit, often indistinguishable from human posts [97]. Deepfakes appropriate real identities for fraudulent content [92], while AI agents operate at scales that blur the line between authentic and synthetic social interaction.

AI, AI agents, and AI-generated content cannot simply be treated as their human equivalents in our model. There is ground here for rich theoretical, empirical, and systems work, which we pose as

provoking questions for future work. For theory, would an AI agent be considered a "stakeholder' in how we evaluate content for an audience collapse, is it a "degraded" user along our dimensions with no self-concept, or something else entirely? What does it mean for AI to have "stakes" in context collapse, and is that the appropriate model? If so, what are the stakes for AI? Are there novel context collapses arising from AI-human interaction on social media? In empirical work, how do users respond to and consider an AI's context when communicating with a chatbot? And for systems, how would we signal AI content to avoid problems as context? Or, how do we design effective strategies to distinguish AI content from others to not harm human-human social interactions on sites? We are curious about AI agents, context collapse, and how richer theorization of AI "context" may shape both design and policy interventions in this space.

7 Limitations and Future Work

The goal of this paper was to provide a context grammar to facilitate more effective research, empirical examinations, and design opportunities. We did this specifically to retheorize context collapse, a concept often grounded in the social phenomena on these platforms. Different foci (e.g., understanding ads and search behaviors) on social media might need different (sub-)dimensions of context.

An alternative perspective on retheorization of context collapse is that it is not needed—that the fuzzy nature of the theory offers more productive ambiguity than the structured grammar resolves. Productive fuzziness has clearly allowed interdisciplinary scholarship to build on context collapse and expand the concept from audience management to what it stands for today. This open-endedness has also enabled researchers to develop rich explanations of how users cope with context collapse (e.g., folk theories). By creating a context grammar, we highlight the intellectual connections between these expansions of the original concept. Moreover, this grammar allows our community to reason about the boundaries of this conceptual framework. Therefore, our work attempts to reconcile what we perceive as conceptual trouble [44, 113] while maintaining productive conceptual ambiguity [125]. We hope others reflect on and see our work as a discussion artifact situated in this rich history.

In trying to operationalize context for context collapse, we tried to balance the generalizability of what context means on social media without encompassing all behavior and use of the platforms. As noted in Section 3.6, we intend context collapse to be distinct from other processes that happen on social media, such as attentional contexts and contextual manipulation or deception. We likely miss relevant dimensions of context, and we look forward to work that helps expand on these.

Lastly, we inevitably miss some related concepts relevant to social media in our efforts to make context a tractable concept. For example, we do not explore search algorithms or multiplicities of use and non-use [7, 78]. Our intent was to attend to the primary social dynamics on platforms as they related to the user-platform dyad. We encourage future work that enriches the definitions of contexts for context collapse and look forward to seeing this.

8 Conclusion

In this paper, we presented a retheorization of context collapse for the modern social media landscape. We believe in the power of context collapse as an analytical framework for CSCW and social computing, and thus sought to resolve challenges we observed in its theoretical ambiguity and need to adapt to modern social media platforms. By introducing dimensions of context for social media—the user, the platform, and the data/interaction—context collapse becomes a precise analytical frame that provides greater explanatory and rhetorical power. Finally, our refinements of well-known context collapses, and the presentation of new collapses, demonstrate the power of our context grammar for future scholarship. We are excited about the potential of this new grammar to promote research and design in social computing.

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