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**Published in:**

Journal of Human Values

**Publication status and date:**

Published: 01/01/2017

**DOI (link to publisher):**

[10.1177/0971685817733568](https://doi.org/10.1177/0971685817733568)

**Document Version**

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

**Document License/Available under:**

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**Citation for the published version (APA):**

Kaul, A., & Chaudhri, V. (2017). Do Celebrities Have It All? Context Collapse and the Networked Publics. *Journal of Human Values*, 24(1), 1-10. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0971685817733568>

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# Do Celebrities Have It All? Context Collapse and the Networked Publics

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Journal of Human Values  
24(1) 1–10  
© 2017 Management Centre  
for Human Values  
SAGE Publications  
sagepub.in/home.nav  
DOI: 10.1177/0971685817733568  
<http://jhv.sagepub.com>



## Abstract

With the advent of social media and increase in networked publics, context collapse has emerged as a critical topic in the discussion of imagined audiences and blurring of the private and the public. The meshing of social contexts portends problematic issues as messages inadvertently reach unimagined audiences causing shame and leading to loss of ‘face’. In this article, we specifically study the impact of context collapse on some celebrities ‘who had it all’ yet, lost ‘it some’ to the world of networked public. The article examines celebrities sharing identity information across multiple contexts and explores situations of lost fame when ‘face’ is threatened, usage falters and breaks some of the well-established norms of interactivity. It concludes that lack of prudence in separating social contexts, loss of ‘face’ and social approval can dampen online celebrity presence. It proposes the use of ‘polysemy’ to simultaneously appeal to audiences from different contexts.

## Keywords

Celebrity, collision, collusion, context collapse, face, imagined audience

## Introduction

Long before the Internet changed the communication landscape, Hannah Arendt (1998) stated, ‘Everything that appears in public can be seen and heard by everybody and has the widest possible publicity’ (p. 50). Fast forward to the age of the Internet and the veracity of the statement is proved. The public and the nature of publicity have moved to still broader domains from which there is little or no escape. Whatever is posted in the social media is for enmasse consumption. This communication from the ‘networked publics’ (boyd, 2007) is targeted at socialization, gaining visibility and sharing of information. What happens when the shot misses the target or collides with information not intended for a set of defined audience? ‘Context collapse!’ “Context Collapse” has been identified as the rationale behind the decline of personal sharing of information and intimate details on social media platforms, such as Facebook’

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(Borkovich & Breese, 2016, p. 168). Does context collapse impact user image? What happens in the context of celebrities with an established image and ‘face’ (Goffman, 1959)?

Scholarship is replete with examples where social media interactivity both engaged the publics and drew flak. There have been reported instances of some celebrity posts that backfired and some that were celebrated benefitting as they did, from unexpected turn of events where the final outcome was a mutated form of popularity and newly opened opportunities in restricted spheres. In the case that posts backfired, while the celebrities may not have intended disrupting public tranquility, the unremitting attention paid by the ‘imagined/invisible audience’ (Marwick & boyd, 2011) led to embarrassing situations in which they were captured and framed and ‘face’ threatened.

Some of the reasons attributed to the image collapse stem from the affordances of social media for networked public are invisible, that is, they are not present or co-present when contributions are being made. Contexts are no longer distinct and can collapse for lack of spatial, social or temporal boundaries. Finally, with no control over context and context collapse, meaningless binaries, difficult to maintain, add to the woes of networked users (Meyrowitz, 1985).

Given the magnitude of social media affordances and the indefinite nature of approach to the publics, we explore the following questions in the article: Are there conforming norms of context and content? What happens when the usage falters and breaks some of the well-established norms of interactivity? What happens in the case of celebrities? How do the publics perceive the message and what is the impact on the ‘image’ and ‘face’ of the celebrity?

We begin with an overview of social media and boundary management developing an understanding of ‘networked publics’, ‘imagined audience’, proceed to an understanding of ‘context collapse’, explain the significance of image and ‘face’ in the social media space. While discussing the different sections, we present some cases of context collapse from celebrity lives. We end with a discussion on implications.

## **Social Networking and Boundary Management**

Social networking sites have brought with them a dramatic shift in the socio-cultural behaviour of celebrities in online podia as well as offline platforms. Challenging the traditional media patterns for communication, the social media provides affordances for ‘self-performance’, informing the world that ‘I exist and am willing to engage’, that grants an opportunity to build social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2011), interactivity, creation, consumption and sharing of content (Davis, 2012) with persistence, replicability, scalability, searchability of information (boyd, 2010) and shareability (Papacharissi & Yuan, 2011). The quantum of information-sharing is much greater for now there is higher accessibility to a much larger audience (boyd, 2007).

The way forward for such a complex social structure, such that maximum participation is encouraged, is to design a better interface, which supports the interpersonal boundary behaviour. The idea is to improve the higher levels of social interactions on SNSs and not to prevent it. It may be difficult to either define or exercise boundary management around the public and the private when the lack of familiarity with technology or the desire to publicize the personal in the public space gains prominence.

boyd (2007, p. 2) refers to this new structure of ‘an increasingly mediated form of sociality’ as ‘networked publics’, with social networking sites being the key medium of interactions. With social media affordances, actors within a networked public have to manage invisible audiences, context collapse and the blurring of private and public (boyd, 2010). These varying dynamics of an individual online are managed under various frameworks of privacy and sharing policies. When this content is viewed by publics other than the necessary audience, it is termed as the invisible audience and though

the users may feel that they know who they are posting to and why, the online audience is potentially limitless, which is the essence of the term 'imagined audience' or the public.

Who are the 'public'? The term 'public' is a collection of people who share 'a common understanding of the world, a shared identity, a claim to inclusiveness, a consensus regarding the collective interest' (Livingstone, 2005, p. 9); the 'imagined community' (Anderson, 1991) for which there is no one public, but a multitude in which some are included and others excluded (Warner, 1992). In the context of cultural and media studies, 'public' has been used synonymously with 'audience', a group bound together by a shared text, be it a view or a performance (Livingstone, 2005). They 'can be reactors, (re)makers and (re) distributors, engaging in shared culture and knowledge through discourse and social exchange as well as through acts of media reception' (Ito, 2008, p. 3). They are the 'imagined collective/audience' with the function of connecting larger groups of people beyond the small family and friend circle.

What comprises 'imagined audience', what are their perceptions, what are the user expectations from this group and what are the associated benefits or challenges in reaching out to them? Let us pause and deliberate on the example of a common man turned celebrity, named Zack 'Danger' Brown who did not know what was coming his way when on a regular day in July 2014, he started Kickstarter and tried to raise a \$10 for the ingredients of potato salad which he craved to eat. He went on to explain on his page that he was just making a potato salad and had not yet decided what kind it would be. What started as a silly gag culminated to a huge popular trend which ended up raising \$55,000 million. In September of the same year, hundreds of pounds of spuds were consumed in the world's largest public potato party—Potato Stock—thrown by Zack in his hometown Columbus, Ohio. The event raised money for non-profit organizations, which worked to fight hunger in Ohio. He paid his tribute to another viral sensation of the year, The Ice Bucket Challenge, by dumping a bucket of potatoes on himself! Zack ended the final lapse of the Kickstarters' journey with launching a cookbook named *The Peace, Love and Potato Salad Cookbook* in July 2016. It was issued free to all those who pledged more than \$50 during the Kickstarter in July 2014 (Good, 2016). The accidental success of this social media fluke ended up raising money for a larger cause and popularity which got equated with celebrity status.

What made the trend and Zack so popular? It may be difficult to provide a concrete answer for the task of comprehension is not easy considering the visible and 'invisible' audience, the quantum of information and the ease of shareability of the content. Consider the paradox in the social media age where interactivity requires a redefinition of content to prevent any misalignment or negative consequences; where the 'the ability to present oneself has become a critical economic asset' (Sternberg, 1998, p. 5), but the knowledge of who is the actual and imagined audience is getting scanty. For the social media user, it may be difficult to gauge the invisible audience, but the signs or cues (Goffman, 1959) provided by the real audience, deliberate or otherwise, definitely influence the imagined audience (Marwick & boyd, 2011).

Whatever the preferred term or definition or understanding, 'imagined audience' or 'publics' have become critical players in the social media domain give meaning to identities and interests of networked users. A slip in understanding the audience and their expectations can create havoc on the image of the user. A case in point is Madonna. She managed to stir the hornet's nest when, on 4 January 2014, she posted a picture of herself with her underage son on Instagram, with him holding a bottle of liquor. It created a stir and attracted backlash from the entire Internet fraternity. The act was incongruent with the notion and value systems that drinking is not a domain for non-adults. Consequent acts of 'bad parenting' led to her son's arrest in drug charges. She also lost the custody battle to her husband, Guy Ritchie. Madonna's advent on social media itself had been a long awaited move anticipated by her fans but when it did happen, her social media accounts became 'hashtag-strewn, meme-littered jamboree of misfires' (Robinson, 2015), which dotted her image painstakingly built over the years. Her failure to capitalize on the virtual arena of Internet world might as well indicate her low social media acceptance

and failure to connect to an audience which is potentially limitless (ibid.). On social media, there is a need to manage levels of social interactions, thereby paving the way for various boundary management techniques.

As individuals increasingly interact with their professional and personal contacts in online social-networking sites, which are primarily personal in nature, there is likely to be a conflict of their own interests leading to a collision of their personal and professional identities. In this context, the expanding online social-networking space poses a massive challenge of boundary management as the individuals voluntarily invite self-tailored disclosure to multiple audiences while keeping in mind the guidelines, which monitor their normal social interactions. Moreover, these boundaries are not always static or under control but are negotiable structures in which the stakeholders are the community members, service providers and content owners. Interpretations and misinterpretations, creating a mockery of the celebrity interactions bear testimony to the need for managing boundaries. The boomerang effect of inability to do so is more evident in the case of celebrities. Academy Awards 2014 was a moment of absolute delight and frenzy in social media when John Travolta managed to mess up the name of upcoming performer Idina Menzel to Adele Dazeem. It was an act which birthed a million memes and sent the Internet viral activity into a meltdown. John's action morphed into a phenomenal moment of making him the laughingstock not only for that one night but also for it to be 'the night of blunder' in his career. His flubbed lines were a result of his attempt to pronounce the singer's name 'IdinaMenzel' (Hodgson, 2014). The output of the pathetic attempt was 'Adele Dazeem', which does not have remote similarity to the original name. The audience was quick enough to make him realize that. Travolta was pitilessly bombarded online. The viral hit that the mistake created was extraordinary. The faux pas fashioned host of virals, memes, parody and celebrity reactions. A Twitter account @adeledazeem popped up soon with more than 20,000 followers in 3 days. *Slate* magazine created a widget to 'Travoltify' anyone's name urging people to get their name garbled by a confused celebrity (Pulver, 2014).

This does not preclude possibilities of context collapse where boundary management becomes ineffective and content spills to different domains for intended and unintended audiences. The challenge lies in communicating over social media where the actual behaviour of users, their tweet, retweets, likes and dislikes can be viewed, collected and assessed real-time. Are there then new ways to manage the boundaries of multiple social identities under the single umbrella of various online platforms? The answer lies in online boundary behaviour: content boundary management behaviour where an individual deliberately integrates personal and professional boundaries and hybrid boundary management behaviour in which the individual deliberately keeps the personal and professional identities separate (Tammes, 2015).

What happens when boundaries and context collapse? Challenges and loss of image and face! To understand 'what happens' and 'how it can be managed', if at all, let us first unpack the term.

## Context Collapse

Context collapse was first used in the context of journalists who simultaneously spoke to a multitude of audiences with different ideas, ideologies and perceptions (Meyrowitz, 1985). Almost 17 years later, boyd (2002) used the concept in terms of social media and underscored the importance of connecting with one another digitally. Elaborating further, she enunciated that context collapse referred to the flattening of distinct audiences, permeation of ideas, information and norms from one domain to another so that all formed part of a similar group of message, facilitating communication and quick dissemination of information across the network which would otherwise have been impossible.

Wesch (2009) defined 'context collapse' as a situation in which multiple contexts collapsed into 'that single moment of a YouTube recording. The little glass lens becomes the gateway to a black hole sucking

all of time and space—virtually all possible contexts—in upon itself” (p. 23). Paraphrasing this view, Marwick and boyd (2011) stated that ‘Social media technologies collapse multiple audiences into single contexts, making it difficult for people to use the same techniques online that they do to handle multiplicity in face-to-face conversation’ (p. 114). Many celebrities may be photo-shopping their images to depict the enhanced aspect of their aging physical self, but the world took to massive online criticism when Kris Jenner was caught doing so red handedly on Instagram in October 2014. She posted the photo-shopped version (where she looked much younger) of the snaps at the launch of her new cookbook with Gordon Ramsay. The latter posted the original photos on his Instagram account which were starkly different. Little did Kris know that her fans had already taken a look at the original picture. The act of smoothening her wrinkles, changing the colour of her skin and repositioning her book was not taken in the correct stride. This also brought unintended attention to Gordon who was appreciated for posting the original photo (Shenton, 2014). It was interesting to note how a mistake by Jenner caused her loss of reputation and the same ‘mistake’ skyrocketed Ramsay to fame.

Context collapse can be a result of ‘collusions’ and ‘collisions’. Collusions happen when ‘intentionally’ the actor collapses, blurs or flattens the context. This implies that collusions are deliberate though they can misfire and lead to social media jokes or fighting. Collusions, thus, topple networked walls to obtain social and informational evidence (Rainie & Wellman, 2012) and facilitate in garnering and maintaining social capital (Ellison et al., 2011). Collisions, on the other hand, are unintentional and happen when two or more contexts overlap or collide. Context collisions, garner more attention, though, they do upset all issues related to privacy (Petronio, 2002). Collisions also have a positive side for which they can create ‘happy surprises’ (Davis & Jurgenson, 2014, p. 482) leading to spirited debates. The key differentiator between the two points is the element of ‘intentionality’ (ibid., p. 476).

Recall the incident of Anthony Weiner whose upward trending political success came to an abrupt halt after he made one of the stupidest social media mistakes of all time in July 2013. He was wedged in a sexting scandal after he accidentally Tweeted a picture of his nether parts. Little did he know that it was open for the entire world to see other than the intended woman he was having a chat with. This accidental action made him almost a celebrity overnight much to the dismay of his wife, Huma Adebini, who was a top aide to the then presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. Weiner’s overnight rise to fame (rather, notoriety) and celebrity status thanks to his casual, accidental, tweet, equal or more phenomenal to any mainstream actor. Being caught in this scandal, Weiner had to withdraw his candidature from the election of Mayor of New York City (Scanlon, 2016). This professional setback was followed by a personal one when his wife announced her separation from him soon after his latest sexting scandal (Scanlon, 2017).

Researchers have started observing the attendant results or impact of context collapse. Blurring borders of one’s online and offline personality with an access to infinite audience has larger social implications. Evidently, the established SNSs are facing a major issue. As technological advances make it real for people to have a virtual life, the domain and scope of context collapse cannot be largely confined to what is happening online. The key area in which impact has been observed and measured is with reference to an imagined audience. The audience is not always known, there is a difficulty in determining the audience, and even the intentional address to a homogeneous audience may not necessarily be confined to the ‘assumed’ boundaries. Then there is the blurring of private and personal life which questions the nature and content of disclosure on SNSs and the extent of use of privacy settings.

What happens when this blurring of the context boundaries exposes the ‘real’ from the ‘reel’ life of celebrities where there is a vast factual difference, especially where the dynamics of the results depend on the intent? The study focuses on the boomerang effects of context collapse in the lives of celebrities, both when colluded or collided. What collapses here is not just the boundaries but also the belief, years

of brand building and good faith giving rise to unforgettable media controversies. How do celebrities manage this difference to the tune of their benefit or for worse? One of the very interesting examples is of Raper Bow Wow who missed out on the fact that when on social media, you are addressing an 'infinite audience' (Borkovich & Breese, 2016, p. 167). In January 2010, Rapper Bow Wow, in a state of inebriation tweeted that he was too drunk to even feel his face. To add spice to his story he gave details of his location and car. The authorities found it easy to arrest him for drunk driving (Gatecrasher, 2010). With overwhelming evidence against him, it is not surprising that the lesson learned weighed heavily against him.

Less is known, though, of the differing impact of context collapse across the social and demographic and if status and power can also affect the final outcome. To avoid pitfalls and dangers of context collapse and communicate through a relatively porous platform, users need to bridge identities by building social capital and segment networks to avoid social rejection (Lim, Vadrevu, Yoke, & Basnyat, 2012). The segmentation is dependent on user skills of managing face and image building and may vary by gender, race, age and class (Hargittai & Litt, 2013). Within this context how does the user manage face or image?

## **Managing Face and Image Building**

Goffman (1959) posited that all individuals in a given situation present a face as a social presentation of their identity or their image. This image or 'face' is constantly being negotiated in the process called 'face-work' (p. 12). This is something more than the actions of an individual. It is the perception and judgement of the actions by other stakeholders who are part of the interaction. Among other factors that determine the perceptions is the context, our identity, relationships and so on. As all individuals are figuratively living in their own spaces 'theatrical performances', the actions and image in public are like the front stage performance, the 'curated identity' is reflective of the role assigned for the audience, who in turn play their independent roles. Goffman (1959) stated that it is front stage performance on which an actor is judged. Based on performance theory, one can state that there are three fundamental components in the sharing of social information. When explicitly stated, information is 'given'; when impacted by subtle nuances and unconscious moves of actors, information is 'given off', the intention of which is 'inferred' by the audience. This implies that communication is both a combination of signals presented by the actor and the signs inferred by the audience. Building on the theory, one can deduce that individuals present an 'idealized' self rather than an authentic version of the self, tweaking their behaviour and providing details to generate positive impressions.

In the social media domain, actors put on a front for specific target audiences. However with the increase in the invisible friend circle, all categories collapse under one rubric (Hewitt & Forte, 2006). Celebrities, respected for the image, the 'face' they have created, have a coterie of followers who are influenced by their behaviour and performance. Their acts are drawn from their daily lives, creating an onstage persona which may be perceived as positive or negative. This on-stage presentation of self, when contexts collapse—advertently or inadvertently—either rob celebrities of the revered status or escalate then to greater heights (Tammes, 2015).

One would wonder if it was for a bit of comic relief or some light-hearted self-appreciation when Bill Cosby asked the world to meme him amidst facing serious sexual assault charges. He posted a #CosbyMeme Generator on his website, which allowed users to choose from a range of his pictures and add their own text. What was meant, quite naively, to start a humour-laced publicity ended up being a dashboard of character assassination highlighting the assault charges in creative ways, which indeed

were humorous. The trolling went on to blast *The Cosby Show* actor instead of applauding his fame and publicity seeking act. Bill Cosby deleted the post later during the day but the deletion was not enough. This example still stands as one of the biggest social media blunders amidst serious sexual assault allegations (Keating, 2014). His deliberate act of publicity turned into a mishap as he did not consider that his current audience was laced with a notion of his darker side from the backstage, though that act may have been years ago. This reflects the volatility of the online medium, which has the potential to create and destroy a long-standing image built over the years.

It also validates the point that on-stage performance designed for positive eyeballs may turn negative in the perception of audience. The success story of Lady Gaga draws attention to a positive and deliberate blurring of the personal and the professional to produce an immaculate on-stage performance structured to appeal and draw a great fan following. The process of self-presentation through which this social veteran garners support is an intricate knowledge of audience expectations and perceptions. Focusing on-stage performance and keeping backstage performance under wraps is but the beginning of the process of building and maintaining 'face'.

The implications can be dire for celebrities when the backstage becomes frontstage and there is loss of 'face'. The example of Kate Moss comes readily to mind. In September 2005 when she was partying with her partner and close friends, the images of her doing cocaine (from a video which was hidden) while consuming alcohol flashed across a British tabloid. What followed was a swift spread of the news along with criticisms from various angles. While celebrities, such as Naomi Campbell, Sharon Stone and Robbie Williams, openly came out in her support accusing the breach of privacy and the immense pressure along with loneliness and hardship that the teenaged supermodel would be going through, others spared no words to display their disgust. What had collapsed was not just her image but the brands for which she modelled and was an ambassador to. As per the December 2005 issue of *Vanity Fair*, she became the centre of ridicule. Moss, who was making between \$5 million to \$9 million a year and her estimated worth was at \$55 million when the incident flashed out, lost a lot of contracts. It is reported (Ward, 2005) that the two contracts, H&M, with a value of about \$1.7 million, and Burberry, worth about \$700,000 annually, were terminated. Chanel simply decided to let its contract with Moss worth \$1.3 million expire in October of the same year. While the numbers add up to her financial debacle, there is another point of view that her popularity grew after the incident and consequently her salary and contract value. What is of importance is that when the backstage suddenly came on-stage, it became difficult for the audience to accept the realities which crashed the successful image of Kate Moss (ibid.).

## Implications and Discussion

The recalibrated social media space (boundary management), invisible audiences and publics, image, and vulnerability (of celebrities) in the face of context collapse has become a hard reality. Whether intentional or accidental, the results have been dire and irked some of the strongest and volatile comments leading to 'face threat' and 'face loss'. Not surprisingly, Turkle (2011) posited that 'technology is seductive when what it offers meets our human vulnerabilities [...] Digital connections offer the illusion of companionship without the demands of friendship. Our networked life allows us to hide from each other, even as we are tethered to each other' (p. 1). With technology comes a plethora of information, some relevant and some irrelevant, connectedness and intimacy reducing the nature of relationships to a click and a 'like' or a 'dislike'. Where does it take us from this point? To bright and dark moments in our lives that can break or build trust and reputations. The truth is that all these situations possess the potential of altering the image perception of the user.



‘We live in a world where there is more and more information, and less and less meaning’ (Baudrillard, 1981, p. 6). Consider the statement in the light of the celebrities (discussed in the article) with an already established image, revealing and concealing aspects of their personalities on different social platforms. Their connection, deep and anonymous, with the ‘invisible audience’ is clearly visible in the attempt to understand the ‘generalized *generalized* other’ (Mead, 1934). As consumers of the information through social media channels, we rarely, if ever pause to consider the ‘meaningfulness’ of the content. The problem arises not because of the inane consumption of information or the brighter social media sharing moments. It is the darker moments that give way to privacy issues and concerns about personal and professional lives leaving the image tarnished and reputation sullied.

Much of it has also to do with the interplay between the macro-level (e.g., societal norms and roles) and micro-level factors (e.g., motivation and attitude; Giddens, 1984) where the macro-win facilitates scalability of the messages. An understanding of consumer motivations and/or contexts may be a good starting point for arresting negative social media impacts. The example of Madonna clearly highlights the importance of the consumer context. The same can also be said of Zack ‘Danger’ Brown.

Can the perpetuating context collapse be arrested? In our study of celebrities, it is important from the perspective of maintaining image. A second vetting and sourcing of participants (friends) with a control over audience size may be the answer to the question (Borkovich & Breese, 2016). Celebrities have begun to use ‘polysemy’ (Albertson, 2006) or coded communication for gaining traction with different and even oppositional audiences.

Tension still persists between what to reveal and what to conceal to mitigate the possibilities of misinterpreting information and intent. The front stage appearance must always appear to be authentic and true. An incorrect assessment, as exemplified by Bill Cosby, can mar the front stage performance and convert the celebrity into a subject for ridicule.

## Acknowledgement

The authors would like to acknowledge the support of Ms Meha A. Sanghvi, Academic Associate, Communication Area, IIMA, for helping with the literature review.

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