

A Viral Moment that Made History: Gendered Reactions to a Spontaneous Event at a Coldplay Concert

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Abstract: The fairness of gender representation in media remains a strong concern in contemporary public debate and is visible in scholarship. This paper presents a case study examining a spontaneous social phenomenon that unfolded on 16 July 2025, during a Coldplay concert, when the romantic relationship between a male company CEO and a female head of human resources—colleagues of comparable social, marital, and professional backgrounds—was unexpectedly revealed in public. The event, entirely unplanned and unmediated, rapidly went viral, generating vast amounts of user-generated content (UGC) and embedding itself into popular culture. Due to its exceptional virality and enduring cultural resonance, it can be regarded as a historical moment in the post-digital sphere, exemplifying how gendered narratives are constructed, amplified, and memorialised online. This study employs a quantitative content analysis of Instagram posts related to the event, complemented by qualitative reflections that illuminate underlying attitudes and symbolic gender framings. This mixed approach enables both the systematic mapping of engagement patterns and the interpretive understanding of how users ascribe meaning and moral value to male and female figures in comparable circumstances. Findings show that, despite the protagonists' similar social and professional standing, gendered asymmetries persist in public perception. The male figure was frequently represented through narratives of leadership, charisma, and professional success, while the female counterpart was disproportionately subjected to moral judgment, emotional stereotyping, and scrutiny of personal integrity. The study concludes that spontaneous viral events such as this offer unique insight into unfiltered digital storytelling, revealing how collective narratives of gender continue to reproduce structural inequalities even in seemingly organic contexts. As part of a broader research project on storytelling for gender equality, this paper contributes to understanding how viral, unscripted events both reflect and shape contemporary gender discourse in online culture.

Keywords: Gender representation, Social media, Post-digital storytelling, Virality, Spontaneous event, User-generated content, Instagram, Coldplay concert

1. Gender Representation in Media

The fairness of gender representation in media remains a strong concern in contemporary public debate. However, high-level scholarly discussion on this issue still lags behind. Surprisingly, gender representation has not received a broad attention within the wider field of gender equality research. Existing studies have examined it mainly through specific lenses, such as journalism (Iranzo-Cabrera, 2020), online presence (Lagrange et al., 2024), leadership positions (Lyubykh et al., 2024), news reporting (Mostafa Taha & Fahmy, 2023), and sports (Alkhamash, 2021).

Within sport media, research has highlighted disparities both in the quantity of coverage (Alkhamash, 2021) and in the quality of gender portrayal (Antunovic & Cooky, 2024). In journalism studies, gendered patterns in general media coverage have been also addressed (Iranzo-Cabrera, 2020; Mostafa Taha & Fahmy, 2023; Antunovic & Cooky, 2024). These works note, for instance, the persistence of traditional gender roles (Mostafa Taha & Fahmy, 2023), while Antunovic & Cooky (2024) go further by calling for quantifiable accountability measures within the media organisations to ensure balanced, non-stereotypical representations and the inclusion of diverse voices in both production and leadership roles.

Overall, previous research has predominantly adopted an organised, top-down perspective on gender representation in media. In response, this study contributes to the literature by analysing a social media case that illustrates a bottom-up form of representation. An additional value of this research lies in our comparative analysis of male and female representation, in contrast to studies that focus on only one gender's portrayal.

The aim of this paper is to reveal underlying attitudes and symbolic gender framings within the contemporary cultural climate, using a case study of a spontaneous viral event involving both a man and a woman. First, we assess the cultural significance of the selected event. Next, we compare the representation of the male and the female involved. Third, we examine how male and female publishers have presented the gendered situation of this event. Finally, we analyse the perspective of anonymous publishers on this spontaneous viral phenomenon.

2. Case Study Design

The chosen case study concerns the public exposure of a romantic affair between Andy Byron, the CEO of a company, and Kristin Cabot, the head of human resources of the same company, during a Coldplay concert held on 16th July 2025. The company, Astronomer, operates in the STEM industry. The event spread rapidly across social media, resembling an unstoppable tsunami.

This specific event was chosen for analysis because it represents a natural occurrence—it was not organised to elicit a societal reaction—and provoked spontaneous responses. These reactions were shaped by underlying attitudes towards men and women, as content creators prepared posts expecting them to be popular among social media users. Therefore, the event provides an appropriate case for examining underlying attitudes and symbolic gender framings in the contemporary cultural climate.

This study employs a quantitative content analysis of social media posts related to the event, complemented by qualitative reflections. This mixed approach enables both the systematic mapping of engagement patterns and the interpretive understanding of how users ascribe meaning and moral value to male and female figures in comparable contexts. Given the event's rich potential for visual representation, a visual-based social media platform was chosen: Instagram. The study analysed creative expressions of content creators on this social media, in the form of images, videos, or a combination of both, and only publicly accessible posts were included.

Posts were collected between 29th July 2025 and 3rd August 2025. Sampling social media content on Instagram presents methodological challenges, as the platform does not provide a finite or easily retrievable population of posts and content circulation is shaped by algorithmic visibility and hashtags rather than by clearly defined categories. For this reason, posts related to the event were collected iteratively and analysed as they appeared during the observation period. Within the resulting dataset, 40 distinct accounts were identified, representing six different industries, which ensured a heterogeneous sample of content creators and communicative perspectives. Data collection continued until saturation was reached, that is, until additional posts no longer introduced new relevant patterns of representation or engagement. The final sample consisted of 161 posts (n=161).

As the naturally accruing (hi)story of attitudes towards gender and symbolic gender framings is perceived via general storytelling framework, we considered Berger and Milkman's (2012) emotional coding of the message, Connell and Messerschmidt's (2005) narrative roles, and, for gender portrayal, works of Entman (1993) and Suico (2007). While we drew on the terminology and categorisation suggested by these authors, we allowed the data itself to guide the development of categories in this case study.

We collected formal and content information of the posts in the sample in the following areas:

1. Information about the publishing of the post: name of the account, date of publishing, business branch of publisher (entertainment, media/news, etc.), information on the person (male, female, organisation, etc.)
2. Information about the medium used. Instagram offers four options of medium: picture, video, multiple items with picture or video as a title item.
3. Formal structure of the post. We started with the categories "plain original" and "original with a caption". The following categories were added during data collection: "Original with caption" are the posts that include the still frame or video from the event with a caption, "original+" are the posts that include still frame or video of the event and a non-event-related photo, "inspired by" are the posts that are originally created with the event at heart, "reenactment" are the posts including the copied behaviour on jumbotron at other events or "the cheaters' hug" in a different context, "no visual reference to original" are the posts that refer to this event only per words in caption (none of the original visual material is used).
4. Information on likability of the post was observed by recording likes of the posts.
5. Information of the target of the post.
6. The visible intent of the post.
7. The emotional frame of the post.
8. Narrative roles we observed for the male in the affair (hereinafter, He/Him), the female in the affair (hereinafter, She/Her), His wife and Her husband.
9. Gender portrayal of Him, Her, His wife and Her husband.
10. The use of infidelity tropes for Him, Her, His wife and Her husband.

11. Positivity direction in the caption for Him, Her, His wife and Her husband. Observed options: positive, neutral, negative, and no mentioning.
12. Designations of Him and Her in the caption were collected.

The collected data allowed us to see the sample as a reflection of the contemporary cultural climate regarding men and women, as it consists of posts by contemporary creators intended for a contemporary audience. We first present gendered framing by comparing posts published by female and male creators. Subsequently, we analyse the posts from anonymised accounts, enabling a comparison with the male/female analysis. The separate examination of anonymised posts was guided by Suler's Theory of the Online Disinhibition Effect. Suler (2004) argues that anonymity, invisibility, and asynchronicity in online environments reduce social restraints, prompting individuals to express hostility and aggression that they might suppress offline. Together, these analytical steps enable the extraction of core themes and underlying perceptions of the male and the female.

We acknowledge the limitations of the study, as the analysis is restricted to posts published only on one social media platform, Instagram. Furthermore, because the event did not have an event-specific hashtag, a comprehensive collection of all posts related to the event could not be obtained within the scope of this research.

3. Findings of the Case Study

The selection of posts offers a broad perspective on the case. Among the 161 collected posts there are 22 (13.66%) from male accounts, 13 (8.07%) from female accounts, 36 (22.36%) from accounts where gender is not specified, and 90 (55.90%) posts from accounts that belong to organisations.

The sample represents six industries: 86 posts (53.42%) from accounts that belong to media or news organisation, 69 posts (42.86%) from accounts that belong to entertainment providers, 2 posts (1.24%) from accounts in the food industry, 2 posts (1.24%) from an account of a mortgage broker, 1 post (0.62%) from an account of a car rental company, and 1 posts (0.62%) from an account of someone in crafts.

The 161 posts were posted by 40 different accounts. Some accounts posted multiple times, while others posted only once. Accounts that posted repeatedly tended to distribute their posts over time; therefore, the greatest diversity of accounts publishing occurred in the days immediately after the event, when the overall volume of posts was at its highest (see Fig. 1)

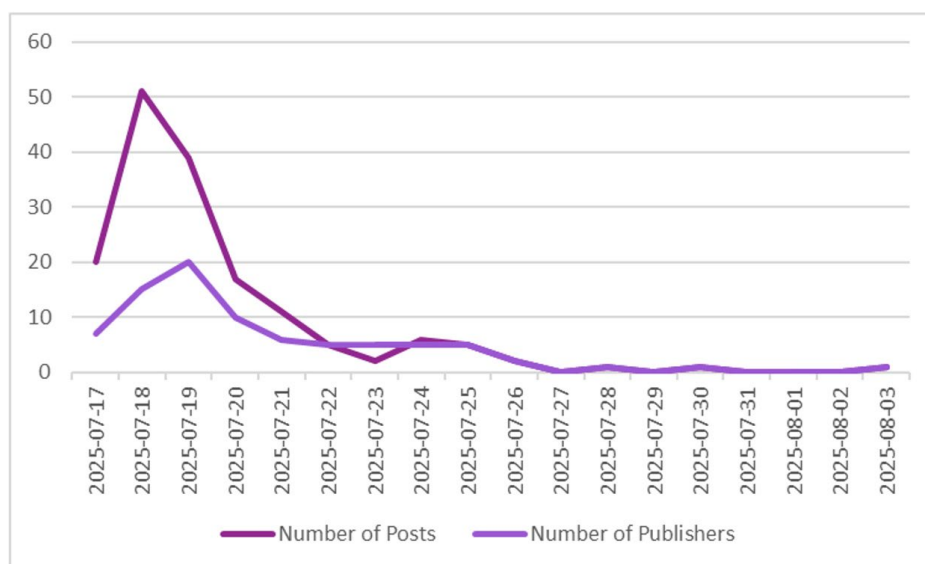


Figure 1: Frequency of posts by day between 17th July 2025 and 3rd August 2025

For a medium-related variety, we examined four types of posts: single photo, single video, multiples items with photo as a title item, and multiple items with a video as a title item. There are 67 single-photo posts (41.61%), 71 single-video posts (44.10%), and 22 posts of multiple items with a title photo (13.66%). No posts consisting of multiple items with a video as a title item were found.

We were able to distinct five types of formal structure of the posts: original with caption; original+ (e.g. original photo accompanied by a caption and a non-event-related photo); inspired by; reenactment; no visual reference to original. Initially, we expected to find posts of plain reshare of the original still frame of video, but none of was found. Unexpectedly, as many as 26 posts contain no visual reference to the event at all (see Fig. 2).

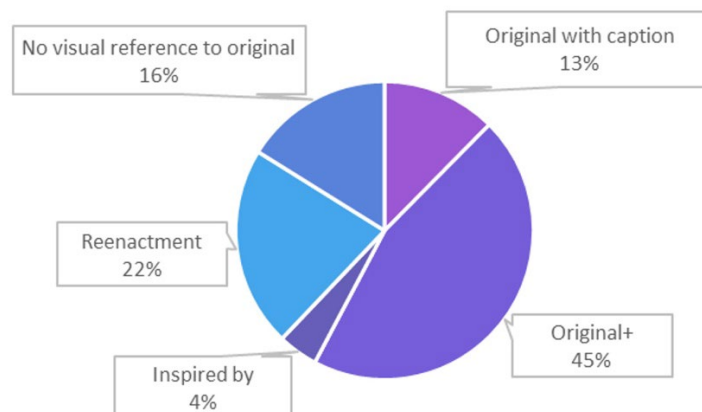


Figure 2: The variety in the formal structure of posts

Statistics of engagement suggest varying yet steady involvement. The lowest number of likes is 48 (an “original with caption” post using this event to illustrate unwise mortgage choices), while the highest number of likes is 3,432,594 (the post is given in Fig. 3). The average number of likes is 152,808.4 likes, and the median of likes is 8,645.5 likes. Seven posts were excluded from these descriptive statistics, as their likes were not publicly available.

A more reflective presentation of engagement can be achieved through intervals: no posts receive single-digit likes; 1 post (0.62%) receives likes in tens; 25 posts (15.53%) in the hundreds; 53 posts (32.92%) in the thousands; 37 posts (22.98%) in the tens of thousands; 33 posts (20.50%) in the hundreds of thousands; and 6 posts (3.73%) in the millions. The posts with likes in the millions were published during the first week of the event and originated by media/news and entertainment accounts.

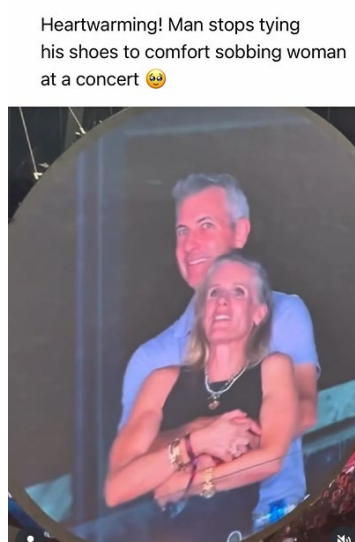


Figure 3: Most popular post in the sample (posted by @fuckboyproblem.s on 18th July, 2025)

Posts related to this event are not limited to those concerning the two main individuals involved (see Fig. 4). In total, 280 instances of targeting are identified, of which 17 posts (10.56%) target only Him and 2 posts (1.24%) target only Her. The most frequently targeted persons are He, She, they as a couple, his wife, and her husband. Other targets include the music band Coldplay and its lead singer individually, the secretary and other non-

specific employees at the company Astronomer, the company Astronomer itself, Donald Trump, a Coldplay fan, and Jada Pinkett Smith.

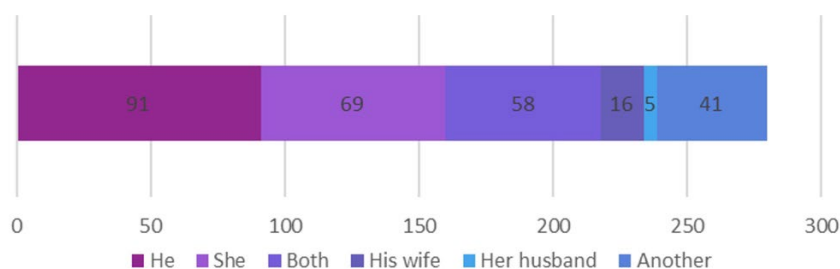


Figure 4: Targeted persons in posts

The intent of the publisher of the posts seems to be primarily to humourise the situation (105 posts, 65.22%). Nevertheless, in 22 posts (13.66%), the aim is to denounce the behaviour, in 18 posts (11.18%) to purely inform the viewers about the developments in the event, and 44 posts (27.33%) are classified as “intent to take advantage of virality”, as they do not contribute substantively to the discourse and/or are completely outside the usual scope of the publisher. Accordingly, most posts employ an emotional frame of amusement (147 items, 91.30%), with 4 (2.48%) conveying anger, 3 (1.86%) showing disgust and 8 (4.97%) remaining neutral.

Analysis of narrative roles for the most frequently targeted persons shows a significant focus on the male and his family, rather than on the female and her family (see Table. 1). He was more often presented as an active participant of the affair than she was, whereas his wife was presented as a victim four times more often than her husband.

Table 1: Narrative roles for mostly targeted persons

	He	His wife	She	Her husband
Perpetrator	116 (72.05%)	0	89 (55.28%)	0
Victim	5 (3.11%)	19 (11.80%)	5 (3.11%)	5 (3.11%)
Bystander	0	0	2 (1.24%)	0
Judge	0	0	0	0
Blame attribution	8 (4.97%)	0	7 (4.35%)	0
None	32 (19.88%)	142 (88.20%)	58 (36.02%)	156 (96.89%)

Gender portrayal was observed for the four most frequently targeted persons (see Table 2). The total of number of attributions may exceed 161 as each portrayal could encompass more than one quality. He was more often attributed with beauty and strength than she was, but also, he was more often attributed with the immoral behaviour than she was. This further supports the view that she is presented as a less active participant in the affair.

Table 2: Gender portrayal of most frequently targeted persons

		He	His wife	She	Her husband
1	Physical beauty	14 (8.70%)	1 (0.62%)	11 (6.83%)	1 (0.62%)
2	Strength/Power	48 (29.81%)	3 (1.86%)	17 (10.56%)	4 (2.48%)
3	Emotionality	3 (1.86%)	3 (1.86%)	5 (3.11%)	0
4	Immorality	113 (70.19%)	0	89 (55.28%)	0
5	Morality	0	1 (0.62%)	0	0
6	None	37 (22.98%)	152 (94.41%)	68 (42.24%)	156 (96.89%)
	Total attributions (1-5)	178	8	122	5

The analysis of fidelity tropes indicates that publishers mostly do not orient themselves towards any specific trope (see Fig. 5). Although the comic treatment trope is the most frequently observed, most posts do not conform to a particular trope and instead simply address the situation as a clear-cut example of bad behaviour being exposed.

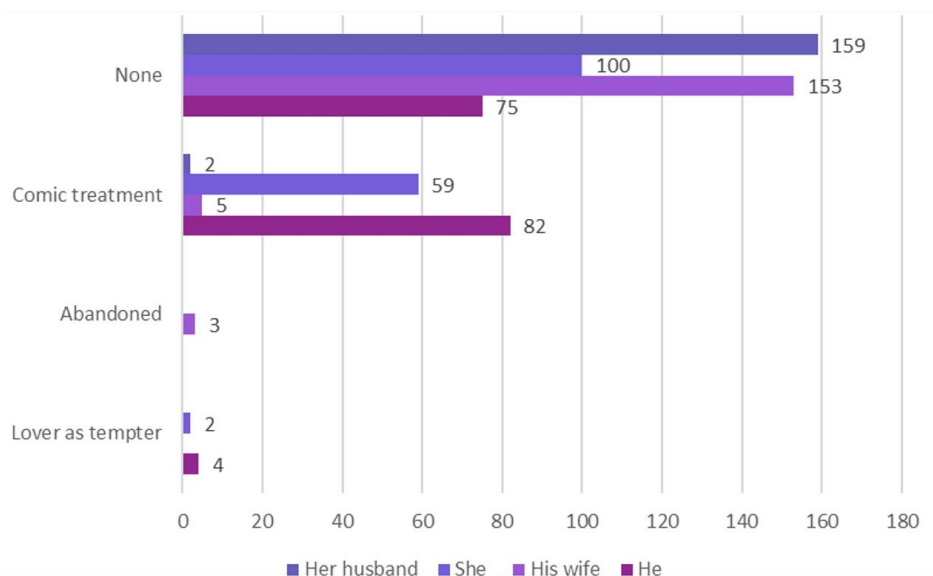


Figure 5: Fidelity tropes among most frequently targeted persons

Caption analysis was conducted in two ways: examining the direction of positivity and the style in which the person is mentioned in the caption. Overall, the positivity of the captions is in general remarkably low (see Table 3); even the spouses who were cheated on have received negative mentioning in the caption.

Table 3: The direction of positivity in the caption, in numbers of posts

	He	His wife	She	Her husband
Positive	3 (1.86 %)	9 (5.59%)	1 (0.62%)	0
Neutral	10 (6.21 %)	2 (1.24%)	8 (4.97%)	1 (0.62%)
Negative	105 (65.22 %)	3 (1.86%)	78 (48.45%)	2 (1.24%)
None	43 (26.71 %)	147 (91.30%)	74 (45.96%)	158 (98.14%)

The analysis of the style of mentioning the person in the captions was carried out for him and her. He was mentioned in 73 posts in 11 different ways, while she was mentioned in 45 posts in different 20 ways (see Table 4). He was mostly referred to by only his professional title (82.19% of designations included his professional title), whereas she was mostly referred to by both her professional title and her name (77.78% of designations included her professional title). He was never assigned designations that she did not receive. Conversely, she was the only one to be referred to as a general employee, through a non-personified mention, or as a part of an affair.

Table 4: Types of mentioning and specific designations in absolute numbers and percentage in the sample (n=161)

Type of mentioning	Of Him		Of Her	
Pure professional title	CEO (31), Tech CEO (1).	32 (19.88%)	Head of HR (7), HR Chief (2), HR exec (1).	10 (6.21%)
Professional title and name	CEO Andy Byron (27), Chief executive <...> Andy Byron (1).	28 (17.39%)	HR Chief Kristin Cabot (6), Head of HR Kristin Cabot (4), HR exec Kristin Cabot (2), Chief HR Officer Kristin Cabot (1), Chief people officer Kristin Cabot (1), HR head (1).	15 (9.32%)
General employment mentioning	x	0	HR lady (3), employee (2), Colleague Kristin Cabot (1).	6 (3.73%)

Type of mentioning	Of Him		Of Her	
Name	Andy Byron (4), Andy (1).	5 (3.11%)	Kristin Cabot (6), Kristin (1).	7 (4.35%)
Gendered mentioning	Man (3), He (2), Father (1), Guy (1).	7 (4.35%)	Woman (2), She (1).	3 (1.86%)
Colloquial	Workhusband (1).	1 (0.62%)	Workwife (1).	1 (0.62%)
Non-personified mentioning	x	0	A part of "their" (1).	1 (0.62%)
As a participant of an affair	x	0	HR-chief 'mistress' (1), Kristin Cabot "the side piece" (1).	2 (1.24%)

Within the sample, He was mentioned in 45.34% of the posts, whereas She was mentioned in only 27.95% (see Table 5). A surprising 49.69% of posts mentioned neither of the two, suggesting that the focus was on the common foul behaviour rather than on a specific person.

Table 5: The number of times he and she are mentioned in the posts

	Number of posts	Percent
Only he is mentioned	36	22.36
Only she is mentioned	8	4.97
Both are mentioned	37	22.98
Neither is mentioned	80	49.69

As previously mentioned, there are 22 posts from male accounts and 13 from female accounts. Given this small number of posts, meaningful statistical analysis is not feasible. However, visible trends among the posts in each group can be observed:

- Male posts exhibit greater diversity in medium than posts from female accounts.
- In terms of formal structure, male posts also exhibit greater diversity.
- Posts created by male publishers receive higher likeability rates.
- In targeting individuals, the male publishers focus primarily on the persons involved in the affair, whereas the female posts display a wider diversity in targets.
- The male accounts mostly tend to humourise the situation, including 6 posts classified as taking advantage of virality and 2 posts seeking to denounce; in contrast, female accounts employ all five observed intent types.
- Posts from male accounts use only the emotional frame, whereas female accounts use four out of the five observed frames.
- The assignment of the narrative roles for Him, His wife, Her and Her husband is broadly similar across posts from male and female publishers, with the exceptions of one male account assigning a victim role for Him and two female accounts assigning a victim role to Her husband.
- Gender portrayal is rather similar, apart from one female account attributing beauty to Him, and two female accounts attributing strength to Her.
- The fidelity tropes seem to be handled by male and female accounts in rather the same way, except for one male account attributing the "Lover as tempter" trope to Him and two male accounts attributing the "commit" treatment to His wife.
- Regarding of positivity direction in captions, His wife, She and Her husband are treated pretty much the same by male and female accounts, whereas He has much more diversity among posts from male accounts (in posts by female accounts he is assigned only negative or no mention).
- Designations in captions are not controversial: when mentioned, both Him and Her are generally referred to in the same manner, e.g. "CEO Andy Byron | Head of HR Kirstin Cabot" or "workhusband | workwife". All designations are respectful.

The rest 126 posts are from anonymised publishers (35 from private publishers with no clear identification and 91 post from a company account). As 126 items is still a small amount for a statistical analysis, and in favour of easier comparability with information given above, we present the trends among the posts:

- The diversity in the choice of the medium among anonymised publishers is high as photo, video and multiple photo collection are used multiple times, with single photos being the dominant medium (56 posts).
- Among the types of formal structure, the type “Original+” type is dominant (59 posts).
- Likability rates among posts of anonymised users vary considerably, ranging from 48 (the lowest) to 3,432,594 (the highest), which correspond to the lowest and highest values in the entire sample.
- In targeting individuals, anonymised publishers focus on all observed categories: 67 posts target Him, 47 target Her, 51 target them as a couple, 13 target His wife, 4 target Her husband, and 28 target other persons.
- Humour is the main intention of their posts by anonymised publishers (79 posts); nevertheless, three other notable intentions are observed: to take advantage of virality (34 posts), to inform (16 posts), and to denounce (15 posts).
- Regarding emotional framing, amusement predominates (114 posts), with 3 posts being anger-based and 2 expressing disgust. In total, 7 posts did not employ any emotional frame.
- The assignment of the narrative roles for observed persons is largely consistent with the roles assigned by males and females publishers: Him (97 posts) and Her (70 posts) are usually presented as perpetrators, while His wife and Her husband are typically assigned no role or, in some cases, the role of the victim.
- Gender portrayal among posts from anonymised publishers is more diverse; nevertheless, the dominant traits are strength and/or physical beauty of the targeted person, along with high levels of perceived immorality for Him (90 posts) and Her (73 posts).
- Fidelity tropes, when used (none in 56 posts), are mostly presented as comic treatment. Even His wife received comic treatment in 3 posts, and Her husband in 2 posts. “Lover as tempter” trope was assigned to Him (3 posts) as well as to Her (2 posts).
- Regarding of positivity direction in captions, He and She mostly receive negative or neutral captions; His wife received all four observed types of captions (positive, neutral, negative or no mentioning at all), whereas Her husband received mostly no mentioning, but one neutral and two negative mentions.
- Among the words of designation towards Him and Her in the captions, there is a high variety. All types of designations from Table 4 (except workhusband/workwife) are found among anonymised publishers.

4. Conclusions

During the jumbotron camera time at Coldplay concert, a cheating affair was revealed, which led to the event being humourised to the point of ridicule on the social media platform Instagram, even producing several widely recognisable novel memes and popular culture references extending beyond social media. This spontaneous event thus became not only an entertaining viral moment but also a culture-forming phenomenon in the post-digital era context. In this sense, the case illustrates how gender representations circulate and evolve within participatory digital environments, complementing previous research that has primarily examined gender representations through more institutionalised media contexts such as journalism or sport coverage (Iranzo-Cabrera, 2020; Alkhamash, 2021; Mostafa Taha & Fahmy, 2023).

A spontaneous event that establishes new popular culture references related to male and female representation also anchors perceptions of men and women. Although the couple’s behaviour was unanimously condemned, He received visibly more attention than She did, and His legitimate relationship attracted more focus than Her legitimate relationship. Moreover, She received a wider variety of verbal designations than He did, being the only one to receive disrespectful or undermining designations. This observation supports the findings of Jane (2016) and aligns with broader evidence on the prevalence of online misogyny, showing that women are disproportionately targeted by hate speech and harassment in digital environments. More broadly, these results resonate with previous studies on gender portrayal in media, which have documented the persistence of gendered framing and unequal representation across different media domains (Mostafa Taha & Fahmy, 2023; Antunovic & Cooky, 2024).

In terms of gender representation, an important question is how each gender represents not only themselves but also the other gender. Comparison of male and female publishers’ perspective on the case suggest that female publishers tend to display greater diversity in their posts, whereas male accounts are more clear-cut on their approach. In this case, no harsher treatment of the other gender was observed. This finding nuances

previous scholarship that often focuses on structural imbalances in representation (Antunovic & Cooky, 2024), suggesting that user-generated environment may produce more heterogeneous expressive patterns even when broader gendered narratives persists.

Anonymous publishers exhibit the widest range of expression across all observed areas, which aligns with the theory presented by Suler (2004). The protection afforded by anonymity allows for a more authentic expression of oneself, especially on controversial issues. Therefore, the discourse initiated by anonymous publishers is just as valuable as the discourse initiated by strong male or female individuals. Although this raises an ethical concern regarding the risk of crossing the boundaries of respect.

The findings highlight how online narratives construct and reinforce the roles of men and women, with attention, framing, and verbal designations shaping public perception and storytelling. Often produced by anonymous individuals, these narratives provide a genuine reflection of societal attitudes and invite reflection on gender equality. By analysing a spontaneous viral event, this study therefore complements existing research on gender representation by showing how similar dynamics of framing and symbolic positioning also emerge within everyday social media interactions, not only within professional media production. Future research can expand to other cases of gender representation in order to further understand how traditional stereotypes and roles persist in online discourse.

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AI Declaration: AI tools were not used in this research except for grammatical correction of the text.

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