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# Audio description of gender: self-description as an evocation of identity

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## ABSTRACT

Gender gets socially constructed in many visual ways, but people who are blind or who have low-vision want to know the gender of those around them, too, as well as other salient positionality details. Like with age, race, fashion, etc., a person's appearance can provide a lot of information about them and their character. Audio description, as a form of audiovisual translation, is a way to make that appearance accessible to those who cannot see it. Yet empirical research about audio description of gender – a complicated and highly contested arena of public discourse – is underdeveloped. This study addresses that issue through a Grounded Theory approach, constructivist in nature, that both generated self-descriptions of portrait images and piloted a model way to analyze them. This process prompted 179 new self-descriptions written during three hackathon-like events over multiple years, illuminating compositional gender-construction strategies as well as fertile paths for audio description research.

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Audio description; gender; portrait; self-description; blind; low-vision

## 1. Establishing a model for the empirical analysis of gender construction via audio description

Gender labels evoke identity. They are considered a key aspect of describing any person, including via self-description. Yet they also are becoming increasingly contested and complicated, with emerging concerns rising about their potential for creating and perpetuating gender inequality in gender-conscious societies around the world, including within translation studies (TS) and, more specifically, audiovisual translation (AVT) contexts (Andone, 2002; Bassnett, 2005; Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Corrius et al., 2017; De Marco, 2006; De Marco, 2012; Dinan et al., 2020; Hammack et al., 2022; Larkosh, 2014; Lee, 2021; Von Flotow & Josephy-Hernández, 2018; Wang et al., 2020). As an umbrella concept, gender broadly refers to a complicated set of social understandings, internal and external to a person, that manifest in a person's social presentation as well as in a person's interpretation by members of a community, a swirl of meaning that can be difficult to parse and articulate (Bennett et al., 2021). Audio description – as a form of audiovisual translation, primarily for the benefit of people who are blind or who have low-vision – is necessary for everyday social-inclusion purposes. Yet

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national, international, and industry audio-description guidelines generally have not kept pace with this rapidly evolving public debate, rarely acknowledging it, and leaving describers without clear best practices for when to include gender in descriptions, and if so, how?

In this vein, academic researchers are beginning to examine gender discourse designed for people who are blind or who have low-vision and unable to see important visual cues of gender (e.g., Stangl et al., 2020; Villela & Iturregui-Gallardo, 2020). On parallel paths, researchers also are experimenting with empirical approaches to improve understandings about audio description in practice, including through more attention to word choice within compositional strategies (e.g., Graven et al., 2020; Hutchinson & Eardley, 2019; Kim et al., 2020; Lopez et al., 2018; Soler & Luque, 2018; Walczak & Fryer, 2017). Inspired by the confluence of these interests, this study used a constructivist approach to prompt the creation of self-portrait descriptions and then used Grounded Theory techniques to inductively identify and examine ways in which those descriptions might socially construct gender. This proof-of-concept model was developed and refined over a couple of years and during three hackathon-like events focused on media accessibility in public places. In addition to gaining empirical insights on the social construction of gender in these particular audio description contexts, this model was built with reliability, replicability, and transference in mind, with the intention of later testing the model on other audio description corpora as well as calibrating it to have other social-identity foci, such as race, age, and fashion. In that respect, this manuscript is aimed at showing how the model and its associated processes can work in practice, rather than trying to definitively settle any gender-issue debate. The model, in other words, is intended to support the debate, not take sides on it.

## 2. Portraiture, choosing and describing a self-portrait can serve as a window to the soul

Portraiture is a universal and millennia-old practice in the visual arts, with extensive scholarly development around it (Freeland, 2010; Hall, 2015). The audio description of such visual art, though, has emerged as a complementary and mostly contemporary area of concern for an interdisciplinary mix of academics (Freeland, 2010; Fryer, 2016; Maes, 2015; Soler & Luque, 2018; Spinicci, 2009; West, 2004). Portraiture is just one genre of the visual arts, but portraiture also is considered a fundamental way in which we communicate our identity to others, providing visual contextualization through imagery and sight-based signs of age, ethnicity, gender, etc. Gender identity, as an important aspect of portraiture, is understood and performed within societies based on culture, often expressed through visual media, including ‘selfies’, which require sophisticated interpretations of mostly visual cues about culture for them to make sense (Brooks & Hébert, 2006; Humphreys, 2018). In this vein, subtle visual clues matter, and equivalent audio clues are essential in order for people who are blind or who have low-vision to match mental imagery with the self-presentation being constructed in their presence. Thereby, audio-described portraiture, as an emerging subgenre of its own, has the potential to bridge the visual with the audible through multi-modal contexts in ways that can bring audiences together, regardless of level of visual acuity. Beyond conveying basic information about a person’s appearance, portraiture also offers other intriguing

intellectual aspects, worthy of consideration. Self-portraits, for example, provide windows into how people think about themselves, how they show themselves to others, and, on a more-philosophical level, the relationship of mind to body (Freeland, 2010; Hall, 2015; Spinicci, 2009). Portraits also are thought to provide privileged access to the subject's soul (Hall, 2015). So how does a person who cannot see, or see well, participate in such important societal conversations and presentations of identity?

Current guidelines for audio describers to address gender mostly are murky and out-dated. More than a dozen sets of national and international guidelines were reviewed for this study – including from the American Council of the Blind, American Foundation for the Blind, Broadcast Authority of Ireland, Canadian Association of Broadcasters, and the Royal National Institute of Blind People – and for the most part, they did not address complications of gender labels in any depth. Many do not even mention gender at all. Of those that do, the guidance was vague or contradictory. For example, the nonprofit organization Media Access Canada in its (2015) guidelines, which were still circulating on the organization's website a decade later, stated 'The appearance of characters should not require that they be identified by their gender expression, unless these types of identifications would provide meaningful information or insight to a sighted viewer that would not otherwise be available to the visually impaired in a similar time-frame, i.e., plot development, character motivation or background'. A comedy that featured cross-dressing and a drama about gender transition were used as examples of when gender should be mentioned, but examples found within the guidelines also used gendered pronouns, without note, such as in 'Andrew loves *his* shiny bike' and 'John sneers as *he* speeds away in *his* car'. Some guidelines mention gender labels but do not provide significant structure about how to employ them, such as the guidelines (2015) that Accessible Media Inc. and The Canadian Association of Broadcasters collaborated on, for both Described Video Best Practices and Post-Production Described Video Best Practices, which associate (p. 14) 'gender' as an 'individual physical characteristic', along with race, age, disability, etc., and then assert broad and nebulous instructions for use of these labels, such as 'individual/physical characteristics that are clear in context need not be described unless relevant' and 'always describe an individual and his/her physical characteristics using the same generic attribute consistently'.

Some guidelines do not mention gender labels explicitly but then feature them in prominent discourse positions in their examples, such as: Snyder (2014, p. 40), who lists several core aspects for the 'who' in descriptions of people, including age, hair, build, clothing, and race but not gender. Nevertheless, at various points in the book, he mentions gender, in general, and privileges gender in samples, as one of the first details he shares, such as in (p. 75) 'Photo of a black *man*, in profile, facing left' and (p. 76) 'Backlit, and in wispy silhouette, a photo of a white *girl* ...'. Some guidelines use abstractions that could refer to gender, such as: The nonprofit Described and Captioned Media Program's (2021) Description Key, which states, 'When relevant to the content, describe individuals by using the most significant physical characteristics' and 'Identify race or other potentially sensitive characteristics when they are relevant and meaningful to the program'.

Also, in a similar vein, and helpful contextually, the Describing Diversity report examined how audio description has been used in contemporary practice. The report – sponsored by, among others, a British nonprofit organization called VocalEyes (Hutchinson

et al., 2020) – emphasized the importance of gender as one of many significant human attributes that deserve sophisticated AVT practices. It made the philosophical point in the report (p. 36) that many human attributes – such as gender, race, and age – are seen, and therefore audio describers need to describe them in mindful ways. But also, they wrote (p. 14), that gender descriptions come in many forms. For example, a small person might more commonly be called ‘puny’ if male and ‘petite’ if female, one description being considered negative and the other positive in societal discourse. In addition, in practice (p. 42), the gender-neutral pronoun ‘they’ could cause narrative confusion when employed with the same plural pronoun in the same story. Beyond broad suggestions, though, and a few examples, like those, existing guidelines rarely delved into the challenges of AVT practices related to gender.

Yet when images of people are audio described, especially portraits, defining another person’s gender becomes a key part of that describer’s job. This study’s focus is on ways in which that specific job, of describing gender, happens. The describer – by sight alone – has to determine if the subject should be labeled a ‘he’, a ‘she’, a ‘they’, or some other label should be used. The describer needs to decide, on the spot, if gender is a topic that should be avoided altogether (for a multitude of potential reasons). This decision process typically happens without consultation of the person in the image, who receives the gender label but has no choice in the matter. The audience member, who often is blind or visually impaired, typically is uninvolved in that choice as well and has no agency to question it. This procedural dynamic puts the audio describer at a nexus of a gender-identification process, in a position of power, which can be analyzed as expressed through its discourse products. But what about when self-descriptions are involved? In such a situation, the describer is the describee as well. That person might be able to pick their particular portrait, as in this study, and that person also will be able to know an unparalleled amount about the subject matter, including the context of the image, and even the feelings that person has within it, which cannot be seen but can be articulated. How does such agency manifest in terms of audio description identifying gender in these sorts of self-portraits?

### 3. Materials and method

In response, this study’s practical purpose was to find ways to better understand, on a foundational level, how gender identity emerges through the discourse of audio description. One of the most-difficult aspects of researching audio description is getting access to a suitable corpus of descriptions for study. There is no open repository or iconic public collection or even commonplace use of portrait description. Therefore, we had to generate our own. We did that as a part of our existing audio description training program, called a Descriptathon. The Descriptathon is a way for us to teach professional communicators at public places about audio description but also to have them practice description and create public products that are audio described. Our research team has hosted Descriptathons once or twice a year for the past five years. These intensive three-day events, modeled after gamified hackathons, bring together teams of public communicators, such as interpretive staff members at U.S. National Park Service sites, with volunteers from outside of those organizations, and with members of their communities who are blind or have low-vision. As a part of the Descriptathon orientation –

through an Institutional Review Board-approved process of informed consent, which asked for permissions to study and publish these photos and descriptions – participants were asked to upload a portrait photograph and to audio describe that photograph, with the prompt: ‘This photo identifies you as a no-longer-faceless person to other users, including users who are blind or who have low vision, and gives everyone an opportunity to practice inclusive audio description principles (by showing and describing your self-portrait)’. Some chose to do so, and some did not. There was no significant reward or penalty for either choice, and we explained that in addition to traditional portraits, any photograph could be used to represent the person as an avatar. Some participants therefore used photos of animals (e.g., a butterfly), landscapes (e.g., a sunset), and other types of imagery (e.g., a rubber duck) to portray themselves. Those without human representations were removed from this sample before analysis, but the sample did include other gray areas of the self-description presentation-and-description concept, such as one animated avatar of a person, participants in small groups with other people, and an image of just a person’s hand holding a phone. Those vetted 179 descriptions, voluntarily provided, were gathered at the start of Descriptathon 6 (18–20 August 2020), Descriptathon 7 (9–11 February 2021), and Descriptathon 8 (26–28 October 2021), confirmed as a self-description – not placeholder text or gibberish – and then analyzed for this paper.

A few people participated in two or three of these Descriptathons and used the same self-description for more than one event. They were not counted twice, meaning such response duplication was removed from the sample before analysis, which also sometimes doubled or tripled the deletions from the overall sample total, too, when, for example, a person in multiple Descriptathons did not provide a self-description either time. That non-participation moment counted as three non-responses, even though it was the same person doing the same act three times.

### 3.1 Participants

Participants were all adults, aged 18 and older. They were widely dispersed across the United States but also residing in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Nigeria. Descriptathon 6 primarily focused on the Washington, D.C., area, and Descriptathon 7 and Descriptathon 8 primarily focused on the Midwest and Pacific Northwest regions of the United States, but some teams also came from other regions, too, and some teams had members in other places. They were mostly either paid staff members in participating organizations or volunteers for those organizations (including the U.S. National Park Service, U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Parks Canada, National Parks UK, The Kennedy Center, the American Council of the Blind, the Blinded Veterans Association, the Canadian Council of the Blind, the Helen Keller National Center for DeafBlind Youths & Adults, and the Royal National Institute of Blind People), with a few additional volunteers from outside of those organizational structures, such as a blind university student from a private East Coast university, a banker who specializes in accessible media, and a couple of friends of other participants.

Because the assignment of gender was being studied in this part of the project, participants were not asked to explicitly identify a gender beforehand as a demographic indicator. We also did not gather other demographic details, such as age, race, and highest

education level, until Descriptathon 8. In that D8 sample, which generally would be consistent with the types of participants we had attracted in previous Descriptathons, we had 83 of the 103 participants respond to our question about age. A few participants were 18–25 years old (5), and a few were 66–75 years old (9), but the rest were distributed relatively evenly in-between: 26–35 (18), 36–45 (19), 46–55 (15), and 56–65 (17). In terms of racial identity, 80 of the 103 responded, with 68 labeling themselves as ‘white’, and for education level, 83 of 103 responded, with 72 of the 83 having earned a university bachelor’s degree, including 29 who had earned a master’s degree. When asked about their experience level writing audio description, on a 5-point Likert-like scale, from Very Experienced to Very Inexperienced, 10 listed themselves at the top of that scale, at Very Experienced, but 44 labeled themselves at the bottom of that scale. In other words, generally speaking, our convenience sample was predominately middle-aged, white, highly educated, and inexperienced as an audio describer.

Of the 23 blind or low-vision participants in that D8 group, 6 were congenitally blind (blind since birth), 7 were adventitiously blind (blinded by illness or injury), and 10 labeled themselves as low-vision. Like all participants, they were asked to rate the importance of gender in audio description. Of the 20 who responded, 2 said gender was not an important aspect, 9 said it was moderately important, and 9 said it was very important.

### 3.2 Procedure

In addition to the two authors of this paper, both sighted, our data-analysis team also included a paid research assistant, who is blind. Using an inductive and constructivist Grounded Theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1999; O’Connor et al., 2018), our team members in the first round of data analysis independently unitized our corpus of 179 self-descriptions and then thematically labeled those units. We clustered these themes, over a couple of more rounds of discussion among team members, and what became evident in that process was that these units we decided were gender-constructing mostly could be identified as gender-related through three primary concepts: (1) The identification of a clearly Gendered Name (e.g., Doug or Natalie), (2) The use of a Gendered Noun (such as ‘man’ or ‘woman’), and, (3) The use of a Gendered Pronoun (such as ‘he’ or ‘she’). We also had enough outliers in two similar clusters that we created a fourth category to combine those, (4) The use of a Gendered Descriptor, which included both single-word adjectives (such as ‘bearded’) and descriptive phrases (such as ‘wearing a dress’). While we acknowledge that English does not typically have adjectives with definitive gendered boundaries, per se, these descriptive phrases that we coded as Gender Descriptor do clearly alert the listener to the possibility or probability of an expressed gender identity, which can be compared with other cues in the text for confirmation or contrasts.

Using those four categories as our codes, we then went back to the descriptions fresh and each independently looked specifically for those gender-constructing expressions within them. After the initial coding process, we had total agreement among the three independent coders on 121 out of 179 descriptions (68 percent). For the remaining 32 percent, we analyzed our differences in each case, talking about the disagreement and seeking complete agreement. Only one round of reconciliation was needed. We were able to identify the differences or errors and agree and align all three coders on the



same codes for each of the 179 descriptions. Most of the original differences were related to a word not being coded in one of three sets, e.g., Coder 1 missed a ‘her’, or a code being misapplied, e.g., Coder 2 labeled the word a pronoun when it really should have been a noun, and so on. Outliers that prompted deeper discussion among our group are reported in the Discussion section.

Another aspect of this data that was coded was author point of view. Even though these were self-portraits, typically described by the person in the photo (some blind participants reported asking others for help on this task), the dominant point of view used in the writing style was Third Person. That was obvious quickly. But we wanted to know how dominant was that perspective choice, which was not guided by the description instructions. In sum, this analysis was shaped by the following five research questions:

**RQ1:** Did the describer choose to write the self-description from a First Person, Second Person, or Third Person perspective?

**RQ2:** Did the describer choose to include a formal name? Did that name indicate a likely gender?

**RQ3:** Did the describer choose to use a Gendered Noun?

**RQ4:** Did the describer choose to use a Gendered Pronoun?

**RQ5:** Did the describer choose to use a Gendered Descriptor?

## 4. Results

Even though this sample had an overall response rate above 60 percent, of people in the Descriptathon who participated in our self-portrait study, our intent here is to not to argue that these results are definitive or global in nature because we have little empirical work like this available to check and to compare our findings. These descriptive statistics illustrate this particular sample’s participants, and by doing so, we intend to create a model for analysis and to raise issues in this piece rather than resolve them. We fully expect that other samples, with different demographics and more-diverse populations, will create different results. We hope that’s the main point taken from this paper and that active comparisons with other corpora can begin to happen.

In what ways are diverse samples alike and different under this novel model of data analysis? We think transference and comparisons will be a long-term key to the value of this work. That said, this sample of 179 participants, across multiple events, does provide a foundation to build from, and it carries out basic research into how these particular people presented gender when writing self-descriptions without specific instructions about point of view or content and with no reference to gender studies in the orientation. With such caveats, several findings seem substantial and worthy of further inquiry. For the response rate ([Table 1](#)), all three samples showed consistent results, in which about a third of blind or low-vision participants decided to create a self-description, while about two-thirds of sighted participants choose to do so.

In this process, in whole, we received 179 self-descriptions, which totaled 13,542 words. The shortest description we received was three words ‘(First and last name) happy’. The longest was 273 words. These descriptions were analyzed independently by all three coders and eventually converted into 1093 agreed-upon, gender-constructing units, meaning a gender-constructing code emerged in this data set about once every 13 words. Gender-constructing pronouns accounted for about half of those expressions,



**Table 1.** Response rate.

	Participants	Self-descriptions	Response rate
D6 – Blind/low vision	16	5	31%
D7 – Blind/low vision	25	9	36%
D8 – Blind/low vision	23	9	39%
D6 – Sighted	54	38	70%
D7 – Sighted	84	55	65%
D8 – Sighted	80	63	79%
Subtotal of Blind/low vision	64	23	36%
Subtotal of Sighted	218	156	72%
TOTALS	282	179	63%

across the spectrum of visual acuity, only slightly more predominate with sighted describers than with describers who are blind or who have low-vision.

The average word count for the descriptions in our sample was 76. The median word count was 63. After the descriptions were coded, we also analyzed those for gender-constructing expression and found that our sample had 53 self-describing males (30%), 107 females (60%), and 19 (10%) who did not express either male or female identities clearly in their descriptions.

#### 4.1 Results for RQ1: First Person or Third Person?

In answer to RQ1, (Table 2), a strong preference was shown by all participants in this sample (sighted/blind/low-vision) for the Third Person point of view with self-descriptions. Some used First Person, and a couple of the descriptions had examples of Second Person mixed into the discourse, plus some with mixtures of perspectives, like a bit of First Person followed by mostly Third Person. Or some other blend. As an example, one participant wrote, in mostly Third Person, '(First name) wears dark sunglasses, a camo sun visor with her dark curly hair visible at the top of the visor, a blue shirt and white shorts and jacket'. But then also added in Second Person, 'You can see the straps of a backpack on her shoulders'. Another incorporated Second Person into a reference to the viewer's gaze, as in 'This is a headshot of a Caucasian female with furrowed eyebrows looking intently at you'. Yet no description was written entirely in Second Person, so the descriptions were coded as either First Person or Third Person, with the rare Second Person sentences ignored in those descriptions as they were coded as the perspective used in the predominance of the discourse. That same coding approach was used in one other case that mixed First Person with Third Person but mostly used Third Person.

**Table 2.** RQ1: First Person or Third Person?

	Self-descriptions	Chose Third Person	Third Person
D6 – Blind/low vision	5	4	80%
D7 – Blind/low vision	9	5	56%
D8 – Blind/low vision	9	9	100%
D6 – Sighted	38	36	95%
D7 – Sighted	55	51	93%
D8 – Sighted	63	61	97%
Subtotal of Blind/low vision	23	18	78%
Subtotal of Sighted	156	148	95%
TOTALS	179	166	93%

4.2 Results for RQ2: Formal Name?

In answer to RQ2, (Table 3), only about 40% of participants overall decided to name themselves in the self-description. The sample is small, but nearly two-thirds of people who are blind or who are low-vision did, though. For anonymity, the formal name will be replaced in these examples by ‘(Formal Name)’, but here are three of those uses, including only the sentence using the formal name but excluding the rest of the description:

- ‘(Formal Name) is a white young woman with light blonde, straight, shoulder length hair pulled back some so you can see her ears and small gold hoop earrings’.
- ‘Picture shows (Formal Name) smiling with short brown hair and a brown beard posing with his left shoulder forward in front of an American flag while wearing a National Park Service Uniform’.
- ‘Photo shows (Formal Name), an African American woman standing with her guide dog Iris on a walking path that is bordered with large white boulders.

If a gendered name is used, it could indicate a gender probability, as in ‘Kevin’ likely would be associated with a man, and ‘Danielle’ likely would be associated with a woman. If the name was not typically associated with a particular gender identity or was unclearly associated, it was not coded. For example, ‘Alex’ at first glance could be considered a likely male name, but it also is a common abbreviation for a female-oriented name, such as Alexandra or Alexandria, putting it into a gray area of interpretation. Without further textual context of gendered nouns, pronouns, or descriptors, it therefore could not be coded as gender expression.

4.3. Results for RQ3: Gendered Noun?

In answer to RQ3, (Table 4), like with the response rate, this was another area in which participants diverged based on their level of vision. People in this sample who were blind or low-vision used a Gendered Noun, such as ‘man’ or ‘woman’ about half of the time, while sighted participants chose to include such a noun about three-quarters of the time. Here are some examples of those descriptions coded as using a Gendered Noun, with the identified Gendered Noun in bold italics and with the rest of the description omitted as a way to focus on that noun use:

- ‘An Asian American *man* wearing a yellow, collared shirt with black backpack straps slung around both shoulders connected by a slim horizontal strap at chest-level’.

Table 3. RQ2: Did the describer choose to include a formal name?

	Self-descriptions	Included formal name	Named
D6 – Blind/low vision	5	4	80%
D7 – Blind/low vision	9	4	44%
D8 – Blind/low vision	9	6	67%
D6 – Sighted	38	17	45%
D7 – Sighted	55	17	31%
D8 – Sighted	63	27	43%
Subtotal of Blind/low vision	23	14	61%
Subtotal of Sighted	156	61	39%
TOTALS	179	75	42%

**Table 4.** RQ3: Did the describer choose to use a Gender Noun?

	Self-descriptions	Used Gendered Noun	Gendered Noun
D6 – Blind/low vision	5	1	20%
D7 – Blind/low vision	9	6	67%
D8 – Blind/low vision	9	5	56%
D6 – Sighted	38	22	58%
D7 – Sighted	55	38	69%
D8 – Sighted	63	46	73%
Subtotal of Blind/low vision	23	12	52%
Subtotal of Sighted	156	106	68%
TOTALS	179	118	66%

- ‘Head and shoulders view of a middle-aged *woman* with dark wavy hair cut just above her ears and with bangs brushed to the left, salt and pepper hair but more pepper than salt at this point’.
- ‘A head-only photo of a Caucasian *male* with grey-ish hair, stubble, sideburns and a soul patch’.

In addition, some examples emerged in which a Gender Noun was obscured or avoided, even when the author would have been able to apply a gender label, such as:

- A ‘*person* in an orange body, white helmeted space suit holds a small mostly white with black and brown spots dog’.
- ‘Smiling, happy *person*, sitting on top of a mountain in the sunshine, waving’.
- Cloudy skies over a snowy sand landscape as the back drop behind a ***person*** standing with their hands in their pockets’.

Yet, with just a few exceptions, participants in this sample stuck closely to either a binary construction of gender (as male or female) or omitted gendered labels.

#### 4.4 Results for RQ4: Gendered Pronoun?

In answer to RQ4, (Table 5), another divergent finding of this sample was that about half of participants who were blind or low-vision chose to add a Gendered Pronoun to their self-description while more than three-quarters of participants who are sighted chose to do so. Showing their importance in shaping the mental representations, these Gendered Pronouns often were used repeatedly, even within a single line of description, emphasizing masculinity or femininity, such as in these examples (with the Gendered Pronoun in bold italics):

- ‘*Her* arms fall in front of *her* and *she* clasps *her* hands’.
- ‘*He* has *his* right hand on *his* hip and left hand leaning on the post of the porch.
- ‘*She* angles *her* body diagonally, looks directly into the camera, and raises *her* right hand towards the balcony with *her* hand parallel to the balcony, as though *she* is jokingly suggesting *she* is helping to support it’.

In a few cases, the describer used no formal name, no Gendered Noun, or Gendered Pronoun, such as:

**Table 5.** RQ4: Did the describer choose to use a Gender Pronoun?

	Self-descriptions	Used Gendered Pronoun	Gendered Pronoun
D6 – Blind/low vision	5	1	20%
D7 – Blind/low vision	9	3	33%
D8 – Blind/low vision	9	8	89%
D6 – Sighted	38	30	79%
D7 – Sighted	55	38	69%
D8 – Sighted	63	46	73%
Subtotal of Blind/low vision	23	12	52%
Subtotal of Sighted	156	114	73%
TOTALS	179	126	70%

- ‘Me in December 2020 at Aspen on a ski trip with disable(d) veterans’.
- ‘This a selfie of me in front of a National Park Service Arrowhead’.
- ‘Caucasian park ranger in uniform stands on a grassy lawn in front of a bright green two-story frame house and a one story limestone building’.

**4.5 Results for RQ5: did the describer choose to use a Gendered Descriptor?**

A few gender-constructing expressions came in the form of adjectives, such as ‘bearded’, but not enough to create a coding category for those. Sometimes the expression was more complex than a single word, needing a phrase to build the point, such as ‘wearing pearl earrings and a pendent necklace’. The Gendered Descriptor code therefore was created (Table 6) to cover those. In answer to RQ5, this code illuminated the most-complex types of gender-constructive forms, including those that are inferred by details that might be colloquial or jargony. For example, the research assistant working on this project uses English as her second language. When the two coders who spoke English as their first language encountered the phrase ‘5 o’clock shadow’ in one of the descriptions, they both coded it as a Gendered Descriptor indicating a man was involved, who had beard stubble on his face after a day’s work. That phrase meant nothing to the ESL coder, which required a reconciliation conversation about the phrase and its gendered meaning. A similar challenge for our ESL collaborator was the gendered spelling difference between blond (a man) and blonde (a woman), which is an unusual quirk in American English that likely also would not trigger gender constructs in the minds of native English speakers, either. Context was important in the coding, too, in these cases, because isolated utterances of meaning could be misconstrued without considering nearby associations. For example, as critical when using the Gendered Descriptor code, a person described with ‘hair that is pulled back into a bun’, might be thought to indicate a

**Table 6.** RQ5: Did the describer choose to use a Gendered Descriptor?

	Self-descriptions	Used Gendered Descriptors	Gendered descriptors
D6 – Blind/low vision	5	0	0%
D7 – Blind/low vision	9	2	22%
D8 – Blind/low vision	9	5	56%
D6 – Sighted	38	18	47%
D7 – Sighted	55	25	45%
D8 – Sighted	63	24	38%
Subtotal of Blind/low vision	23	7	30%
Subtotal of sighted	156	67	43%
TOTALS	179	74	41%

woman, but not if the full phrase is analyzed: ‘full dark beard with long curly hair that is pulled back into a bun’.

As another complex example of gender-constructing expressions using Descriptors, we had in our sample the following: ‘Middle aged, female with long braids to the side of her face. Slight makeup and lipstick on her lips. A subtle smile, with her left-hand index finger touching the side of her jawline, she is wearing a ring on her middle finger and a gray hair scrunchy on her left wrist’. In that case, we identified a noun, ‘female’, with the additional emphasis of ‘long braids to the side of her face’, and which included the pronoun ‘her’. Could a man have long braids to the side of his face? Yes, but not with the inclusion of the nearby noun and pronoun, which frame the braids detail as gendered bookends. This person is wearing ‘slight makeup and lipstick’, too, with a ‘gray hair scrunchy on her left wrist’, which provides concrete visual details via Descriptors to the heavily gendered description.

## 5. Discussion

During our Descriptathon 8 registration, we asked the 23 participants who were blind or who had low-vision to rate the importance of gender in audio description. Of the 20 (87%) who responded, 18 said describing gender was moderately or very important to them. When asked why, their additional commentaries helped to highlight both the complexities and the importance of addressing this issue in the field, including such thoughts as:

- ‘Gender is part of who we are, cis-, trans, non-conforming. It is a part of our individuality’.
- ‘Because I want the describer to tell me what they see, and gender is a part of that. ... if gender is not clear, then say that as well. Avoids some confusion’.
- ‘I think it’s important since we don’t want to misgender people, and (we want to) respect who they are’.
- ‘Knowing someone’s gender can also help in understanding why they might apply certain filters to their responses, which experiences they share, their approach to life and so on’.
- ‘this is tricky because I think it would be important for the individual to identify their own gender’.

In short, contemporary society is having a conversation – and negotiating new rules – about gender, and people who are blind or who have low-vision also want to be involved in that discussion. But people who cannot see or see well are reliant on describers to construct and share gender expressions, meaning they are facing a new threat of social exclusion when they are left out of these debates or, on an even more fundamental level, not even privy to situation because of inadequate audio description. Similar discussions also need to happen about race, age, body shape, etc., in audio description practices. This study shows a way to enter those, and researchers in this vicinity – including at intersections among TS, AVT, disability studies, gender studies, technical communication, and other intellectual neighbors – are thirsty for more data and empirical research, like this, focused on grounded audio description discourse and practices.

This study used a constructivist Grounded Theory approach to identify and examine gender-constructing expressions in authentic contexts, including examples that were explicit (Gendered Noun and Gendered Pronoun) and implied (Gendered Name and Gendered Descriptors). Grounded Theory is an inductive approach to identifying thematic clusters within qualitative data, via multiple close readings, among multiple independent raters, who then confer and share findings from their analyses. What did we find? That in our sample, gender-constructing expressions were common but unevenly applied, meaning they are worthy of more study and better refinement in industry best-practices documents.

In these self-portraits, which were prompted with only generalized instructions, they almost always were written in Third Person perspective. But what would happen instead if participants were prompted to write in First Person? Further research could use reception-studies techniques to determine if the writer's preference in this case, for Third Person, matches the audience's needs and expectations or if First Person is a better compositional strategy for self-portraits. In another broadly consistent but surprising finding, we rarely encountered Third Person gender-neutral pronouns (e.g., they for a single individual) in any of these descriptions. So another impact of using First Person instead of Third Person perspective in descriptions would be to transform many pronouns into gender-neutral forms, such as how 'he' would be replaced with 'I' in cases of self-reference.

As a model for future research, this approach could be used to determine how much homogeneity of a sample could affect findings. The sample in Bennett et al. (2021) comes to mind as a group that might not generate the same results as we did here, even if they were given all of the same prompts in all of the same ways. Participants in that study – described as users who were also Black, Indigenous, People of Color, Non-binary, and/or Transgender – were self-describing images, or already mediated versions of themselves, too. But their descriptions were not analyzed for gender-construction expressions, like this study did, creating a gap in our understanding about reliability across cases and contexts.

Another finding in this study that deserves further inquiry in reception studies relates to ordering and patterning of description. In other words, does it matter to audiences which gendered-discourse types are included and in what order, for an audience member when that person is creating a mental image of the individual being described? A hypothesis could be made, for example, that the description – at least for maximum gender-construction clarity – should start with the person's name, followed by an explicit Gendered Noun use, followed by consistent use of the appropriate Gendered Pronoun in a description peppered with Gendered Descriptors. But such a proposition needs testing with real audiences in authentic contexts. In our sample, describers showed no consistent pattern of use of those main gendered-discourse types in self-portraits. Some used a Gendered Name/a Gendered Noun/a Gendered Pronoun/a Gendered Descriptor pattern, and some didn't. Some used all of those but in a different order. Some used many but not all. Some used none of those. Therefore, after determining ideal ordering and patterning, further research could test the impact of guidance and training on this process by, for example, introducing these types of gendered-discourse types before the writing of the self-description occurred, to create expectations and to get a sense of the intentionality of inclusion or omission of any particular type of discourse. Research like this would get complicated by inclusion of variables related to other social-identity

cues, such as race, age, and body shape, but a holistic approach to self-portrait description, including all of the details listeners would want to know, seems an ideal target.

This research also brings to the foreground several large and related questions, worthy of further pursuit, such as: How does the description of gender in general affect the audio description reception experience? What precisely does the description of gender add to that experience, or the absence of such description leave wondering? Do gender-construction expressions in audio description help with orientation in social settings? Envisioning action? Solidifying memories? How does being blind or having low vision affect personal reflections about gender identity? And gender expression? How do subjects of description feel about describers assigning them gender identity without their permission? And, maybe most profoundly, how does gender-constructing description broadly shape perceptions of people and possibly reinforce gendered stereotypes in society?

Maybe because many audio description guidelines today are oriented toward live or dynamic performances, such as in theater, film, or television – with additional audible cues, such as tone, pitch, and dialogue within those mediums to help conjure gender – this topic of gender cues in audio description has not been studied often or in much depth. But when a silent image of a person exists, and it needs to be described, that description substitutes for the visual picture being shared. That image is a social-connector and an identity shaper. This type of relatively narrow research focus on a particular aspect of audio-described portraiture – which can be replicated on other critical components of portrait description, such as age, ethnicity, and social class – could begin to build a deeper understanding of what we talk about when we talk about gender in audio description. And also this type of analysis can illuminate what we talk about when we talk about how people look and why that appearance is important. Such acute awareness of gender-identity language could be incorporated into training materials for describers, to support richer descriptions, but it also has the broader potential to be used to address social issues that contribute to gender discrimination, gender bias, or just general inequality of gender representations in media. By carefully examining gender-constructing expressions in all of their forms, including in audio description, and in practice, users of gendered labels can gain power in terms of how they are seen and identified through the spoken language.

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