

# “Describing Without Identifying”: The Phenomenological Role of Gender in Cataloging Practices

Travis Wagner<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup>The University of South Carolina’s School of Information Science, United States

[wagnertl@email.sc.edu](mailto:wagnertl@email.sc.edu)

## ABSTRACT

This dissertation explores gendering practices of visual information catalogers. The work aims to understand how catalogers perceive gender when describing persons within visual information. The qualitative study deployed queer interpretative phenomenological analysis to understand how catalogers think broadly about describing identity. The infused queer theoretical tenets helped to understand that while participants may not directly name gender as challenging, the conflation of gender into cisnormative monoliths (assuming every person's gender matches their sex-assigned-at birth) or silence around gender produce telling opinions concerning non-binary gender. The research also utilized a Think Aloud exercise wherein participants undertook in-the-moment cataloging three moving images. One image represented “neutral” cisgender identities, and two clips represented subversions to gender binaries. Thirteen catalogers were interviewed, and data produced noteworthy findings. The small sample size reflects qualitative methodological priority regarding a participants’ intimate, lived experiences rather than aiming for generalizability. Catalogers describe work with visual information as inherently challenging since describing anything without context requires caution. Catalogers also noted hesitance around describing humans given societal complexities around identities like race and gender. Nevertheless, participants during the Think Aloud exercise relied on gendering as descriptive shorthand (pronouns, male/female labels) and only reflected on these presumptions when engaging with the footage whose contents challenged gender binaries. Implications suggest a need for inclusivity training catalogers around contemporary notions of gender. Further, given the impact of the gender non-conforming footage on cataloger’s perceived practices, another implication suggests value in increased access to and representation of gender diverse materials within cultural heritage.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

cataloging; metadata; critical librarianship; special populations; archival arrangement and description

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

Gender identity; qualitative methods; phenomenology; queer theory; visual information