



Putting queerness into words: The audio description of *Sex Education*

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Abstract: Recent audiovisual works have increasingly featured non-normative characters, setting a trend in the industry. In translation studies, minority representation has been examined through feminist and queer translation theories. In such instances, the translation process is filtered by the professional's subjectivity and positionality, since translators act as mediators, making translation a purposeful and intentional act. This is especially relevant in AVT, due to the vast scope of audiovisual contents that has traditionally contributed to the perpetuation of stereotypes. Since the cultural turn in translation studies (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990), feminist and queer approaches have produced significant works (Baer, 2020; Castro & Ergun, 2017). Although AVT has been a focus (Martínez-Pleguezuelos, 2018), applying queer feminist perspectives to media accessibility is less explored (Iturregui-Gallardo, 2023; Iturregui-Gallardo & Hermosa-Ramírez, 2024). Netflix's *Sex Education* (2019–2024) exemplifies diversity, presenting fresh views on sexuality and identity, especially in its final season, which featured more queer and intersectional characters. This paper examines the audio descriptions (AD) of the series, by means of a multimodal approach (Villanueva-Jordán, 2024) to analyse how queerness is constructed and represented in the audio described version of the audiovisual content. The analysis raises questions about the agency, subjectivity, and ideology of accessibility professionals in AD. The results emphasise the importance of diversity in AD and its impact on queer and non-normative visually impaired people's social engagement and self-representation.

Keywords: queer; audiovisual translation; media accessibility; representation; multimodality.

1. Introduction

Representation matters, as has been demonstrated in several research experiences that correlate exposure to diversity, particularly queer representation, with more positive attitudes from groups usually related to more conservative views, such as cis straight men and religious people



(Calzo, 2009; Gomillion & Giuliano, 2011). Representation in audiovisual content is also beneficial for queer individuals and other minorities when it comes their wellbeing (Bond & Compton, 2015).

To represent, to present or depict something, understood as the “re-presentation” of the world, emphasises the process of construction developed in audiovisual production (Casey et al., 2007). What we consume on screen is never an unmediated image of reality since this reconstruction of reality has involved decisions about what and how components of an audiovisual text are shown. This decision-making process undertaken by creators has an important impact on how certain social groups are depicted, and this is particularly relevant when it comes to stereotypical representations. Therefore, the study of representation will always lead to an exploration of how power and ideology are deployed in the realisation of any media text. In order to observe how power and ideology interact with the decisions made by creators and mediators (audio describers and translators), it must be taken into account that fiction will never be an unbiased representation of reality (Casey et al., 2007). Historically, dominant social groups have overseen the way in which certain identities have been represented in relation to gender, class or race (Hall, 2018).

This decision-making process, which is present in all types of representation, is also present in the tasks undertaken in translation (cf. Von Flotow, 2012) and media accessibility. The ideological, political and social approaches to translation were theorised some decades ago with the establishment of the cultural turn (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990) and have since then developed into many perspectives towards Translation Studies that have focused on postcoloniality (Bassnett & Trivedi, 1999), gender and feminism (Castro & Ergun, 2017), activism (Tymoczko & Gentzler, 2002), queerness (Epstein & Gillett, 2017), and a long etcetera of social inequalities impregnated in all societies. This is particularly relevant in audiovisual translation, since the great scope of audiovisual contents has been traditionally connected to the perpetuation of stereotypes (De Marco, 2006). Recent studies have paid attention to how these decision-making processes take place in media accessibility services when it comes to minorities and diversity, particularly in audio description (AD) (Villela & Iturregui-Gallardo, 2020; Iturregui-Gallardo, 2023; Iturregui-Gallardo & Hermosa-Ramírez, 2024). These aforementioned studies have based their methodologies on feminist and queer translation theory and investigate the mediating power exerted by audio describers. In this type of intersemiotic translation the visual component in the audiovisual text is translated and transformed into a verbal description (Matamala, 2019) and is primarily targeted at people with sight loss.

The present article analyses the English AD of the series *Sex Education* (Nunn, 2019–2024), with special emphasis on season four, which include several non-normative individuals as both protagonists and recurrent characters. The description of non-normativity, for which the audio describer acts as filter and mediator of information will potentially explain the ideological load of the AD task.

The following sections will explore gender perspectives in media accessibility and audio description that draw from feminist and queer postulates in Translation Studies to inspect the representation of queerness and the power structures that impact any process of mediation. The theoretical background brings to the fore the notion of ethos and reworking of the ethos (Spoturno, 2019, 2022) considering the multimodality of the audiovisual text (Villanueva-Jordán, 2024). The representation of queerness in *Sex Education* is scrutinised to unveil a multilayered whole which is



processed and summarised in the aural message found in the AD experience. Examples of AD are presented and discussed to point at the decisions taken by the AD professional. The study closes with some conclusions in which trends and new possibilities are explained. This will further develop this line of research and reproduce the methodology in future settings.

2. Gender and audio description

Scholars have mainly examined the portrayal of diverse characters in key audiovisual translation (AVT) modes like subtitling and dubbing (Martínez-Pleguezuelos, 2018; Villanueva-Jordán & Chaume, 2021; Von Flotow & Josephy-Hernández, 2018). Research into media accessibility services for people with disabilities is only now gaining traction, revealing significant potential in this field (Iturregui-Gallardo, 2023). However, the contribution of feminist and queer perspectives to AD has been largely overlooked, despite the relevance of the visual component's role in the visual representation of diversity. With the apparition of recent audiovisual content featuring increasing numbers of non-normative characters, some studies have addressed how AD has represented such identities in recent years (Villela & Iturregui-Gallardo, 2020; Iturregui-Gallardo, 2023; Espasa, 2024; Haider et al., 2024; Iturregui-Gallardo & Hermosa-Ramírez, 2024).

Villela and Iturregui-Gallardo (2020) analysed the AD of *Flutua* (dir. Hooker, 2017), which portrays a gay couple—one of whom is deaf—and features queer artists. The study highlights the portrayal of non-normative identities and the audio describer's role as both mediator and filter, but remains as a description of the possibilities, without engaging further with the content. Later, Iturregui-Gallardo (2023) proposed a queer feminist methodology to both analyse and produce ADs, and provided some examples from Netflix series (*Sex Education*, *Las de la última fila*, *Feel Good*, *Special*, and *Heartstopper*), illustrating how minority representation can be altered or lost in the audio description. The same methodology, combining Castro's (2008) feminist translation strategies and Démont's (2017) queer translation modes, is presented in a case study by Iturregui-Gallardo & Hermosa-Ramírez (2024), where they explored gender-conscious AD strategies for a documentary on lesbophobia, featuring diverse women whose experiences are shaped by factors like race, gender expression, and age. The article highlights the challenges of AD production and underscores the pivotal role of AD professionals in shaping visually impaired audiences' understanding of the content. Focusing on the use of language, Haider et al. (2024) analyse Netflix content with trans and gender-non-conforming characters and the use of gendered terms and pronouns in AD, and how misgendering results in microaggressions. Finally, Espasa (2024) discusses the presence of intersectional characters, particularly those multilingual, and how these complex identities are transferred through audiovisual translation and media accessibility services.

Apart from the work produced in AD for audiovisual products, research has also been conducted on other products where visual images are mediated for blind users and users with sight loss. Examples are the analyses of automated image descriptions generated by AI (Stangl et al., 2020), or the work by Bennett et al. (2021), which dealt directly with AD users and the (self)representation of race, gender, and disability. In the same vein, Oppegaard and Miguel (2022) interviewed queer and racialized blind users. They concluded with the need for ADs to support gender self-expression and avoid social exclusion.



In the realm of professional practice, some guidelines and recommendation have also tackled such topics (Fryer, 2016; Hutchinson et al., 2020; Singh, 2021). While these recommendations offer valuable insights for crafting ADs, existing ADs exhibit varying approaches to depicting aspects like race or sexual identity, as shown in Iturregui-Gallardo (2023). Although the efforts made in the aforementioned recommendations and guidelines contribute to the ongoing negotiation of how diverse identities are represented, they fall short of providing solutions. This shortfall may stem from the relatively recent emergence of greater diversity on screen and a growing societal awareness of these issues, as indicated in the regular reports issued by GLAAD (see, for instance, their 2024 report “Studio Responsibility Index”)¹.

3. The representation of non-normativity on screen

In order to reflect on how representation works, it is worth mentioning that fiction is unable to provide a neutral or objective depiction of reality. Fiction will only shape how audiences interpret subjects and will assign meaning to them (Casey et al., 2007). As a matter of fact, Hall and Du Gay (1996) challenge the concept of a fixed and fully defined subject, suggesting that the construction of subjects is embedded in a continuous dialogue within historical, cultural, and social discourses. In this endeavour of constructing identities, Hall notes that dominant social groups often dictate how identities are portrayed in terms of gender, class, or race (Hall, 2018), which will directly have an impact on how these representations reach marginalised communities (Dyer, 2002).

Since cinema and TV became widely available scholars have long studied how minorities are depicted in the media, with notable attention given between the 1960s and 1990s (Fitzgerald, 2010). Early research largely focused on race, particularly African Americans, with Clark’s (1969) influential model identifying four stages of representation (summarised in Fitzgerald, 2010): Non-recognition, the absence of minority representation in dominant media; Ridicule, minority characters are portrayed as foolish, lazy, or laughable; Regulation, minorities are depicted as enforcers of dominant societal norms; and Respect, minorities are treated equivalently to other groups, with normalized portrayals of interracial relationships.

Clark’s framework has proven to be useful when analysing minorities other than racialised individuals, such as queer people (Raley & Lucas, 2006; Moore, 2015) and can extend to other marginalised populations, including disabled individuals. In the United States, the main exporter of audiovisual content globally, depicting queerness was prohibited during a great deal of the 20th century under the *Hollywood Production Code* (1930–1968) and the *Code of Practices for Television Broadcasters* (1952–1983), and early depictions of queer individuals, especially gay men, were related to child molesters, victims of violence or drag queens (Raley & Lucas, 2006). It was not until the 70s and 80s that representation of queerness was done in a more positive light (Netzley, 2010), but it was never for recurring and complex characters (Dow, 2001). The representation of queerness started being more nuanced in the 90s, albeit it closely followed stereotypes (Dow, 2001).

When it comes to representation beyond race and queerness, McRuer (2006) notes a similarity in how society erases or ridicules both disabled and queer individuals when, for instance, disabled people are portrayed as heroes or fighters in reductive narratives of their life experiences,

¹ GLAAD also issues reports on representation in advertising, gaming, social media, and other platforms.



while gay and lesbian experiences are constrained by heteronormative depictions that exclude more diverse perspectives when it comes to affection, sexuality, and family arrangements. The interaction between queerness and disability in activism and gain of rights, as well as the development of currents of thought that reflect on identity, discrimination, and visibility materialised in crip theory (Moya, 2022). McRuer (2006) claims that queer and disabled individuals have historically represented unproductivity and failure and been linked to illness (e.g. HIV pandemic) but have provided as space for erratic modes of life, leading to the reconsideration of affective bonds and care networks that call for the destruction of the nuclear family or marriage as the default environments for care.

The role of media accessibility professionals in mediating content—whether visual or auditory—significantly shapes how identities are represented. Adopting feminist and queer translation approaches in accessibility services opens the door to challenging entrenched stereotypes and passive interpretations of non-normative identities (Martínez-Pleguezuelos, 2021). Accessibility practices, such as subtitling for the Deaf and hard-of-hearing or AD for blind and visually impaired audiences, offer opportunities to critically reflect on diversity, similar to how written and audiovisual translations can adopt varying perspectives.

3.1. Ethics in representation: Collective and individual ethos

As suggested by Casey et al. (2007), representation is never a portrayal of reality, since it will always show a mediated biased depiction of it. However, the representation of minorities, historically managed by dominant groups (Hall, 2018), has evolved in terms of diversity and respect, that means more queer characters and in more diverse roles (GLAAD, 2024). Under this light, it is convenient to talk about ethical representation, and in this case, of queerness. I discuss ethics and representation based on Amossy's (2014) concept of ethos, conceived from the Aristotelian understanding as the self-image cast by a speaker or narrator and received by an audience, that reflects traces of the identity of the discourse producer in the discourse itself. Spoturno (2019, 2022) sees translation as a means by which the ethos can be modified in what she refers to as the reworking of the ethos. The ethos, as the image attached to a certain individual (*éthos individuel*) or a group of individuals (*éthos collectif*), is always based on a previous ethos (*éthos préalable*). Thusly, the reception of that image, a text, a narrative, will always be based on a matrix of previous images on the receiver's end within the translation process.

In her work, Spoturno (2019, 2022) analyses the reworking of the ethos of Puerto Rican poet and writer Rosario Ferré and Argentinian poet and activist Alicia Partnoy, through the translation of their work for the English-speaking North American readership. This hermeneutical process, by which an individual can be interpreted differently through their own discourse (i.e. poetic production), serves as a framework for the analysis of the elaboration of AD of queerness. Ethical mediation involves responsibly conveying diversity to challenge traditional (and simplistic or negative) representations of non-normative minorities, which can be examined critically through feminist and queer theoretical lenses.

Following this process, the audiovisual representation of the characters and the narratives they are found in their ethos, is already comprehended based on the previous ethos of the audience. This process adds a layer of complexity when mediating the ethos by means of audiovisual



translation, which means that a different linguistic community is going to process meanings based on their previous ethos. In the case of AD, the modulation of the image of such individuals and narratives is not only based on the previous ethos of describers but is also reworked to make sense in an aural rendition of the contents and processed by an audience who may, in their turn, face the message through their previous ethos.

4. Multimodality and meaning-making processes in AVT

Chaume (2001) argues that the audiovisual text belongs to a typology with an organisational mode that presents a semantic framework that has to be deconstructed by viewers in order to be comprehended. As pointed out by Villanueva-Jordán (2024), AVT has been conceptualised from the notion of constraint, which is consistently present in the analytical approaches to AVT (Titford, 1982; Mayoral et al., 1988; Pedersen, 2011; Ranzato, 2016; Baños & Díaz Cintas, 2017; Bolaños García-Escribano, 2017), Martí Ferriol (2010, 2013) even proposes strategies derived directly from the constraints in AVT. However, as suggested by Spiteri (2019), this framework of constraint represents also a source for creativity.

To study translation processes, and AVT in particular, multimodality stands as an integrated model of analysis (Kaindl, 2004; Borodo, 2014; Pérez-González, 2020a), as it addresses how the production of meanings simultaneously uses different semiotic repertoires (Iedema, 2003). In this sense, multimodality provides an effective way to describe communicative situations in their various forms and their complexity in producing meanings (Seizov & Wildfeuer, 2020). This is especially relevant in AD which develops a verbal description of the visual component while relying on the rest of the sound elements in the audiovisual text, creating, in turn, a new text in which elements complement each other. The concept of “grammar” proposed by Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) for image analysis suggests that the elements constituting semiotic sets do not restrict the meanings of these sets; rather, they contribute to the generation of meanings resulting from the interaction between their semiotic components.

The semiotic load in an audiovisual text enters a process of resemiotisation depending on the context in which they are found and transposed (Kress, 2020). This is evident in any translation set in which the translator, or audio describer, reads and divides the complete text into a diversity of semiotic components. Villanueva-Jordán (2024) places the audiovisual text in a particular communicative event (in a space and time that may change and that make different readings possible different) in which textuality is malleable. The versatility of signs is encapsulated by social semiotics, which stands as the most popular approach in translation studies (Kaindl, 2012; Remael & Reiers, 2018; Pérez-González, 2020b), following postmodernist postulates in translation.

Based on Reiss and Vermeer (2014) and Kress (2020), Villanueva-Jordán (2024) highlights translation as a process of meaning reconstitution, therefore with analysis potential from social approaches to semiotics and a multimodal perspective. Translators undertake a process of semiosis, creating meaning attached to signs assign makers, designing and producing in their work a target multimodal text. Therefore, for the analysis of AVT, and media accessibility services, observing semiotic design processes deployed by audiovisual translators and media accessibility professionals (as historical subjects and positioned in specific sociocultural contexts) becomes essential. Under



this light, AVT is examined from a critical discourse analysis perspective, influenced by the theories of Halliday and Matthiessen (2014) and Foucault's conception of power (Villanueva-Jordán, 2024). This approach observes how texts facilitate the circulation of power resources, promote ideologies, and silence others (Sindoni, 2016).

4.1. Multimodality and AD: Queer layering

If Kaindl (2020) categorises dubbing as an intramodal (from the verbal mode to the verbal mode), intersystemic (due to the production of meaning by means of an alternative linguistic system), and potentially intramedial and intrageneric; AD can be described as intermodal (from a visual to a verbal mode), intersystemic (production of meaning by means of another linguistic system), intermedial (visual and aural channels), and intergeneric (since AD counts on a set of expected patterns). The message goes through modifications that reshape its content to fulfil all the requirements to reach users, who mostly rely on the aural channel for the enjoyment of the audiovisual text.

When it comes to queerness, resemiotisation takes place through the audio describer who will undoubtedly have an impact on the form of the discourse around queerness (Villanueva-Jordán, 2024) in the accessible audiovisual content. It is here where Foucault's influence on discourse analysis and the poststructuralist conception of translation as rewriting place the relationship between translation/rewriting and power in the spotlight, pointing at the translator as a non-neutral agent whose actions are not "innocent" (Bassnett & Lefevere, 1990). I argue here that queerness, the meanings associated with it and its semiotic deployment, are also coded within communities. By detaching from queer postulates that historically disentangle ontological constructions of queerness within societies, and the self-perception of queer individuals, I sustain that queerness unfolds by means of a set of semiotic cues that make it meaningful and therefore intelligible to normative individuals, who represent the majority of consumers of audiovisual content.

It is within this context that queerness is fragmented into layers of meaning that are processed differently by audiences. The representation of these layers of queerness are irremediably selected, understood and reproduced by the filter of AD, or any other AVT mode, and it is later reconstructed in its translated form by professionals and, eventually, by audiences. The positionality of the describer, as translator (Villanueva-Jordán, 2024), is crucial for the presentation of this multilayered meaning of queerness.

This is particularly remarkable in *Sex Education*, which shows a queer utopia (Horeck, 2021) where individuality produces multilayered queer characters that fall far from old more simplistic representations of queerness on screen. This becomes a challenge in the AD, which reproduces the different layers of queerness in a multimodal format that are later embedded into a verbal string of words. The representation of queerness is not only limited by the usual constraints offered by AVT but also sees its multilayered multimodal presentation—visual components, such as clothing and make-up, and music, voices, and other sounds—reduced to a single channel.



4.2. Queerness in Sex Education

Netflix's *Sex Education* (2019–2024) set itself apart from other high school series with a strong focus on diversity. Achieving worldwide success, this high school comedy provided a refreshing take on sexuality and identity, breaking away from conventional fiction norms to present a more inclusive perspective than usual in teen series. The series acquired great popularity, being watched in more than forty million homes around the globe (Porter, 2019). The series plays with very recognisable features of genres such as the British “teen drama”, when it comes to humour, and of the American, when it comes to the references to pop culture (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020). The episodes explore issues related to sexuality while bringing to the fore serious contemporary sexual politics including queer politics, feminism, racism, poverty and ableism (Frost, 2020). Since the series was launched, it has captured the interest of scholars (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Horeck, 2021; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021; Zurian et al. 2021; Allen, 2024).

The series is described as queer utopia (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020; Horeck, 2021), in which “outing” stories are rarely a reason for trauma and that integrates completely the vast diversity of sexual and gender orientations (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020). The show uses humour and positive affect to centre queer perspectives and displaces heteronormativity as an idealized form of sexual and social relation (Horeck, 2021). It has been described as “one of the most quietly radical shows on television” (Brookes, 2020), especially for how the topics around sexuality, identity and affection are portrayed (Allen, 2024).

The final season, developed by a more diverse group of screenwriters, notably increased the presence of queer and non-normative characters. It also introduced intersectional characters, where disability, transness, and ethnicity intersected, highlighting the complexity of identity formation, which follows the characteristics of the writing and production team behind the camera, predominantly female and notably Black, Asian, and minority ethnic (Famurewa, 2020). According to Laury Nunn, creator of the series, audiences seek to see themselves reflected in the characters (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020). However, despite the positive reception of the series, it also responds to commercial purposes that consider variables such as the increase of LGBTIQ+ and teen audiences (Silva & Satler, 2019) and an audiovisual panorama in which diversity has proven profitable (Farr, 2016).

While it is true that the show presents a view of denaturalising heterosexuality, by engaging the audience affectively with its queer reorientation (Horeck, 2021), Vázquez-Rodríguez et al. (2020) point out that this utopic universe in which all non-normative characters are accepted correspond to a neoliberal ideology (Hasinoff, 2015) that makes structural and social prejudices and transhomophobic attitudes disappear, thus solely focusing on individuality. Nevertheless, even if *Sex Education* portrays a utopic, imperfect and biased representation of queerness, it is worth bearing in mind that while the inclusion of queer characters in the audiovisual does not erase the violence suffered by queer individuals, it problematises the situation and fosters debate (Peele, 2011).

The uniqueness of this series resides not only in its dialogues and stories, but also in its *mise en scene*, editing, musical soundtrack, performance and camera work (Horeck, 2021). In fact, the construction of queerness happens through a multimodal whole that encompasses practices, clothing, make up, music, and symbolism. By using the power of metatextuality, it reflects the



essential role queer audiovisuals have played for audiences who do not fit the norm (Horeck, 2021), in a process of queer breeding (Marshall, 2013) that reflects on queer inheritance as working through logics of reproduction or binary outside the heteronorm.

The queer utopia constructed in *Sex Education* is explained in a multimodal message that offers a multilayered view of queerness. The final message, in which image, sound and cultural references are intertwined, can be analysed through social approaches to resemiotisation in which the standpoint and situated knowledge of the audience plays a crucial role in their comprehension of the audiovisual content. In the case of AD, this polyphony of components configuring queerness in the audiovisual content is recoded into a verbal stream reshaping it into words that coexist and fuse with the rest of the elements that form the aural dimension of the audiovisual text.

5. Methodology

The series *Sex Education* was selected due to its rich queer visual component. As mentioned in the previous section, the series not only presents a vast myriad of dissidences but does it in a (utopian) way that allows for the construction of dense and complex intertwined messages of queerness, which also rely on pop culture references and camp symbolism. In particular, the series' fourth season presents more queer and multilayered queer characters than the previous seasons, which reflects the writing and creative team behind the cameras.

The first step was to select characters who visibly showed signs of queerness, understood as those aspects which result in discomfort, unintelligibility, and incongruity when compared to cisheteronormative structures of thought. Finally, the analysis was based on Eric Effiong, the protagonist's best friend, who is Black, of Nigerian family, gay and camp; Cal Bowman, a Black non-binary student who struggles with body dysmorphia and whose story becomes an important plot in the last season; Abbi Montgomery, a white trans female student; and Roman, a genderfluid trans male student of Pakistani descent, Abbi's partner. The latter two characters are considered the "it couple" of the high school. Some of the other queer characters are secondary and thus appear in less scenes.

To conduct the analysis, all the scenes where these characters appear as main characters were selected and the English AD of the scenes was transcribed. The data collection was performed using an Excel table that included the transcribed text and a series of categories which reproduce the multimodal semiotics of queerness: makeup, clothing, physical appearance, and actions. The observation was qualitative and had the intention of disentangling the queer components that made it to or that were reshaped in the AD script and how these components interacted with other audio elements to reproduce the multilayered meanings of queerness. Taking this into consideration, a final column was left for observations, in which the researcher could provide further insights into the scene, aspects that should have been specified, the selection of vocabulary used to describe certain elements, and the relationship between the visual component, dialogue and sound elements (music and other ambience sounds). The result was a well-furnished table in which information was collected and placed in parallel for every instance in which these queer characters appeared on screen. Results are presented and discussed in the following section.



6. Discussion of results: Audio describing queerness

This analysis has focused on a list of queer characters, that are particularly defiant of the heteronorm and that have an important presence in the series. The results are presented and discussed for each of the characters, and they are placed in order of appearance in the series.

6.1. Eric Effiong

Eric is Otis best friend and a recurrent character in the series, appearing in all four seasons. He is the queer character with most scenes and whose character arc is more defined and explained since the audience knows him more in depth. In terms of AD, this means that there are more instances in which the character gets to be described, and therefore, there is more room for his characterisation, making it more nuanced and diverse than other characters'. Instances of AD are provided in different examples which follow a chronological order.

Example 1: Eric Effiong, Season 1, Episode 1

Season 1, Episode 1
Context Eric is in his room alone, on his bed laying on his stomach while applying make-up in front of a mirror. His father calls for him.
AD transcript In his bedroom, Eric lays on his bed with his laptop. He applies make up. He reads Otis' reply: Yes but tomorrow I'm dead! Eric applies more blush. / He grabs a wipe and removes his lip gloss.
Items Make up
Music and other ambience sounds The song <i>I can't stand the rain</i> by Tina Turner plays in the background.

Source: Author (2025)

In this scene, Eric is applying makeup in his room when his father calls for him and he abruptly stops putting on makeup and removes it. The action is accompanied by a song by Tina Turner, who is an icon for the (Black) queer community. As mentioned before (Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2021), queerness is constructed through the actions (a cis man applying makeup) and the use of camp cultural references (Tina Turner). While the visual and aural semiotic resources in this scene construct a layered portrayal of Eric's queerness, the AD flattens much of this meaning, reducing the semiotic relevance of some details.

Through the lens of multimodality, this scene conveys a convergence of visual (makeup, body language) and aural (Tina Turner's track) modes. The concept of queer layering is highly pertinent here. The scene encodes queerness through multiple signifiers: the intimacy of Eric's bedroom, his use of makeup as gender expression, and Tina Turner's music. On top of that, I argue that queerness is also constructed through negativity here (secrecy, failure, cf. Halberstam, 2011). Eric removes the makeup when his father calls for him, as if this was something punishable. The AD follows all these details constructing queerness but fails to mention the chairs blocking Eric's door, that are present in the frame.



Example 2: Eric Effiong, Season 1, Episode 3

Season 1, Episode 3	
Context	Eric and Lily are putting make up on and dressing up, they talk about sex and Lily asks Eric to show her gay porn. While they watch a video, Eric's father enters the room with tea and biscuits, and asks Lily to leave. He then asks Eric to remove the makeup.
AD transcript	Eric wears a dress and a boa. / Then his dad hands him a mug.
Items	Makeup, clothing, actions
Music and other ambience sounds	No music or ambience sounds

Source: Author (2025)

The relationship Eric has with his religious Nigerian parents considering his homosexuality and queerness could be considered as part of the queer utopia (see Section 4) presented in *Sex Education*. In Example 2, Eric's clothing is prioritised in the AD ("a dress and a boa"), over other queer aspects such as makeup. Eric's act of dressing up and engaging in intimate conversation with Lily serves as a moment of queer self-expression and exploration. The scene is rich in semiotic cues (makeup, costume, and gestures), that visually articulate Eric's fluid identity. The AD reduces this multimodal complexity to; "Eric wears a dress and a boa." From the perspective of ethos and queer representation, this instance reflects a reworking, or partial erasure, of Eric's constructed subjectivity. Eric's ethos as an expressive queer character is reduced to a generic instance of cross-dressing.

When Eric's father interrupts Lily's and Eric's dress up session, Lily is invited to leave. The father seems clearly disappointed (which is understood by the tone of his voice) but then hands his son a mug of tea. The failure to acknowledge the tension between father and son exemplifies the selectivity of the AD task. This detail is a clear example of the complexity of Eric's parents' relationship with their son's identity (worry and protection rather than queerphobia).

Example 3: Eric Effiong, Season 1, Episode 5

Season 1, Episode 5	
Context	Eric is ready to go see the musical <i>Hedwig and the Angry Inch</i> with Otis. He is all dressed up as the main character of the musical.
AD transcript	At Eric's house, Eric wears red high heel boots, cut-off jean shorts and a long blonde wig. / Eric grabs a tiger print coat, smiles at his dad, then goes to the door. / His dad shakes his head.
Items	Makeup, clothing, action
Music and other ambience sounds	The song <i>Live Baby Live</i> by INXS plays at the end of the scene as Eric opens the door and leaves.

Source: Author (2025)

In Example 3, Eric is dressed up as Hedwig, the protagonist of the musical *Hedwig and the Angry Inch* (Mitchel, 2001). Eric's scene is put in parallel with Otis². The AD highlights the boots, the shorts and the blonde hair, which are very identifiable traits of the musical's protagonist, a cult musical emblem of queer resistance and gender fluidity. While this instance of AD succeeds in

² Otis is also dressed up as Hedwig, but her mother just says bye and wishes him a nice evening.

transmitting more than minimal visual information, the absence of descriptors related to makeup, facial expressions or the performative nature of Eric’s self-presentation limits the semiotic density of the moment, which includes intertextual references to queer culture.

Crucially, the describer notes Eric’s father shaking his head, a subtle but charged gesture that signals disapproval and breaks the positive energy of the moment. Eric’s father is concerned about his son being exposed to violence and mistreatment. The describer’s omissions may result in queer layering being lost in translation. Subtleties are lost in the description, such as the finesse and detail of Eric’s costume in comparison to Otis’, of which the AD only mentions he is dressed up as Hedwig, as well as Eric’s campness, which acts in contrast with Otis’ more rigid (masculine) movements.

Example 5: Eric Effiong, Season 1, Episode 7

Season 01, Episode 07	
Context	Eric is dressing up for the high school dance.
AD transcript	At his house, Eric applies mascara, gold glitter around his eyes, and wears silver lipstick. He puts on one dangling earring and dons a west African headdress of green thick fabric, wearing a multicolour suit, he checks his reflection then goes down to his family. / His mum and dad sit up from their easy chairs and Eric starts off. / Eric smiles.
Items	Makeup, clothing, ethnic features
Music and other ambience sounds	A funky unidentified song plays in the background.

Source: Author (2025)

Example 5 shows how the AD profiles Eric’s queer identity in its intersectional complexity, which stands out as a rich multimodal moment where queerness, Blackness, and cultural heritage intersect visually and aurally. It is not only non-normative given the fact that he is a queer man but also because of his ethnic expression when he uses traditional Nigerian fabrics and accessories within a white European milieu. The AD explicitly mentions Eric’s “mascara, gold glitter around his eyes, and silver lipstick,” along with his “West African headdress of green thick fabric” and “multicolour suit,” offering a vibrant image of gender nonconformity and ethnic pride. This representation aligns with the idea of queerness as layered and culturally situated and reflects a form of multimodal semiosis (Kress & Van Leeuwen, 2006; Villanueva-Jordán, 2024). The AD’s attention to these components conveys a sense of defiant self-expression in direct dialogue with dominant norms (Hall, 2018).

From the perspective of the ethos (Amossy, 2014; Spoturno, 2022), this moment signals a reworking of ethos through Eric’s embodiment, especially as he is seen by his family, whose reaction (“sit up from their easy chairs”) is left ambiguously interpreted. The audio describer could have gone beyond surface and engage with the political charge of Eric’s appearance, as a queer Black individual embracing both gender expression and cultural lineage, in a public, by delving into his families’ facial gestures.

In Example 6, the AD of Eric’s preparation to meet Adam presents a display of queer embodiment through action, music, and intertextual references. The inclusion of Todrick Hall’s *Nails, Hair, Hips, Heels*, enhances its alignment with LGBTQ+ self-celebration. The importance of the song and its lyrics, an ode to the camp, are left space in the AD script to be present in the multimodal message cast through the aural channel



Example 6: Eric Effiong, Season 3, Episode 3

Season 03, Episode 03
Context
Eric in his room getting ready to meet Adam.
AD transcript
In his room, Eric lip-synchs with the music. He finishes his makeup and dances towards his bed. He cartwheels over his bed then dances into his floral print shirt. He takes Rahim's poems from his drawer. He grabs Pablo Neruda and Ocean Vuong from his bookshelf and tosses them on his bed.
Items
Clothing, makeup, action
Music and other ambience sounds
The song <i>Nails, hair, hips, heels</i> by Todrick Hall plays in the background.

Source: Author (2025)

On the other hand, the AD mentions the authors whose books are tossed on the bed by Eric, poetry collections gifted by his ex-boyfriend, Rahim. Neruda is a classic Chilean poet, while Vuong is an important queer poet, who happens to be a non-white author as well. This moment of AD presents a layered resemiotisation of queerness, translating not just the visual but also Eric's cultural interests.

Example 7: Eric Effiong, Season 3, Episode 5

Season 3, Episode 5
Context
Eric before leaving on the family trip to Nigeria. His mum is upset about his outfit. Then Eric goes back to his bedroom.
AD transcript
At his house, Eric rushes downstairs with his suitcase, he wears a flamboyantly patterned tracksuit. / Eric heads upstairs. / In his room, Eric puts away his flamboyant clothes. He pulls on a plain jean bomber jacket over his striped shirt. He examines his reflection then looks at a picture of him and Adam. He smiles, then slips the photo into his backpack.
Items
Clothing
Music and other ambience sounds
No music and no relevant sounds

Source: Author (2025)

In the excerpt found in Example 7, the AD conveys a moment of identity negotiation as Eric prepares for a family trip to Nigeria. The AD uses the words “flamboyantly” and “flamboyant” to refer to Eric's typically vibrant and queer outfits. The word evolves from the French “flambe”, “flame”³, and refers to the extravagant, which catches the eye and is noticed. By using this term instead of others that can easily be related to “having a lot of colours”, queerness is better conveyed, also reappropriating a term that has been used to refer to homosexuality negatively in the past, like the term queer (Traugott, 2005)⁴. This adjective would not be probably used to describe a straight character dressed in colours, but it is used to embrace Eric's iridescence and queerness.

However, the shift occurs when Eric retreats to his bedroom to replace the outfit with more subdued clothing (a “plain jean bomber jacket”), suggesting a conscious modulation of his queerness in response to the expectations of the Nigerian culture and his family. The AD thus subtly exposes the complexities of queer visibility within diasporic contexts, where queerness must often navigate

³ https://www.oed.com/dictionary/flamboyant_adj?tab=factsheet

⁴ Also found in an entry of the Wikipedia section on LGBTQI+ terminology.



multiple, and sometimes conflicting, social codes. In the description, Eric’s change of outfit is set against him smiling while taking his picture with his boyfriend Adam, illustrating his negotiation of his own identity.

Example 8: Eric Effiong, Season 4, Episode 5

Season 04, Episode 05	
Context	Eric is in a dream on a bridge where he encounters a black female God.
AD transcript	In the countryside, a river flows gently beneath a truss bridge. Eric dances on the bridge wearing a silver coat and purple iridescent pants. He pauses to gaze at a silver penis-shaped chapstick. He holds the chapstick to his lips.
Items	Clothing, makeup, actions
Music and other ambience sounds	The song <i>Chapstick</i> by Todrick Hall starts playing in the background.

Source: Author (2025)

In Example 8, the scene portrays Eric dancing on a bridge in a silver coat and iridescent purple pants, pausing to sensually apply a silver penis-shaped chapstick to his lips. The scene is set to the song *Chapstick* by Todrick Hall, and the AD deliberately pauses to allow the lyrics to be heard, reinforcing its performative and camp aesthetics. The AD focuses on the shape of the chapstick (penis-shaped), since it is of crucial in the queer and camp narrative. Through these intersecting semiotic elements (costume, actions, and music) the AD participates in a multimodal queering of identity and desire. However, the AD does not specify the kind of dance movements, linked to voguing, a type of dance linked to the ballroom and drag scene, which could have added to the layering of queerness and the semiotic load of the moment.

6.2. Cal Bowman

Cal is a non-binary Black student who is struggling with their identity and their own body image. The AD refers to them with non-binary pronouns and terms from the beginning, before this is explicitly stated by the character themselves. Although this could be somehow patronising for the AD user, since information is provided beforehand, the character’s appearance is visually gender-fluid. The use of non-binary language highlights this visual characteristic in the AD.

Example 9: Cal Bowman, Season 3, Episode 3

Season 3, Episode 3	
Context	Cal enters the girls’ changing room.
AD transcript	In the girls’ change room, Cal carries their backpack to a bench near the far wall. As Cal takes off their baggy blazer, they glance at the other girls chatting and changing. Cal removes their baggy button down to reveal a little red crop top. / The girls stare at Cal. Cal notices, then takes their new uniform out of its plastic wrapping. Cal holds up the girls’ tie and examines it. Now dressed, Cal tucks on their snug-fitting grey button-down shirt. Cal sighs, then changes out of their baggy pants. They try on their tighter blazer and take it off again. Cal tosses it into their bag then puts on a baggy sweatshirt and a larger blazer. Cal sits with their eyes closed on the bench.
Items	Clothing
Music and other ambience sounds	The song <i>Trans Mantra</i> by Ezra Furman plays in the background.

Source: Author (2025)



In Example 9, the scene follows Cal as they enter the female changing room and is forced to navigate the discomfort of gendered expectations while they change. Although non-binary pronouns and terms are used for Cal, the AD in Example 9 notably misgenders a crucial item of clothing: Cal's binder is inaccurately described as a "little red crop top," which falls far from embracing the queerness of the piece of clothing used by trans and non-binary masculine people, undermining the gender-affirming function of the binder.

This scene deals with Cal's struggle when being obliged to dress "more feminine" by the head of the high school. Furthermore, the AD does not allow space for the song *Trans Mantra* to be heard. This omission is particularly significant given that the song's lyrics explicitly articulate trans experiences of resistance to a normative society: "I'm living somewhere nobody goes to, I'm speaking in a language nobody talks."

Example 10: Cal Bowman, Season 4, Episode 3

Season 4, Episode 3
Context
Cal in their bedroom.
AD transcript
In their bedroom, Cal scrolls through images of young men on their tablet.
Items
Physical appearance
Music and other ambience sounds
The song <i>Feels like I'm in love</i> by Kelly Marie plays in the background.

Source: Author (2025)

As in the previous example (Example 9), in Example 10 the AD fails to portray an important part of the queer component. Cal is looking at young trans men on their tablet, as suggested by the top-surgery scars on their chests. This is also written in the search bar on Cal's screen and reflects language explicitly referencing transmasculine identities, but it is not conveyed in the audio description despite being an important part of the multimodal description of queerness.

The omission reflects a failure of queer visibility and layering: the AD flattens the scene's gender complexity. Drawing from a more creative notion of AD, it could have added to the multimodal construction of meaning. This instance exemplifies a lost opportunity to render the scene's queer gaze audible. The result misses the chance to affirm trans(masculine) embodiment and desire, which are central to Cal's story.

6.3. Abbi Montgomery and Roman Zardari

The queer utopia presented by *Sex Education* (Horeck, 2021; Vázquez-Rodríguez et al., 2020), allows for an ideal queer world in which Abbi and Roman, both trans people, are the it-couple of the high school. These two characters are two of the most non-normative characters in the series due to the way they behave, present and exist.



Example 11: Roman Zardari, Season 4, Episode 2

Season 4, Episode 2
Context
Otis talking to Roman about their sex problems with Abbi.
AD transcript
Otis glances across the yard and sees Roman lifting weights and the outdoor gym. Otis heads over to the gym and as he heads inside, he takes off his backpack and jacket. / Roman stretches. / Flashback: Roman is asleep in bed with Abbi. / As Roman lays with his eyes shut, Abbi masturbates besides him. / Abbi's hand moves beneath the covers. / Roman hands over his water bottle as he moves to a cable machine. / Roman stands and pulls down on handles.
Items
Makeup, clothing, accessories (nails)
Music and other ambience sounds
No music, and just some gym ambience sounds.

Source: Author (2025)

Example 12: Roman Zardari, Season 4, Episode 3

Season 4, Episode 3
Context
Inside the club, Roman is dancing with his group of friends, and is being observed by Cal, the non-binary student struggling with his body dysmorphia.
AD transcript
On the dancefloor, strobe lights flash as dancers group beneath blue, pink and purple lights. Roman, Aisha and Abbi dance in a group. Cal watches as Roman removes his sparkly vest revealing a leather harness fitted tightly over his bare tattooed chest. There are scars beneath his nipples. Cal's eyelids go heavy as they watch Roman. Cal blinks and diverts their gaze.
Items
Clothing, physical appearance
Music and other ambience sounds
The song Strut by Elohim & Big Freedia is playing in the club.

Source: Author (2025)

Example 13: Roman Zardari, Season 4, Episode 8

Season 4, Episode 8
Context
Roman is preparing his bedroom for a romantic night with Abbi.
AD transcript
Roman lowers a record needle onto a turn table. He places a frog and a strawberry stuffy beside a pillow on his bed that reads "you stole my heart". He lights a candle and sets small dishes of snacks onto a vanity. He skewers a cherry with his long fingernail. He eats the cherry then scatters dried rose petals on the bed. He dances in his see-through purple robe when Abbi arrives.
Items
Clothing, accessories, actions
Music and other ambience sounds
Roman plays the song <i>2 become 1</i> by Emma Bunton on his record player.

Source: Author (2025)

Example 14: Abbi Montgomery and Roman Zardari, Season 4, Episode 8

Season 4, Episode 8
Context
Abbi and Roman are having sex in Roman's bedroom.
AD transcript
In Roman's bedroom, Roman sits naked straddling Abbi. He angulates his pelvis as they hold hands and gaze into each other's eyes. He pulls her up to him and they embrace kissing each other.
Items
Actions
Music and other ambience sounds
A soft piano song plays in the background.

Source: Author (2025)



Across Examples 11 to 14, Roman Zardari's character is depicted through a complex mixture of queer embodiment, sexuality, and gender expression, yet the AD varies in its ability to fully embrace Roman's trans and queer identity. Roman's appearance constantly calls into question femininity and masculinity.

In Example 11, nothing is said about queerness, when some camera work points at Roman's body hair or long gel fingernails, two crucial components in the character's physical appearance. The fingernails do not appear in the AD until the scene portrayed in Example 13, when he is preparing his bedroom for a romantic night. Following Spoturno (2019, 2022), this could be understood as a missed opportunity to ethically rework Roman's ethos in a way that challenges prior ethos (*éthos préalable*) of queerness as either comic, tragic, or hypersexualised (Raley & Lucas, 2006).

However, Roman's queer physicality is directly addressed when Cal's looking at Roman's chest as he dances (Example 12). The AD carefully follows the camerawork that focuses on Roman's tattooed chest and the leather harness that leaves his top-surgery scars seen. Cal's reaction, described as "Cal's eyelids go heavy" is capturing their burning desire to get their chest done, which nuances and refines the action of "staring at" or "looking at", and that is representative to the complexity of semiotics in the scene (Kress, 2020), that capture not only objective details (Roman's body) but also is loaded with emotionality and subjectivity (Cal's gaze).

In this vein, in Example 13, the AD highlights Roman's long fingernails and see-through purple robe, details that challenge the viewer's understanding of gender expression. As in Example 12, the omission of Roman's body hair, a traditionally masculine trait, is an important choice made by the AD script and narrows the semiotic range available to construct Roman's identity, reducing in turn the potential for queer layering.

Towards the end of the last episode, Abbi and Roman are seen having sex (Example 14). The scene, without showing genitalia, shows how Abbi laying on the bed, penetrates Roman, who is on top. The AD makes use of the verb "to straddle" which goes beyond being on top and focuses on the movement when he "angulates his pelvis". The penetrative sex incarnated in a trans couple by which traditional sexual roles are challenged is put very consciously on screen and so is reflected in the AD which completes Abbi's line at the end: "I love being. This moment subverts conventional representations of heteronormative sexual practices by positioning Abbi as a feminine figure in a penetrating role, which directly questions traditional gender expectations. In addition, the verbal description of the characters accompanies elements such as their (trans) voices, which complete the multimodal semiotic message by which queerness is aurally transmitted.

7. Discussion

The queer utopia put forward by *Sex Education* stands as a great example of diversity on television, bringing minority representation to the very fore. The series depicts characters who are not only queer, but who have different skin colours, wear clothes, makeup and accessories from various ethnical backgrounds, have different disabilities and relate sexually and affectively in a myriad of manners. Despite the critiques faced by showing an unrealistic society in which discrimination is barely noticeable and whose characters must only deal individually with their own differences (Hasinoff, 2015), it cannot be denied that the creators and scriptwriters have developed the series



with the clear purpose of portraying diversity. Given that greater representation of diversity in audiovisual contents fosters acceptance and diminishes discriminatory and negative attitudes to non-normative individuals, *Sex Education's* potential is indisputable.

In such multimodal texts, many of the codes that carry queerness are visual, which create a semiotic system that is linked to pop culture, queer iconicity, makeup, clothing, actions and so on. This visual component is entangled in a whole with music, voices and other ambient sounds to create a multimodal message that is decoded by audiences. As proposed by social approaches to semiotics (Kress, 2020), the ability to decode and understand the various modes of multimodal content is strongly dependant on the receiver's sociocultural position (Villanueva-Jordán, 2024). This last assumption is particularly relevant to the construction of queerness, the manifestations of which are historically linked to negative connotations. In the case of AD users, multimodal complexity is embedded in the aural channel, thus becoming temporarily linear and heavily dependent on verbal description.

Thus, the audio describer acts as a filter of the audiovisual multimodal message and transfers the message in a verbal account. Adopting a sociosemiotic perspective, based on poststructuralist postulates, the situated knowledge of accessibility professionals (cf. Haraway, 1995) and their working environment will have an impact on the way queerness and queer characters and narratives are explained and conceptualised. As proposed by the reworking of the individual and collective ethos in translation (Spoturno, 2019, 2022), the understanding of an entity (person, characteristic, action) in the original (audiovisual) text (, that is emitted by the message, undergoes modifications in the translated (audio described) rendition. This analysis evinces how the expression of queerness is built by means of a multilayered construction that is intelligible to varied extents. Some of the elements that convey queerness may or may not be understood in the same way globally, while others rely on culture, on society, on the identity of the audience and so on. It is through this social observation of semiotics that queerness has the potential to make sense and can be perceived positively or negatively.

In the analysis presented in this article, which has focused particularly on the characters of Eric Effiong, Cal Bowman, Abbi Montgomery and Roman Zardari, the AD demonstrates in general a positive and ethical approach when representing the queerness. It shows that efforts have been made to portray the nuances and reduce stereotypical representations through lexical choice, and to allow for all the information outside the audio description to participate in the multimodal account of queerness. Illustrative examples of this are the recurrent use of the adjective “flamboyant”, which has been pejoratively used in the past and is able to grasp queer looks and movements; or the spaces left by the AD for the songs in the background that complete the multimodal expression through music and pop references (with the song *Nails, Hair, Hips, Heels* by Todrick Hall or Tina Turner's *I can't stand the rain*).

However, some instances of the AD fail to convey elements that carry queerness. Examples of this are the loss of some details about physical appearance, such as Roman's long nails worn since his first scene or his body hair, which is never mentioned; the scars on the chest of the trans men Cal was scrolling down on his tablet; or the confusion of the binder Cal was wearing to cover their chest by a “crop top” in the AD — a piece of clothing normally related to femininity. Despite these incongruencies in the AD, it is vital to bear in mind the constraints of AD, such as time and space.



While some of this lost information could have been mitigated with the increase of physical space, some choices may be the result of the professional's subjectivity and agency. The confusion of the binder for a crop top, is a good example.

8. Conclusions

The analysis presented in these pages provides evidence of the complexity of the audiovisual text and its translation processes that take place in accessibility services, such as AD. Furthermore, the complexity increases when dealing with queerness (Iturregui-Gallardo, 2023). This is materialised in the form of a multilayered expression that is processed and interpreted differently by the receiver's subjectivity, as suggested by social semiotics perspectives applied in the field of Translation Studies (Villanueva-Jordán, 2024), that in this case is mediating for a second receiver who is decoding a mediated message in the form of verbal description.

Overall, the methodology used to create the AD in the analysed scenes seems to aim at ethical representations of queer and non-normative individuals, trying to focus on elements that convey and shape queerness in the narrative. However, the AD has also failed to convey certain meanings and could have made different choices when selecting the elements of queerness to be included in the script, which leads us to consider the professionals knowledge, positionality and subjectivity when dealing with certain messages of queerness.

Whereas the multimodal analysis presented here was conducted by systematising the observation of the scenes, it is still a descriptive analysis that risks showing the researcher's positionality, in terms of nationality, preferences and experiences. The inherent characteristics of the researcher, and the time and place where the study took place are proof of the complexity of hermeneutical observations of processes of resemiotisation (Kress, 2020). However, it also opens the way to the replication with other audiovisual contents and contexts and provides evidence for the potential possibilities of such methodologies.

The current analysis only takes into account the AD and the visual elements dependant on it. Since dialogues also play an important role in the aural message presented to the AD user, textual analysis of the dialogues may also be carried out in combination with AD. On the other hand, the AD was only analysed in British English. Other proposals should include ADs in other languages and there is potential for the comparison of multilingual analysis of scripts that may reveal fruitful trends in the handling of queerness in the series.

Finally, this analysis was conducted from the standpoint of the researcher. Even if this can identify trends and provide a constructive commentary, to better understand how AD conveys queerness, research should be carried out with AD users, people who are blind or visually impaired. Besides, the study could be reproduced in different territories with speakers of different languages, within the sociocultural environments of both the accessibility practitioners and the AD users.



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