

Audio Description in Arabic: A Scoping Review

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Abstract

Arabic is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world, yet audio description in Arabic remains in its infancy, both in terms of service provision and as an academic discipline. To date, there is little standardisation and few guidelines available in Arabic compared to other languages such as German, English, Spanish, and Portuguese. This article presents a scoping review of the literature in audio description in Arabic. First, the review summarises existing research conducted on audio description in Arabic in film, museums, and wayfinding. Then, it presents and contextualises audio description practices in Arabic film festivals, on-demand platforms, museums and heritage sites, and live events. This article calls for further research and the adoption of audio description in Arabic-speaking countries, given the potential of audio description to break down barriers and allow audiences with blindness and low vision to participate in cultural, educational, and entertainment experiences, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society.

Key words: accessibility, Arabic, audio description, blindness and low vision.

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Introduction

Accessibility is playing an increasingly important role in our societies, as efforts grow to create more inclusive environments and socially just communities, both globally and locally. Initially conceived “as a means to overcome physical or sensorial barriers” (Matamala & Orero, 2016, p. 3), accessibility is now seen as a much broader concept including means to overcome linguistic, technological, and digital barriers, among others.

The field of audiovisual translation (AVT) has significantly contributed to accessibility by providing access services to media via subtitling, dubbing and, subsequently, audio description (AD). Within the Arabic-speaking countries – a total of twenty-five spread across Africa and West Asia (World Population Review, n.d.), modes of AVT such as subtitling and dubbing are widespread. However, AD remains limited, both in research and practice. This limitation translates to an estimated 3 million people having inadequate access to entertainment, knowledge, and art.

In this review paper, we aim to provide an updated account of the history and recent developments in AD in Arabic, encompassing both research and practice. In the next sections, the paper describes and examines the history of AD in Arabic and discusses the current trends in the field. Following a review of the literature, this article presents an overview of the AD industry in Arabic, including TV, film and the arts. The final section reflects on the current state of AD in Arabic-speaking countries and discusses potential future directions for practice and research. The review highlights the growing necessity of AD developments in Arabic and calls for a standardisation of guidelines.

1. Disability, Accessibility, and Blindness in Arabic-Speaking Countries

Disability and accessibility studies still “remain largely a Euro-[North]American endeavour”; however, there is a growing and urgent demand for perspectives from the “Global South/Majority World” (Scalenghe, 2019, p. 109). Arabic-speaking countries, spanning across northern Africa and western Asia, are heterogeneous, and their accessibility efforts vary. Reliable data on disabilities is scarce and often unreliable, due to underreporting and narrow representation of disabilities (Rohwerder, 2018). This creates challenges in forming a clear understanding of disability and accessibility in Arabic-speaking countries. Although awareness of disabilities is increasing, as evidenced by the rise in academic studies and practices cited in this paper, our experience as researchers and practitioners suggests that efforts remain fragmented and disconnected, with limited collaboration among scholars and between scholars and the industry.

Reports by Disability and Development organisations on disability in the Arab world indicate that people with disabilities face social discrimination, unemployment, issues accessing education and political participation and overall inequality (Abou Khalil & Khoury, 2020; Rohwerder, 2018). Furthermore, even though many Arabic-speaking countries are signatories to the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, there continues to be a lack of legislation ensuring the equal rights

and full participation in society of people with disabilities (Abou Khalil & Khoury, 2020; Rohwerder, 2018). The structural discrimination, along with social stigma, creates a disadvantaged situation that requires reforms that address inequalities and contribute to a more inclusive society.

A lack of recent national statistics of disability in Arab countries (United Nations Population Fund, 2022), in conjunction with the taboos and stigma associated with disabilities in Arab countries, contributes to the invisibility of people with disabilities, which contributes to a lack of awareness in terms of their needs and in providing access to services, such as AD. Echoing Scalenghe's sentiment that "not only does disability studies have much to offer to Middle East studies, but Middle East studies has much to offer to disability studies" (2019, p. 109), there is still much to be done in advancing disability and accessibility research in the region, particularly with regard to legislation, and collecting and maintaining updated statistics, as well as in terms of scholarly work.

2. Notes on Arabic, Cinema, TV and On-Demand Platforms

Arabic is a diglossic language, a situation in which two languages, or two varieties of the same language, coexist within a community, each used for specific linguistic and communicative purposes. The term usually applies to languages with distinct "high" and "low" (colloquial) varieties, such as Arabic. In the case of Arabic, Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) is the official, standardised language used in most formal media and news broadcasting communications, and it coexists with the various regional colloquial varieties of Arabic that are spoken and which vary from country to country (Cote, 2009).

On TV and on-demand platforms, news, animation, and other shows in MSA coexist with TV shows and films produced in regional spoken colloquial Arabic varieties. In some cases, the same show can be filmed or dubbed in a combination of different regional colloquials, such as the latest *Space Jam* film, in which the various characters spoke in different colloquial Arabic varieties (Abozaid, forthcoming). The films are then screened across Arabic-speaking countries, illustrating that regional varieties of Arabic are not confined to national borders, but rather are used throughout the Arab world.

As the number of foreign media productions dubbed into Arabic continues to increase, so do questions regarding which form of Arabic to use when localising the foreign content (MSA or regional colloquial, and if colloquial, which one). The diversity of Arabic variants in Arabic content has significant implications for AD, as it must adapt to this complex linguistic landscape. This diversity may conflict with existing AD guidelines, which recommend using the same language variety as the dialogue (Netflix, 2023). Consequently, there is a need for active engagement with audiences to gather their feedback and preferences regarding the choice of language used in AD.

3. Methodology

In this review paper, we use a scoping literature review methodology to examine existing research on AD in Arabic. Scoping reviews address broader topics where many different study designs might be applicable (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005, p. 20). Specifically, in this scoping review, we aim to "examine the extent, range and nature of a research activity: this type of activity might not describe research findings in any detail but is a useful way of mapping fields of study where it is difficult to visualise the range of material that might be available" (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005, p. 21).

To the best of our knowledge, this review encompasses all studies on Arabic AD that have been published in English to date. Such a review scope is made feasible by the limited body of research in the field and the recent nature of these studies.

For the review, we followed the framework proposed by Arksey and O'Malley (2005). Following the identification of the research question, namely, "what is the existing literature on Arabic AD and what is known about Arabic AD practice?." The next stage involved a comprehensive search of academic databases, including Google Scholar and the HBKU library database, among others, using keywords such as "audio description" "Arabic language," "AD in Arabic," and "accessibility in Arabic media." Peer-reviewed journal articles, book chapters and published master's theses are included to provide a thorough understanding of the evolution and current state of AD in Arabic-speaking contexts. Tapping into existing networks, relevant organisations and attending conferences in the field (X) has also allowed us to ensure that the review is comprehensive. The final stage was charting the data. We adopted a charting approach akin to a "narrative review" (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005)

The literature review is structured into categories based on the context of the AD: film and media on on-demand platforms; museums and heritage sites; and wayfinding. We provide a summary of the studies and their position within the existing literature, highlight key trends, identify gaps, and offer recommendations for future research. We pay special attention to research on the use of AD in the different manifestations of the Arabic language, considering the linguistic variations present in Arabic-speaking countries and their implications for AD.

Following the examination of the academic literature, a section on the practice of AD is incorporated to provide a deeper understanding of AD in Arabic. The focus in this section is on real-world applications of AD in Arabic-speaking countries, mostly in Qatar, and examining case studies, current AD projects, and the practical challenges faced in the industry. In the analysis, we incorporate both secondary sources and the author's own experiences as an audio describer. By comparing these practical applications to the findings from the literature, we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of both the theoretical and practical aspects of AD in the Arabic language.

4. Research on AD in Arabic

Research on AD in Arabic is scant, with the earliest studies emerging in 2016. A thorough search of the academic literature reveals only a few research studies and a number of students' master's theses (cited below) from two universities in Jordan and Qatar, namely, Applied Sciences Private University and Hamad bin Khalifa University, respectively.

According to Di Giovanni (2018), there are four categories or strands on AD research: (1) "what to describe" strand, which looks descriptively at the language of AD and how it works, characters' descriptions and the use of cinematic terms in AD; (2) "psychology-based" strand, on the intersection between AVT and psychology; (3) "alternative routes in AD," i.e. artificial voices, text to speech to the translation; and (4) "inclusive" strand, on comprehension, users' preferences and opinions, i.e. live enjoyment of art or entertainment.

Our review below indicates that most AD research in Arabic falls under the inclusive strand category, with a couple of studies focusing solely on linguistic aspects of AD. There is significant potential for research, especially in the strands of "alternative routes" and "what to describe", given the lack of research as well as recent developments in artificial intelligence and text-to-speech and speech-to-speech technologies.

In the next section, we summarise the studies conducted on AD in the Arabic language and their main findings, divided into three focus areas: film and media on on-demand platforms, museums and heritage, and wayfinding.

4.1. Research on Film and Media on On-Demand Platforms

Research studies on AD in Arabic for films and media on on-demand platforms date back only five years. To the best of our knowledge, seven studies have been conducted to date: three reception studies, two corpus studies, an analysis of an AD in a political film, and a study on an AD university course with a community project. Out of the seven, only two are reception studies with participants who are blind and have low vision (Alnatsheh, 2020; Darwish & Haider, 2022), and four are MA theses. The studies in this section are presented in chronological order. However, this limited and relatively recent body of work reflects a significant research gap in the Arabic-speaking world, particularly in the absence of longitudinal studies, broader geographic scope, and comparative cross-linguistic analyses that could provide a deeper understanding of AD reception and production in Arabic.

Alnatsheh (2020) investigated the possibility of having dialectal AD for Arabic films. She made two versions of an AD of a Qatari film, *Sh'hab*, one in MSA and the other in Qatari dialect (the original language of the film). There were seven blind participants in the study. Most participants stated that the Qatari version was more enjoyable and immersive; however, when asked which version they preferred, the majority chose MSA, because "it has a larger reach and it is more inclusive" (Alnatsheh,

2020, p. 28). The study's small sample size and focus on a single short film limit the generalisability of its findings. Further research is needed to examine whether similar preferences exist across other dialects and genres, and to what extent sociolinguistic perceptions influence AD preferences in different Arabic-speaking communities.

The author offers two potential explanations for participants' preference for MSA. First, it could be that participants are more accustomed to AD in MSA because of the local film festival, Ajyal, which has been offering inclusive screenings with AD in MSA since 2015 (see Section 6.1). Second, it could be because dialects are sometimes negatively perceived by speakers, who favour the higher register in cultural, educational, and other informational contexts. Research in dubbing also demonstrates that language preservation is often one of the reasons why viewers often prefer MSA over dialects (Ghobain, 2017).

Al-Zoubi (2020) conducted a reception study with 30 Arabic-speaking sighted participants to explore whether AD adds value to sighted viewers' experience and their potential to increase their enjoyment of the film. The study, using the Spanish film *Tiempo de Blues* dubbed and audio described in MSA, found that participants who watched the AD version had higher comprehension and enjoyment scores (71% and 80%) compared to those who watched only the dubbed version (53% and 53%). However, the AD group answered more dialogue recall questions incorrectly, likely due to increased cognitive load. Since recalling dialogue is not crucial, these results suggest that AD can enhance overall film comprehension. The findings have broader implications for AD, beyond just Arabic.

While this study presents intriguing findings about the added value of AD for sighted viewers, the absence of visually impaired participants and reliance on a foreign-language film dubbed into MSA limit its ecological validity. More inclusive research involving blind and low-vision participants is essential to better assess the impact of AD on primary target audiences.

Said (2020) compiled the first bilingual AD glossary in English and Arabic to assist Arabic audio describers. The glossary, based on 18 audiovisual materials across various film genres, contains 1,467 word entries with definitions, examples, and Arabic equivalents. It covers terminology related to characters' appearances, attention focus, interpersonal interactions, setting changes, emotional states, and on-screen text.

Although a valuable tool, the glossary's practical implementation and uptake in professional or training contexts remain untested. Empirical studies are needed to evaluate its effectiveness in improving AD quality or consistency across different AD providers.

In Jordan, two studies by Darwish and Haider (2022) and Darwish et al. (2023) focused on AD in the Netflix show "AlRawabi School for Girls", involving participants with vision loss. The first study, with 152 participants, assessed the AD's quality, technical issues, and comprehension, all scoring above 70%. Additionally, 83% of participants felt AD in Arabic-language series enhanced social inclusion, supporting the need for AD legislation in Arabic-speaking countries.

However, 51% found the combination of Modern Standard Arabic (MSA) and the Jordanian dialect confusing, as dialogues were in dialect, and AD was in MSA. This finding suggests the need for further investigation, particularly regarding the use of MSA and dialects in AD. In terms of meaning-making, 29% of participants felt some sense was lost. The second study analysed the AD's content, identifying six categories, including character descriptions and emotional states, and noted instances of code-switching between MSA, English, and Jordanian Arabic, a phenomenon that deserves further exploration in Arabic AD.

These studies are among the few that include participants with vision loss, making them crucial contributions. However, further critical engagement is needed with the sociolinguistic implications of code-switching and the emotional or cognitive toll it may impose on users. Moreover, the impact of AD on narrative interpretation in serialised content is still underexplored.

More recently, Hejazi (2024) analysed the AD of a Palestinian film and looked at the description of the Occupation and Palestinian struggle, examining cases of censorship and the implications of the objectivity-subjectivity debate in a political film. Hejazi argues that AD can serve as both a tool for social justice and a form of political activism. Finally, Jimenez-Andres and El-Taweel (2024) explored the intercultural exchanges in a postgraduate course on media accessibility that was centred around a film-festival project and found that such projects foster community building and intercultural learning among students, scholars, filmmakers, people with disabilities, and other artists. The research findings also highlight the relationship between accessibility and culture, a topic that has been overlooked and has yet to be explored in academic discourse.

4.2. Research on Museums and Heritage Sites

There are three research studies on AD in Arabic in museums, all conducted in Qatar. At the Museum of Modern Art (Mathaf) in Doha, Neves (2016) developed Enriched Descriptive Guides (EDG) and tactile versions of a number of paintings, available both in Arabic and English, the first of their kind in Arabic in Qatar, and likely in the MENA region. The goal of the project was to provide a multisensory experience for visitors, and the guides were drafted and re-drafted through collaborative meaning-making, working with different stakeholders, including the artist. While pioneering, this project would benefit from more rigorous user testing and feedback analysis to validate the efficacy of the multisensory elements. Additionally, the broader replicability of this model across other institutions in the region remains unexplored.

Also, in Qatar in the same year, El-Taweel (2016) developed and tested Arabic and English Enriched Audio Guides for one of the most popular and distinctive tourist attractions in Qatar, Katara Cultural Village, and did so following the ADLAB and Art Beyond Sight guidelines (Axel, n.d). She developed three guides: AD (on its own), AD with movement, and AD with touch. Participants were taken on a tour with the guides and then filled in a questionnaire. ADs with movement were the preferred option

for participants with low vision, as they provided information about the attraction while also giving a sense of space during tours.

Almaslamani (2018) conducted another study on the use of enriched audio guides for tourism and cultural attractions in Qatar. Almaslamani developed and tested two enriched audio guides, one in Qatari colloquial Arabic and one in MSA, for two paintings made by a Qatari artist. Most participants stated that they preferred the MSA version over the Qatari Arabic version. There were twelve participants in the study: six who were sighted and six who had vision loss. The AD activity was conducted and evaluated for the purposes of the study. The findings revealed differing opinions among participants. Some considered MSA to be more eloquent and rich, while others saw its use as a valuable opportunity to promote and teach the language. Furthermore, several participants believed that MSA was better suited than dialects for representing cultural and heritage contexts. Those who preferred the Qatari Arabic version of the enriched guides emphasised that it is more appropriate for communicating Qatari culture and heritage. It was more accessible to visitors, as some descriptions in MSA used very specialised terminology that could be difficult to understand. The three authors (Almaslamani, 2018; El-Taweel, 2016; Neves, 2016) encourage further research on descriptive guides in Arabic and the wider availability of enriched descriptive guides to provide cultural access for all in Qatar.

4.3. Research on Wayfinding

Other initiatives have focused on wayfinding in the tourism sector. Serry (2017) studied accessibility at Hamad International Airport (Qatar) and created an EDG based on AD, raised tactile maps, and a replica of the airport's Departure Hall. Concurrently, Saad (2017) analysed the existing in-flight safety information of Qatar Airways for passengers with visual impairment and developed an audio-tactile information kit to facilitate understanding the inflight safety information. Both studies reported a better experience and understanding of information and spaces when provided with accessible information. More recently, Altekreeti (forthcoming) prototyped and evaluated an Audio Descriptive Guide (ADG) for the Education City Tram in Doha. The final product contained information about the main venues served by each stop, as well as wayfinding information, which people with vision loss in the study valued positively. This work was conceived by the author as a pilot case study to be finalised and implemented in the setting of the Education City Tram in the near future. While promising, this study remains at the prototype stage. Its success will depend on institutional collaboration and integration into existing infrastructure. Future work should explore user testing in live transit environments and assess how such tools intersect with mobile navigation technologies.

5. AD in Practice

Despite growing demand, AD practices by media outlets, entertainment hubs, and cultural centres in the region remain limited. It is important to note that there is currently no legislation, rules or

regulations in Arabic TV, on-demand platforms, cinema, or live cultural events that govern the provision of AD in the region. However, several noteworthy efforts exist that deserve documentation and further research. These efforts can be categorised into film festivals, television, on-demand platforms, museums, heritage sites, and live AD. While we aim to provide a comprehensive overview of AD practices, limited documentation may result in some practices being underrepresented. Given our professional involvement in Qatar, we have incorporated numerous practices from the country, drawing on direct knowledge and insight.

5.1. AD Practice: Film Festivals and Screenings

AD in film festivals was first offered in Morocco in 2009, at the Marrakech International Film Festival (Alattar, 2021), followed by Qatar and Egypt in 2015, at the Ajyal Film Festival, and the 22nd Cairo International Cinema and Arts Festival for Children, respectively (Masreya Media, 2021). Since then, the offering of AD in film festivals has grown. Marrakech International Film Festival's 2019 edition screened five feature films with AD (Alnatsheh, 2020). In Qatar, the Doha Film Institute and Hamad bin Khalifa University have also worked on an Inclusive screening for the Ajyal Film Festival. The first screening in 2015 was for the short film called *The Hero and the Message*, an animated film about the founding Emir of Qatar. Since then, the AD scripts and voicing have been produced by students in the Master's program of AVT at HBKU for the screening during the yearly Ajyal festival. In most of the screenings, the AD has been in MSA as it represented a unified language and was widely understood among the Arabic speakers in attendance (author's testimony). In 2019, the festival screened a number of short films for the Inclusive screening, with one film in Qatari colloquial Arabic.

In 2019, Egypt hosted a screening of a film with AD. The film, *Mummification in Ancient Egypt*, was screened at the Antiquities Museum in Bibliotheca Alexandria (Bibliotheca Alexandria, 2019). According to the Museum, "the idea of AD of films is considered a new experience of its kind, and it is being applied for the first time in an Egyptian museum (Bibliotheca Alexandria, 2019)." The museum also states that this is the first time archaeological information has been exhibited in an Egyptian museum and made accessible to people with visual impairments.

5.2. AD Practice: TV

Within Arabic-speaking countries, viewers have access to national and international TV channels, in Arabic and in other languages. For example, viewers in Qatar can access TV channels from Bahrain, Lebanon, and other countries.

In order to analyse the current provision of AD in Arabic, we conducted a thorough review of all TV channels available in Qatar, which number around 195 channels (see Appendix A for the full list). The review of the channels was initially conducted in 2018 and 2020, encompassing both cable and subscription outlets in Qatar. The outlets included free-to-air TV, subscription channels, and

streaming services. The channels were available in Qatar through Ooredoo TV, a cable service that broadcasts most networks and channels available in the Arab world. The data was initially collected for a presentation at the International Telecommunication Union (ITU) in Geneva in 2018 and to the Arab States Broadcasting Union (ASBU) in 2020. In 2023, for the purposes of this paper, we conducted another review of the channels to find out if there had been any changes to the AD offering since 2020. No changes in the AD offer were found in TV channels.

We found that none of the channels currently offer AD as a service. While some channels offered an AD option, we did not find any shows or films on these channels that actually utilised the AD option. That is, the AD option was available on the menu, but we did not find any shows that had AD in that channel. Some possible reasons for the lack of AD on Arabic TV could be due to project finance allocation, limited professionals and resources in the field, the lack of awareness of the existence and necessity of access services, or the lack of legislation that compels channels to offer AD. This means that, at present, no AD is available on Arabic public or private television programming. This lack of access has a wide range of negative implications, particularly in terms of exclusion from educational and entertainment media, cultural isolation, and a general lack of awareness of AD, both among sighted and blind audiences.

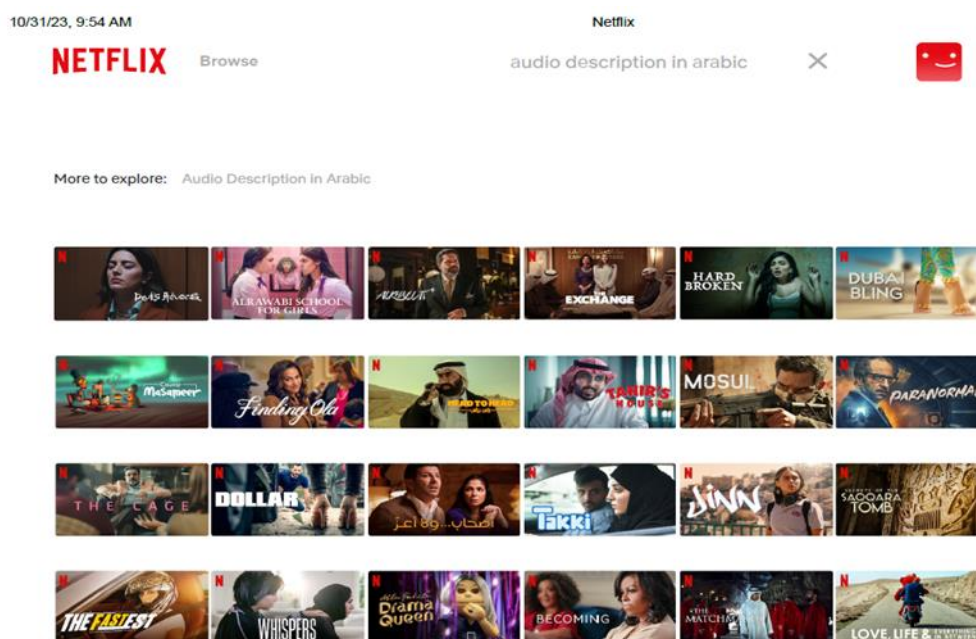
5.3. AD Practice: On-Demand Platforms

As with television programming, there is currently no legislation, nor rules or regulations governing the provision of AD on on-demand platforms. To date, Netflix is the only streaming platform that provides AD for shows and films in Arabic (see Annexe 1). OSN+ is another streaming platform that offers the AD option on its menu, but, similarly to the TV channels mentioned above, the authors in their review did not find any shows or films with AD on OSN+.

Netflix provides AD in Arabic for selected shows and films. In October 2023, when searching for AD in Arabic on Netflix, there were 24 shows and films on Netflix with AD in Arabic (see Figure 1). Of these, 22 have Arabic as the show's original language, one show's original language is in almost equal parts Arabic and English (*Dubai Bling*), and one is originally in English (*Becoming*). Both *Dubai Bling* and *Becoming* have options to select voice-over in Arabic. While the original Arabic of all of these shows is in a regional Arabic colloquial variety, the AD is in MSA, which may be challenging for Netflix guidelines, which state,

The vocabulary should reflect the predominant language/accent of the program (for example, American English vs. British English; Castilian Spanish vs. Mexican Spanish, etc.) and should be consistent with the genre and tone of the content while also mindful of the target audience. (Netflix, 2023)

This suggests the potential value of further research and the development of tailored guidelines for the Arabic language and other diglossic languages to better address their specific needs in relevant contexts.

Figure 1*Titles with Arabic AD on Netflix*

Note. October 2023.

5.4. AD Practice: Museums and Heritage Sites

AD was first introduced in museums in Qatar in 2015, in the Mathaf, Arab Museum of Modern Art (Neves, 2016). Since that time, several initiatives have provided people with visual impairments access to art. Some of these initiatives are cited in Section 5.2, concerning the initiatives' research output.

Two other exhibitions in Qatar also provided AD to its visitors in 2022: The Children's Art Exhibition, *Reesha*, and *Seero Fi Al Ard*. *Reesha* took place in 2022 and was a collaboration between the Qatar National Library and Hamad bin Khalifa University. The exhibition showcased the artwork created by children under the guidance of a Qatari artist. At the exhibition, visitors were able to scan a barcode on their mobiles and listen to the AD of the art on display (Qatar National Library, 2023). AD was also available for *Seero Fi Al Ard*, the final art by the Indian artist Maqbool Fida Husain, "highlighting the progress of humanity on land, in air and sea, and their inclination to utilise the surrounding resources to achieve their goals" (Qatar Foundation, 2023).

Finally, the National Museum of Qatar's website states that the museum "offers an immersive range of cutting-edge technology and accessibility initiatives, making it one of the world's leading museums when it comes to accessibility features for guests" (Qatar Museums, 2023). In practice, bespoke tours

and audio guides for people with vision loss visitors remain limited to guided tours, which require pre-planning and pre-booking with a limited capacity.

5.5. AD Practice: Live Events

Live AD has been available in various events in Qatar since 2022, including sports events, theatre productions, and school events. FIFA World Cup 2022 provided an opportunity for AD to extend an inclusive experience to all viewers. Live AD in Arabic and English was available during the opening and closing ceremony (FIFA World Cup Qatar, 2022). It is worth noting that this could be the first audio-described sports event in Arabic, specifically designed for blind and low-vision audiences.

Another event which offered live AD was the 2022 edition of the D'reesha Performing Arts Festival. 'D'reesha Performing Arts Festival is "a unique event that celebrates a diverse range of talents in fields like theatre, music, poetry, and more. It unites the community, highlighting both global performing arts and Arab culture" (Education City, 2023). The festival provided live AD in English and MSA to the audience for two plays, *Ibn Battoota* and *Rumi* (Qatar Foundation, 2022).

Finally, the Al Noor Centre for the Blind in Doha offered live AD in English and Arabic to its graduates, families, and other guests during the graduation ceremony and for a small art exhibition showcasing the art of its graduates in May 2023 (author's testimony).

Although these practices are limited in scope and largely confined to a single country, they represent a crucial first step toward the development of AD in Arabic. Despite their limited reach, it is essential to document and acknowledge them, as they lay the foundation for future advancements in the field. Their recognition is vital, not only to track progress but also to highlight the gaps and challenges that still need to be addressed in order to expand AD practices across the Arab world.

6. Conclusions

In this review article, we outlined the recent developments and current trends of the field of AD in Arabic. In terms of AD research, there is a growing interest in the field, especially on film and streaming platforms, coinciding with the increased availability of AD on Netflix. We believe that the upward trend will likely persist, and research studies in the field will continue to emerge. Existing research, while modest and exploratory, is innovative, rigorous and offers in-depth insights into AD in Arabic. The lack of AD guidelines and tradition in Arabic has fostered a highly innovative environment in both research and practice. However, Arabic AD research and practice are still in the early stages of development. In terms of research type, most AD studies fall under the inclusive strand category, with only a few studies focusing purely on the linguistic aspects of AD. Given the limited research, there is considerable potential, particularly in areas such as content description and alternative approaches in AD.

Research suggests that the current guidelines may not be fit-for-purpose in the Arab context, primarily due to the diglossic nature of Arabic. Further research in this area is necessary for the development of guidelines for Arabic language. Existing research has yielded inconclusive results regarding the use of MSA versus dialect in AD, as is the case for other AVT modalities. There seems to be, however, a preference for AD to be in MSA, suggesting a potential direction for further investigation and clarification.

Alternatively, the choice between MSA and dialect may depend on the nature of the content, with certain types of content more appropriate for MSA and others better suited to vernacular forms. Audience preferences are likely to vary, suggesting that the most effective approach may be one in which guidelines do not prioritise one over the other, but instead allow content producers or audio describers to make the decision based on the specific context.

In terms of AD practice, we identify the centrality of culture and heritage, which presents unique and creative avenues for access and inclusiveness. To date, these are small-scale initiatives, with most being targeted events that often take place only once a year. Nonetheless, the continuity of these projects over the years is a testament to the efforts made by stakeholders to provide AD in the region. It demonstrates its potential and the audience's eager reception. These efforts have contributed to raising awareness about accessibility and AD in Qatar. However, to date, AD practice in museums and heritage sites remains limited to a specific geographical context. It has yet to expand into different locations and industries.

There is an indication that the two primary blocks to the expansion of AD in the region may be the lack of legislation governing its provision and the lack of awareness regarding accessibility and the rights and demands of persons with disabilities. If the current state of AD remains stagnant, we predict that: (1) AD will become a niche industry, not readily available and accessible to the public; and (2) the project-scale dynamic will persist, causing further fragmentation in the field as different countries, organisations, and industries approach projects independently. If states and institutions do not advocate for the provision of AD on a wider scale, most initiatives will remain project-based and have limited impact.

The current state-of-the-art in AD in Arabic shows that AD has only timidly entered the region as a research discipline and access service, but its future is encouraging, especially given the trajectory of other AVT forms and the rise of accessible content in on-demand platforms, where content with AD is being offered for the first time. This is a significant development for AD, which may increase awareness of accessibility as well as the value of AD in terms of access to culture and media for people who are blind or have low vision. We believe that this increase in AD content, coupled with increased awareness around media accessibility, will also encourage research on AD.

As AD continues to evolve in Arabic-speaking countries, the implementation of binding legislation is crucial to ensure its widespread adoption and integration, creating a legal framework that guarantees accessibility and inclusion for all. Societies striving for social cohesion and justice, such as Qatar in its

Qatar National Vision 2030 plan¹, should prioritise accessibility initiatives to effectively achieve their objectives. AD promotes social justice by guaranteeing that people with blindness or low vision have equal access to media. It serves as a powerful tool in breaking down barriers, allowing diverse audiences to participate in cultural, educational, and entertainment experiences, contributing to a more equitable and inclusive society.

¹ <https://www.gco.gov.qa/en/state-of-qatar/qatar-national-vision-2030/our-story/>

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