

# Approaching Engagement in Audio Description\*

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## ABSTRACT

Humans' attraction to fiction is believed to respond to a search for pleasure, entertainment or enjoyment. Readers and film viewers engage with books and movies to participate in an experience that will provide some kind of gratification. However, the mechanisms that lead to engagement with written and audiovisual narratives are highly complex and not yet fully understood.

This paper constitutes a theoretical approach to engagement in audio description. Drawing on literature from Psychology and Media Studies, it will be argued that engagement is facilitated by comprehension and immersion. An insight on these intricate mental processes will be provided by dwelling on the creation of mental models, the feeling of being transported to the narrative world and the development of affective dispositions towards fictional characters. The close relationship between comprehension and immersion will then be unraveled, before some strategies that could enhance engagement in audio described films are outlined.

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## KEYWORDS

Accessibility; audio description; engagement; immersion; transportation.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

Most of us are fiction consumers because the stories that we read in books, see in films or recreate when playing video games offer us pleasure, entertainment or enjoyment. They constitute an open door to an exciting fictional world in which to get immersed and with which to get engaged.

Even though enjoyment, immersion and engagement are terms frequently used to intuitively describe our involvement with different kinds of narratives, their real extension conceals a network of complexities worth exploring. However, as McMahan (2003) notes, the use of the terminology describing the psychological involvement of the player, spectator or reader is not consistent in the literature. Some authors use immersion to designate what others call engagement, while some scholars use both concepts to refer to different processes, the boundaries of which are rarely clarified. In this light, it seems necessary to begin this paper by providing tangible definitions of these three key terms.

All throughout this article, enjoyment, immersion and engagement will be applied to different processes and will not be exchangeable. First, enjoyment will define the ideal effect of the filmic experience.

Second, borrowing Murray's (1997: 98) metaphor, immersion will be understood as the feeling of "being transported to an elaborately simulated place (...) the sensation of being surrounded by a completely other reality." Following this definition, immersion will be conceptualized as the process of psychologically submerging into the narrative.

Finally, engagement will define a state in which film spectators are immersed and keep interest in the story. In the fields of augmented reality and video games, Dow *et al.* (2007) identify the players' interest in the game with engagement, as do Schönau-Fog and Bjørner (2012), for whom the desire to continue playing is considered a fundamental indicator of engagement. In line with these authors, it will be argued in this paper that interest is what distinguishes engagement in the filmic context. According to our view, immersed spectators would be psychologically submerged in the fiction, whereas engaged spectators would be captivated by the narrative. In the case of film audiences, interest translates into a close involvement with the story: a desire to keep watching and discover the twists and turns that await throughout the plot.

## 2. PSYCHOLOGICAL INVOLVEMENT WITH FILMS: RELEVANT PRIOR RESEARCH IN AUDIOVISUAL TRANSLATION

Research in Audiovisual Translation has embraced new and complex topics in the last years and scholars have put on the radar exciting questions dealing with cognition and the psychological involvement of audiences with translated audiovisual products. This section will review recent studies covering these issues. Due to space restrictions, only research dealing strictly with engagement, immersion or enjoyment will be covered.

One of the first research questions to be posed with regard to the topic of this paper had to do with the differences between dubbing and subtitling in terms of users' cognition, psychological involvement and enjoyment. Wissmath *et al.* (2009) tackled these issues empirically by asking their participants to watch 30-minute movie segments and to complete four existing instruments: Kim & Biocca's (1997) presence questionnaire, Green & Brock's (2000) transportation scale, Rheinberg *et al.*'s (2003) flow short scale FKS, and a direct question instructing participants to assess their enjoyment on a 1 to 5 scale. After analyzing the responses obtained, the researchers found no significant differences between the two translation modalities regarding presence, transportation, flow or enjoyment. These conclusions were supported by Perego *et al.* (2015), who did not observe any positive effect of dubbing over subtitling on enjoyment, memory or comprehension. Using subjective measures in the form of questionnaires, these scholars assessed their participants' general comprehension, characters' face and name associations, dialog and visual scene recognition, film appreciation, perceived effort and metacognitive judgments of memory and comprehension. Interestingly, their results were consistent for young and for older viewers.

Focusing on subtitling, Kruger *et al.* (2016) explored how intralingual subtitles affect immersion and enjoyment. The authors tailored a highly reliable 44-item self-report questionnaire based on previously existing instruments used to measure transportation, character identification, presence, perceived realism and enjoyment. These subjective measures revealed increased levels of transportation and identification with characters when the participants watched a film with subtitles as opposed to without them. However, differences in enjoyment between both groups were not significant. This research team also set a methodology to explore immersion using electroencephalography technologies (EEG), which they expect to apply to audio description (Kruger *et al.*, 2017).

Following with accessibility for the visually impaired, Fryer & Freeman (2012) used the ITC-SOPI (Lessiter *et al.*, 2001) to analyze the levels of presence reported by sighted as well as by blind and visually impaired (BVI) individuals during the last scene of a film. Their results showed that viewers reached higher levels of presence when no audio description (AD) accompanied the film, whereas the BVI participants experienced more presence when an AD was provided. Also, the levels of presence reached by each group were comparable. Fryer & Freeman (2014)

also studied how the emotional cues provided in the AD of clips eliciting sadness and fear influenced presence. The scholars assessed the emotional experience of their participants, their sense of presence and the extent to which they identified and empathized with the characters in the clips that they were shown. Their results were not consistent for the two emotions explored but they showed that adding an AD to emotion-evoking materials did not decrease presence.

Very recently, Walczak and Fryer (2017, 2018) dealt with immersion by exploring how several AD styles and vocal delivery influenced presence. Using a customized questionnaire that combined relevant items from the Emotion Elicitation Scale (Gross & Levenson, 1995), the ITC-SOPI and questions exploring the participants' preferences, the authors found that BVI users favored creative ADs (which featured filmic language and subjective descriptions of the narrative events) over standard ADs. Furthermore, creative ADs allowed for increased levels of presence. When it comes to genre, participants exposed to human-narrated emotive ADs in dramas reported higher levels of presence than those exposed to synthesized voices. However, such differences were not statistically significant in the case of documentary films.

Even though the body of research exploring these issues is not extensive yet, the aforementioned studies suggest that the spectators' psychological involvement can be influenced by several elements, depending on the modality of translation considered. With regard to AD, which is the main focus of this paper, immersion seems to be affected by the genre of the audiovisual material, together with the contents, style and narration of the descriptions. Furthermore, immersion is pictured as a multifaceted construct that deserves closer attention. The following section will deal with immersion in the context of AD.

### 3. ENGAGEMENT IN AUDIO DESCRIBED FILMS: COMPREHENSION AND IMMERSION

As Dede (2009), we understand immersion as an aid to engagement. In our view, in order to be engaged in a story (that is, in order to be so truly interested so as to wish to know what will happen next), spectators must have experienced some kind of prior psychological involvement with the narrative. Also, very much in line with Busselle & Bilandzic (2009), we would argue that engagement is a complex process that requires something else: comprehension.

This section will offer a theoretical account of immersion and comprehension as facilitators of engagement in the AD context. However, according to Vorderer *et al.* (2004), for any media experience to be enjoyable, some prerequisites have to be fulfilled. Borrowing the idea of the prerequisites and adapting it to the case of audio described movies, it could be argued that two prior conditions are necessary for engagement.

### 3.1 NECESSARY CONDITIONS

As far as the user is concerned, the AD addressee must have the willingness to participate in the filmic experience. This has traditionally been related to the suspension of disbelief, meaning that any spectator who wishes to enjoy a movie will have to accept the facts depicted in the narrative as true, regardless of their plausibility and their alignment with reality. Several authors have shown reservations towards this concept but Worth (2004) offers an interesting perspective. Drawing on a philosophical approach, the author questions the notion of suspension of disbelief because believing (or disbelieving) cannot be willingly decided. Our senses and thinking guide our credulity and it is not possible for us to voluntarily cease to believe something that we perceive as or consider to be true. Under Worth's view, audiences do not suspend disbelief; they are always aware that they are presented with an unreal story, but this does not hinder their ability to engage with it. In fact, it is that awareness of fictionality what facilitates the spectator's emotional response to the film:

I do not have to *believe* what is going on in a fiction in order to be affected by it. In fact, I *cannot* believe what is happening if I am to have an emotionally appropriate (aesthetic) response. This is especially true when it comes to tragedy or horror. I generally am not amused by others' tragic lives nor do I derive pleasure out of watching people chased, stalked, or murdered. But in the context of a representation, these things are often made enjoyable." (Worth, 2004: 446).

In line with Worth, the current paper will move away from the notion of suspension of disbelief and will conceptualize the users' willingness to participate in simpler terms: as their true predisposition to take part in a filmic experience, which they eventually seek to enjoy.

In addition to this prerequisite, another necessary condition will also be needed: the contents of the audiovisual material must be perceived as sufficiently interesting by the receiver. This interest is determinant since it will justify the initial investment of time and cognitive resources in the filmic experience.

These necessary conditions are characterized as such because they depend solely on the receiver's attitude towards the filmic experience and are rarely influenced by other factors. When they are fulfilled, the spectator is in the position to engage in the filmic experience, which, according to Busselle & Bilandzic (2008), entails comprehending the filmic plot and getting psychologically involved in the story. The next subsections will explore how these mental processes might take place in the case of AD.

### 3.2 COMPREHENSION

In order to understand the story, audiences will watch a movie and interpret it with the help of their prior knowledge. Under the frame of the Mental Model Theory (Johnson-Laird, 1983), this will allow viewers to create and constantly update mental representations of the narrative world, which will eventually lead them to comprehension. Several scholars (Braun, 2007; Fresno, 2014; Vercauteren, 2016) have pointed out that BVI audiences are also believed to create mental models in their attempt to comprehend audiovisual narratives. The processes that facilitate film understanding by audiences with visual loss are assumed to be comparable to those described for sighted viewers, with one exception regarding the nature of the information received. Whereas sighted audiences perceive the images in non-accessible films, BVI spectators rely mostly on the auditory information coming from the coherent unit formed by the film dialogues, the original soundtrack and the AD. The correct processing, integration with prior knowledge and interpretation of this information will generate mental models of the situation, the events depicted in the film, and the characters who participate.

Interestingly, the results of several empirical tests undertaken in the field of AD suggest that comprehension might not be strongly correlated with enjoyment (Cabeza-Cáceres, 2013; Walczak & Fryer, 2017). In fact, it is feasible that unprecise or incomplete mental models that allow for partial comprehension might be sufficient for certain spectators to enjoy specific types of movies. For instance, understanding the particular reason why a KGB spy is chased by an MI5 agent in a James Bond movie might affect the mental model created of the situation. However, this comprehension gap might not be detrimental for enjoyment to someone merely interested in the action of the film. For this reason, when comprehension is mentioned in this paper as a facilitator of engagement, it should not be conceptualized as the need to understand every single bit of information received by the BVI person. Rather, it refers to a more general understanding of the main narrative lines, which leads to the creation and updates of mental models comprehensive enough to allow the receiver to follow the plot.

### 3.3. IMMERSION

The literature dealing with the psychological involvement with narratives tends to identify two facilitators of immersion: on the one hand, the feelings of flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990), being transported to (Green & Brock, 2000) and experiencing presence in the fictional world, and, on the other hand, the development of dispositions towards the characters in the story (Raney, 2004). The following sections will examine these ideas in more detail.

### 3.3.1. FLOW, TRANSPORTATION AND PRESENCE

Flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) has traditionally been used in Psychology to describe the experience felt by people who are mentally absorbed in the activities that they are carrying out. The term accounts for the scenario in which the performers get so deeply concentrated that they lose temporality. This phenomenon is frequently observed in readers, who were defined by Gerrig (1993) as travelers who are transported away from their world when exposed to narrative fiction. Cueing on this theoretical framework, Green & Brock (2000: 701) present transportation as a process during which “all mental systems and capacities become focused on events occurring in the narrative”, thus highlighting that the attention of the receiver (not restricted to the reader anymore) is now on the fiction.

Closely related to transportation is the notion of presence, which has received attention from several AD scholars. Originally coined in the field of virtual reality, it was first utilized to describe the sensation of being in a mediated space different to where the body of the player was actually located (Biocca, 1997). Later, the term was borrowed and used to account for similar phenomena by readers and film spectators.

### 3.3.2. DISPOSITIONS TOWARDS CHARACTERS

Feelings of flow, transportation to and presence in the fictional world facilitate immersion but the literature tends to point out that so does the spectator's emotional response towards the characters that inhabit it. Identification theories and disposition theories are often used to account for the receiver's involvement with the characters.

In their attempt to comprehend and enjoy films, spectators monitor the story paying special attention to the characters. Identification theories propose that audiences imagine themselves as those characters and experience the fictional events as if they were happening to them (Tal-Or & Cohen, 2010). Identification encompasses aligning with the characters' goals and plans (Oatley, 1999), as well as adopting the characters' perspective during the narrative events. Furthermore, as a result of identification, the audiences lose awareness of themselves (Cohen, 2001). Several models of media enjoyment and engagement rely on identification theories to account for the spectators' emotional response to the characters. However, drawing back on Worth (2004), this approach does not seem congruent if the audience is not assumed to suspend disbelief. If spectators are always aware of the film's fictionality, it would be reasonable to expect them to think of characters as fictional entities different from themselves, and this would complicate identification.

For the theoretical framework exposed so far in this paper, disposition theories (Zillmann, 1994; Raney, 2004) provide a more convenient approach, since they conceptualize the response to the characters from a slightly different angle. Under the light of disposition theories, audiences do not experience filmic

events “as if they were” characters. Instead, spectators take into account the filmic plot and evaluate the characters’ actions from a certain distance and according to their own moral values. This judgement leads to the development of affective dispositions towards the fictional beings, which will fall somewhere within the spectrum between liking and disliking the characters.

### 3.3.3. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN TRANSPORTATION AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF DISPOSITIONS TOWARDS CHARACTERS

The previous subsections have exposed the idea that both transportation (together with flow and presence) and the development of affective dispositions towards characters facilitate immersion. However, it should be highlighted that these mental processes could also benefit from each other.

The fact that transportation moves the spectators’ attention to the narrative world exposes them to the fictional situation and their participants, which, according to Green & Brock (2000), can facilitate that receivers respond emotionally to characters. However, we agree with Cohen (2006) when he suggests that this relationship could be bidirectional: the fact that audiences develop dispositions towards characters might increase their desire to find out what will happen to the fictional beings, thus contributing to maintaining the addressees’ attention in the fictional world.

### 3.4. RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN COMPREHENSION AND IMMERSION

For the sake of clarity, comprehension and immersion have been treated so far in this paper as independent mental processes. However, they should be thought of as tightly connected since they have the potential to influence each other.

To start with, BVI audiences are supposed to reach comprehension through the creation of mental models. However, it is our belief that those representations might also have a positive effect on transportation and the development of dispositions towards characters. The fact that AD users generate mental models of the situation, the events and the characters in a story could help them evoke the narrative fiction by inspiring their imagination, which, in turn, could contribute to maintain their focus of attention in the fictional world. Furthermore, as far as characters are concerned, the creation and updates of their mental models could be valuable to make sense of their mental states, that is, their emotions, motivations, goals, hopes, beliefs, desires and feelings (Fresno, 2016). This insight on the characters’ psychology would allow for an understanding of their actions (Persson, 2003), which may then be evaluated according to the spectator’s own moral values. As a result, audiences would develop affective dispositions towards characters.

On the other hand, immersion might also affect comprehension. The creation of initial mental models of a narrative by the spectators suggests a close monitoring of the film developments, which would require a certain degree of attention to be placed in the fictional world. Also, after those initial representations have been created, transportation might facilitate their updates. Since transported spectators would be mentally surrounded by the narrative world, they might be more aware of the new incoming information throughout the film, and more inclined to integrate it to their existing models. Furthermore, developing affective dispositions might also help perfecting the representations of the characters. When audiences respond emotionally to them, they cease to be indifferent to the fictional beings. This higher involvement could lead spectators to pay more attention to those characters over others, which could be beneficial in terms of model updating.

Section 3 has reviewed theoretically how immersion, comprehension and the tight relationship between them might facilitate engagement. Figure 1 offers a graphical representation of the aforementioned ideas.

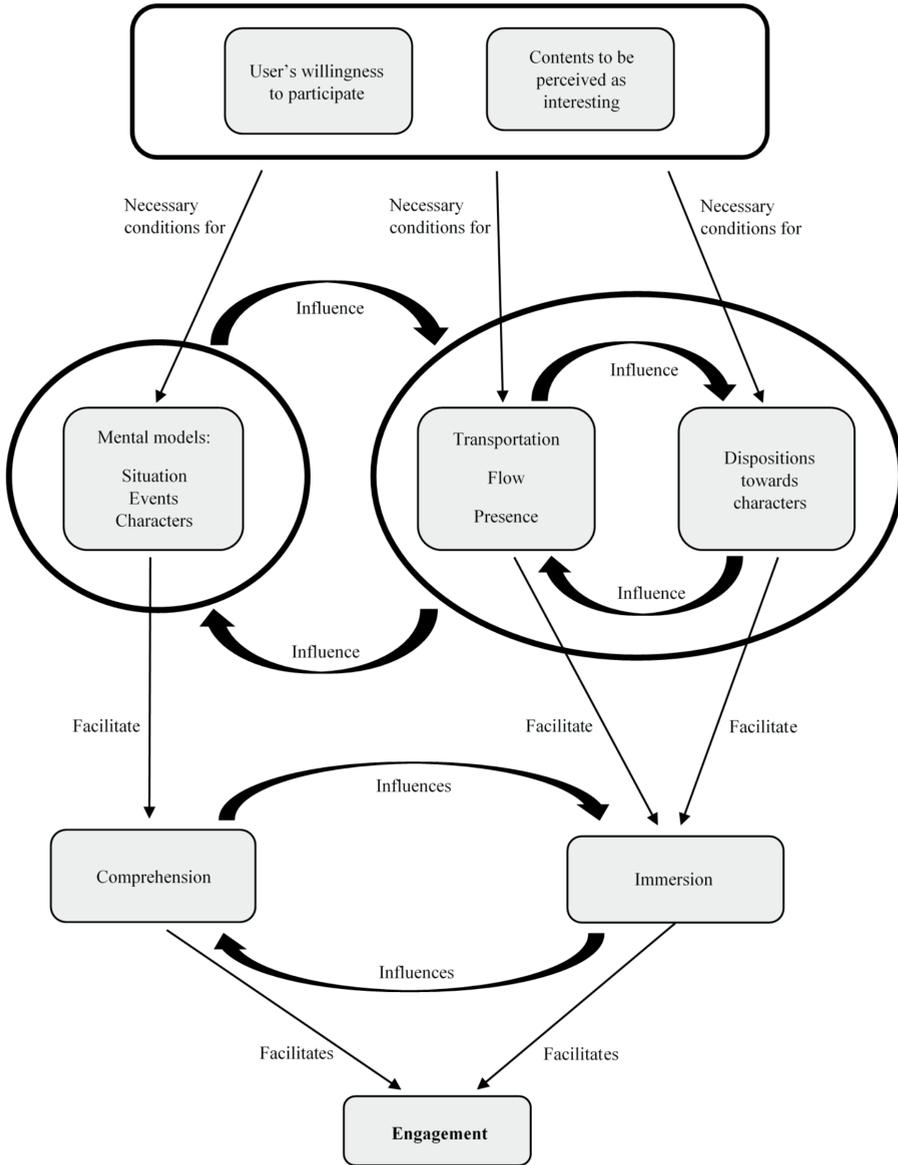


Figure 1. Facilitators of engagement and the relationships among them.

#### 4. POSSIBLE STRATEGIES TO ENHANCE ENGAGEMENT IN AD

The theoretical framework presented in the previous sections has highlighted the role of cognitive and psychological involvement as keystones for engagement. However, it is important to keep in mind that the cognitive processes associated to both comprehension and immersion depend on individual traits. Comprehension is tightly related to working memory, the span of which varies between people. And, due to personal attributes, some spectators are more prone to feel immersed than others, meaning that they are more inclined to be transported by the fiction or to develop dispositions towards characters (Green & Brock, 2000; Owen & Riggs, 2012). On the other hand, most of our knowledge on narrative comprehension, immersion, engagement or even enjoyment comes from theoretical models. Empirical research exploring these complex psychological processes is underway, but a profound understanding of the relationships between them and of the exact factors that influence each other is not clear yet. In this scenario, coming up with formulas aimed at boosting engagement directly and systematically in the AD context seems complicated. Instead, the focus of this section will be to discuss a number of general strategies that could have an effect over comprehension, immersion or both, which would in turn contribute to providing a more engaging experience.

In this vein, attention strikes as particularly relevant since it aids both comprehension and immersion. Concerning the former, attention will allow short-term memory to keep certain information active in order to relate it to prior schemata and to new data which, eventually, will lead to the creation of the mental models guiding the filmic comprehension process. Regarding immersion, attention will allow the spectator to keep focused in the narrative world, thus favoring flow, transportation, presence and the development of dispositions towards characters. Consequently, being able to deliver AD scripts that attract and maintain the users' attention in the fiction seems a good starting point toward engagement of the BVI users in the filmic experience. This section will elaborate on how certain general AD strategies could, according to the theory and some prior research, contribute to that end. The ideas presented here should be understood as speculative hypotheses, the validity of which remains to be empirically tested.

##### 4.1. TECHNICAL STRATEGIES

Some technical decisions made during the post-production of pre-recorded audio described materials might affect the reception by BVI individuals trying to enjoy them.

#### 4.1.1. FINAL MIX OF THE AUDIO DESCRIBED PRODUCT

A good final mix that harmonically blends the AD in the original soundtrack and adjusts the volume levels of each part when necessary may make the experience more pleasant (Van der Heijden, 2009), but might also facilitate cognition and immersion. If the quality of the final product is poor and the AD is overridden by sounds or music that make it inaudible, users might miss relevant information, which could hamper comprehension. Also, if these technical issues happened frequently, the receivers would become more aware of them as they kept happening. As a consequence, an undesired displacement of the focus of attention from the fiction to the real world could occur, which may have a negative impact on immersion.

#### 4.1.2. VOICE AND INTONATION

Another technical variable that could make a difference for the BVI is an appropriate selection of the narrator's voice (Iglesias Fernández *et al.*, 2015), which should preferably be human (c.f. Walczak & Fryer, 2018; Fernández-Torné & Matamala, 2015; Szarkowska, 2011), easily distinguishable from those of the characters, and whose delivery should sound inviting to the receiver.

In addition to the quality of the voice, the narrator's intonation could also play a role in the reception process. Except for the case of ADs aimed at children audiences, in which more expressivity is allowed, the usual convention is to keep the intonation neutral. Despite the prominence of this feature in audio described products, scarce research has explored its effects empirically. Focusing on comprehension, Cabeza-Cáceres (2013) found no substantial differences when various intonation styles were presented to BVI users. However, the participants in his research –used to the neutral AD style– reported a preference for those intonations that matched the narrative situations exposed on screen. Similar reflections were also shared by Ramos Caro (2013) when she tested the emotional impact of audio described products.

Though the voice and the intonation are still under-researched, these studies seem to suggest that they are paralinguistic variables with potential to influence immersion. In fact, if they are not perceived as convenient and the users focus their attention on how the AD is being uttered instead of concentrating on what is being said, transportation could be hindered.

#### 4.2. SCRIPT-RELATED STRATEGIES

The way in which a script is written could also influence immersion and comprehension. Several aspects related to the selection and presentation of the information to be included in the AD script will be discussed in this section.

#### 4.2.1. SELECTION OF THE INFORMATION

BVI users need to assimilate and integrate on the fly the aural information coming from the film and from the AD. Contrary to written narratives, which allow addressees to set their own reading pace, AD follows the rhythm of the film that it accompanies. Furthermore, the narration needs to be fragmented and carefully synchronized in those parts of the movie where no important auditory information is heard. Due to these restrictions, a proper selection of the information to be described seems crucial since, if key details are missing in the AD script, the mental models created by the user might lack essential details and might compromise comprehension.

#### 4.2.2. AMOUNT OF INFORMATION, SPEED OF NARRATION AND AD PRESENTATION

An adequate selection of the information is undisputable. Nevertheless, AD writers not only include in their scripts those details that are more relevant to comprehend the movie but, depending on the time available to allocate each piece of AD, they will also offer additional information to help outlining a more precise picture of the narrative events. So far, it is at the audio describers' discretion to provide more or less details in their scripts, but this intricate matter deserves further attention.

The challenge stems from the fact that films vary in their length, narrative complexity, dialogue density and pace, all of which influence their intrinsic load (Sweller & Chandler, 1994). To the best of our knowledge, no experimental research has yet analyzed cognitive load in AD, but it seems reasonable to assume that, at least for audiovisual materials that pose high intrinsic load (for instance, puzzle films), keeping low the extraneous cognitive load could aid (or, rather, could avoid complicating) comprehension and immersion. From a theoretical point of view, several script-related decisions have the potential to influence the extraneous load in audio described films. Among them, the amount of information provided in the AD script, the speed at which it is narrated and the way in which it is presented to the user seem some of the most salient. These three variables might affect cognitive load individually, but it is possibly the interaction among them and with the film that they accompany which might magnify the effects. An example will help illustrating this argument:

When creating a script, the writer can choose between including a long and informative AD or a less detailed and shorter one. The amount of information provided in the AD will have a direct impact on its narration speed: the more details that need to be communicated, the fastest the narration will have to be delivered. Also, if the film allows for such a distribution, the writer could think about segmenting the longer descriptions of the settings, characters and actions to deliver them in shorter bites of information, which might be easily recalled (Fresno, Castellà & Soler-Vilageliu, 2014) and cognitively processed.

All these decisions should be consciously taken since they could have implications in terms of cognitive load. Long AD scripts rich in details might work well in easy to follow slow-paced movies that do not require abundant cognitive resources from the user. Furthermore, these kinds of elaborated descriptions may favor transportation for receivers whose cognitive capacity is sufficient to process the data received. However, the same amount of information might be more difficult to assimilate when provided in narratively complex movies. When the audiovisual products are highly challenging by themselves, long and detailed ADs –which will be narrated faster– might lead to an increased extraneous cognitive load. Especially in the case of users with less cognitive capacity (for instance, less working memory span), this might pose a challenge for comprehension.

The idea that a high cognitive load may affect comprehension seems evident. However, immersion might also suffer if following the film is perceived as a hard task that requires a conscious effort by receivers who do not have a great need for cognition. Cacioppo & Petty (1982: 116) defined the need for cognition as “the tendency for an individual to engage in and enjoy thinking”, and this theoretical construct is believed to influence transportation in narratives. In a study comparing transportation across print and audiovisual media, Green *et al.* (2008) showed that individuals with lower need for cognition were more transported by audiovisual media (traditionally perceived to be easier), while people with more need for cognition exhibited higher transportation rates when reading (supposedly more cognitively demanding than watching a movie). This led the researchers to conclude that transportation tends to be higher when participants are exposed to materials that match the cognitive effort that they desire to invest. Conversely, when presented with narratives that require lower or higher mental involvement, transportation is diminished.

In a similar vein but focusing only in complex film narratives, Owen & Riggs (2012) analyzed how several factors, including the need for cognition, influenced transportation. The researchers worked with three versions of the film *Memento*: the original movie, in which the events were presented in inverse chronological order, an edited version of the film in which some minutes of key information were missing, and a final edited version in which the events were shown chronologically and all the information was provided to the spectators. The authors found higher transportation levels for the condition perceived by the participants as less cognitively demanding (that is, when the film was presented chronologically). Their results also revealed that the addressees’ willingness to mentally engage in the challenges presented by the movie influenced their experienced transportation considerably.

Returning to the field of AD, the fact that the users’ need for cognition might influence transportation suggests that, when faced with audio described movies that pose high cognitive load, users with lower need for cognition might experience less transported. Therefore, from a theoretical perspective, modulating the amount of information to be included in AD scripts, its narration speed and the

way that it is presented to the user in accordance with the film that it accompanies could be useful to reduce the extraneous cognitive load posed by the AD, which could have an impact not only on comprehension, but also on immersion.

#### 4.3. VIVIDNESS OF THE AD

Nisbett & Ross (1980: 45) defined vivid information as that which is:

(...) likely to attract and hold our attention and to excite the imagination to the extent that it is (a) emotionally interesting, (b) concrete and imagery-provoking, and (c) proximate in a sensory, temporal, or spatial way.

Under this undertaking, vivid ADs could help keep the BVI user transported to the narrative world, thus enhancing immersion.

Several AD guidelines and training documents recommend the use of vivid language and this issue has been taken into account by several scholars when testing the reception of traditional ADs as opposed to alternative styles. For instance, Szarkowska (2013) and Walczak & Fryer (2017) explored how BVI audiences responded to *auteur* and creative descriptions respectively, both of which relied on vivid language. The participants in Szarkowska's research reported higher levels of entertainment, whilst those who took Walczak & Fryer's test reported increased levels of presence. Even though these findings cannot be solely attributed to the use of a more expressive language (this was only one of several characteristics of the *auteur* and creative AD scripts used by the researchers), vividness could be expected to have played a role, at least as a distinctive feature of non-conventional scripts.

#### 4.4. OBJECTIVITY OF THE AD

According to the traditional AD approach, only what is shown on screen should be included in the scripts. As such, audio describers are expected to restrain their descriptions to the visual information, without including any kind of personal interpretation of the images in a film.

In the last years, several scholars have explored other styles of AD that subjectively interpret the visual information in a scene. For instance, Mazur & Chmiel (2011) found that, when it comes to facial expressions and body language, BVI individuals showed a slight preference for subjective descriptions. More recently, Ramos Caro (2016) observed that non-objective ADs elicited more intense emotional responses than neutral descriptions for scenes portraying fear and sadness. And with regard to immersion, Walczak & Fryer (2017) proved that creative ADs allowed for higher levels of presence. It should be noted here that most of the times, when non-objective AD styles have been tested, subjectivity has only

been one of several parameters to be altered in the experimental materials. For instance, Ramos Caro's alternative ADs featured subjective descriptions, but also metaphors and explicitations of certain inferences. Similarly, Walczak & Fryer's creative ADs presented subjective evaluations of the characters and their actions, but they also included camera terminology.

Even though it would seem imprecise to relate the increased levels of emotional response and presence found in the aforementioned research exclusively to subjectivity, it would be reasonable to hypothesize that it may have influenced the results. According to Kruger (2010), moving away from the visual information and focusing on its narrative effects could help BVI audiences to better imagine the story world. We would argue that this would facilitate transportation and that, in certain situations, going beyond merely visual descriptions could also favor comprehension. Especially in the case of cognitively demanding films with high intrinsic load, adopting a less visually-oriented description in favor of a more interpretive one may help receivers to better process and apprehend the whole meaning of the images. Perhaps, in those cases in which the complexity of the film could pose a challenge for the user, a careful use of interpretive descriptions may help reduce the extraneous cognitive load of the AD.

## CONCLUSIONS

Research in AD has embraced new topics in the last years, including cognitive and psychological aspects of reception. Exploring how users comprehend and get involved with audio described products are some of the challenges that scholars are beginning to address in attempts to improve the receivers' experience with filmic AD.

Following this trend, the current paper has provided a theoretical approach to engagement. Departing from the idea that interest is what distinguishes engaged users, it moved to consider comprehension and immersion as two facilitators of engagement. These mental processes were then outlined. The case of the former was analyzed from a mental models approach and it was proposed that the creation and updates of mental representations of the narrative is what guides BVI users in their comprehension of audio described films. On the other hand, transportation (together with flow and presence) and the development of affective dispositions towards the characters were suggested as potential facilitators of immersion that could possibly influence each other. Furthermore, the intricate relationship between comprehension and immersion was explicated. Finally, taking into account this theoretical framework as well as prior research, several strategies that could enhance engagement through the optimization of comprehension and immersion in AD were outlined.

A variety of aspects related to the users' memory, comprehension, transportation, presence and affective response to fictional characters have been explored independently in AD. This paper proposes a wide theoretical framework that

accommodates and brings together all these approaches while highlighting the connections between them. Hopefully, it will inspire further research that will allow professional audio describers to provide more and better scripts.

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