

the7stars

# The Power of Words

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## A new era for words

Whilst industry bodies, agencies and broadcasters have continually measured the impact of audio, TV, print and outdoor advertising, the use of words within these media has often been ignored.

In recent years, there has been a surge in Brits opting to turn on subtitles and captions when viewing content, with two-thirds (69%) now claiming to do so.

The rise of TikTok videos showing people singing along to the on-screen lyrics of their favourite songs or asking people to ‘Get Ready With Me’ has likely facilitated the expectation of seeing subtitles and captions on video content. In fact,

it’s hard *not* to come across an Instagram Reel, Youtube video or a TikTok that doesn’t have captions embedded into the post automatically.

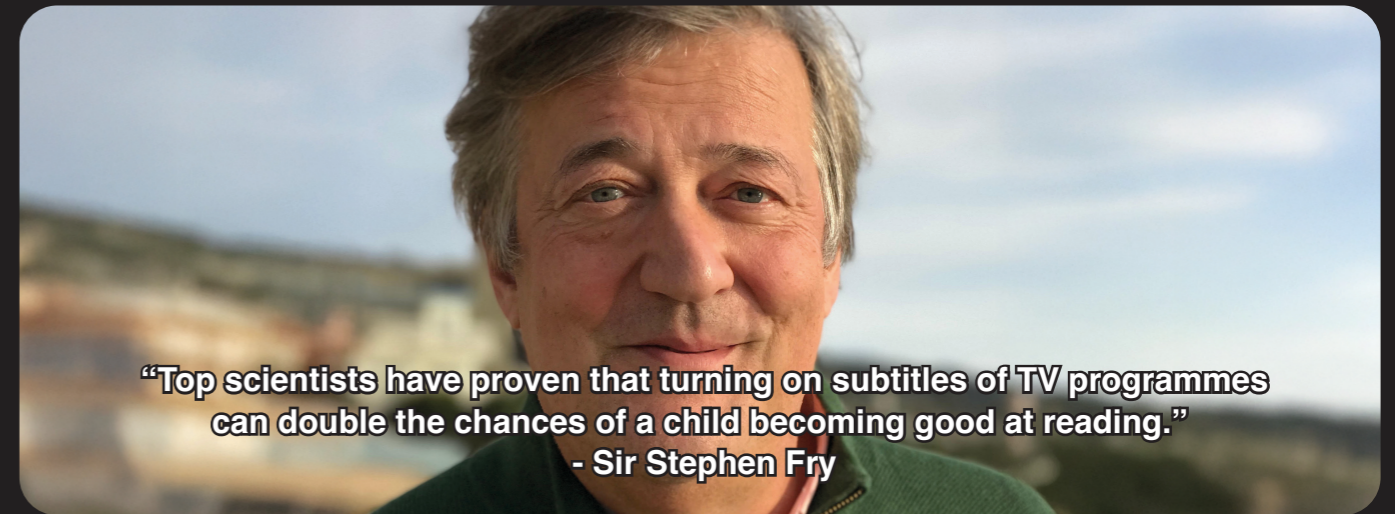
The growing demand for subtitles and captions has found its way across multiple verticals and has been enhanced by better technology and advancements in AI. It is now cemented in culture, from Spotify allowing transcriptions for some podcasts so listeners can read along with an episode’s audio to Central Cee dropping his new music video for his song ‘Limitless’ on YouTube with captions already embedded in the video, so they are a permanent fixture.

**61%**

of 18-24-year-olds prefer to read text while they watch video content

**90%**

of ITV programming is claimed to be embedded with subtitles



Broadcasters also implement subtitles and captions, each to a different extent. For instance, the BBC has implemented a personalised display for subtitles so users can change the colour, background shade and size of subtitles, and ITV claim 90% of their programming is embedded with subtitles, with a mandate to include subtitles in advertising this year. Whereas Amazon Prime only has one standard display, but often have multiple different languages to choose from.

Implementing subtitles enhances the flexibility of video consumption by enabling audiences to engage with content across a wider range of environments. Traditionally, video was most effective in sound-on settings, but the growing use of subtitles has significantly improved the viewing experience in sound-off or low-volume scenarios, e.g. watching content in bed.

The topic also has far reaching implications and has come to the fore with initiatives such as ‘Turn on the Subtitles’ <https://www.turnonthesubtitles.org>,

which aims to increase child literacy through the use of quality subtitles.

It would be remiss to ignore the impact having subtitles and captions would also have on the 12 million people who form the d/Deaf and hard of hearing community (RNID). A 2023 study by RNID explored how people continue to face barriers accessing TV through on demand platforms due to a lack of subtitles and captions. With 85% of people with hearing loss and deafness stating that the lack of subtitles stopped them from watching a programme and a third of Brits felt excluded from watching a programme with their family.

Whilst previous focus has been on the rise of podcasts and online video – we want to turn our attention to words, which we believe has been overlooked in recent years. **the7stars and Differentology partnered up to understand the nation’s relationship with and attitudes towards subtitles and captions, to understand their impact on advertising.**

**It is important to note the distinction between subtitled and captioned content – subtitles refer to words that are put on the screen exactly as they are spoken, whereas captions include notation of the sound effects and other audio aside from dialogue.**

## Watching with subtitles: for better or worse?

Nearly 7 in 10 Brits claim to use subtitles and/or captions when watching content (content covering social media, TV and streaming, and audio platforms.)

Streaming platforms lead the way here, with two-thirds of Brits watching TV or streaming services with subtitles and captions at least sometimes.

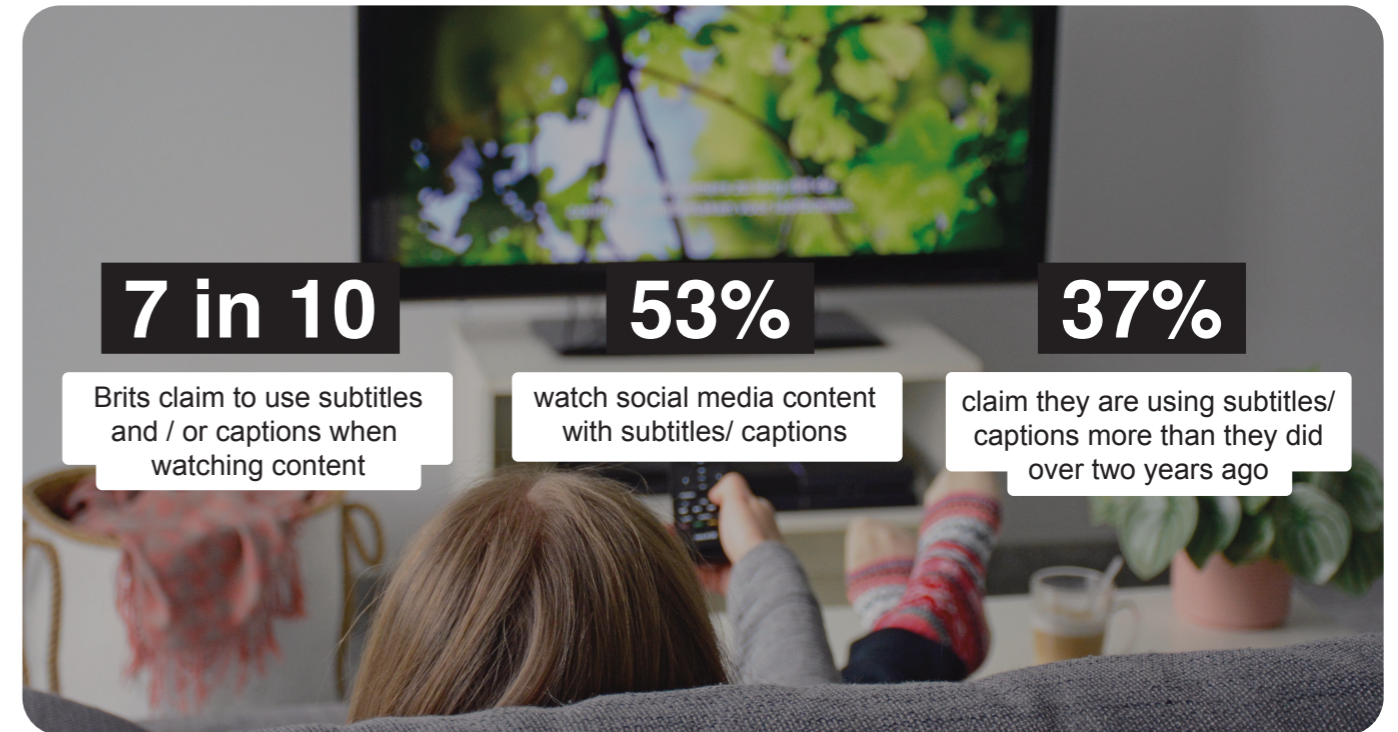
Just over half of Brits (53%) also watch social media content with subtitles/ captions - and there is even greater potential to see auto-generated subtitled/ captioned influencer content, which is becoming more commonplace.

A third engage with subtitles/ captions when listening to or watching audio formats including podcasts, highlighting its popularity regardless of format or mode. Two-thirds of Spotify listeners aged 18-24 also have the lyrics showing while they listen to music on the platform at least sometimes and half of Spotify listeners in this age group claim it enhances their overall listening experience.

44% of parents even agreed that they noticed improved developmental benefits to their children's reading skills when the subtitles are turned on.

Whilst half of the general population state that they are using subtitles or captions the same amount as they have always done, we do see growth in usage over time. **37% claim that they are using subtitles or captions more than they did over two years ago and 35% claim to have seen advertising with subtitles/ captions more than they did over two years ago!**

Platforms which don't offer the option to add subtitles or caption run the risk of annoying some viewers with **17%** of the general population claiming they would find something else to watch that did have the option to add subtitles or captions and **13%** saying they would think worse of the person/company/platform who made the content.



### Why this is important?

Subtitles/ captions are becoming the norm and there is an expectation to have the option to use subtitles/ captions across a range of different media formats. Ensure you aren't left behind by starting conversations with platform providers to see how captions and subtitling can work for you.

## Enhancing the viewing experience

Although the number one reason for using subtitles/ captions is the content being in another language (34% of those who watch with subtitles), almost a third of those who watch with subtitles claim it helps them **understand** the video content better.

The main drivers for people using them more was to provide better impact and stronger comprehension of what is being said; over a quarter (28%) claim the inclusion of subtitles/ captions provides more impact than without them.

**3 in 4**

Brits are feeling positive about subtitles/ captions and agree that brands that use them are deemed more caring

**66%**

of Brits think that brands that use advertising with subtitles/ captions are more trustworthy and engaging

**64%**

claim to feel less distracted watching ads with subtitles/ captions than when watching them without

→ “I feel like I understand things a lot more and it’s easier to comprehend the concept.”

→ “I find that a lot of modern TV is hard to understand. The actors mumble and they don't enunciate what they are saying. The audio mix is too quiet. I am a native English speaker myself, but I turn the subtitles on to understand what they are actually saying, so I can understand the plot.”

→ “Even if I can hear the video, I like to read the subtitles because it helps me to understand the videos more.”

→ “I just find that I can understand/focus more on what is happening/being said whilst the subtitles are on. It’s something that has just become a habit now.”

There is an overarching feeling that the use of subtitles/ captions is a good thing. Brits generally feel that having them on-screen adds something positive and importantly it does not take away from the video content, with three-quarters of Brits who expressed an opinion feeling positive about subtitles/ captions. And younger adults are even more positive (nearly 9 in 10 of 18-34s).

That positivity about the usage of subtitles also extends to the brands that use them. For example, 70% (of those who expressed an opinion) said that they feel more positive towards brands that use subtitles and captions and three-quarters agree that brands that use them are deemed to be a more caring brand—something that again is largely driven by 18-34s.

Two-thirds of Brits (66%) think that brands that use advertising with subtitles/ captions are also more trustworthy and engaging.

65% said that they also notice the products/ brands that use subtitles/ captions in their advertising more than those that don't and 64% claim to feel less distracted watching ads with subtitles/ captions than without.

There is an understanding that the audio quality isn't always intended for home viewing and is not as good as it once was, with over a third (39%) of those who watch with subtitles agreeing that it is now harder to hear the actors on screen — this rises to two-thirds for respondents aged 55+ who struggle even more. Even Jon M Chu, the director of the smash hit film Wicked, urged people on X to “Tell your movie theatres to turn the sound levels up to a 7, rather than the standard 6.4 sound some cinemas use”.



Ultimately, if people can't hear the dialogue on a show or film they are intentionally watching, then they may not hear the advertising that runs alongside it.

On the flip side, a minority of, 1 in 10 said that they are using subtitles/ captions less than two years ago. Half of those who choose not to watch video content with subtitles or captions said that they found it can be distracting.

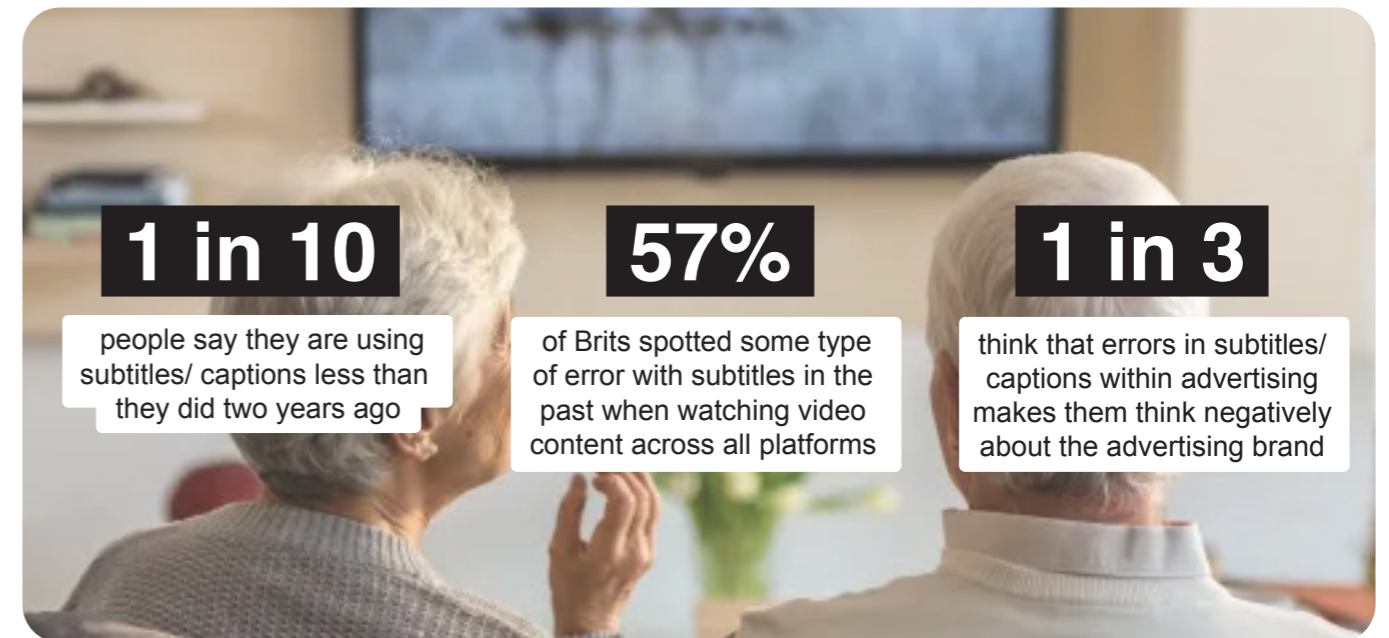
57% of Brits feel they see some kind of error when watching video content at least some of the time, across the platforms we tested.

And these issues with the format and accuracy of the current subtitle/ caption landscape are a strong barrier to adoption. A quarter of Brits (28%) think that subtitles/ captions are too slow and don't line up with what is on-screen, and a further quarter (23%) agree that they are full of mistakes. A fifth of Brits believe that they appear too fast and therefore can spoil the plot if not lined up properly. These errors can reflect badly on the person/ company making the content, with a further 1 in 3 agreeing that errors in subtitles/ captions within advertising makes them think negatively about the brand.

**“They are distracting and often out of kilter with what is actually being spoken.”**

**“I also don't like watching videos with captions when the timing is even just slightly off, especially if the video is in English. Also, there are some subtitles in certain media content that are wrong and aren't really what is being said.”**

**“There have been occasions when the subtitles are not aligned with the spoken words, and this makes the viewing experience much less enjoyable.”**



**Why this is important?**

**Subtitles/ captions can provide more impact and aid understanding when deployed properly and reflect positively on the brands that utilise them. Consider how you can start to weave this into existing creative across all media formats. Ensure that sense checking is conducted to avoid subtitling errors.**

## Words drive positive impact

We explored three different advertising creatives chosen from a range of categories in various advertising formats, to assess the impact of subtitles across categories (Cunard, The Cotswold Company, Iceland).\*

At an overall level and averaging out across all three creatives, watching with subtitles drove a **+3% point** uplift in brand cut through/salience, and the same uplift for consideration.

Whilst these were not significant increases, they indicate a directional positive shift, and we also saw a **+4% point** increase in those who reported strongly liking the ads, when they watched with subtitles.

There was no strong evidence that including subtitles made people feel negatively about the adverts; on the contrary we observe a positive increase in future consideration across all three brands among those who saw the brand's ad with subtitles included (vs. those who saw the non-subtitled version), indicating that subtitles in adverts bear little, if any, negative effects on the brand.

Interestingly we found that people who claimed to *rarely or never use* subtitles or captions in their day-to-day life generally had more pronounced effects than those who are regular subtitle/caption viewers.

Across the board, those that do not typically turn on subtitles had better brand cut through (+5% points), stronger impressions (+5% points) and improved consideration (+5% points) compared to those who were avid subtitle viewers.

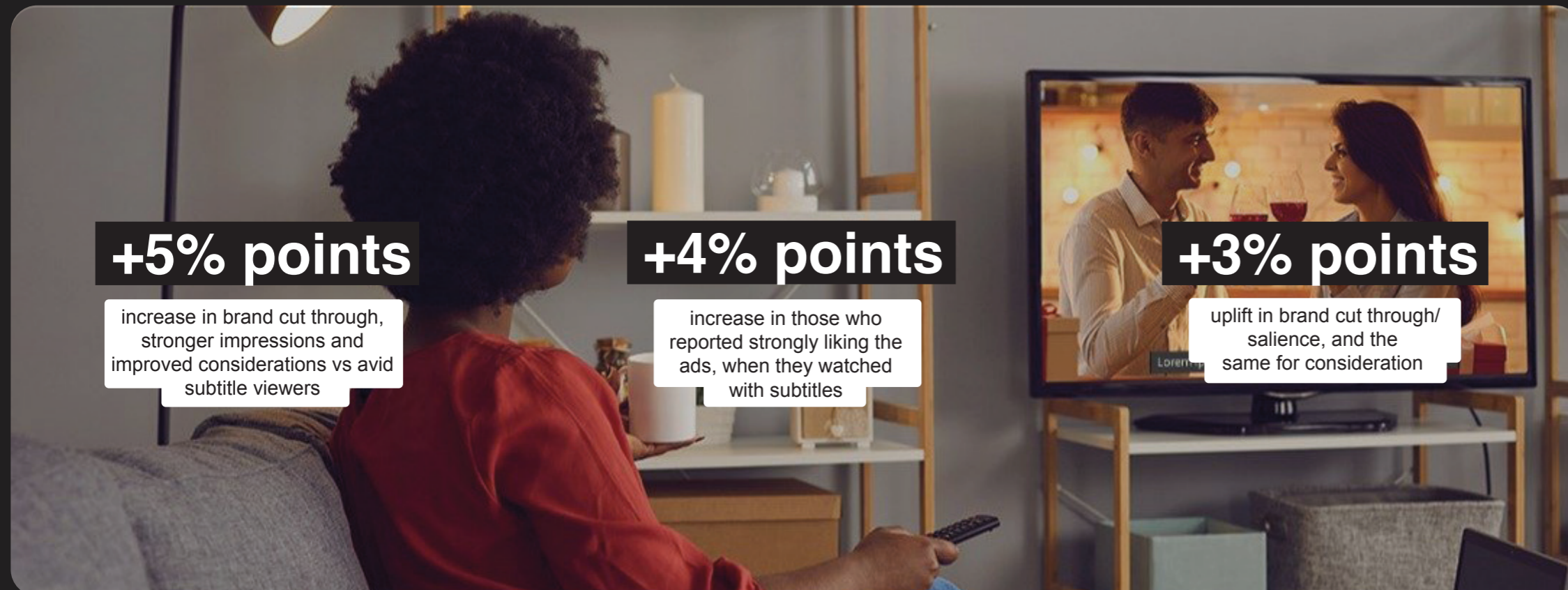
After averaging out the impact across 8 different metrics\*, we saw a **+5% points** increase in impact for Cunard, a **+4% points** increase for The Cotswold Company and a **+3% points** increase in impact for Iceland, when comparing to those who are regular subtitle viewers.

For this audience, it is a more novel concept, and they paid more attention to what was being

said, so rather than mentally switching off when they saw the adverts with subtitles included, they still engaged and took something away from the advertising.

\*For more details on methodology, please refer to 'End notes on methodology'

\*(Spontaneous brand cut through, prompted awareness, Consideration of brand with no reference to the ad, Average Perception score, Likeability of ad, Ad impact on Impression of brand, Recommendation, Ad Impact on consideration)



**+5% points**

increase in brand cut through, stronger impressions and improved considerations vs avid subtitle viewers

**+4% points**

increase in those who reported strongly liking the ads, when they watched with subtitles

**+3% points**

uplift in brand cut through/salience, and the same for consideration

## Ads with curated visual subtitles had a stronger impact compared to more generic subtitles



For the Cunard advert, where the subtitles were built directly into the creative, we registered the strongest scores, most notably for the below:

- +6% pts increase in Positive impression
- +5% pts increase in 'Stood out from other ads like it'
- +5% pts increase in 'Recommendation to others'
- +5% pts increase in 'Likelihood to visit the website'
- +3% pts increase in 'Consideration in future'

This is likely associated with how natural and sensitively designed the ad was to include subtitles as part of the creative from the offset, rather than having crude automated subtitles that are only added on as an afterthought.



For The Cotswold Company, we saw positive movements also but to a lesser extent

- +5% pts increase in average agreement with perceptions
- +4% pts increase in brand cut through/salience
- +4% pts increase in being 'Informative'
- +4% pts increase in 'Consideration in future'



Iceland noted the smallest impact, potentially because the ad featured direct talking to the viewers so people could lip read, the format was familiar, there were multiple messages displayed on screen and the subtitles were the most standard. With that being said, there was still a more positive impact seen when the subtitles were included than when it was excluded.

- +5% pts increase in 'Will take an action'
  - +5% pts increase in 'Recommend Iceland to others'
  - +5% pts increase in 'Shop in-store at Iceland'
  - +4% pts increase in 'Visit Iceland's website'
- +4% pts increase in 'Stood out from other ads like it'
- +4% pts increase in 'Consideration in future'

### Why this is important?

Subtitles, done correctly, can help shift long-term metrics such as consideration, that typically take a while to change. It can also encourage more positive impressions towards the brands using subtitles in their advertising – endeavour to create and provide advertising copy with subtitles where possible.



## The power of words for brand campaigns

### To summarise

- Subtitle/ caption engagement has grown in recent years, with Brits taking an active step to turn them on to aid impact and understanding
- Brands that include subtitles/ captions are deemed more caring and trustworthy — and more importantly there is no evidence of negative impact when used correctly!
- Those who don't typically use subtitles/ captions had stronger shifts across the board when including them e.g. better consideration and claimed intent to act

If you are interested in understanding more about how to apply these learnings to new or existing creative or just want to learn more about what questions to ask, then please reach out to the7stars Creative department and Insight team:



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## Question Checklist

It is the responsibility of agencies and brands alike to consider how to include subtitles/ captions within advertising. Here are some starter questions to encourage easy dialogue about the topic:

- How can we strategically select and emphasize specific keywords in subtitles to create measurable, lasting brand associations in viewers?
- Have you spoken to the appropriate creative teams on what is the best way to visualise the subtitles/ captions within advertising content?
- When brainstorming new creative ideas, is subtitles/ caption inclusion on the agenda sheet, so they are considered from the get-go?
- Can you encourage personalisation with subtitles/ captions formatting? E.g. change the colour, shading, size and positioning?
- Have you assessed if all your media formats have the capacity to be captioned/ have subtitles included?
- Have you embedded subtitles/ captions into your social media posts/ influencer content?
- Have you spoken with advertisers and broadcast platforms to ensure consistency and accuracy of subtitles/ captions for your video content?
- How should content providers react to ensure their approach across all content areas are fit for purpose?
- If content is to be viewed with subtitles/ captions, does the creative copy need to be adjusted so that important information is not blocked or covered up by the subtitles/ captions at the bottom of the screen?
- Advertisers who do direct response advertising and require on-screen messaging such as promotions & price points with supporting legal text will need to consider the use of subtitles within that context. Similarly, advertisers who need to substantiate claims or are in heavily regulated sectors and who require the use of on-screen legal text should also consider the use of subtitles within that context.
- If there is no space on the copy or no time to convey DR messaging alongside classic subtitles/ captions, can you explore ways to include dynamic text, call outs or audio cues to help aid impact and understanding?



## End notes on Methodology

Our research consisted of two separate research phases where we explored two main questions:

### PHASE 1 =

A usage & attitudes survey:

What is the impact of including subtitles/captions on driving outcomes?

### PHASE 2 =

A/B brand uplift study:

Does the inclusion of subtitles impact brand metrics and creative impressions?



Both subtitles and captions are covered within phase 1, whereas our chosen advertising in phase 2 focused on the inclusion and exclusion of subtitles specifically.

### Phase 1: Usage & Attitudes Study

We spoke to a nationally representative sample (total UK population) of 2,000 individuals using the7stars Voices4all sampling approach, with sample and fieldwork provided by Walr.

Conducted in August 2024, this 12-minute usage and attitudes survey was the starting point of the study and gave us a picture of the content landscape. It explored the nation’s use of and sentiment towards both subtitles and captions, and attitudes regarding subtitled and/ or captioned advertising.

*It is worth highlighting that we could not analyse those in the d/Deaf and hard of hearing community as the sample size was N=<50.*

### Phase 2: Control/ Exposed Test

A nationally representative sample (total UK population) of 2,000 individuals was surveyed using the7stars Voices4all sampling approach and used a control/ exposure (A/ B) methodology. Fieldwork was provided by Walr.

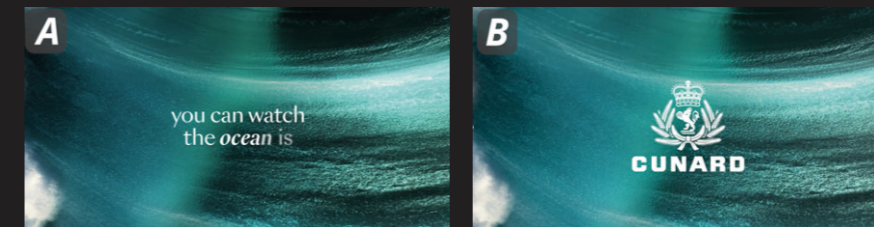
The adverts chosen were designed and executed by the7stars’s in house creative team ‘Supernova’ and as such, we were able to include and exclude subtitles on each creative for the A/B tests where necessary.

Control = No campaign exposure

Test No Subtitles = Campaign exposure (un-subtitled)

Test Subtitles = Subtitled campaign exposure

### First Ad: 30” audio ad for luxury ocean voyager, Cunard



- A. Incorporates real life quotes gathered from people currently experiencing a Cunard voyage and overlays it with the passenger’s real-life voices. The use of subtitles was organically woven into the creative itself and are integral to the campaign. The subtitles were sensitively created to match the style of the waves in the background to signal a ship at sea, with italics and transitions utilised throughout.
- B) Whilst the ‘Test No Subtitles’ still had the original dialogue and background, the brand logo was introduced and replaced the subtitled quotes.

### Second Ad: 30” TV ad for furniture retailer, The Cotswold Company



- A. The Cotswold Company recently unveiled their new TV advert focusing on quality handcrafted furniture. The advert had a voiceover narrative alongside subtitles that were superimposed at the bottom of the asset.
- B. The original asset did not have the superimposed subtitles.

### Third Ad: 30” TV asset for supermarket, Iceland



- A. TV personality, Josie Gibson, is the new face of the supermarket and in the ad, she speaks directly to shop goers and directly to the camera. The superimposed subtitles took on her Bristolian tone and explanation marks and punctuation.
- B. The original asset did not have the superimposed subtitles.



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