

Define research & insight



**Superimposed text in TV advertising**  
Final Report

November 2018

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# I Executive Summary

## Background to the research: Project context, method and sample

- Many TV ads use superimposed text (referred to here as ‘supers’) to qualify headline claims. These qualifications are included to prevent the audience from being misled. Consequently, it is important that the supers are legible and comprehensible to TV audiences. It is the role of the Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) to oversee regulatory standards in this area – ensuring that supers meet this criteria and the audience is adequately protected.
- Qualitative research was needed to review if, how and under what circumstances viewers use supers in TV ads. As part of this, a key focus was to understand the extent to which supers are both legible and comprehensible for viewers in ‘real-life’ settings, with a view to producing recommendations and insights identifying factors that might improve their legibility and comprehensibility.
- Two stages of research were undertaken with a general public audience, all of whom were, to varying extents, consumers of advertising. The sample also explored the impact for different socio-economic groups, genders, life-stages, eyesight levels and TV setups. In both stages, sets of broadcast adverts were shown to respondents in-home.
- Whilst Stages 1 and 2 both addressed the main research objectives, the method, scope and focus were slightly different for each stage in order to facilitate iterative learning across the project.
  - Stage 1 included 90 minute face-to-face individual and paired depth interviews with 58 consumers, covering how viewers use supers and how that varies between different types of viewers and adverts. There was also some consideration of legibility and comprehension of supers based on respondents’ reactions to advertising, although these aspects were addressed in greater depth during Stage 2.
  - Stage 2 included 60 minute face-to-face individual and paired depth interviews with 80 viewers, and focused principally on exploring the range of issues that impact on the legibility and comprehension of supers, again by assessing respondent reactions to adverts.

## Audience attitudes to supers in TV adverts

- All respondents understood what supers were and could recall having previously seen them on TV adverts. The majority referred to supers as either “the small print” or “the terms and conditions”.
- There was general agreement among respondents as to the perceived content of supers. Most assumed that they comprised a combination of terms and conditions that advertisers had some legal obligation to show, as well as additional information about the product or service being advertised.

- Respondents often assumed that positives about the product or service would be prominently displayed in the main advert, while caveats and exceptions would be shown in the supers. For this reason, supers were often viewed with some scepticism, and assumed to comprise 'the stuff they don't really want you to see'.
- Given the importance of the information they were seen to contain, most respondents believed it was important that supers should be both legible and comprehensible.
- The majority across both stages of the research reported finding supers difficult to read when watching adverts on TV at home and many expressed the view that such illegibility was a common part of advertising.
- Most respondents expected to see supers on certain advert types more than others. Adverts for high value products, finance, money and banking services, cars, gambling and utilities were all considered likely to have supers.

### Audience consumption of supers in TV ads

- In terms of both reported consumption and observed behaviour, supers in most TV adverts fell below the radar for the majority of respondents when watching TV at home. That is to say, they very rarely read or paid attention to this type of text when watching TV adverts. At the same time, audience differences in consumption of supers also emerged.
- The more times adverts were shown during the interviews, the more likely respondents were to subsequently notice or make reference to the supers. This suggests that viewer engagement and understanding of supers can increase with greater exposure.
- The audience differences in consumption of supers that emerged were based principally around age, as well as eyesight level.
- Younger people (those under age 30 who had not yet started a family) who self-reported as least likely to watch TV adverts, were consequently exposed to fewer supers. Moreover, their lower overall interest in watching adverts for financial products and services resulted in a corresponding disinterest in, and lack of engagement with, the supers in those adverts.
- In the case of respondents at the 'family' life-stage, interest in adverts for insurance, utilities, car finance, loans and mortgages could rise, particularly if the product or service offered is personally relevant. With that, the likelihood of paying attention to supers in those adverts also rises.
- Retired, and particularly elderly, respondents had the strongest interest in the information contained in supers. However, being least able to read and quickly

comprehend supers, older audiences had the greatest need for them to be legible and understandable, especially given their typically poorer eyesight.

- The reasons given by respondents as to why they tended to pay little attention to supers were closely linked to how they typically consumed TV adverts. For example, because overall less attention is paid to adverts than to TV programmes, for most adverts, only superficial details are noticed. Even for memorable adverts, respondents still felt it was unlikely they would read the supers, since the point of engagement is the advert itself, not the fine detail.

### Factors affecting legibility of supers in TV ads

- There was overall agreement among respondents that various factors could make supers more difficult to read. These included:
  - Contrast between the super and the background (highest impact)
  - Duration of hold (high impact)
  - A moving background (moderate impact)
  - Creative elements within the advert that distracted attention (moderate impact)
  - Competing text within an advert (moderate impact)
  - Positioning of the text (moderate impact)
  - Size of text (moderate impact)
  - Distorting text (compressed text and letter spacing and shadowing) (moderate impact)
  - The number of words, lines and information in a super (moderate impact)
- The impact was found to be cumulative rather than strictly hierarchical. In other words, the more legibility issues the super in question had, the more difficult it was to read. In the sets of adverts presented, respondents consistently identified the same specific supers, and issues within them, as harder to read than others.
- The contrast between the super text and background emerged as a key legibility factor and was mentioned frequently by respondents. Adverts using white/pale supers text on a light-coloured background were particularly difficult to read.
  - Exacerbating this illegibility were shifting background colours, which could alter the contrast between the text and background as the advert progressed.
  - Alongside colour contrast, boldness of text also proved to be a major differentiating factor in creating good contrast.
  - Key learning: using bold text, in a colour that contrasts as much as possible with the background, would improve contrast and therefore legibility.
- The duration of a super, although more difficult to rank discreetly in terms of its impact on legibility, could still have an influence on how easy to read the text was. By way of illustration, a short duration could make a super difficult to read in its entirety. Conversely, the longer a super is on screen, the more time viewers have to read it, so the more legible it becomes. Key learning: In light of this finding, displaying a super on screen for as long as possible – ideally for the full length of the advert – would improve legibility.

- Moving backgrounds were also found to affect the legibility of supers. Simply put, a moving background was generally acknowledged to make the super harder to read than a static background. Key learning: displaying the super on a static background block would improve legibility.
- Creative elements within the advert could serve to distract attention from the super itself. In this way, competing non-text creative elements could make the supers less noticeable, and somewhat harder for viewers to read.
- A further legibility issue to emerge was the display of additional, competing text whilst the supers were on screen. Such additional text competed for respondents' attention, and was typically more prominent than the super text, making the latter more recessive and difficult to focus on. Key learning: feature only one piece of text on screen at any one time.
- The positioning of text on screen was another significant influence. Given that respondents usually expected the super to be placed at the bottom of the screen, when the super was placed elsewhere, it was often missed entirely. Key learning: respondents would prefer to find all supers placed at the bottom of the screen, where they are expected and more noticeable.
- The size of the text in supers had a moderate impact on legibility. Small text contributed to making supers more difficult to read and slightly less noticeable, although not completely unreadable. Key learning: a larger text size, and a bold font, improved legibility and suggested the advertiser had 'nothing to hide'.
- Distorted text that appeared compressed ('tall', 'thin', 'skinny' or 'squashed') to respondents posed a further legibility problem. Although not completely illegible, it made supers more difficult to read across respondents. Shadowing (normally in the style of a drop shadow, a visual effect which gives the impression that the letters are raised) was also seen as a distortion of the text, making it harder to read. Key learning: avoid any distortion or manipulation of the text.
- Finally, a further legibility issue concerned the number of words, lines and information in a super. Broadly put, the more text on screen at once, the harder it was to read. Respondents additionally felt that the use of excessive amounts of text could potentially reflect an attempt to distract or confuse on the part of the advertiser. Interestingly, respondents had far less trouble reading information presented over multiple supers. Indeed, this style of presentation was preferred in place of one single super containing the same amount of information, despite the necessarily shorter duration of each consecutive super. These findings suggest that splitting larger amounts of information up into two or more short supers presented sequentially during the advert would aid legibility.

## Factors affecting comprehension of supers

- Comprehension of supers among respondents was generally good: most were able to understand the language used with little confusion.
- The few exceptions tended to cut across audiences, although it was the oldest respondents that reported more comprehension issues overall. Where comprehension issues did arise, they were usually due to the use of niche terminology, acronyms, initialisms and/or numbers in the super, as well as inadequate explanation more generally.
- The use of niche terminology in particular had the potential to confuse those who were unfamiliar with the specific product area being advertised. (This had a moderate impact, as whether or not a respondent understood a specific term varied according to the individual.) Moreover, the overuse of such language could additionally reduce respondents' willingness to engage with the text.
- The use of acronyms and initialisms could also make understanding supers more difficult for respondents, albeit at a lower level, since the overall meaning could usually still be deduced from the surrounding context.
- Where large amounts of numerical information were used, this had the potential to cause confusion making the super more difficult for respondents to comprehend. The impact of this type of issue depended on the amount of such information in the super - multiple numbers in a single super had a higher impact than use of a single number, as did the presentation of numbers in a way that required an additional calculation on the part of the viewer (such as a percentage).
- Lastly, inadequate explanation of specific points within supers appeared to have a moderate impact on comprehension, as it could occasionally leave some respondents unsure as to precisely what was being communicated by a super.

\* \* \* \* \*



## II Introduction

### A. Project Background

#### The ASA and BCAP

The Advertising Standards Authority (ASA) is a not-for-profit organisation that regulates advertising across all media, ensuring that it complies with the UK Advertising Codes. The Broadcast Committee of Advertising Practice (BCAP) is the industry committee that writes the UK Code of Broadcast Advertising (the BCAP Code) and provides compliance advice to the industry. The ASA and BCAP regulate TV and radio advertising under a co-regulatory arrangement with the Office of Communications (Ofcom).

#### Viewer comprehension and use of superimposed text ('supers') in TV adverts

The BCAP code requires that advertisements must not mislead viewers. Information necessary to qualify claims in adverts "must be presented clearly", with guidance available from BCAP on how advertisers should achieve this. Superimposed text, also called 'supers' or 'small print' (the term 'supers' will be used throughout this report) is an important way that advertisers convey qualifying information to viewers. Supers are overlaid onto the main ad creative and usually appear at the bottom of the screen.

BCAP's guidance focuses on aspects of supers that can impact legibility and comprehension. The guidance covers provisions such as amount and communicability of text, size of text, position of text, duration for which text is displayed on screen ('hold'), how numbers are presented and any signs and abbreviations used. Effective presentation of supers maximises viewers' ability to read and understand them.

The guidance was developed in the early 1990s by a predecessor regulator to BCAP, the Independent Television Commission. It was based on an extensive review of the evidence around legibility of text on screens and from related areas. However, little research has been undertaken more recently into how legible and easily understood supers are, or if/how the general public use them, as well as how this might vary between different types of advert or different audiences.

This is a timely opportunity to update the picture of how supers (and the ASA and BCAP's regulation of them) work for viewers in the modern TV viewing environment.

### B. Research Aims and Objectives

The overall aims of the research were as follows:

- **Understand how viewers use supers in broadcast ads.**
- **Look at the extent to which viewers are able to read supers for broadcast ads in a 'real-life setting'.**
- **Look at the extent to which viewers can understand the content of supers.**
- **Draw out insights that may help to improve the legibility of supers in the event**

**that the research shows that viewers are not able to read the text in a real-life setting.**

To meet these objectives, the research needed to explore the following areas:

**a) How viewers use supers in adverts (claimed use and actual use)**

- Whether viewers notice supers
- Whether they are interested in reading them
- Whether this varies for different types of adverts (and if so, which ones and how)
- Whether they then try to read them (and how this varies between adverts)
- How the above varies between different types of viewer (e.g. age and demographics)
- How this varies depending on home TV setup (e.g. size of TV, sitting distance from TV)
- Whether their claimed use differs from their actual use and, if so, how and under what circumstances

**b) Legibility of supers**

- How legible supers are in a 'real life' setting, including:
  - whether they can be read;
  - how this varies between adverts;
  - which factors are key in determining whether the supers are legible or illegible; and
  - how this might vary by type of viewer, demographics or TV setup.
- Whether differences exist between viewers' self-reported ability to read supers and monitored ability
- What changes may be needed to improve legibility – for example, whether new approaches might be required to address:
  - font and spacing/compression of text;
  - colour combinations;
  - background / shadowing;
  - duration of hold;
  - number of characters per line, line length and text arrangement;
  - complexity of the information presented; and
  - relationship to the wider content of the ad – other text on the screen, changing backgrounds and music.

**c) Comprehension of supers**

- How confident participants are that they understand the information included in the supers
- Whether participants are able to demonstrate their understanding of the information in adverts
- If, how and why this varies (e.g. amount of text, duration text is displayed for, number of points in text)
- How this varies by type of viewer, demographics or TV setup

## C. Method and Sample

### Method

A depth and paired-depth approach was used, comprising:

- **20 x depth and 19 x paired depth interviews (90 minutes) in Stage 1.**
- **26 x depth and 27 x paired depth interviews (60 minutes) in Stage 2.**

In total, 138 respondents were interviewed across the two stages.

Interviews were carried out in respondents' homes, using their home TV setup to ensure a real-world setting that was as natural as possible. Permission was requested at recruitment for moderators to be allowed to use respondents' TV set-ups to play adverts. Moderators had with them broadcast-quality copies of all adverts (supplied by the ASA) on three different devices to ensure that adverts could be played on or from a:

- Laptop, with an HDMI cable to connect laptops to respondents' televisions (this method was used in the majority of sessions);
- USB stick to plug directly into compatible TVs; and
- Burned DVD.

Both stages of research addressed the main research objectives but the focus was different for each.

#### Stage 1 method

**Stage 1** interviews (90 min) were longer than those in Stage 2 (60 min) and were designed to provide deeper insight into how viewers use supers without initially drawing attention to supers as the focus of the research. These interviews focused mainly on the first set of objectives – how viewers want to use supers, how this varies between different types of viewers and whether there were any differences between different types of advert. Legibility and comprehension were also considered but were not the primary focus in Stage 1.

Interviews therefore started by showing respondents a series of adverts in a block (4-5 adverts per block; 13 adverts in total). Appendix 3 contains a full list of adverts shown in each research stage. All of the adverts shown included supers; some had known or suspected legibility or comprehension issues.

Respondents were given no instructions beyond being told they would be shown a set of adverts and then asked about them (please see Appendix 1a for the full discussion guide). After viewing the adverts, respondents were invited to tell moderators everything they had noticed about the adverts – what each advert had been about, what it was offering, any memorable details, etc. An issue of key interest was whether respondents would spontaneously mention supers. Respondents were then shown each advert individually and asked to comment – again, with no direct reference to supers by the moderator.

The above steps were then repeated for a second block of adverts.

After this, the interview moved on to discuss respondent consumption of TV adverts in more detail, and then about their perceived consumption of supers. This helped to provide a rich and detailed background context in which to set overall findings about the legibility and comprehension of various factors within supers.

Finally, a full set of adverts (three blocks) was shown to respondents, this time with specific instruction to pay attention to the supers. For each, any issues respondents encountered when reading or understanding the super were noted. In this way, legibility and comprehension were also briefly examined; this was to provide some initial guidance around which issues may be more or less important for respondents, and to inform the discussion guide and stimulus (advert) selection for Stage 2, so that these issues could be studied in more detail.

After each advert was shown and discussed, the screen was paused on the super and respondents were given a paper handout of the screenshot. This was to better differentiate comprehension from legibility – so a super that may have been difficult to read when it appeared on an advert in real time could be considered in more detail to assess understanding.

### **Stage 2 method**

Stage 2 was preceded by a break in fieldwork for interim analysis of Stage 1 findings. This was used to develop initial hypotheses around respondents' use of supers and to adapt the approach for Stage 2.

It was noted during this analysis period that many of the supers shown in Stage 1 adverts had multiple legibility and/or comprehension issues within each super and that, while respondents had been able to identify all of the factors that made a particular super difficult to read or understand, they had not been able to differentiate the impact of *individual* issues within each super. Care was therefore taken in Stage 2 to select, as far as possible, adverts that had fewer issues within the super (again, these adverts can be seen in Appendix 3). A small number of adverts were assumed to be safely compliant, i.e. to have no suspected legibility or comprehension issues within the supers. These compliant ads were included to provide a baseline, i.e. to ensure that respondents could read and understand such supers without issue.

Stage 2 interviews (60 minutes) focused on testing a larger number of adverts (19 adverts in total) to differentiate, and assess the relative importance of, a range of issues that could impact on the legibility and comprehension of a super (please see Appendix 1b for the Stage 2 discussion guide). The key difference from Stage 1 was that respondents were explicitly directed to focus on supers from the start of the interview and viewed adverts one at a time, rather than in blocks. As per Stage 1, after an initial discussion about the super, the TV screen was paused on the super and respondents given a paper handout of the screenshot.

They were also asked to complete a ranking exercise whereby the adverts were (as far as possible) ranked from best to worst in terms of legibility of the super. As part of this, they were asked to divide adverts into groups that represented supers that were easy to read, harder to read, hard to read and (if appropriate) impossible to read. This provided moderators with an additional, quasi-quantitative tool for analysis and helped to determine the relative importance

of each issue. The method used in Stage 2 therefore allowed the various issues that could impact on legibility and comprehension to be thoroughly and systematically examined.

## Sample

The sample was structured to reflect the following main criteria:

- A good spread of ages including respondents who were 75+
- A range of types and sizes of TV
- All had either a TV with HDMI input or a working DVD player connected to their TV (so that the ads could be shown)
- Minimum quotas were set to ensure inclusion of those with poor eyesight (e.g. spectacles and contact lens wearers)
- Hearing ability occurred naturally across the sample
- BAME representation occurred naturally according to each area
- None were to say they 'never watch adverts on TV'
- A good spread of reading abilities – this was self-assessed at screening but all had to be able to read English to basic standard
- All respondents (especially the retired) were fully able to give informed consent to take part in the interview

For the full sample structure, please see Appendix 2.

Stage 1 included some adverts for online gambling and short-term loans. It emerged on analysis that none of the Stage 1 respondents had personal experience of either taking out a short-term loan or of gambling online. Consequently they did not see themselves as the target audience for such adverts, and were less likely to engage with them (including paying attention to the information in the supers and assessing its importance and relevance). Stage 2 therefore included 7 respondents who had direct experience of online gambling and 7 who had taken out a short-term loan.

## Locations

Fieldwork took place across 14 locations in England (Northampton, Leicester, Leeds, Bristol, York, Nottingham, London, Brighton, Birmingham), Scotland (Paisley, Edinburgh), Wales (Swansea, Cardiff) and Northern Ireland (Belfast). Stage 1 fieldwork was conducted in June 2018 and Stage 2 fieldwork was completed in July 2018.

## Team

The research team included: Joceline Jones, Caroline Hewitt, Dani Cervantes, Alex Gibson, Camille Mulcaire and Ellinor Ottosson.

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## III Detailed Findings

### 1. Audience engagement with TV adverts

#### 1.1 Section overview

This section provides a brief overview of respondent engagement with TV adverts. It considers how respondents watch adverts in a natural, real-world setting, and whether this varies between different types of advert and among different audiences. This provides the context for later considering how respondents consume supers. It also considers what actions respondents may take after watching a TV advert.

The section begins by discussing TV advert viewing behaviours, focusing on levels of engagement. It then considers which types of TV advert are likely to provoke interest, and how all of the above can vary between different audiences.

Findings from this and the following two sections are predominantly informed by Stage 1 of the research.

#### 1.2 How respondents watch and consume TV adverts

As previously detailed, Stage 1 interviews included a section where respondents were asked about their consumption of TV adverts (see Appendix 1a for the full discussion guide). The purpose of this was to set their consumption of supers in a broader context. Stage 2 did not directly ask respondents about their consumption of TV adverts.

All respondents in the sample reported watching, and paying some attention to, certain TV adverts, meaning they could also (in theory) pay attention to supers. In general, they were sufficiently engaged with adverts to the point of recognising when an advert might be of personal interest or relevant to them. Nonetheless, there were some tendencies for the oldest respondents to take a more active interest in adverts. Younger audiences, on the other hand, tended to engage least, and often reported passive, as opposed to active, viewing.

Respondents' relative interest and engagement in TV adverts becomes important when considering supers, as the level of attention paid to adverts partly determines the attention paid to the details within those adverts, such as supers.

#### 1.3 Types of advert that can engage interest

Respondents were questioned about adverts that engaged interest, to see whether there was any spontaneous awareness or recollection of supers within any particular types of advert. They were not asked about supers directly, but were given opportunities to discuss any adverts they spontaneously recalled in as much detail as they could.

A few types of advert generated more interest and attention (i.e. respondents reported watching them more actively than most adverts), although these varied both between audiences and between individuals. These included:

- Adverts with memorable creative elements;
- Adverts for memorable products or services;
- Adverts for low value products or services entailing no financial risk; and
- Adverts for high-value products / services where a purchase was already being considered.

All of the above can combine to affect if, how, when and to what level of detail people think they notice and read supers when consuming TV adverts.

## 2. Audience attitudes to superimposed text in TV adverts

### 2.1 Overview

This section provides some background about if and when respondents look at and read supers on TV adverts. It considers if, when, why and how respondents read supers in a natural, real-world setting, if and how this varies between different adverts (or types of advert) and any differences between audiences.

The section begins by discussing how respondents view supers – whether they are aware of them, what they think they are used for by advertisers, and of their opinions of their likely content and placement. It goes on to consider whether, and under what circumstances (or types of advert) respondents think supers are more or less important, and why.

### 2.2 Respondent terminology and perception of supers' content and purpose

All respondents understood the idea of supers and what was meant by them – on prompting, all recalled seeing them on TV ads. When referring to supers, the vast majority of respondents called them either 'the small print' or 'the terms and conditions'; the few who did not had not given them sufficient thought to give them a name.

Respondents over both stages generally agreed about the (perceived) content of supers, i.e. what they were for and the type of information contained within them. The general perception was that supers comprise a mix of terms and conditions (assumed by most to be legally required, such as APR and interest rates, general exclusions, the length of contracts and other contractual details), and additional information about the product or service being advertised.

*I'd say it's to cover themselves. [f, B, empty nester, poor eyesight, Belfast]*

*When they're telling you the T&Cs, like banks, loans, mortgages. [pair, C1, empty nester, poor eyesight, York]*

A commonly-espoused belief was that this additional information was likely to be negative in nature, i.e. to illustrate the downsides of the product and / or service. So, while the main body

of the advert was seen to sell the benefits, any super was assumed to detail the caveats. Spontaneous examples offered included caveats to up-front deals and special offers, caveats to product guarantees and warranties, details of contract lengths and, importantly, additional costs.

*The things they don't want you to see. [m, B, family, Edinburgh]*

*It's the things they don't want you to know. [m, B, pre-family, York]*

A small number of respondents believed that most advertisers have honest intentions and use supers to keep their target audiences as well-informed as possible about their products and services. However, the majority of respondents were more sceptical about their purpose, and a few assumed supers were only there so that the main body of an advert could deceive consumers.

*I admit it, I am cynical and I just assume that if something seems too good to be true then it probably is, and the small print is going to explain how none of what they've just suggested really applies. [pair, C1, empty nester, poor eyesight, Northampton]*

When discussing supers, the majority of respondents referred to finding some of them difficult to read when watching adverts at home (i.e. outside of the research session). Among many respondents, being unable to easily read supers could sometimes drive scepticism and suspicion of brands. Some felt that any reliable company would make their supers easy to read, which would help to generate trust in the brand. In contrast, being unable to easily read a super could drive the assumption that an advertiser 'has something to hide', which could lower trust in that advertiser.

*When they make them so small you can't read them, you immediately think 'oh what are they trying to hide?' [pair, C1, empty nester, poor eyesight, Northampton]*

*It turns me right off. Makes me just not trust them. Just tell the truth and let us decide for ourselves if we want it on that basis. [pair, C2, family, Leicester]*

However, there was also a general feeling that hard-to-read supers are an accepted part of advertising, and that the onus is on the buyer to fully investigate an offer before purchasing.

*If you buy something because you believe a shouting man on the telly has told you the whole truth, and you just take it at face value, you're a bit naïve really. You've got to do your research. [f, D, pre-family, Leicester]*

### 2.3 Respondent perceptions of the importance of supers and reported consumption

Only a few respondents questioned whether supers were necessary in adverts. Those who questioned their necessity argued (as above) that people generally do their own research before purchase and could be given 'the Ts and Cs' at a later stage. Most respondents



however held the view that supers could contain important information, and so should be legible and easy to understand.

*It is necessary to read it, and that means it should not be hidden.* [f, B, retired, Brighton]

Most respondents would expect to see superimposed text on some advert types but not on others. Those seen as more likely to have supers included adverts for any high value (£100+) product; finance, money and banking adverts; car adverts; gambling adverts and utilities adverts (including broadband and mobile phones).

More generally, any super providing additional information that substantially altered the perceived details of an advert was seen as important (and many argued that such information should not be 'relegated' to a super but should be made clear in the main body of the advert). One such example within this piece of research was an advert for a magazine subscription (advertised at an introductory offer of £1.99) with a 'free' model bus piece in each issue. Consumers could then build the bus a piece at a time with each edition of the magazine. Only when the super was read was it understood that assembling the whole bus would require purchasing 130 editions of the magazine, priced at £8.99 per issue – making the bus, in effect, cost over £1,000. Respondents argued that this information substantially altered the perceived nature of the offer, making the information in the super crucial to a full understanding of the product being advertised.

*That is actually a complete con, and they're obviously trying to hide it.* [pair, C1, family, Belfast]

*That's different to a lot of the terms and conditions you see, that is very important information there. The amount you will actually pay is a lot more than the amount the advert is suggesting.* [pair, D, retired, Swansea]

Most respondents additionally felt that supers were most important in any products or services that required a substantial or ongoing financial outlay, such as a high-value item or an ongoing contract. These were generally considered major investments that require a clear picture in order for consumers to make informed judgments about whether or not to purchase, and where full understanding of the terms and conditions was therefore seen as important.

*I'd expect them on anything to do with money, where you subscribe to things.* [m, B, family, York]

Examples of such products and services included 'big ticket' items with warranties and guarantees (e.g. white goods, electricals and cars); contracts that tie people in to an ongoing financial commitment (e.g. mobile phone contracts, broadband and utilities); anything that potentially involves debt (e.g. credit cards and loans), and anything where there is a risk of losing money (e.g. gambling).

### 3. Audience consumption of supers

#### 3.1 Overview

This section discusses and compares respondents' consumption of supers, i.e. how much attention they paid to them. As a reminder, in order to assess observed consumption, Stage 1 respondents were first asked to watch a series of adverts without any specific reference to supers, then asked to recall details of the advert (to see whether information contained in the supers was noted). After this, respondents were then directed to watch adverts again and this time asked to pay attention to the super.

In Stage 2, where the focus was more on teasing out different aspects that could impact on legibility and comprehension of supers, respondents were briefly asked about their consumption of supers but were then immediately directed to pay attention to them.

The section begins by discussing how respondents thought they used supers, then outlines the reasons why supers typically fall below the radar for most respondents.

#### 3.2 Respondents' observed consumption of supers

In Stage 1, when respondents were directed to watch adverts with no additional instructions, then questioned about what the advert had been about, only a handful of respondents across the sample (approximately eight of the 58 respondents) noticed or referred to the supers. This did not vary by which of the three blocks of adverts was shown first.

Of those eight who did refer to supers, approximately half spontaneously commented that there had been supers, but that they had not read them or had been unable to read them (the super was noticed, but not read). Others noted and spontaneously played back a detail from the supers, e.g. a contract length or a 'hidden cost'. On later discussion, it emerged that all of these had been due to a respondent being interested in the type of product or service prior to the research session and having already carried out their own research (e.g. purchasing a new mobile phone on a contract, looking into life insurance).

*I did see that in the small print it says it's a 36 month contract and I noticed that because it's funny, I was just looking at mobile phones last weekend and contract length is one of the things I'm thinking about. [f, D, pre-family, Leicester]*

The more times the adverts were shown, the more likely respondents were to subsequently notice or refer to the supers. For example, on a second viewing (where adverts were shown individually), almost half across the Stage 1 sample made some reference to the super.

When questioned about this, respondents typically reported that they did not often pay active attention to supers unless an advert had engaged their interest.

*I don't normally bother no, especially if the advert hasn't caught my attention. [pair, C2, family, poor eyesight, Leicester]*

*With my eyesight no, I would have to press pause on the TV if I wanted to look at them and I can't say I've ever done that. [f, D, retired, poor eyesight, Swansea]*

### 3.3 Audience differences in consumption of supers

A number of differences emerged in how different audiences consumed supers. This was mostly driven by age, although poor eyesight was also a factor.

#### 3.3.1 Younger & pre-family respondents

Younger people, particularly pre-family, self-reported as feeling less targeted by certain adverts, particularly those for financial products and services (e.g. utilities, loans, mortgages, and insurance), meaning they were less likely to actively try to read the supers in such advert.

*Most of the ads don't interest me because they're for stuff like insurance or mortgages or credit cards and I'm just not interested in those kind of things. [pair, C2, pre-family, Paisley]*

Although younger people did report signing up for some financial products, most notably mobile phone and internet contracts, they typically felt themselves to be very 'net savvy', so as a matter of course would undertake comparisons and pay attention to the type of detail contained in supers such as price per month, up-front deals and, contract lengths. They consequently did not feel that they needed to read a super in a TV advert in order to fully inform themselves about the various terms and conditions of such products.

*You just wouldn't use a TV advert to find your next phone, you just wouldn't do it. You'd ask your mates then you'd check the internet to see where's got the best deal and you'd read all the different conditions. [f, D, pre-family, Leicester]*

#### 3.3.2 Family respondents

As people get older and may move to the 'family' life-stage, with associated factors such as a mortgage, a car, etc., interest in adverts for the above type of products and services can rise. As people start to own their own homes and have children, interest in insurances, utilities, car finance, loans and mortgages can also rise. Adverts for these types of products were reported by respondents to be more likely to be watched, so the chance of paying attention to supers (in ads for personally relevant products or services) also rose.

*Like I said it does remind you that you might need to think about switching. [m, family, poor eyesight, Cardiff]*

#### 3.3.3 Older respondents

Retired people, particularly older viewers, arguably have greatest interest in the information contained in supers and greatest need for them to be legible and comprehensible. People aged 70+ were more generally likely (in our small sample) to declare an active interest in watching adverts in general and in looking at 'the small print' in all types of adverts (supers and other types of advertising). Although not always the case, they also tended to be less

internet-savvy, so were more reliant on the details contained in adverts (although most claimed that they would still visit a shop or phone up for more details about a product or service of interest).

Conversely, the oldest respondents in our sample also found it more challenging than younger audiences to quickly comprehend adverts and were sometimes left confused about what certain adverts had been about. This was noticed by moderators in some of the research sessions, and also reported by some of the oldest respondents.

*You do sit and think, 'what on earth was all that about'? [f, D, retired, poor eyesight, Swansea]*

*Adverts these days have got so much going on, they're so fancy, like car adverts in particular, you wouldn't even know they were for a car. All the flashes and bangs, bells and whistles. People just want to know about what you're selling, and sometimes I don't even know that. [m, B, retired, poor eyesight, Northampton]*

*There's so much screaming and shouting, and loud music, you don't really know what's going on unless you see it a few times. [f, C1, retired, poor eyesight, Leicester]*

Consequently, although the oldest audiences stated that they were generally more interested in supers than other audiences, they were sometimes less able to read, understand and digest them, as their active attention was devoted to trying to understand the main points of the advert. This could additionally be compounded by generally slower reading speeds, generally poorer eyesight and lack of familiarity with jargon.

### 3.3.4 Impact of eyesight

When paired depths were carried out, there were sometimes noticeable differences within couples between those with better and poorer eyesight. Those who wore glasses to watch TV due to being short-sighted were more likely to report 'screwing their eyes up' and straining to be able to read supers.

*I would have to peer right up at the screen to read the small print. [pair, B, empty nester, poor eyesight, Brighton]*

*I'm not saying I want to read the writing but if I did, I would pause the television and I might need to get closer for some of them as they can be very small. [m, B, retired, poor eyesight, Nottingham]*

For those for whom glasses were not essential when watching TV, wearing glasses could be the difference between being able to read supers or not, even when viewing of the rest of the advert is not compromised. Poorer eyesight often also corresponded to older age groups, with the majority of retired respondents in the sample wearing glasses.

### 3.3.5 Other factors

Other factors did not have a noticeable or consistent impact on people's consumption of supers. All respondents in the sample had HD TVs, most of which were 40-55 inches, and most sat 2-3 metres from their TV screen, but screen size and viewing distance did not have any observable impact on respondents' ability to read supers.

### 3.4 Reasons for low salience of supers in different types of TV adverts

When questioned on their reasons for paying little attention to supers, a number of stated factors emerged.

Firstly, because only certain types of advert engage active attention, for most adverts, only superficial details about the advert were noticed – e.g. what was being advertised, and sometimes a few creative details.

*You're not thinking about the small print when the singing man is on. I couldn't even tell you if those adverts have got any or not [f, C2, family, poor eyesight, Nottingham]*

For memorable adverts (as described above), respondents *thought* it unlikely that they would read supers. For this type of advert, the point of engagement was the advert itself, not the fine detail, and the creative elements such as 'the story' of the advert or a memorable character, could distract from noticing supers. As a note, this emerged in practice during the Stage 1 research session, particularly when watching a Vodafone advert with a compelling storyline – even when directed to look at the super, respondents often became distracted during the advert and failed to notice it.

*You get caught up in the story so you're watching the main screen wondering what's going to happen, your eyes aren't drawn to the writing at the bottom. [pair, C1, family, Northampton]*

For low value adverts, respondents also considered themselves unlikely to notice or read supers. The low perceived risk associated with a purchase made 'the small print' seem irrelevant. This also emerged in practice in Stage 2 research, when respondents viewed adverts for a new Robinsons squash drink and a 'Go Outdoors' summer sale; despite having seen both adverts on TV multiple times outside of the research session, the fact that each had a super had not been previously noticed by any respondents, nor was the information considered particularly relevant.

*You really don't need to know the juice content, if you're that interested like as a mum I watch their sugar so might read the label if I was buying it for the first time but I wouldn't try to read it when the advert was on TV. [pair, D, family, Swansea]*

For adverts for high value products/services that could potentially engage interest and, ultimately, lead to a purchase, respondents' reported that their next steps would be further research. They typically assumed that they would discover the details shown in 'the small print' when they investigated further. Therefore, although they reported being more likely to

both notice and try to read supers in such adverts, there seemed to be little impetus to try to take in all the information in the supers while an advert was playing on TV.

*There's no denying that the small print has got important information but as I was saying you would find all of that out later when you were doing your comparisons. [m, C1, empty nester, poor eyesight, Northampton]*

## 4. Factors affecting legibility and comprehension of supers

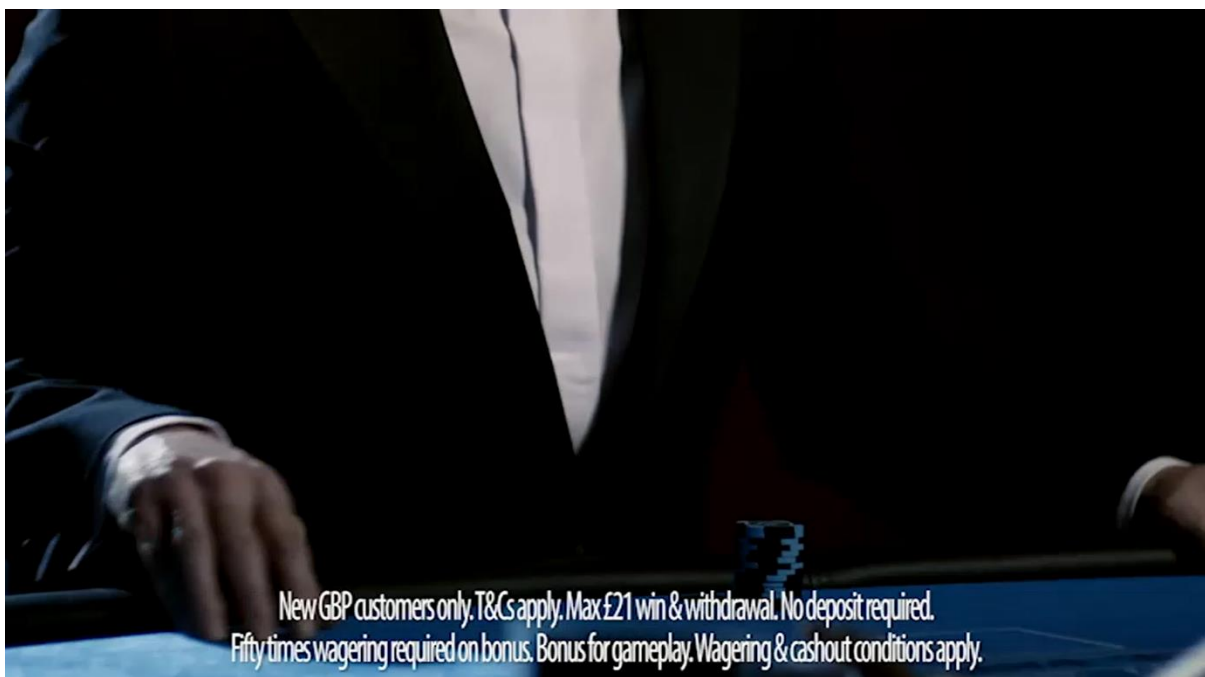
### 4.1 Overview of section

This section sets out the various issues that can impact both legibility and comprehension of a super. Each factor is considered separately for both legibility and comprehension. Respondents in Stage 2 completed a ranking exercise – results from this ranking exercise have been used to describe the general impact of each factor. It should however be born in mind that this project is qualitative, and that no definitive statements are suggested about the absolute relative impact of each factor.

When respondents were directed to pay attention to the supers, a number of factors emerged that impacted on legibility and comprehension and, overall, legibility of supers was a far greater issue than comprehension. However, a small number of respondents were unable to read *any* of the supers in any of the adverts. Such respondents tended to be older (70+), to sit at an angle to their TV or to have poor eyesight.

To an extent, factors impacting legibility and comprehension co-vary, in that an advert that is hard to understand is harder to read and an advert that is hard to read is also harder to understand. However, for the purposes of this report, the factors have been split out as far as possible.

An example of how legibility and comprehension can co-vary is from a 21.co.uk advert shown in Stage 1. A screenshot of this advert is shown below.



This advert had various issues that impacted comprehension – as well as using niche terminology such as ‘fifty times wagering required on bonus’, it presented multiple different statements in a single super, each of which required time for respondents to take in and understand. This had knock-on effects on how difficult the advert was to read, in that respondents reported ‘getting lost’ before they reached the end of the super. Despite the super being on screen for a substantial amount of time, respondents were therefore often unable to read to the end of the super because of the effort required to understand the highly complex information. In this way, a super that is hard to understand also becomes hard to read.

## 4.2 What works well to aid legibility and comprehension

A number of factors were identified throughout both stages of research that helped to aid legibility and comprehension. All of these points were important in helping to make supers easy to read and understand. These were as follows.

### Legibility:

- Strong contrast between text and background – both in terms of boldness of text and colour contrast (black text on a white background provided the strongest contrast in the adverts shown);
- Text that is in focus;
- A static background;
- Long duration on screen (a super should ideally be displayed throughout an advert);
- Eliminating/reducing distracting creative elements and other competing text (where possible);
- Placement of the super at the bottom of the screen (where respondents expect it to be);
- Text that is a good size – the larger the font size, the better;
- A clear font that is not distorted or manipulated in any way;
- Well-spaced letters and words; and
- Keeping the overall amount of text to a minimum – where impossible, splitting each point of information into two or more short supers that appear consecutively.

### Comprehension:

- Use of Plain English where possible, and minimal use of niche terminology;
- Minimal use of acronyms and initialisms;
- Keeping amounts of numerical information to a minimum;
  - alternatively, presenting numbers sequentially over multiple supers in an advert -this was found by respondents to be easier to comprehend and digest
- Keeping numerical information as simple (e.g. real numbers are easier to understand at-a-glance than trying to work out percentages); and
- Clear explanations of key points within the supers.

A small number of adverts in Stage 2 were included as examples where both legibility and comprehension appeared (to researchers) to be good. This was confirmed during the research sessions, where respondents universally agreed that these particular adverts were easy to

read and understand. Screenshots from these four adverts are shown below for illustration (more screenshots from the same adverts can be seen in Appendix 3):



In all of the above examples, the text is sufficiently large, was on screen for a sufficient length of time to be read, and there was good contrast between the text and background.

## 4.2 Factors affecting legibility of supers

### 4.2.1 Overview

Respondents noted a variety of factors that could all make supers more difficult to read. These were spontaneously mentioned – respondents were not directly prompted, other than being asked how difficult or easy the super was to read and understand, and why.

In Stage 1, there was no strong agreement across different respondents about which factors were most important in making a super legible. In addition, in Stage 1 many of the adverts shown had multiple legibility issues, such as small text with poor contrast displayed on top of a moving background, which meant that it could be difficult for individuals to differentiate exactly which factors made a super difficult to read, and the relative importance of each factor. Findings from Stage 1 also suggested that the various factors that could negatively impact legibility could sometimes be *cumulative* rather than strictly hierarchical, i.e. the more issues an advert had, the more difficult it was to read.

Consequently, Stage 1 respondents were able to identify the 'best' and 'worst' adverts in terms of legibility, but were not always able to unpick which of the different issues made that advert more or less legible. In Stage 2 therefore, adverts were selected so as to have as few potentially cumulative issues as possible.



Stage 2 respondents were asked to complete a ranking exercise about which of the adverts were easier and harder to read, and why. This was to further tease out the relative impact of each factor on legibility. Results of this were used as part of the analysis into which factors had greater and lesser impact on the legibility of the text used in supers. Results from this exercise were not always consistent across respondents (i.e. not all respondents ranked the adverts in the same order), but there was a good consistency among the adverts that were ranked worst (most difficult to read) and the factors that made this the case.

Consequently, although the following factors are not in a strict hierarchical order, their relative importance across respondents can be expressed in more general terms of *greater and lesser impact* on legibility. Factors that are described as having ‘moderate impact’ still *had* an impact and should not be discounted as unimportant. For most of the factors below, the impact is on a sliding scale and there is a point for any factor where text would be rendered unreadable. For example, although ‘size of text’ is described as having ‘moderate impact’ relative to contrast, there is a point at which text would become too small to read. Consequently, the descriptions in terms of impact can depend on an individual advert.

The factors were as follows (each of these is discussed in subsequent sections):

- Contrast between the super and the background (highest impact)
- Duration of hold (high impact)
- A moving background (moderate impact)
- Creative elements within the advert that distracted attention (moderate impact)
- Competing text within an advert (moderate impact)
- Positioning of the text (moderate impact)
- Size of text (moderate impact)
- Distorting text (compressed text and letter spacing and shadowing) (moderate impact)
- The number of words, lines and information in a super (moderate impact)

One potential factor that did *not* apparently impact legibility or comprehension was having a series of supers displayed sequentially in a single advert (as opposed to only one super). This was however highly dependent on each of the supers being *very short and simple to understand* ‘at a glance’ – for example, the aforementioned advert for TalkTalk was seen as having supers that were easy to read and understand, despite having multiple short supers. Multiple supers were therefore not necessarily hard to read, provided that each individual super was of a sufficient text-size and length, and remained on screen for a sufficient length of time.

*That’s easy. Each of the lines of small print is short and to the point.* [m, B, family, York]

#### 4.2.2 Contrast between super and background (highest impact)

Assuming a super can be read (i.e. the text is in focus) and is noticed, the greatest number of respondent complaints about legibility were to do with the various factors that affected the contrast between the text and the background. This could be anything that meant that the

supers did not stand out well against the background making them difficult to read and, in some cases, actually impossible.

The most common complaint was about adverts that used white or pale text on a very light-coloured background, which made it both difficult to notice and difficult to read. This effect was magnified when the text was very faint. An example<sup>1</sup> is below.



Double data, offer ends 29th May, selected tariffs. Requires a 36 month contract & 36 month credit agreement at 0% APR representative with Tesco Mobile Limited. Credit check, 18+. Fair Use Policy applies. Charges & terms at tescomobile.com/terms.

*It's partly light writing against light background which makes it harder... and some of the information is irrelevant. [f, B, retired, Brighton]*

Almost all respondents found this type of super very difficult to read. Many commented that, in a natural setting (i.e. not during a research session when they were being directed to look at supers), they would not have even bothered to try to read it.

*The contrast isn't great... it could be bolder and bigger. [pair, C2, empty nester, Brighton]*

The super became even more difficult to read if the colour of the background changed while the super was being displayed, particularly if the colour of the background sometimes shifted such that it was almost the same colour as some of the text, while other parts of the background were a different colour. (This is a separate issue to the background moving under the super, which is covered in section 4.2.4.) An example is shown below<sup>2</sup>.



Free Spins available on selected Daily Jackpot games. Free Spin value £0.20 per spin. Available once per customer, expires in 48 hours of qualifying. No deposit required for free spins. UK and Ireland only. T&Cs PaddyPower.com

*The first bit is OK-ish. The next bit you can't read at all because it's white on white. [m, B, retired, Brighton]*

Respondents reported that two or more different contrast levels in the same super made the parts of the super with poorer contrast even more difficult to focus on, as their eyes were more naturally drawn to the part of the super with better contrast.

When shown a number of different adverts with contrast issues, it emerged that *boldness* of text was a more important differentiating factor in creating good contrast, over and above differences in *colour* between text and background.

*It's easy; the font and contrasting colours, and it's bold. [m, B, pre-family, York]*

<sup>1</sup> Screenshot from Tesco mobile advert

<sup>2</sup> Paddy Power online gambling advert

Overall, the ideal scenario for respondents in terms of contrast would have been bold text in as contrasting a colour as possible to the background (e.g. black text on a white background or vice versa), on a single-coloured background, such that the super and the background stood out well from one another. In general, the bolder the text and the greater the contrast, the easier supers were to read for all respondents. The exact point at which the contrast was too poor for the super to be read varied across respondents, with eyesight being a key factor – those with poor eyesight required better contrast for a super to be legible. This effect was most marked in very elderly respondents who also had poor eyesight (in our sample, all respondents over age 80 wore glasses, so it is unclear how much of this effect is due to eyesight, how much to old age and how much to a combination of both).

#### 4.2.3 Duration of hold (high impact)

The duration of hold for a super – the length of time for which a super is displayed on screen – is an interesting issue in that it is on a sliding scale and so cannot effectively be ranked discretely in terms of impact on legibility. However, too short a duration could make a super difficult to read in its entirety, as respondents only had time to read through some of the text before it disappeared from the screen.

*I don't think it was up on the screen long enough before it changed. [m, C2, family, Belfast]*

A range of durations of supers were shown throughout the research sessions. These ranged from very short (a super almost 'flashing' on and off the screen) to very long (super on screen for the entire advert). Obviously, the longer a super is on screen, the more time respondents had to read it, so the easier it was to read, and vice versa. There did however come a point where the duration was too short for a super to be read, at which point it effectively became illegible.

*It wasn't up on the screen long enough. I think the text was ok...But definitely duration: it wasn't up long enough. [m, C2, family, Belfast]*

Appropriate duration, i.e. the point at which a super is on screen for sufficient time to be read, obviously also co-varied with other factors, particularly the number of words in the super but also the reading speed of individuals. The fewer the words in the super, the shorter its on-screen duration could be without impacting legibility.

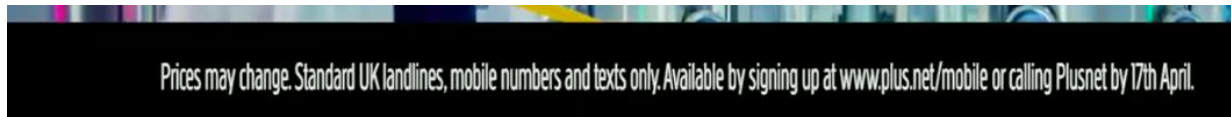
*It wasn't on the screen for long enough but otherwise it was OK. [pair, D, family, Birmingham]*

All of the above add to the challenge of reporting qualitatively on the relative importance of duration compared to the other issues impacting legibility. What can be said is that the longer the duration, the more legible the super becomes, and that some respondents (particularly older respondents or those with poor eyesight) did struggle to read some of the supers shown as they were not displayed on screen for a sufficient length of time. Respondents were of the opinion that advertisers should ensure that supers are displayed for a sufficient duration to allow viewers (including those with poor eyesight and slower reading speeds) time to comfortably consume the full message. Displaying supers on screen for as long as possible -

ideally (assuming there is only one super) for the entire duration of an advert - would improve legibility.

#### 4.2.4 A moving background (moderate impact)

Another factor that affected legibility was whether the background to the super was static or moving. A static background typically utilised a block of colour at the bottom of the screen on which the super was overlaid, as per the image below<sup>3</sup>.



In contrast, a moving background overlaid the super on the advert itself, meaning that as the advert progressed, the background changed underneath the super.

*That's less easy. The background's moving.* [pair, D, family, poor eyesight, York]

A moving background was generally acknowledged to make the super harder to read than a static background. This factor did not however generally make a super particularly difficult to read in and of itself unless other issues were also present (such as poor contrast or compressed text). For example, in an advert for Phillips One Blade, one of the supers was on a moving background of a man shaving. In this example, the text was large and had good contrast, and respondents reported finding it one of the easiest supers to read despite appearing over a moving background. Therefore, although legibility would be improved by displaying a super on a static block under the advert, having it on a moving background did not have a majorly negative impact on legibility, providing no other issues were present and the text is large and clear.

#### 4.2.5 Creative elements within the advert that distract attention (moderate impact)

Adverts that have a variety of non-text creative elements could effectively distract viewers from noticing supers. (From a practical perspective it may not be possible to provide any recommendations around this factor but, as an emergent point from respondents in the research, it is still worth noting.) Such competing elements included fast-paced adverts with 'flashes and bangs', interesting narratives, engaging action sequences or a catchy soundtrack. This was compounded when the super was displayed at the exact point where attention was diverted, such as not displaying a super until a key action sequence.

#### 4.2.6 Competing text within an advert (moderate impact)

Additional text displayed in an advert while a super was on-screen was found to be highly distracting for respondents, as it competed for their attention. Such text was typically more prominent than the super (e.g. bolder typeface, larger text, better contrast with the background), which made it more noticeable and easier to read, and made the text within the super more recessive and harder to concentrate on.

<sup>3</sup> Plusnet advert

*You can't read more than one thing at the same time.* [m, B, pre-family, York]

This effect was mitigated if the text displayed within the advert directly related to a super (e.g. advertising an APR in the main body of the advert while also displaying it within the super) but was magnified if the text within the advert and the super were unrelated.

Another example of two different pieces of text competing for attention occurred in adverts where the 'real' super was displayed above or below what appeared to be another super. Again, the competing text was typically displayed more prominently, which distracted respondents from being able to easily read the super (where the information respondents identified as more important was detailed). An example is shown below<sup>4</sup>.

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**www.agepartnership.co.uk | Freephone 08080 555 888**  
 Fee of 1.95% (minimum £1,395), only payable on completion. Equity released, plus accrued interest to be repaid upon death, or moving into long-term care.

*All you see there is the website and phone number, that's where your eye slides back to. It's easier to read so that's what you're going to focus on.* [pair, C2, empty nester, poor eyesight, Brighton]

*It's sneaky because the big writing is less important than what's in the small writing, which is the financials.* [m, C1, retired, Birmingham]

The key problem with both types of 'competing text' is that, as many respondents pointed out, people cannot simultaneously read more than one piece of text at a time. Their attention was naturally drawn to the more prominent text, meaning that even when they actively tried to read the super, they found it difficult to do so.

Having only one piece of text on screen at a time would therefore improve legibility, i.e. not having any on-screen text in the main body of the advert when a super is displayed, or limiting this on-screen text to information directly relating to the super.

#### 4.2.7 Positioning of the text (moderate impact)

Respondents generally expected supers to be placed at, or near, the bottom of the screen. When the super was placed elsewhere in the advert, it was often missed entirely, particularly when it was near the top of the screen or on the far left or right hand side (see example below where the super appears on the top-right of the screen)<sup>5</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Age Partnership

<sup>5</sup> Hachette advert



This is reinforced by the contextual findings from Stage 1 where, when asked about supers, respondents often spontaneously described them as being the ‘small print’ *at the bottom of the screen* – this was the expected placement for a super.

*It should be on the bottom... that's where you're used to seeing these things. Your eye is automatically drawn to the website at the bottom. [f, B, retired, poor eyesight, Birmingham]*

Although only one advert, as above, had this issue, this finding – respondents failing to notice a super when it was not at, or near, the bottom of the screen – occurred across almost all research sessions when viewing this particular advert. This was despite the fact that respondents had been specifically directed to look at, and read, the supers while watching adverts.

When watching TV in a natural setting, it can therefore be reasonably assumed that respondents would be even less likely to notice and read an unconventionally-placed super. This means that for practical purposes, even when no other legibility factors are present, such supers will not be noticed and therefore cannot be read. Respondents would therefore prefer to find all supers placed at the bottom of the screen, where they are expected and so would be more likely to be noticed.

#### 4.2.8 Size of text (moderate impact)

The size of the text in supers had a moderate impact on legibility, and was often raised as a minor improvement that could be made to certain sets of supers, as opposed to a factor that made supers illegible. Obviously there does exist a point at which text would be too small to read, but in this research project and in this set of adverts, this was not generally an issue.

*It's short and sharp and very clear against that background. It could be a bit bigger but it's not the end of the world. [pair, C2, empty nester, Brighton]*

As a legibility factor, small text did contribute towards making supers somewhat more difficult to read and slightly less noticeable. An example is shown below.<sup>6</sup>



It is certainly the case that larger text is easier to read than small text and adverts that had larger-than-average text in the supers were often spontaneously positively commented on, both because the text was easier to read and because the larger size (and sometimes also a bold font) suggested the advertiser had 'nothing to hide'. An example is shown below.<sup>7</sup>



<sup>6</sup> Staysure travel insurance for over-50's

<sup>7</sup> Phillips One Blade razor at Boots


*If they have any interest in people actually reading their small print, they would do it like that. Nice and clear, simple information, easy to read, useful and informative [pair, B, empty nester, Birmingham]*

The size of the text as a factor affecting legibility was, unsurprisingly, raised most frequently by respondents with poor eyesight and exacerbated when those respondents were also elderly.

It is difficult to recommend specific changes to the currently recommended font size for supers given that audience factors such as TV size, individual eyesight differences, etc. varied substantially. However, it was clear that larger size and bold font improved legibility of supers.

#### 4.2.9 Distorting text (Compressed text, spacing and shadowing) (moderate impact)

Many respondents noted that some adverts appeared to compress the text – terms they used to describe this included ‘tall’, ‘thin’, ‘skinny’ or ‘squashed’ – and to use smaller than usual spaces between words. Both of these made a super more difficult to read. An example is shown below<sup>8</sup>.



Promotion paid as £1 casino bonus. Fixed wagering target £990 on selected games before winnings transferred to cash balance. £50 max win and withdrawal from bonus. Terms and conditions apply. No deposit required. Promotion credited as £1 casino bonus with enhanced payout of 10x wins from first £1 staked. Max enhanced payout £1000.

*The text is too squashed. It's not clear at all... I hate these adverts – they trick people. [f, C1, family, poor eyesight, Brighton]*

*The font is very, very narrow, so it's very tall and thin. [f, B, empty nester, poor eyesight, Belfast]*

Others used shadowing around the super, which also made the text more difficult to read.<sup>9</sup>



Bonus for gameplay. Ninety-nine times bonus amount to be wagered before cashout. No deposit required. £50 max win & withdrawal from bonus.

*It looked like it was all squashed together...and a wee bit blurry, maybe because it was so squashed together but it's like it has a blurry line round it too, over on the left of the screen. [m, C2, empty nester, Belfast]*

While shadowing is not the same issue as compressing text and spacing, respondents tended to classify it as a ‘text issue’ rather than a contrast issue – i.e. they perceived that the text itself had been altered in a way that made it harder to read, rather than any issues to do with how the text stood out against the background. (It should be noted that shadowing is sometimes used in the belief that it helps legibility, but the opposite was generally true in the examples used in this project – it was perceived to distort text and therefore made it harder to read.)

<sup>8</sup> Slot Mob online gambling advert

<sup>9</sup> LeoVegas online gambling advert



Respondents were generally unable to further unpick which of the different ways of distorting text made supers more or less legible – it was generally agreed that all made the text harder to read than using non-distorted text.

These issues were somewhat mitigated when the super had good contrast and duration, but were magnified by other issues such as large amounts of text or very small text size. Taken alone (i.e. without other issues compounding the impact on legibility), distorting the text made it more difficult to read and, in a real world setting, respondents would be less likely to take the time and trouble to attempt to read it.

*Squashy text is hard to read, it's uncomfortable really, it's far easier not to even bother trying. So if they want us to be able to read the text, just make it nice and big and clear like Boots do. [pair, B, empty nester, Birmingham]*

When considering text, respondents reported that the most legible text was that which looked 'normal' (i.e. it looked similar to fonts laid out in publications, documents and articles). They were unable to articulate any more specific parameters for ideal size, style and spacing of text, but expressed the view that text should not be distorted or manipulated in any way.

#### 4.2.10 Number of words, lines and information in a super (moderate impact)

Overly-long lines of text were also seen as harder to read than shorter supers. This factor is, to an extent, like duration in that there are no absolute points at which a super goes from legible to hard to read, but in general, the more text on screen at once, the harder the super was to read.

Supers that comprised a single, long line of text were generally considered more difficult to read than when the same amount of text was split over two lines and centred on the screen. Respondents reported that it was easier for them to focus on two lines of a centred super rather than a single line that ran from the far left to the far right of the screen. A centred line could be read in a glance without having to move their head or eyes around the screen.

*You would have to be really invested and interested to try to read all the way across the screen like that. Again it makes me think they've done it like that, in a long line, in a deliberate attempt to make it hard to read, so I don't trust them. [pair, C1, empty nester, poor eyesight, Northampton]*

In contrast, a single line of text meant that they had to track their eyes across the width of the screen – this was seen as more difficult.

*You would have a job on your hands trying to read all that and actually take it in. [pair, C2, retired, Birmingham]*

However, once a super was split into three or more lines, it was also considered more difficult to read, even if centred on the screen.

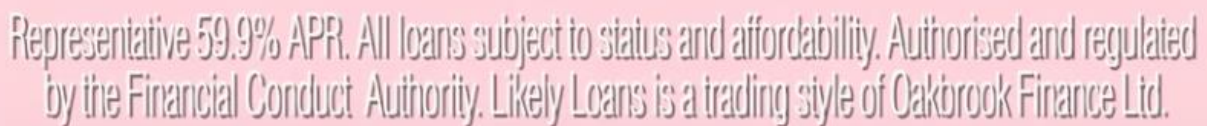
The above effects were exacerbated when the information in the super referenced multiple facts – taking in multiple facts felt harder to read / understand than a single fact, even if both used the same number of words.

*It's not easy at all. There's a lot to read.* [pair, B, retired, poor eyesight, York]

While some respondents acknowledged that advertisers have a duty to outline the details of their product or service thoroughly, excessive amounts of text could also be seen as an attempt to distract or confuse, particularly when some of the information was seen as irrelevant to the product or service.

*It's just more or less saying that it's a registered charity, do they need all that writing?*  
[f, C2, family, Belfast]

An example highlighted by respondents is shown below<sup>10</sup>.



Representative 59.9% APR. All loans subject to status and affordability. Authorised and regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority. Likely Loans is a trading style of Oakbrook Finance Ltd.

*You don't need all that information frankly – there are words in there that could be eliminated.* [f, B, retired, poor eyesight, Birmingham]

In the example above, respondents complained that seemingly-superfluous information was mixed in with details of the high interest rate on a loan service (this super also has contrast issues). Including information about a 'trading style' (a term that meant little to respondents) was seen as an attempt to distract from the more important financial information.

*There's a lot of information there and it's a bit waffly... is it really relevant?* [pair, C2, family, Brighton]

Interestingly, as previously mentioned, respondents did not have any issues reading information that was presented over multiple supers, although this was highly dependent on the information being presented in short chunks with few words in each super, using Plain English (e.g. TalkTalk advert). Indeed, this style of presentation was seen as easier to read than presenting the same amount of information in a single super, even though presenting information over multiple supers naturally meant a shorter duration for each super.

Ideally, therefore, when the super comprises more than one fact, and more than a small number of words, it should be split into two or more supers that are presented sequentially during the advert, and superfluous information should not be included at all. Failing this, presenting two lines of text in the centre of the screen makes the super easier to read than presenting a single, longer line across the screen.

<sup>10</sup> Oakbrook Finance 'Likely Loans' advert

## 4.3 Factors affecting comprehension of supers

### 4.3.1 Overview

Comprehension of supers was generally good, with most respondents able to understand most of the language used. The exceptions that occurred typically cut across audiences, with the oldest audiences generally reporting more comprehension issues overall, which may be down to a combination of generally poorer eyesight and, for some, slight cognitive decline.

The factors are not presented in any particular order, as different respondents found that different factors had more or less impact on comprehension. The factors are:

- Use of niche terminology in supers;
- Inadequate explanation of terms, conditions and offers;
- Use of acronyms and initialisms in supers, and;
- Use of numbers, particularly complex numbers.

### 4.3.2 Use of niche terminology

The use of niche terminology, specific to the particular type of product or service being sold, could confuse those who were unfamiliar with the product area. The most obvious and consistent examples occurred in online gambling adverts, which used a number of gambling terms that those who did not gamble were unsure of the meaning of – these included ‘cashing out’, ‘withdraw from bonus’, ‘fixed wagering target’, ‘enhanced payout’ and others.

*To be honest, I didn't really understand what some of the jargon was trying to tell me.*  
[m, C2, family, Belfast]

On discussion, it emerged that very few of the respondents in Stage 1 had any experience of this type of gambling, which explained why this finding was so consistent across audiences. Those who had gambled online (a few Stage 2 respondents) were not confused by such terms, providing that the type of gambling being advertised was the same type of gambling as their personal experience (e.g. an online casino user understood all terminology in an online casino advert, but a respondent who only placed horse-racing bets online did not).

*It's not very clear to me at all but I've only done the horses so online poker isn't the same, it's a different sort of gambling completely.* [pair, D, family, Nottingham]

Other niche terminology was more or less understood depending on individual knowledge and interest. Adverts that could cause confusion with terminology included vehicle finance (e.g. ‘personal operating lease’), loans (e.g. ‘trading style’), an equity-release scheme (e.g. ‘accrued interest’ and ‘equity release’) and some broadband adverts (e.g. ‘no caps’ and ‘super router’).

*I've never heard the phrase ‘trading style.’* [f, C2, pre-family, poor eyesight, Belfast]

Over-use of niche language could reduce respondents' willingness to engage with the text (i.e. if the language did not appear targeted at them, they reported being less likely to bother to read and try to understand the supers).

*This much jargon just makes you switch off, you're even less likely to want to read the writing at the bottom. [pair, B, retired, poor eyesight, Birmingham]*

Conversely however, respondents who were confused by niche terminology assumed that if they were interested in the product or service, they would be able to investigate further. Consequently, their lack of understanding of a few terms was not something they were overly concerned about, and they did not generally think that advertisers needed to make such terms clearer in supers.

*I don't know what a super router or a cap is, but I'm sure that if I wanted a new broadband, I would be able to look it up or ask someone, and then I could decide if that was something I wanted. [f, C2, retired, poor eyesight, Swansea]*

*If I wanted that [car] and I needed to understand all about a personal operating lease, I assume that's some sort of balloon deal, I'd go to the dealership and get them to talk me through it all. [pair, C2, empty nester, Birmingham]*

#### 4.3.3 Inadequate explanations

Similarly, inadequate explanation of specific points within supers could also have a negative impact on comprehension of supers. One such example included reference to a 'discount card' in an advert for the shop 'Go Outdoors' – although respondents could envisage what a discount card was, there were no further details in the super about how to acquire one or how it related to the advert. Similarly, in the same advert, the super referenced a 'price guarantee' without any further elaboration, which confused some respondents.

*I've not got a problem with reading it, but what's the discount card about? Am I going to need one to get the 60% off they're talking about in the advert? And what are they guaranteeing the price against? This is what I mean when I say they hide things in the small print. [pair, C1, empty nester, poor eyesight, Northampton]*

*I understand all the words so it's not that, but there's no context for it. What's this discount card and why are they writing about it at the bottom of the screen? [pair, C2, family, Leicester]*

#### 4.3.4 Use of acronyms and initialisms

The use of acronyms and initialisms could make comprehension of a super more difficult. This was at a lower level, however, as the general meaning could be gleaned from the surrounding context.

Difficulties in comprehension could happen in one of two ways – either multiple acronyms and/or initialisms within a single super, or ones that were not well-understood in context. In

this set of adverts, this included an initialism in a car advert<sup>11</sup> where “AMG-GLA” was part of the car name. Although there was some individual variation in what was understood, in general, the more acronyms and initialisms that were used within a super, the more challenging the overall super was to comprehend.

*Look at that, you've got this AMG, this GLR or whatever it was, I can't even remember now and it's all nonsense, they just don't want you to read the important bit which is about how the deal they're offering on screen isn't as good as they're making out. And it works, there is no way I'd read that. I'd go to a dealership and make them talk me through it all.* [pair, B, retired, poor eyesight, Birmingham]

However, commonly-used initialisms such as ‘APR’ were well-understood and caused no comprehension issues.

#### 4.3.5 Use of numbers

The use of numbers could sometimes cause confusion and consequently make a super more difficult to comprehend. Specifically, large amounts of numerical information could made it challenging for several respondents to fully understand the information they were seeing, particularly given the limited time within which they had to read and understand it as they watched it on screen. When respondents were given print-outs of the super to study, some still found some of the numerical information difficult to understand despite having extra time in which to read it.

*It would give you a headache with all those numbers.* [pair, D, family, poor eyesight, York]

For the adverts used within the research, difficulties understanding numerical information could happen in one of two ways. The use of multiple numbers in a *single* super could confuse respondents, particularly when each of the numbers represented a different factor and used different units of measurements (e.g. £ per month, £ up-front cost, £ delivery fee, number of months etc). As an example, some adverts for contract-based services (e.g. broadband, mobile phone) could contain, in a single super:

- The number of months a contract ran for;
- The amount per month during;
- A fixed-term deal of a certain number of months;
- The amount per month thereafter;
- The delivery charge; and
- An up-front fee.

Similarly, some adverts for vehicle finance contained a variety of numbers (e.g. deposit, cost per month, annual mileage, car specifications such as engine size, contract period, amount payable at end of contract, etc).

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<sup>11</sup> Mercedes

*Too much confusing things, with prices and that sort of thing. [f, C1, retired, poor eyesight, Belfast]*

Respondents trying to read multiple numbers within a single super could quickly become confused about the specific meaning of each of the different numbers, and thus found the super difficult to comprehend.

*All them different numbers, if you wanted to take that all in you'd have to pause the advert. [f, D, retired, poor eyesight, Swansea]*

Interestingly, when such numbers were presented sequentially over multiple supers during an advert<sup>12</sup>, respondents found it easier to comprehend and digest the information. Some of the negative impact on comprehension is therefore likely to be due to multiple numbers in a *single* super, rather than the amount of numbers in supers in an advert overall.

*That one [TalkTalk] was fine, because there was just one number on at a time and all the numbers made sense. So it was the amount it cost per month, and a couple of delivery charges and a one-off cost I think. You could understand each little bit. [pair, D, family, Brighton]*

The second way in which the use of numbers within supers could negatively impact comprehension was when they were presented in a way that required an additional calculation in order for respondents to understand the actual number being referenced (derived numbers). Presenting numbers as percentages was the most common example – for example, in adverts for loans or credit cards. Even when calculations appeared simple, the additional mental effort required to calculate a number at the same time as trying to read the text of the super meant that comprehension of the super overall was more effortful.

*It's not that easy to understand, all the financial language. [f, B, Empty nester, York]*

*The abbreviations, money and percentages make it difficult. [m, B, family, York]*

Clearly, some adverts do require numerical information, particularly adverts for financial products or services. Ideally however these should be presented as simply as possible, and sequentially over several supers rather than as multiple figures within a single super.

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<sup>12</sup> e.g. TalkTalk broadband

## IV Conclusions

On the basis of the findings presented within this report, a number of key conclusions can be drawn.

Factors impacting legibility and comprehension co-vary, meaning that an advert that is hard to understand is harder to read and an advert that is hard to read is also harder to understand.

Where legibility is concerned, it is clear that certain factors have a substantial impact on how easy or difficult supers are for viewers to read. Having identified these legibility factors, it is possible to give an indication as to what generally 'works', i.e. what designs/configurations ensure optimal legibility of supers across audiences.

Particularly important is a clear contrast between text and background – both in terms of using bold text *and* a strong colour contrast (ideally black text on a white background). Presenting supers over a static, block (i.e. single colour) background further improves their legibility. Also crucial is the use of text that is clear and in focus.

On the question of duration of hold, it is problematic to suggest minimum time frames for which supers should be presented on screen, as this is largely dependent on the amount and complexity of information contained within a given super, and also on individual differences in eyesight and speed of cognitive processing. Nonetheless, viewers consistently found it helpful when supers were displayed for longer periods of time. Hence, where possible, supers should be displayed for the entire length of the advert, where possible, in order to boost legibility as far as possible.

With regards to positioning of the text, it is clear that placing supers at the bottom-centre of the screen works best for viewers, simply because this is where they would expect to see them presented. Indeed, alternative placements risk audiences missing the supers altogether. Further, presenting two lines of text in the centre of the screen makes the super easier to read than presenting a single, longer line across the screen.

Font size represents a further important consideration: the larger the text size, the easier it is for viewers to read. Well-spaced letters, words and sentences also work best in terms of legibility, particularly when the font and spacing reflect what is typically seen in other documents, e.g. standard Word documents.

It is helpful if the overall amount of text within the supers is kept to a minimum. Where this is not possible, supers are more legible when large amounts of information are split up across two or more supers that appear consecutively, although this is limited to small 'chunks' of information being presented at a time.

Finally, in an ideal situation, other competing text within the advert would be eliminated (or at least reduced as far as possible), thus allowing viewers to direct focus towards the supers.

Considering comprehension, the findings of this report suggest that minimal use of niche terminology in supers is preferable in order to avoid unnecessary confusion among audiences, and that Plain English should be used wherever possible.

Overuse of unfamiliar acronyms and initialisms can also serve to reduce viewer understanding and these should ideally be kept to a minimum within supers.

In addition, supers that contain limited amounts of numerical information are more likely to be comprehensible for viewers than those that contain multiple numbers or more complex numbers such as percentages that require views to compute calculations to understand the figures. Where it is necessary to convey large amounts of numbers, their presentation, sequentially, over multiple supers can make them easier for audiences to comprehend and digest.