Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 20 April to 03 May 2020

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This report focuses on social media conversations and attitudes in English in the UK. For further details including methods please refer to ‘Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 06 to 19 April 2020’.

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Conversations about the coronavirus outbreak

There were a total of 5.85M mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media, in the UK in English, between 20 April and 03 May 2020, representing a 22% decrease to the previous two-week monitoring period (see Figure 1). The majority of mentions in this time period (4.93M, 85.0%) came from Twitter.

Figure 1. Number of mentions around the coronavirus outbreak in English on social media in the UK between 27 January and 03 May 2020.
### Key insights

**Continuous decrease in volume of social media conversations**  
Since the peak on 17 March 2020, the number of social media conversations is continuing to decline, with 22% less mentions between 20 April and 03 May 2020 compared to 06 and 19 April 2020.

**High UK death rate**  
The high rate of deaths in the UK compared to other countries was one of the topics with the highest number of mentions. The UK surpassed 20,000 deaths on 25 April 2020. In mid-March, the chief scientific advisor had said that keeping the death toll below 20,000 would be a ‘good outcome’. There were many calls for the government to explain and justify this high death toll. There were also speculations that these numbers still underestimated the true number of cases, particularly by excluding deaths from care homes. Some social media users speculated on the causes of the high rates, such as the lack of regulation of incoming travellers, the UK government’s policy of asking individuals with symptoms to self-isolate for 7 rather than 14 days, or the public not following social distancing guidelines.

**Coronavirus tests**  
Tests for coronavirus were another common topic. The government surpassed its target of 100,000 tests a day on 02 May 2020, yet many questioned how these numbers are calculated. Furthermore, there were concerns about the quality of these tests and discussions of the dangers of false-positive test results.

**Preventive behaviours and accessing of health services**  
NHS 111 was seen as deficient in its ability to cope with the coronavirus outbreak and contributing to high death rates by refusing to give people tests and send ambulances. There was confusion about mixed messaging about whether individuals should self-isolate for 7 or 14 days if experiencing symptoms. Additionally, there were continued calls for more face masks for frontline workers with conflicting messages about the effectiveness of face masks for general members of the public.

**Other prominent topics of conversation**  
Piers Morgan continued to be a prominent public figure, with 186 tweets during this monitoring period. Progress in research for a coronavirus vaccine by the University of Oxford was largely positively reported on. Money became one of the most highly mentioned keywords, with many mentions of individuals raising money for coronavirus related causes and debates on who should receive taxpayer money to help them through the crisis. Awareness of the importance of staying home during lockdown stayed high.

**Social analytics**  
There was no significant change in social analytics statistics to the previous monitoring period. The main emotion being expressed was love (274.0k), followed by sadness (145.6k). Some of the most common hashtags were #stop, #NHS, #StayHomeSaveLives, #lockdown, #PPE and #MentalHealth. The majority of content was classed as negative (44%) or neutral (42%), with 13% classed as positive. The top twitter authors continue to be news outlets, such as the BBC, football clubs and public figures (the latter two largely due to high numbers of followers rather than high numbers of posts).
Preventive behaviours and accessing of health services

We assessed changing levels of interest and sentiment towards five preventive behaviours: hand washing, social distancing, self-isolation, wearing masks, and using NHS 111. Overall interest in these key preventive behaviours remained at similar levels to the previous 2-week monitoring period (7.9% of all conversations mentioned at least one of these key preventive behaviours between 20 April and 03 May compared with 8.1% between 06 and 19 April 2020).

Social distancing continued to be the behaviour with the highest level of interest, followed by wearing masks and self-isolation. Hand washing overtook using NHS 111, yet both continue to be mentioned by less than 1% of all mentions of coronavirus in English in the UK (Figure 2 and Figure 3).

Figure 2. Bar graph of change in the percentage of mentions of preventive behaviours and/or accessing of health services on social media relative to all mentions in English in the UK between 27 January and 03 May 2020.
We further analysed sentiment towards preventive behaviours and accessing of health services through the automated sentiment analysis provided by Meltwater® which uses natural language processing algorithms. For all five behaviours, the majority of posts were either neutral or negative (Figure 4). The behaviours with slightly higher proportions of negative sentiment were wearing masks and using NHS 111.

By manually reading through social media and news posts, we further identified some common themes underlying negative content for each of these preventive behaviours.
Wearing masks
There were conflicting messages about the effectiveness of face masks to protect oneself and to protect others on social media. Criticisms of a shortage of masks for NHS and care home workers continued to be prevalent. Some social media users linked the lack of face masks, and late updated guidelines allowing frontline workers to wear face masks, to NHS worker’s deaths. Reports of the American politician Mike Pence visiting a hospital without wearing a face mask were negatively reported on.

Using NHS 111
NHS 111 was seen as unable to cope with the outbreak, which by some was linked to privatisation of the public service. Another common argument was that NHS 111’s early failures led to the spread of coronavirus in the UK and that it should have not been made the first point of call. There continued to be many reports of NHS 111 not returning calls, refusing to send ambulances or telling people to not seek medical assistance and this resulting in deaths. Some social media users reported not being given access to testing by 111 despite working in the healthcare sector.

Hand washing
Generally, most mentions of hand washing continued to be positive towards the behaviour of handwashing, with the negative content relating to the negative consequences of ignoring advice to wash hands. There were also reports of key workers at the Doncaster coronavirus testing site not having access to hand washing facilities amongst other issues, leading to questions about the reliability of test results from that site. There were also some posts which argued that people in many low-and-middle-income countries may not have access to hand washing facilities.

Self-isolation
There were many criticisms of the UK government’s advice to self-isolate for only 7 days, which contrasts with the WHO advice of self-isolating for 14 days. Some social media users linked the UK’s high death rate to this policy. Another prominent argument was that the changed UK government’s guidance to continue to self-isolate if still having symptoms after 7 days had not been publicised well enough or updated everywhere, leading to confusing mixed messaging for the public. There were also calls to extend this change in policy to healthcare workers, who were still being asked to return to work after 7 days. Some also criticised other members of the public for not adhering to self-isolation, especially in cities.

Social distancing
Most negative mentions of social distancing were by individuals criticising other members of the public for not adhering to social distancing advice. The hashtag #SocialDistancing was used 6.8k times. Several argued that the UK’s continued high death rate was the result of individuals flouting social distancing advice.