Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 18 to 31 May 2020

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This report focuses on social media conversations and attitudes in English in the UK between 18 and 31 May 2020. 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 4.81M mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media, in the UK in English, between 18 and 31 May 2020, representing an 11% decrease to the previous two-week monitoring period (see Figure 1). The majority of mentions (4.05M, 84.2%) came from Twitter.

Figure 1. Number of mentions around the coronavirus outbreak in English on social media in the UK between 27 January and 31 May 2020.

![Figure 1](image-url)
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 11% less mentions between 18 and 31 May 2020 compared to 04 and 17 May 2020.

#SackCummings: anger over breaking of lockdown rules
The main topic of conversation during this monitoring period were the reports of Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister, Dominic Cummings, breaking lockdown rules at the end of March 2020 to drive 260 miles from London to Durham when he and his wife were showing coronavirus symptoms. Many members of the public posted on social media detailing examples of themselves having missed funerals, births or being unable to help struggling family members in order to adhere to lockdown rules. There were many demands for Cummings to be fired and comments as to ‘Why should anybody heed your lockdown rules?’. Furthermore, there were a higher number of posts expressing distrust in the government during this monitoring period compared to previous ones. One of the most highly engaged with posts was a picture of a billboard which read ‘stay alert -> government incompetence -> costs lives’.

Other prominent topics of conversation
Some other prominent topics were criticisms of the treatment of their workers by British Airways (#BAbetrayal) and the importance of mental health during mental health week, which took place between 18 and 24 May 2020. There were also continued concerns about the UK’s high death toll, particularly for individuals of BAME background. The killing of George Floyd by a police officer in the US was also frequently mentioned.

Preventive behaviours and accessing of health services
Many social media users worried that lockdown measures were being lifted too early. Some also questioned why they should follow public health measures, such as social distancing, self-isolation or wearing masks when these do not appear to apply to politicians. NHS 111 had a particularly high proportion of posts expressing negative sentiments, with continued criticism of NHS 111 being difficult to access and some confusion about whether the service could be used to access tests for coronavirus.

Social analytics
There was no significant change in social analytics statistics to the previous monitoring period. The main emotion being expressed was love (206.5k), followed by joy (105.3k). Some of the most common hashtags were #lockdown, #dominiccumings, #stop, #mentalhealth, #stayalert, #brexit, #BAbetrayal, #covididiots and #staysafe. The majority of content was classed as negative (48%) or neutral (39%), with 11% classed as positive. The top Twitter authors continued to be news outlets, such as the BBC, football clubs and public figures such as JK Rowling (the latter two groups 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 (8.4% of all conversations mentioned at least one of these key preventive behaviours between 18 and 31 May 2020 compared with 8.8% between 20 April and 03 May 2020).

Between 18 and 31 May 2020, social distancing continued to be the behaviour with the highest level of interest, but self-isolation overtook wearing masks as the second most commonly mentioned behaviour (Figures 2 and 3). Hand washing and using NHS 111 each continued to be mentioned by less than 1% of all mentions of coronavirus in English in the UK (Figure 2).

*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 31 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. Using NHS 111 had the highest proportion of negative posts and the smallest proportion of positive posts (Figure 4). Hand washing and social distancing had the smallest proportions of negative posts and, along with wearing masks, the largest proportions of positive posts.

By manually reading through social media and news posts, we further identified some common themes underlying negative content for each of these preventive behaviours.
Social distancing
Many social media users expressed worry that the lockdown was being lifted too early and urged members of the public to continue to social distance. There were many pictures of large group gatherings, particularly on beaches. Cummings’ breaking of the government’s lockdown rules was seen as having led to ‘no one caring about social distancing any more’. There were several posts giving advice on how to social distance whilst protesting in response to the killing of George Floyd. Continuing from previous monitoring periods, there were calls for better social distancing measures at UK airports and on public transport.

Self-isolation
The increase in mentions of self-isolation was due to reports of Dominic Cummings breaking of self-isolating. Social media users also called out the MP Ian Blackford for travelling over 600 miles from London to the Isle of Skye in Scotland whilst experiencing coronavirus symptoms.

Wearing masks
There continue to be conflicting opinions on the importance and effectiveness of masks online, with some social media users strongly criticising others for not wearing masks whilst others are arguing that they are useless or even can make the risk of infection worse. The issue of the need for a solution that enables lipreading and communication for deaf people if face masks become the norm was also highlighted and reports of shortages of masks for essential workers continued. Masks also appear to increasingly signal identification with different ideological beliefs. For example, one social media user reported being called a ‘liberal pussy’ for wearing a mask in public. Some social media users argued that coronavirus was being used to turn western countries into police states, as evidenced by mandatory mask-wearing.

Hand washing
There were some repeated sentiments reported in previous monitoring reports, about the UK government’s insistence on hand washing early on during the outbreak overshadowed the need to impose lockdown measures, as other countries had done. Generally, most posts urged people not to forget the importance of handwashing and stressed the effectiveness of this measure.

Using NHS 111
Reports of high numbers of people dying at home were linked to advice by NHS 111 to self-isolate at home to ‘save the government from pictures in the media of an overwhelmed NHS’. There were also questions about why GPs could not be involved in the coronavirus response or order tests for patients with some general confusion about how to access coronavirus tests. Other criticisms of NHS 111 included that it did not include loss of smell amongst its list of symptoms until recently (PHE advice on this changed on 18 May 2020) so that care workers with this symptom had been told to go back to work in care homes and hospitals by NHS 111 for weeks. Lastly, there was continued anger at the difficulty of being able to reach NHS 111.