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

01 to 14 June 2020

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This report focuses on social media conversations and attitudes in English in the UK between 01 and 14 June 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’.

In this report, we replaced ‘hand washing’ with ‘coronavirus vaccine’ as one of the five behaviours we explored in detail; social distancing, self-isolation, wearing masks, using NHS 111, and coronavirus vaccine This change was made because less than 1% of all conversations around COVID-19 in English in the UK mentioned hand washing whilst vaccines are an increasingly important topic of conversation. The new Boolean search term used was “vaccin*”.

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Conversations about the coronavirus outbreak

There were a total of 3.75M mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media, in the UK in English, between 01 and 14 June 2020, representing a 21% decrease to the previous two-week monitoring period (see Figure 1). The majority of mentions (3.08M, 82.1%) came from Twitter.

Figure 1. Number of mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media in English in the UK between 27 January and 14 June 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 21% fewer mentions between 01 and 14 June 2020 compared to 18 and 31 May 2020.

**#BlackLivesMatter & the disproportionate impact of Covid-19 on BAME community**

The Black Lives Matter protests, which started at the end of May 2020, following the murder of George Floyd by a white policeman in the US, were the most prominent topic of conversation. Many social media posts discussed how to protest in ways that minimise the risk of coronavirus spread and some expressed concern that the protest would lead to an increase in infections. The PHE report on “Disparities in the risk and outcomes of COVID-19”, which showed that Black, Asian and Minority Ethnic groups (BAME) are up to twice as likely to die of coronavirus than those of white ethnicity in the UK was also frequently mentioned. There was anger over the delay in the publication of the report and the lack of direct actions in the report to address the issues it highlighted.

**Other prominent topics of conversation**

The number of deaths from coronavirus was another prominent topic of conversation. Social media users unfavourably compared the UK’s death toll with that of New Zealand, where 22 people have died from coronavirus overall. The government’s reporting of ‘only’ 36 deaths in the UK, on 13 June 2020, was also criticised as insensitive to the families of those 36 people. There were also continued concerns about the easing of lockdown measures and diverging opinions on whether children should be allowed to return to school.

**Preventive behaviours and accessing of health services**

There were concerns about protesters not wearing masks or being able to social distance. Several social media users further expressed anger over MPs being asked to return to the House of Commons. Some social media users expressed that they would not comply with the government’s new track and trace system. There were continued criticisms of NHS 111 advising people to self-isolate at home when experiencing symptoms, as this was perceived to have led to many preventable deaths. There was a range of discussion in relation to a novel coronavirus vaccine, ranging from conspiracy theories about Bill Gates wanting to use the vaccine to microchip the global population, to concerns about the safety of a vaccine developed within months, to questions about the ethics of human challenge trials.

**Social analytics**

There was no significant change in social analytics statistics to the previous monitoring period. The main emotion being expressed was love (161.1k), followed by joy (88.9k). Some of the most common hashtags were #BlackLivesMatter, #Lockdown, #Dispatches, #Brexit, #KayBurley (a television presenter on Sky News), #BorisJohnsonFailedUK, #StayAlert and #MentalHealth. The majority of content was classed as negative (48%) or neutral (39%), with 12% 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 behaviours: social distancing, self-isolation, wearing masks, using NHS 111, and coronavirus vaccine (which replaced handwashing). Overall interest in these behaviours remained at similar levels to the previous 2-week monitoring period (10.9% of all conversations mentioned at least one of these behaviours between 01 and 14 June 2020 compared with 9.6% between 20 April and 03 May 2020).

Between 01 and 14 June 2020, social distancing continued to be the behaviour with the highest level of interest, but wearing masks overtook self-isolation as the second most commonly mentioned behaviour (Figures 2 and 3). Interest levels in a coronavirus vaccine appear to continue to steadily decline since a peak in interest on the 21 April 2020. During the current monitoring period, 1.8% of all conversations around coronavirus in English in the UK mentioned a vaccine (Figures 2 and 3). NHS 111 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 behaviours relative to all mentions of coronavirus on social media in English in the UK between 27 January and 14 June 2020.*
We further analysed sentiment towards preventive behaviours, accessing of health services and coronavirus vaccines 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). Mentions of a coronavirus vaccine had the second-highest proportion negative posts whilst social distancing had the smallest proportion. Wearing masks and self-isolation had almost equal proportions of negative posts but self-isolation had a slightly larger proportion 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 behaviours.
Social distancing
One prominent topic among negative posts on social distancing, reports of Business Secretary Alok Sharma beginning to feel unwell at the House of Commons, when MPs were asked to return to Commons. Social media users argued that social distancing in the Parliament building was impossible and that Jacob Rees-Mogg's social distancing system for the MPs return was 'reckless'. The difficulty of social distancing at Black Lives Matter demonstrations was another prominent topic. There were also conflicting opinions on whether social distancing measures should continue to be enforced in the UK.

Wearing masks
Wearing masks were often mentioned in posts in which social media users urged others to wear masks if attending protests. A number of social media users also questioned why the UK government were late in introducing face masks as a measure to reduce the spread of coronavirus compared to other countries. There were also some conspiracy theories, possibly informed by the documentary-style video titled "Plandemic", that promoted conspiracy theories about the coronavirus and linked face masks to getting sick, which argued that face masks do nothing to protect against coronavirus and reduced the effectiveness of the immune system.

Self-isolation
Similar to negative mentions around social distancing, reports of Alok Sharma self-isolating after beginning to feel unwell at the House of Commons, was the most prominent topic of negative posts mentioning self-isolation. Several social media users also questioned the government’s advice to self-isolate if you are contacted by an NHS contact tracer who tells you that you have been in contact with someone who has tested positive for coronavirus. Two common reasons stated for non-compliance were that the Chief Advisor to the Prime Minister, Dominic Cummings, did not follow self-isolation advice during the peak of the pandemic, and that there was no adequate track and trace system, making the advice meaningless.

Using NHS 111
Again, there were continued reports of individuals repeatedly calling NHS 111 and being advised to self-isolate at home despite experiencing severe coronavirus symptoms. There were continued criticisms of NHS 111 advising people to self-isolate at home when experiencing symptoms, as this was perceived to have led to many preventable deaths. This was also sometimes linked to the hashtag #BorisHasFailed and arguments that staff and patients should not have trusted the government. Another criticism was that NHS 111 does not recognise skin rashes as a coronavirus symptom. There were also complaints that patients were repeatedly ‘bounced’ between GPs and NHS 111 as GPs have no access to PCR testing.

Coronavirus vaccine
The peak in interest in a coronavirus vaccine on 21 April 2020 was due to news that the first coronavirus vaccine in the UK was ready to be trialled on human volunteers.
Generally, we saw some of the same concerns, rumours and conspiracy theories that have been reported elsewhere (see e.g. the Nature article “The epic battle against coronavirus misinformation and conspiracy theories” published on 27 May 2020). One of the more common conspiracy theories we found was that the coronavirus vaccine is a plot by the American philanthropist Bill Gates to microchip the world population. The hashtag #ExposeBillGates was often used in such posts and the vaccine was described as ‘poisonous and unnecessary’. We also found a number of posts promoting ‘natural cures’, such as vitamin C or D, that claimed that you do not need a vaccine if you had sufficient levels of those. Some social media users expressed distrust of the involvement of Dominic Cummings in the development of the coronavirus vaccine in the UK.

There were specific concerns around the coronavirus vaccine trials happening in the UK today, in particular about the recruitment of children, and of human challenge trials. In this context, debunked claims that a GSK vaccine trial for the HPV vaccine in India, which had been partially funded by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, had led to the death of several children, were frequently cited. Other past vaccine trials that were frequently mentioned were human challenge trials for hepatitis on mentally disabled children at Willowbrook State School in New York in the 1960s. In an article that was posted on Twitter several times, the author compares these trials to current coronavirus vaccine trials and argues that then, as now, human challenge trials are unnecessary, as they do not significantly speed up the development of a vaccine. There were also some fake stories wrongly claiming that the UK’s first COVID-19 vaccine trial participant had died.

Furthermore, some social media users questioned whether it was realistic to expect a vaccine within months when vaccines for diseases, such as SARS, are yet to be developed despite years of research. Many social media users expressed concerns about the effectiveness and potential adverse side effects of a coronavirus vaccine that has been rushed through trials. The highly controversial rollout of the dengue fever vaccine Dengvaxia in the Philippines in 2017 was sometimes used as an example of vaccine rollout with ‘disastrous consequences’, as was the swine flu pandemic vaccine from 2009, which led to higher rates of narcolepsy in some populations.

Finally, several social media users felt that the UK government strategy is ‘to basically wait for a vaccine’ which was perceived as inadequate. In addition, the government’s early strategy of herd immunity was called irresponsible in the absence of a vaccine.