Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak
29 June to 12 July 2020
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This report focuses on social media conversations and attitudes in English in the UK between 29 June and 12 July 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 3.1M mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media, in the UK in English, between 29 June and 12 July 2020, representing a 3% decrease to the previous two-week monitoring period (see Figure 1). The majority of mentions (2.49M, 80.3%) came from Twitter.

Figure 1. Number of mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media in English in the UK between 27 January and 12 July 2020.

1 Marks T, Larson HJ, Paterson P. Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 06 to 19 April 2020. Available at: https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d4d746d648a4e001186e38/t/5ebbb69fa8570501f4a4fc05/1589360289531/Media+monitoring+report+UK+COVID-19+6-19April2020+Final+updated.pdf
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 3% fewer mentions between 29 June and 12 July 2020 compared to 15 and 28 June 2020.

Prominent topics of conversation
During this monitoring period, there was no one clear most prominent topic of conversation. Leicester became the first city in the UK to be placed in a local lockdown on 29 June 2020 and there were many news and social media reports on the spike in cases in the city. There continued to be mixed responses to the general easing of lockdown measures in the UK. Some social media users argued that this was reckless and a danger to health and the economy whilst others were asking why it was not happening more quickly. There were many mentions of care homes, with a high number of negative posts commenting on reports that elderly people in hospital had been sent back to care homes without being tested for coronavirus during the peak of the outbreak. There was also widespread anger at comments by Prime Minister Boris Johnson trying to blame care homes for high numbers of resident deaths from coronavirus. In addition, there were a variety of disparaging comments about Chief Adviser Dominic Cummings. He was particularly criticised over reports that he gave a close contact a coronavirus contract without going through the process of open tender. Finally, there were some negative comments on the government’s scheme providing financial incentives for people to eat out: “We don’t need incentives, we need confidence”.

Preventive behaviours, accessing of health services, and a coronavirus vaccine
During this monitoring period, masks became the preventive behaviour with the highest number of mentions. They were also the behaviour with the highest proportion of negative content. This was partially due to negative content by those promoting the use of masks in which they criticised others for not wearing them, and partially due to content by those discouraging the use of masks. Two of the most common arguments of the latter group were that masks are unnecessary or an infringement on their rights. Some social media users expressed concern over the lack of social distancing in newly reopened pubs. Interest in the NHS continued to be low but largely neutral or positive, with testing and advice now generally reported to be easily accessible. There were calls for companies to provide adequate financial security to allow workers to self-isolate when experiencing coronavirus symptoms. In relation to novel coronavirus vaccines, there continued to be a number of rumours circulating. One potentially particularly concerning rumour which is gaining in prominence is that the vaccine is deliberately contaminated with anti-fertility agents.

Social analytics
There was no significant change in social analytics statistics to the previous monitoring period. The main emotion being expressed was love (149.5k), followed by joy (95.8k). The majority of content was classed as negative (45%) or neutral (42%), with 13% classed as positive. Some of the most common hashtags were #Lockdown, #NHS, #Covididiots, #ThankYouTogether, #StaySafe, #BorisJohnson, #Brexit, #Leicester, #SecondWave, and #CareHomes. 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, accessing of health services and anticipating a coronavirus vaccine

We assessed changing levels of interest and sentiment towards five behaviours: social distancing, self-isolation, wearing masks, using NHS 111, and a coronavirus vaccine. Overall interest in these behaviours slightly increased compared to the previous 2-week monitoring period (14.0% of all conversations mentioned at least one of these behaviours between 29 June and 12 July 2020 compared with 12.1% between 15 and 28 June 2020).

Wearing masks overtook social distancing as the behaviour with the highest level of interest (Figure 2). Social distancing was the only behaviour for which overall interest levels fell since the previous monitoring period. Interest levels in self-isolation, using NHS 111 and a coronavirus vaccine, remained steady.

Figure 2. Line graph of change in the total number of mentions of behaviours on social media in English in the UK between 27 January and 12 July 2020.

We further analysed sentiment towards preventive behaviours, including a potential coronavirus vaccine, and accessing of health services through the automated sentiment analysis provided by Meltwater®, which uses natural language processing algorithms. Wearing masks again had the highest proportion of negative posts and the smallest proportion of positive posts (Figure 3). Coronavirus vaccine had the second-highest proportion of negative posts. Self-isolation changed from the smallest proportion of negative posts in the last monitoring period to the third highest. Using NHS 111 had the smallest proportion of negative posts and the largest proportion of positive posts.
By manually reading through the most highly engaged with social media and news posts, we further identified some common themes for each of these behaviours.

**Wearing masks**

The high proportion of negative content for masks was in part because both those promoting and those discouraging the use of masks posted negative content. Many social media users stressed the importance of wearing face masks and urged others to do so. One prominent video was one of the Hollywood actor Tom Hanks speaking out on his thoughts on the importance of wearing masks, washing hands and social distancing. This group continued to express disbelief that anyone could refuse to wear masks, as noted in previous reports. Some social media users linked spikes in coronavirus cases to a lack of widespread adoption of mask wearing and called for making them mandatory in more indoor public spaces. There were also reports of President Donald Trump and Prime Minister Boris Johnson wearing masks in public for the first time. Whilst those promoting the use of face masks argued that they “only make things better”, those discouraging the use of face masks felt that they had disadvantages. Some of the most common arguments against them were that they were unnecessary because coronavirus is “not worse than the flu”, and that mandating the wearing of face masks infringed on their rights and liberties. Some posts pointed out the negative environmental impact of single-use masks, though such posts did not necessarily argue against masks in general. There also continued to be some social media users who were against face masks because they felt that they were part of a global agenda that would eventually lead to the ‘overlords’ taking away all their freedoms and forcing an unsafe coronavirus vaccine on them.

**Social distancing**

The main content underlying negative posts around social distancing were footage of large crowds in London on the first weekend when pubs reopened in England on the 04 July 2020. Many social media users criticised the lack of social distancing evident in the pictures. Generally, there were many posts urging others to continue to social distance to protect themselves and others.

**Coronavirus vaccine**

There was a spike in interest in a coronavirus vaccine on the 10 July 2020 which was due to reports that the UK has opted out of the EU coronavirus vaccine programme. Some social media users were highly critical of this and saw it as being linked to the “vote leave government” shunning “any worthwhile project with the EU”. There were
concerns about how realistic vaccine timelines announced by politicians were for the
 coronavirus vaccines in India and the USA, and positive reports of the UK coronavirus
 vaccine ‘winning the race’. There were some reports on polls showing that a third of
 Britons are unsure or would not have the coronavirus vaccine. On the other hand,
 some social media users posted that they would definitely have the vaccine. There
 were also some discredited rumours that Bill Gates owns patents for both the
 coronavirus virus and vaccine (neither patents exists yet). Additionally, there were also
 rumours around a globalist agenda to ‘mass vaccinate Africa’ with a rushed and
 untested coronavirus vaccine, and conspiracy theories such as that the vaccine will
 be used to microchip people. Earlier this year we saw a rise in concerns around the
 UN tetanus vaccine mass sterilising girls in Kenya and many rumours around Bill
 Gates secretly wanting to sterilise the global population. Recently, concerns about a
 coronavirus vaccine causing sterility appears to be becoming more prominent.

Self-isolation
The proportion of negative content around self-isolation increased compared to the
 previous monitoring period. This was largely not due to social media users being
discouraging towards the behaviour itself, but rather due to criticisms of various
organisations which are not allowing workers to self-isolate. Some prominent
examples included factory workers and migrant workers on farms. The importance of
sick pay, and for companies to financially support workers to allow them to self-isolate
when experiencing symptoms was stressed, with one prominent post claiming that in
care homes where staff receive sick pay, there are lower levels of coronavirus among
residents. There were also concerns about the lack of government advice for
asymptomatic people to self-isolate.

Using NHS 111
Discussions around coronavirus and NHS 111 continued to have a very low proportion
of negative content and a high proportion of positive content. Social media users
reported being able to book coronavirus tests on the NHS 111 website easily. There
were still some reports of not receiving helpful advice when calling NHS 111, but these
were much rarer than during previous monitoring periods. There were also neutral
reports on the use of data from calls to NHS 111 as an indicator of the number of
cases in different areas. Overall, using NHS 111 continued to have the smallest
number of mentions of all the preventive behaviours monitored for our media
monitoring reports.