Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak
27 July to 09 August 2020
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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 8% fewer mentions between 27 July and 09 August 2020 compared to 13 and 26 July 2020.

Preventive behaviours, accessing of health services, and a coronavirus vaccine
For this report, we added a new preventive behaviour. ‘Lockdown’ has now been included as one of the five behaviours we explore in detail. The negative conversation around lockdown centred around public opinion and confidence in the government’s handling of coronavirus, including the possibility of over-50’s being told to stay at home to avoid a second nation-wide lockdown. Some social media users noted that politicians have tried to shift the blame to minority groups for not obeying social-distancing and lockdown rules, leading to stricter rules in parts of Northern England. Users also expressed frustration at apparent violations of social distancing guidelines, such as images of crowded beaches in England during the hot weather.

The polarisation around the wearing of masks noted in previous reports continued, although there were some indications of a reduction in negative sentiment around mask wearing, such as a drop-off in the usage of anti-mask hashtags. In a reversal from the previous reporting period, coronavirus vaccine became the behaviour with the smallest proportion of negative sentiment, however, the discussion on social media remained quite polarised overall. A petition on the Parliamentary website against any penalties for those who refuse a future Covid-19 vaccine had attracted almost 80,000 signatures at the time of writing, suggesting that opposition to a vaccine may be becoming more organised. Finally, some social media users expressed frustration and criticism with the changes to the self-isolation period for people displaying coronavirus symptoms in the UK. These conversations centred around the discrepancy between WHO guidance (14 days) and the UK government’s changing advice (from seven to ten days).

Social analytics
There was a significant drop in negative content (from 39% to 15%) and an increase in neutral content (from 39% to 77%) compared to the previous monitoring period, with 8% of content classed as positive. There were no significant changes in the other social analytics statistics to the previous monitoring period. The main emotion being expressed was love (120.8k), followed by joy (78.1k). Some of the most common hashtags were #NHS, #ExcludedUK, #Covididiots, #Brexit, #Beirut, #Lebanon, #Hydroxychloroquine, #WearAMask, and #HandFaceSpace. The top Twitter authors continued to be news outlets, such as the BBC, football clubs, and public figures such as Piers Morgan (the latter two groups largely due to high numbers of followers rather than high numbers of posts).
Methods
This report focuses on social media conversations and attitudes in English in the UK between 27 July and 09 August 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 ‘Using NHS 111’ with ‘Lockdown’ as one of the five behaviours we explored in detail; social distancing, self-isolation, wearing masks, a coronavirus vaccine, and lockdown. This change was made because less than 1% of all conversations around COVID-19 in English in the UK mention NHS 111 whilst lockdown is consistently one of the most commonly mentioned keywords. Furthermore, we made changes to the Boolean search terms used for ‘Social distancing’, ‘Self-isolation’, and ‘Wearing masks’ (Table 1) to reflect the changing language used to refer to those behaviours.

Table 1: Updated Boolean search terms.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social distancing</th>
<th>((social NEAR/2 distanc*) OR (physical NEAR/2 distanc*) OR socialdistancing OR physicaldistancing OR &quot;social distanc&quot; OR &quot;social distance&quot; OR “physical distance” OR &quot;physical distancing&quot;)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Self-isolation</td>
<td>(isolat* OR selfisolat*)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wearing masks</td>
<td>(mask* OR facecover* (face NEAR/2 cover*))</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lockdown</td>
<td>(lockdown OR (lock* NEAR/2 down))</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

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Conversations about the coronavirus outbreak
There were a total of 2.41M mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media, in the UK in English, between 27 July and 09 August 2020. This represents an 8% decrease to the previous two-week monitoring period (see Figure 1). The majority of mentions (1.88M, 78.0%) continued to come from Twitter.

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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/5d4d746d648a4e0001186e38/t/5ebb69fa8570501f4a4fc05/1589360289531/Media+monitoring+report+UK+COVID-19+6-19April2020+Final+updated.pdf
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, lockdown, and a coronavirus vaccine. Overall, 22.2% of all posts mentioning coronavirus mentioned at least one of these preventive behaviours.

Lockdown had the highest overall levels of interest, followed by wearing masks, social distancing, coronavirus vaccine, and self-isolation. There was a minor peak in conversations about lockdown, wearing masks, and social distancing on the 31 July 2020 due to parts of North England (Greater Manchester, East Lancashire and parts of West Yorkshire) going back into partial lockdown after Public Health England data showed coronavirus cases rising across the region.
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 09 August 2020.

We further analysed sentiment towards preventive behaviours through the automated sentiment analysis provided by Meltwater®, which uses natural language processing algorithms. Coronavirus vaccine changed from having the largest proportion of negative content to the smallest proportion (Figure 3). Wearing masks similarly decreased significantly in its proportion of negative content. Lockdown had both the highest proportion of negative and positive content. Overall, the proportion of negative content was smaller than during previous monitoring periods, and the proportion of neutral content larger.

Figure 3. Automated sentiment analysis of posts around the coronavirus outbreak on social media in English in the UK between 27 July and 09 August 2020, by behaviour.

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.
**Lockdown**

Lockdown, a new behaviour we explored in detail, was the category with the highest proportion of negative content across the monitored preventative behaviours in this reporting period. Nonetheless, as Figure 4 shows, the majority of content related to lockdown was neutral. The newly instated lockdown in Aberdeen, Scotland, and stricter lockdown rules in other parts of Northern England, were the most prominent topic of interest among social media users during this monitoring period.

On the 31 July 2020, Conservative MP Craig Whittaker commented in an LBC interview that Muslim and BAME communities were not obeying lockdown rules, leading to stricter rules being put in place in Northern England. Many social media users criticised his comments, calling them racist and Islamophobic.

The negative conversations around lockdown centred around public opinion and confidence in the government’s handling of coronavirus and the new lockdown rules in Northern England after a spike in coronavirus cases in the region. On the second of August 2020, The Sunday Times reported that Prime Minister Boris Johnson asked his team to prepare a series of measures that could avoid a second nation-wide lockdown, including the possibility of over-50’s being told to stay at home. This announcement led some social media users to criticise the PM’s handling of lockdown in the UK. Further, a continued and prominent criticism was about the Dominic Cummings scandal including the ‘Cummings effect’ on public confidence in the government’s handling of coronavirus.

Some social media users expressed anger towards infringement on civil liberties and freedom and attributed lockdown measures to more non-COVID related deaths than due to COVID itself. Supporters of lockdown measures highlighted the importance of “keeping the virus under control”.
Wearing masks

There was a continuing polarisation around the wearing of face masks, as noted in previous reports, with some social media users advocating the importance of wearing face masks and others arguing that face masks are unnecessary or dangerous. However, in line with the overall decrease in negative content across the board, there was a drop-off in the usage of anti-mask hashtags such as #NoMask compared to the previous period.

Opposition to the wearing of face masks continued to be based primarily on claims that masks are unnecessary, or that they represent an infringement on personal liberty. For instance, some users appealed to the example of Sweden to claim that mandatory mask wearing was not required to defeat the pandemic, while others described masks pejoratively as “muzzles”. However, some people have also started to express concerns about the environmental impact of disposable face coverings. A Sky News article on this subject on 8 August 2020 attracted several hundred likes, retweets and comments on Twitter.

Proponents of face masks continued to stress the importance of avoiding a potential second wave of coronavirus and a second lockdown. Some of these users cited examples of people who had refused to wear a mask and had subsequently contracted the virus, such as the former Republican presidential candidate Herman Cain who died of Covid-19 on 30 July 2020, to underscore the importance of wearing masks.
Social distancing
A number of social media users expressed frustration at apparent violations of social distancing guidelines. These included images of crowded beaches in England during the hot weather and of people packed into bars and restaurants in Scotland. Putative examples of hypocrisy or double standards were a particular cause for frustration. For example, many were angry about suggestions that ethnic and religious minorities were not taking Covid-19 seriously enough (such as the comments by Craig Whittaker MP noted above) when images of crowded beaches during the hot weather suggested that many white Britons were ignoring social distancing guidelines.

Coronavirus vaccine
In a reversal from the previous reporting period, coronavirus vaccine became the category with the smallest proportion of negative sentiment. However, the discussion on social media remained quite polarised. While many expressed optimism about the progress being made in the Oxford vaccine trial and welcomed announcements by Health Secretary Matt Hancock on 29 July, 3 and 5 August 2020 around the expansion of UK vaccine manufacturing and supply capacity, others continued to express concerns that development of the vaccine was being rushed, and that it may be unsafe or ineffective. Some also expressed concerns about potential infringements on individual liberty.

In a sign that opposition to a potential vaccine may be becoming more coordinated, social media users were also circulating a link to a petition on the parliament.uk website asking the government “to prevent any restrictions being placed on those who refuse to have any potential Covid-19 vaccine… [including] restrictions on travel, social events, such as concerts or sports.” This petition had attracted almost 79,000 signatures at the time of writing (this is well over the 10,000 signature threshold for a formal government response and approaching the 100,000 signature threshold where petitions are considered for debate in Parliament).

Self-isolation
Discrepancies between WHO guidance to self-isolate for 14 days for people with COVID-19 symptoms and the UK government’s advice on self-isolation continued to be a concern. Following an announcement made on the 30 July 2020 that the self-isolation period was to be extended to 10 days for people with coronavirus symptoms, Health Secretary Matt Hancock drew criticism after he was interviewed on BBC Breakfast where he stated that the WHO had never recommended people with coronavirus symptoms self-isolate for 14 days. Several social media users circulated a video statement from the WHO Director-General on 16 March 2020 where the advice was that people should self-isolate “for at least two weeks after symptoms disappear”.

The announcement that travellers returning from Spain would need to self-isolate after the 26 July 2020 sparked criticism of the government’s handling of the situation and its impact on workers who would not be able to return to work and would need to take an unauthorised absence.