Key insights

Increase in volume of social media conversations
Since the peak on 17 March 2020, the number of social media conversations had continuously declined with some variation between reporting periods. For this reporting period there was a 44% increase in mentions between 07 and 20 September 2020 compared to 24 August and 06 September 2020.

Preventive behaviours – huge spike in negative sentiment associated with lockdown
Lockdown continued to be the preventative behaviour with the highest levels of interest and polarisation (with the highest proportion of both positive and negative content). In this reporting period, we see a significant increase in negative sentiment associated with lockdown (22% to 71.5%, Figure 3). Conversation around lockdown featured criticism of the government’s handling of the crisis. The case of how Sweden has handled the pandemic featured heavily in social media conversations as evidence to support not wearing masks or imposing a second nation-wide lockdown. Conversations around a COVID-19 vaccine included fears about the speed at which the vaccine has been developed, and conspiracy theories continued to be featured in online conversations. Many social media users expressed frustration and anger over the new tougher penalties for breaking self-isolation rules announced by the government.

Social analytics
Overall sentiment statistics were similar to the previous reporting period, with 14% of content classed as negative, 6% as positive, and 78% as neutral. The main emotion being expressed was love (123.6k), followed by joy (73.5k). Some of the most common hashtags were #covidtesting, #Covidiots, #lockdown2, #excludedUK, #NHS, #Brexit, #vaccine, and #ruleofsix. The top Twitter authors continued to be news outlets, such as the BBC, football clubs, and public figures such as Piers Morgan.

Methods
This report focuses on social media conversations and attitudes in English in the UK between 07 and 20 September 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 2020’1 and ‘Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 06 to 19 April 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/5d4d746d648a4e0001186e38/t/5ebbb69fba85705f0f4a4fe05/1589360289531/Media+monitoring+report+UK+COVID-19+6-19April2020+Final+updated.pdf
towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 27 July to 09 August 2020\(^2\).

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**Conversations about the coronavirus outbreak**
There was a total of 3.1M mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media, in the UK in English, between 07 and 20 September 2020. This represents a 45% increase to the previous two-week monitoring period (see Figure 1). The majority of mentions (2.57M, 83%) continued to come from Twitter.

*Figure 1. Number of mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media in English in the UK between 27 January and 20 September 2020.*

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\(^2\) Marks T, de Graaf K, Pertwee E, Larson HJ, Paterson P. Media monitoring report: Social media conversations and attitudes in the UK towards the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) outbreak 27 July to 09 August 2020. Available at: [https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d4d746d648a4e0001186e38/t/5f5a0f0cef2e722e0e986df1/1599737807542/Media+monitoring+report+UK+COVID-19+27July+to+09August+2020.pdf](https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5d4d746d648a4e0001186e38/t/5f5a0f0cef2e722e0e986df1/1599737807542/Media+monitoring+report+UK+COVID-19+27July+to+09August+2020.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, 20% of all posts mentioning coronavirus mentioned at least one of these preventive behaviours (20% of all conversations mentioned at least one of the behaviours between 7 and 20 September compared with 21% between 24 August and 6 September 2020).

Lockdown continued to have the highest overall levels of interest, followed by wearing masks, social distancing, self-isolation and coronavirus vaccine. Interest in lockdown had the highest percentage increase of 47.7%. Interest in self-isolation and social distancing also increased significantly (39.7% and 36.2% respectively). Although coronavirus vaccine had the lowest level of interest, it continues to increase in each reporting period (26.5% increase).

*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 20 September 2020.*
We further analysed sentiment towards preventive behaviours through the automated sentiment analysis provided by Meltwater®, which uses natural language processing algorithms. In this reporting period, we see a significant increase in negative sentiment associated with lockdown (22% to 71.5%, Figure 3). Coronavirus vaccine and social distancing were the categories with the smallest proportion of negative content (both 13%). Lockdown and wearing masks had the largest proportion of positive content (8.6% and 8.2% respectively).

**Figure 3. Automated sentiment analysis of posts around the coronavirus outbreak on social media in English in the UK between 07 and 20 September 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**
The conversation around lockdown was primarily negative and many social media users continued to criticise the government’s handling of the crises. People took to Twitter to debate over lockdown restrictions including the possibility of another nation-wide lockdown. More chatter about anti-lockdown protests in London featured on social media again this reporting period with more in-person demonstrations taking place in September 2020. Discussion on Sweden’s handling of the virus also received high levels of engagement on Twitter with one social media noting that the “approach by Sweden looks increasingly vindicated”. There was also criticism and discussion of fines for people breaching local lockdown rules and of mixed messaging to the public. There were calls for the government to have more transparency in COVID-19 data and to show the public evidence of a second wave in order to justify a potential second nation-wide lockdown.

**Wearing masks**
This topic continues to be highly polarised with many vocal opponents on social media arguing that they are a “hazard to health”, ineffective and that the threat of COVID-19 has passed, making masks unnecessary. One social media user claimed that a COVID-19 expert from Sweden warns that masks are “very dangerous”. Other people communicated the importance of wearing masks, especially to protect the vulnerable and that we were at risk of a second nation-wide lockdown because of people refusing to wear masks. A tweet by Nicola Sturgeon, First Minister of Scotland, with a link to
the ‘Protect Scotland’ app and a message to wear a mask was one of the most engaged pieces of content, with a reach of 1.29M.

Social distancing
There continued to be a number of users criticising the government reminding people to keep following social distancing rules, following a rise in case numbers among younger people. Criticism included that children are not following social distancing rules because “they are put back in overcrowded classrooms” and that young people were encouraged to eat out and return to work. One person expressed concern that social distancing would have a negative impact on people’s immune system and ability to fight the common cold. Other users continued to express frustration at apparent violations of social distancing rules in the context of rising case numbers, and emphasised the continuing need for social distancing until such time as a vaccine is available, highlighting the risk to more vulnerable populations.

Coronavirus vaccine
Social media users expressed hesitancy around a potential COVID-19 vaccine. One user stated fears around accepting a vaccine that “hasn’t been extensively tested” while also explicitly making it clear they are not “anti-vax”. Conspiracy theories around microchips and fear of mandatory vaccination were also topics of online conversation around a potential coronavirus vaccine. Other concerns expressed related to the timeline when a vaccine(s) would be available for the entire population, and the speed at which new vaccines are being developed. Interestingly, there was positive conversation around the AstraZeneca COVID-19 study being put on hold due to a suspected adverse reaction in a clinical trial participant in the UK – some social media users highlighted this was a good indication that pharmaceutical companies are conducting their studies responsibly and appropriately handling adverse reactions.

Self-isolation
Social media users expressed frustration and anger about the government’s announcement of more frequent checks and tougher penalties for breaking the self-isolation rules. Many people took to Twitter to express outrage about these new measures including fines (starting at £1,000 increasing up to £10,000) for people who test positive for COVID-19 but do not adhere to self-isolation rules, and about school children being sent home from school to isolate for 14 days after being in contact with someone with COVID-19 symptoms. The lack of testing and parent’s also needing to self-isolate were particularly highlighted as huge challenges. There were calls for measures to better support the public to self-isolate, including better access to testing, and measures to financially support those who cannot work from home during the isolation period. Other social media users criticised a poorly functioning test, trace and track system. There continued to be conversation about self-isolation causing more deaths than COVID.