Key insights

Continuous decrease in volume of social media conversations
Since the peak on 17 March 2020, the number of social media conversations has continuously declined with some variation between reporting periods. For this reporting period there was a 3% increase in mentions between 24 August and 06 September 2020 compared to 10 to 23 August 2020.

Preventive behaviours, accessing of health services, and a coronavirus vaccine
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). Conversation around lockdown featured criticism of the government’s handling of the crisis. A viral image of a protest was widely shared and commented on, despite the photo not being accurate (many social media users pointed out the photo was old and not taken in London at the anti-lockdown protests in Trafalgar square on 29 August 2020), people were highly critical of lockdown measures. There was frustration about young people being blamed for a rise in case numbers when the government had encouraged the public to return to work and “eat out to help out”. Conversations around a COVID-19 vaccine included fears about the speed at which the vaccine has been developed, and reflected broader concerns about global politics including around the report that a Russian vaccine triggered an immune response. Criticism of the launch of new payment scheme to support workers who need to self-isolate was also featured.

Social analytics
Sentiment statistics were similar to the previous reporting period, with 15% of content classes as negative, 8% as positive, and 75% as neutral. The main emotion being expressed was love (109.6k), followed by joy (81.4k). Some of the most common hashtags were #Covidiots, #lockdown, #excludedUK, #NHS, #Brexit, #vaccine, #backtoschool and #trafalgarsquare. 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 24 August and 06 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 and ‘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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**Conversations about the coronavirus outbreak**

There was a total of 2.15M mentions around the coronavirus outbreak on social media, in the UK in English, between 24 August and 06 September 2020. This represents a 3% increase to the previous two-week monitoring period (see Figure 1). The majority of mentions (1.65M, 77%) 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 06 September 2020.

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, 21% of all posts mentioning coronavirus mentioned at least one of these preventive behaviours (21% of all conversations mentioned at least one of the behaviours between 24 August and 6 September compared with 26% between 10 and 23 August 2020).

Lockdown continued to have the highest overall levels of interest, however there was an 8% decrease from the previous reporting period, followed by wearing masks, social distancing, self-isolation and coronavirus vaccine. Interest in self-isolation had the highest percentage increase of 31.5%. Although coronavirus vaccine had the lowest level of interest, it continues to increase in each reporting period (2.7% increase).
We further analysed sentiment towards preventive behaviours through the automated sentiment analysis provided by Meltwater®, which uses natural language processing algorithms. Coronavirus vaccine continued to be the category with the smallest proportion of negative content (14%, Figure 3). There was a slight increase in negative sentiment associated with self-isolation (from 13% to 16%) and social distancing (14% to 18%). Lockdown continued to have the highest proportion of both negative (22%) and positive content (13%).

Figure 3. Automated sentiment analysis of posts around the coronavirus outbreak on social media in English in the UK between 24 August and 06 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**

Criticism of the government’s handling of the crisis, including lockdown, continued to feature in online conversations. The dominant narrative criticised lockdown measures using descriptions such as “draconian”, “insane”, “ludicrous” and that the government was promoting a “fear mongering narrative” to get the public to comply. The anti-lockdown protest in Trafalgar Square, London on 29 August 2020 featured widely in social media conversations around lockdown. A photo claiming to be from the “largest UK anti-lockdown protest yet” and that the “evil reptilians have changed the St. George’s flag for a Belarussian flag” was circulating with the caption that BBC News would not show it. However, many social media users were quick to point out that the photo was years old and not taken in London.

Conspiracy theories around Bill Gates and microchips, censorship and totalitarianism, masks being “dangerous”, “people-tracking wristbands tested to enforce lockdown” were circulated among messages about lockdown. One social media user speculated that China was behind encouragement of the lockdown in Italy, claiming that the Chinese Communist Part launched a “massive social media campaign” in Italy to promote a lockdown in early March 2020. One user shared a post highlighting the inaccurate claims that lockdown has no impact on the number of deaths in a country, in an attempt to combat misinformation circulating about lockdown. Matt Hancock’s tweet about lifting local lockdowns in parts of Northern England following data analysis, and stating that ONS figures support the effectiveness of lockdowns, had high reach and engagement on Twitter.

**Wearing masks**

The online conversation around mask wearing remained highly polarised. Opponents of mask wearing continued to argue that the threat from COVID-19 had either passed or been vastly exaggerated, and that mandating the use of face masks represented an infringement of civil liberties. Other users continued to contest their claims, pointing out that by this logic, wearing seatbelts or helmets would also constitute an infringement of civil liberties, and that the pandemic was far from being over.

There was some discussion of the best approach to face masks in schools, including criticism of the government for u-turning on advice against face masks in English secondary schools on 25 August 2020. There were sharply contrasting responses to Matt Hancock’s tweet on 6 September 2020 announcing the provision of 250,000 clear face masks to NHS and care workers to help them communicate with people with certain conditions like hearing loss, autism & dementia. While some users welcomed the announcement, others criticised it as “too little, too late”, and many more responded with baseless claims that the virus was a “scam” or conspiracy from which Mr Hancock stood to personally profit.

**Social distancing**

A number of users reacted angrily to Matt Hancock reminding people to keep following social distancing rules following a rise in case numbers among younger people,
arguing that this was a predictable consequence of the government having encouraged people to return to work and to eat out, and that ministers should not “scapegoat” working age people for doing what the government had told them to do. 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.

Coronavirus vaccine
Coronavirus vaccine remained the category with the lowest proportion of negative content overall, probably reflecting the fact that a vaccine remains hypothetical at this point despite optimism that a breakthrough may be close. Matt Hancock’s tweet on 28 August 2020 about the fast-tracking of plans for the future rollout of a potential COVID-19 vaccine received high engagement on Twitter. A BBC News tweet reporting that the Russian vaccine had generated an immune response also received high engagement, although many of the responses were deeply sceptical about the vaccine’s safety and effectiveness. These fears were driven in part by the speed at which the vaccine has been developed, but also reflect broader concerns about Russia’s motives, with many users making reference to the Russian government’s alleged use of nerve agents against its political opponents. Although these tweets may not be representative of wider public opinion, they nonetheless suggest that there may be particular confidence issues for any vaccine developed with Russian involvement. A vocal minority of social media users continued to express scepticism about COVID-19 vaccines more generally, arguing that the danger from COVID-19 is exaggerated or non-existent, and expressing fears that people will be forced to take a vaccine and would face sanctions if they did not.

Self-isolation
The Prime Minister’s announcement of the launch of a new payment scheme to support people on low incomes who need to self-isolate and are unable to work from home was widely shared. Critics expressed that the £13 a day to stay at home incentive was not enough, and some MPs called for the compensation to be far higher to reflect the civic duty of staying at home to self-isolate. Some people called on the UK government to remove Czech Republic, Jamaica and Switzerland from the Travel Corridors (where quarantine is not required on arrival) to keep COVID-19 infection rates down. There were also social media users reporting that suicide rates in the UK were “higher than COVID” death rate, as an argument against measures such as self-isolation and lockdown. Others commented on the hundreds of people self-isolating after the Banham Poultry factory COVID-19 outbreak.