Social Media Conversations and Attitudes in the UK Towards COVID-19

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6 November - 31 December 2020
Funding

This research was funded by the National Institute for Health Research Health Protection Research Unit (NIHR HPRU) in Immunisation (Grant references: HPRU2012-10096 and HPRU-2019-NIHR200929) at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine in partnership with Public Health England (PHE). The views expressed are those of the author(s) and not necessarily those of the NHS, the NIHR, the Department of Health or Public Health England.
Key Insights

>> There were 9.5 million mentions of COVID-19 between 06 November and 31 December 2020, a 21% decrease compared to the previous period.

>> COVID-19 vaccine conversations increased by 280% over the same time period due to the authorisation of two vaccines (Pfizer/BioNTech and AstraZeneca) and the beginning of vaccination rollout (see figure 1).

>> Consequently, COVID-19 vaccines were the most-discussed topic during this reporting period with 1.5M mentions, overtaking the lockdown category with 0.9M mentions. COVID-19 vaccines were also the topic with the smallest proportion of negative content (14.6%).

>> The most-engaged-with posts about mask wearing were overwhelmingly negative, driven by concerns that masks would continue to be required after getting vaccinated.

Figure 1: Mentions of key preventive measures, 27 January to 31 December 2020.

Spikes in mentions of COVID-19 vaccine (dates and reasons):
- 9/11/2020: announcement that Pfizer vaccine is >90% effective.
- 2/12/2020: authorization of Pfizer vaccine by MHRA.
- 8/12/2020: first dose of Pfizer vaccine given to Margaret Keenan.
- 30/12/2020: authorization of AstraZeneca vaccine by MHRA.
Methods

VCP analysed 9.5 million mentions of the coronavirus outbreak on social media in the United Kingdom between 6 November and 31 December 2020. Mentions represent the number of social media posts referencing a particular word or topic. We assessed changing levels of interest and sentiment towards four preventive behaviours: COVID-19 vaccine, self-isolation, wearing masks and lockdown. By manually reading through the most highly engaged-with social media posts, we further identified some common themes and issues.

For more details of data and 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’.

Findings

In this reporting period, COVID-19 vaccines had the highest overall levels of interest (1.5M mentions), followed by lockdown (0.9M mentions), wearing masks (0.4M) and self-isolation (0.4M). Interest in vaccines has continuously increased with each reporting period and we now see high levels in relation to the other behaviours (figure 1).

Twitter continued to be the top platform for discussions about COVID-19 with 77% of the conversation (figure 2).

COVID-19 vaccines was the topic with the smallest proportion of negative content (14.6%) (see figure 3). Self-isolation had the largest proportion of positive content (12.1%).

Figure 2: Top sources (current reporting period).

Figure 3: Sentiment towards key preventive measures, 6 November to 31 December 2020.
COVID-19 vaccine

COVID-19 vaccines had the highest level of interest during this reporting period as it included the authorisation of two vaccines from Pfizer/BioNTech and AstraZeneca as well as the beginning of vaccination rollout.

The conversation was **largely positive** up until the final few weeks of the year. The news of Pfizer/BioNTech reaching the final stages of development with successful data, and it later becoming the first authorised COVID-19 vaccine, was met with optimism that the worst of the pandemic was behind. This optimism was further expressed when Margaret Keenan, a UK grandmother, received the first vaccination as part of the mass vaccination program and when the vaccine rollout quickly included other high-risk individuals. There were many posts about how everyone should get vaccinated not only to protect themselves but also to do their bit for society, which was explicitly stated by Sir Ian McKellen, a prominent English actor, when he received his vaccine. Negative conversations during the first half of the reporting period included concerns about the link between Bill Gates and pharmaceutical companies.

The final spike of social media activity coincided with the authorisation of the AstraZeneca vaccine on 30 December 2020. These final weeks of the reporting period had more negative conversations with high engagement, although rarely connected to the AstraZeneca vaccine specifically. During this time, the most prevalent frustration came from learning that masks and distancing would still be required after receiving a vaccine. Some people still advocated that hydroxychloriquine is the safest and most effective treatment.

There were also several retweets saying that Pfizer disowned the UK government’s decision to leave 12 weeks between doses as there was no evidence on the impact this lag might have. Some expressed concern for how to transport a vaccine at -80C, particularly to countries with limited infrastructure. A positive conversation emerging during this time period was that the CEO of Timpson group, a British multinational retailer, is allowing any employee eligible for the vaccine to go to receive the vaccine on the company’s time.

**Lockdown**

The conversation around lockdown was **primarily negative** and many social media users continued to criticise the government’s handling of the crisis. British broadcaster Julia Hartley-Brewer criticised a range of topics including the effectiveness of lockdowns and the imposition on individual freedoms. Others took to Twitter to discredit lockdowns by comparing statistics to other countries, not in lockdown. Several users retweeted that there were only 377 COVID-related deaths for people under 60 and thus low-risk people should be able to do what they want. There was a peak of posts about Dominic Cummings surrounding his dismissal. People were frustrated by the lockdown over the holidays after being promised the previous lockdown would prevent this restriction. Users continued to stress the negative economic impact on citizens during lockdown, and particularly on small businesses.

Posts from social media users in support of the lockdowns called for zero tolerance of disinformation and to hold the government accountable for previous harmful decisions. Some advocated for measures that would allow lockdowns to be feasible and successful, such as online teaching resources, minimum income guarantees and a vaccine rollout plan.
Wearing masks
This topic continues to be highly polarised with many vocal opponents on social media arguing that they are ineffective, particularly against the new variant. Many of the negative conversations in this reporting period came after discovering masks are still necessary even after receiving the vaccine. Some advocated legal enforcement should be lifted after all high-risk groups are vaccinated. Two mask related scandals occurred with Nicola Sturgeon and Piers Morgan, both of whom have strongly advocated wearing masks. Both expressed regret for their lapses in these moments. Some people felt the long-term existence of COVID-19 means we need to learn to live with the virus without restrictions.

On the other hand, several social media users expressed shock at the number of people in London not wearing masks, particularly after the new variant and Tier 4 restrictions. Others continued to post personal experiences with COVID-19, pleading that others take the virus seriously both to protect themselves and those around them.

Self-isolation
On 15 November, Boris Johnson tweeted that he was self-isolating after having contact with someone with COVID-19 received high levels of engagement. (figure 5). This tweet caused the only major spike in this category. People questioned his rationale after already having COVID-19 seven months earlier and wondered how a vaccine would work if it's true you're not immune after having COVID-19. Other tweets during this period reported footballers who tested positive.