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

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1 January - 31 March 2021
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 15.7 million mentions of COVID-19 between 1 January and 31 March 2021, a 5% decrease compared to the previous three months.

>> The two most popular topics of conversation were COVID-19 vaccines and lockdown (see figure 1). A new lockdown in the UK was announced on 4 January 2021, covering all but a few days of this reporting period.

>> COVID-19 vaccines conversations had the smallest proportion of negative sentiment (15%). Conversations on wearing masks and lockdown had the highest percentages of negative sentiment (23% and 22%, respectively).

>> Many social media users criticised Boris Johnson's statement that "we did everything we could." People compared his response to the crisis with other countries as evidence that the UK government did not do everything it could to save lives and ameliorate the impact of the pandemic.

Figure 1: Mentions of key preventive measures, 27 January 2020 - 31 March 2021.

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.

Spike in mentions of lockdown:
- 4/1/2021: Boris Johnson announced a new lockdown.
Methods

VCP analysed 15.7 million mentions of the coronavirus outbreak on social media in the United Kingdom between 1 January and 31 March 2021. 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 (3.4M mentions), followed by lockdown (1.7M mentions), wearing masks (0.6M) and self-isolation (0.5M). 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 78% of the conversation (figure 2).

Figure 2: Top sources, 1 January - 31 March 2021.

Figure 3: Sentiment towards key preventive measures, 1 January to 31 March 2021.
COVID-19 vaccine

COVID-19 vaccines had the highest level of interest during this reporting period, primarily commenting on the continued vaccine rollout. The general conversation was primarily neutral (75%). Negative sentiment edged out positive sentiment overall (15% and 8% respectively), although many of the top posts by engagement were either positive or neutral.

One post that received high engagement came from a woman who highlighted the difference in media attention on blood clots caused by the AstraZeneca vaccine compared with birth control pills. This post attracted 37.2K likes, 3.6K retweets and 28 comments. A Twitter user shared a map of countries that support or oppose waiving patent protection for COVID-19 vaccines, saying those in opposition are preventing a large number of countries (primarily from the Global South) to make a coronavirus vaccine cheaply (see figure 4).

Piers Morgan continued to maintain a strong social media presence in the COVID-19 vaccine discussion. Several of his posts included support for COVID vaccine passports, an update on UK vaccination statistics and criticism of Boris Johnson's response earlier in the pandemic. Several others echoed the latter, offering praise for Boris Johnson's vaccine rollout but criticising earlier handling of the crisis.

There were several pieces of misinformation and skepticism during this reporting period. One Twitter user claimed that COVID vaccines and passports are a form of mind control. This post attracted 97.8K likes, 18.5K retweets and 241 comments. Another tweeted, “Why would the government block the Office for National Statistics from publishing side effects and deaths after taking the COVID vaccine? What are they hiding?” One Twitter user shared a photo of a roadmap for vaccine passports published on the European Commission’s website in May 2019 claiming it is proof of an agenda, thus validating everyone who was dismissed as a conspiracy theorist.

Lockdown

The conversation around lockdown was primarily neutral (68%). 22% of the conversation was negative and 9% was positive. This reporting period covered the majority of the UK’s latest lockdown.

There was a spike of interest on 4 January 2021, when Boris Johnson announced a new lockdown in England. On this date people in Scotland were also ordered to stay at home.

The top post by engagement commented on the differing responses between Australia and the UK, criticising Boris Johnson for saying “we did everything we could.” This tweet attracted 80.4K likes, 19.7K retweets and 390 comments. Despite several social media users expressed a desire for lockdown to end, many of the most highly engaged with posts were in support of the lockdown. A BBC News video from 20 March 2021 of protesters opposed to the lockdown attracted 6.2K likes, 5.4K retweets and 3.3K comments.

Several mentions discussed examples of protective measures seemingly not applying to wealthy and influential individuals.
Wearing masks
Interest in masks decreased by 19% compared to the previous three months. Although sentiment was largely neutral (70%), this topic had the highest percentage of negative sentiment (23%) and lowest percentage of positive sentiment (5%). Many of the top mentions by engagement pleaded people to wear masks after sharing a personal experience. The top post came from a medical worker who shared a video of protesters without masks outside the hospital where he just left an A&E shift caring for people sick and dying inside (see figure 5). This photo attracted 54.4K likes, 26.4K retweets and 8K comments.

Several social media users shared that experts are saying COVID-19 cases are increasing because people are not social distancing and wearing masks, whereas flu cases are decreasing because people are social distancing and wearing masks. This claim was popular for those criticising people who say to "just trust science" and fueled negative sentiment about protective measures such as wearing masks.

Self-isolation
Interest in self-isolation decreased by 31% compared to the previous three months. Sentiment was largely neutral (69%), followed by negative sentiment (20%) and positive sentiment (10%). Conversations on self-isolation primarily centred on public figures announcing they tested positive for COVID-19, or were in contact with someone who tested positive, and were self-isolating as a result.

Figure 5: Video of protesters outside St. Thomas’ Hospital on New Year’s Eve

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Worked the late A&E SHO shift on NYE and came out to this. Hundreds of maskless, drunk people in huge groups shouting “Covid is a hoax”, literally outside the building where hundreds are sick and dying. Why do people still not realise the seriousness of this pandemic?