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


1 June - 31 July 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 7.8 million mentions of COVID-19 between 1 June and 31 July 2021, a 17% increase compared to the previous two months. The three most popular topics of conversation were COVID-19 vaccines and wearing masks, closely followed by self-isolation (see figure 1).

>> In England a number of restrictions were lifted on 'Freedom day' on 19 July 2021, including face masks no longer being mandatory in shops and most public transport, the lifting of the 'one metre plus rule' on social distancing, and nightclubs reopening.

>> COVID-19 vaccines conversations had the smallest proportion of negative sentiment (18%). Conversations on lockdown had the highest percentages of negative sentiment (22%).

>> As well as posts encouraging people to get vaccinated against COVID-19, to wear masks, and to self-isolate when pinged, discussions included concerns at the easing of restrictions on 19th July, concerns about vaccinating children, and concerns at Covid vaccination being made mandatory for entry into nightclubs and other venues with large crowds. There were also frustrations at many Doctors missing work and children missing school after being alerted to self-isolate by NHS Test and Trace following contact with a positive case.

Figure 1: Mentions of key preventive measures, 01 August 2020 - 31 July 2021.
Methods

VCP analysed 7.8 million mentions of the coronavirus outbreak on social media in the United Kingdom between 1 June and 31 July 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, lock down, wearing masks and self-isolation. 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 (1.78M mentions), followed by wearing masks (496k), self-isolation (493k) and lockdown (462k mentions). Interest in vaccines has increased by 20% compared with the previous two months (figure 1).

Twitter continued to be the top platform for discussions about COVID-19 with 79% of the conversation (figure 2).

COVID-19 vaccines was the topic with the smallest proportion of negative content (18%) (see figure 3). Lockdown had the largest proportion of negative content (22%). COVID-19 vaccines and wearing masks were the topics with the largest portion of positive content (5% for both).

![Figure 2: Top sources, 1 June - 31 July 2021.](image)

![Figure 3: Sentiment towards key preventive measures, 1 June to 31 July 2021.](image)
COVID-19 vaccines

COVID-19 vaccines had the highest level of interest during this reporting period (1.78M mentions). The general conversation was primarily neutral (77%). Negative sentiment edged out positive sentiment overall (18% and 5% respectively), although the majority of top posts by engagement were either positive or neutral.

Political correspondent Joe Pike tweeted about Dame Sarah Gilbert, who designed the Oxford COVID vaccine, receiving a standing ovation at Wimbledon tennis tournament (52.1k Reach, 62.8k Engagement).

Sir Patrick Vallance tweeted correcting a statistic he gave at a press conference, clarifying that 60% of hospitalisations from Covid are from unvaccinated people and not from double vaccinated people (178k Reach, 40.3k Engagement).

Broadcaster and journalist Piers Morgan tweeted several controversial and highly engaged with posts including suggesting that hospitalised unvaccinated covid patients should be forced to pay for their own hospital care (7.97M Reach, 32k Engagement).

Several highly engaged with posts questioned the easing of restrictions on 19th July before all adults had the chance to be fully vaccinated, raised concerns about vaccinating children, and concerns about the PM’s announcement that “Proof of a negative test will no longer be enough” and that full vaccination will be required for entry into “nightclubs and other venues where large crowds gather”.

Lockdown

Lockdown was the least discussed topic of interest, with 462k mentions for this reporting period (down 23% compared with the previous two months).

The conversation around lockdown was primarily neutral (74%). This topic had the highest percentage of conversation that was negative (22%). Only 4% was positive in this reporting period.

One of the top posts by engagement was by political correspondent Paul Joseph Watson highlighting that lockdown-free and mask-free Sweden had very little Covid deaths per day (1.12M Reach, 24.6k Engagement).

Journalist Shayan Sardarizadeh reported on a lockdown rally in Trafalgar Square, London, on 24 July 2021, highlighting a speech by former nurse and conspiracy theorist, Kate Shemirani, stating that Covid vaccines are Satanic, citing the pattern 060606 (21.9k Reach, 14.2k Engagement).

There were several highly engaged with posts about frustrations at lockdown being extended, even with Covid deaths being low, and discussions around another lockdown in Sydney, Australia, following a small rise in cases.
Wearing masks

Discussions about wearing masks were the second most talked about topic, with 496k mentions for this monitoring period (and a 54% increase compared with the previous two months).

Although sentiment was largely neutral (76%), 20% was negative and although still low, this topic had one of the highest percentage of positive sentiment (5%).

The most highly engaged with post was from a Christian writer, Andrew Graystone (see Figure 6), encouraging people to wear facemasks to protect others (45.5k Reach, 15.7k Engagement).

Many of the top mentions by engagement encouraged people to wear masks, with many posts expressing concern about face masks no longer being required from 19th July, especially given that not all young people have had the opportunity to be fully vaccinated against Covid.

Again, there were several highly engaged with posts about the environmental consequences of single-use face masks.

Self-isolation

Self-isolation was the third most discussed topic with 493k mentions and an increase of 171% compared with the previous 2 months. Sentiment was largely neutral (78%), followed by negative sentiment (19%) and positive sentiment (3%).

A few highly engaged with posts, including one by the Prime Minister himself, discussed him needing to self isolate after being pinged by NHS Test and Trace having been in contact with someone with Covid (3.56M Reach, 32k Engagement). Other high profile people also posted about needing to self-isolate, including leader of the Labour Party, Keir Starmer and British businesswoman and TV personality Deborah Meaden.

Many social media users expressed frustrations on children missing school and Doctors missing work due to the ‘Pingdemic’, and there were also frustrations from travellers needing to self isolate after travelling back from Countries with less Covid than the UK.