

## FSA Covid-19 Horizon Scanning

### Social Media listening, March 2020 to July 2020

#### Summary

We processed social media posts from March 2020 to the end of July 2020 to support our insight gathering around the impact of Covid-19 on food safety, food authenticity and food regulation. We investigated specific questions as well as providing weekly summaries of social media posts that mention the terms Covid-19 and food. Listening revealed key themes on social media concerning consumer purchasing behaviours, food delivery, restaurants' response to lockdown and safety around new regulations and recommendations.

In context with survey and desk research data, social media listening helped to provide a more complete picture of how the public reacted to this pandemic in near real time. In addition, social media listening allowed our communications team to address specific questions relating to food safety, food insecurity and availability/accessibility of healthy food, providing a unique perspective into people's behaviours and opinions.

#### Background

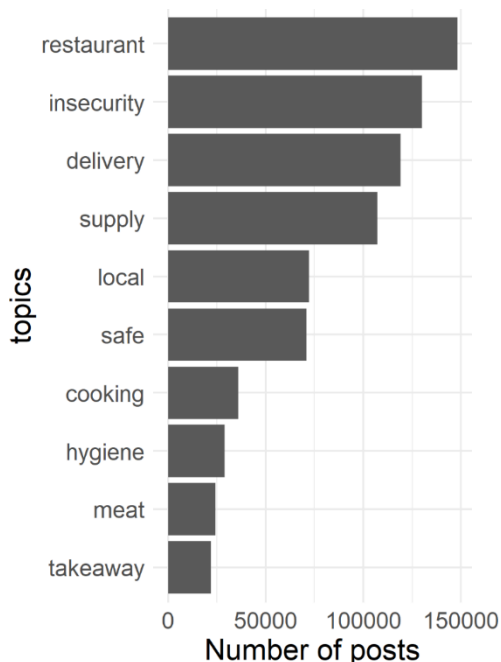
Social media posts, including Twitter, Facebook, Reddit and online news, were extracted from Pulsar. To be included, posts had to be from the UK, mention 'Covid' or an equivalent term<sup>1</sup> and 'food'. Data are available from 1<sup>st</sup> December 2019 for Twitter, Reddit and online news. Facebook pages were captured additionally from the 20<sup>th</sup> March onwards. All social media sources were used in this analysis with twitter accounting for 72%, online news for 17%, and Facebook and Reddit for only 11% of posts. Several terms were added as they became relevant: Rona, when this is over, when this is all over, #newnormal, lockdown, quarantine, pandemic.

Some posts were excluded from analysis, e.g. posts advertising recruitment. Common themes and topics present on social media platforms were identified by the number of mentions of a given phrase present each day. Themes were filtered and summarised to match FSA interests and provide insight into questions relating to food safety.

Throughout the listening period the most frequently mentioned topic included restaurants, bars and cafes, which were mentioned nearly 150,000 times over 5 months. We drew on this to evaluate people's willingness or concerns to return to eating out after lockdown and any concerns relating to food safety that could be addressed by the FSA.

Issues relating to food insecurity included free school meals, food banks, and emergency food parcels. This helped us inform our response to increased food insecurity and use of foodbanks.

Food delivery and supply (including supply disruptions from stockpiling, concerns about global and local food chains) helped us understand people's perception and concerns relating to food availability.



We were interested in how Covid affected food shopping behaviour throughout lockdown, including the increase in local food shopping or demand for local produce.

As lockdown restrictions started to ease, we explored questions around perception of food safety and safety in relation to eating out, as well as questions around people's perception of the importance of food hygiene.

There was specific interest in understanding how lockdown has changed people's food habits e.g. change in dietary preferences, home cooking or ordering more takeaway which informed our communication planning.

Finally, questions emerged on whether people were concerned about safety of meat products following several local outbreaks in meat processing plants.

## Overview

Social media posts numbers were low from early December 2019 to the end of February 2020, with few relevant mentions. The number of daily posts increased sharply early in March 2020, when Covid cases started to increase in the UK. Conversations peaked at the day lockdown was announced and declined in the following months. This could be due to Covid being talked about less as people are accepting a "new normal". It is also possible that the explicit term 'Covid' is mentioned less, as it can be implied in many cases.

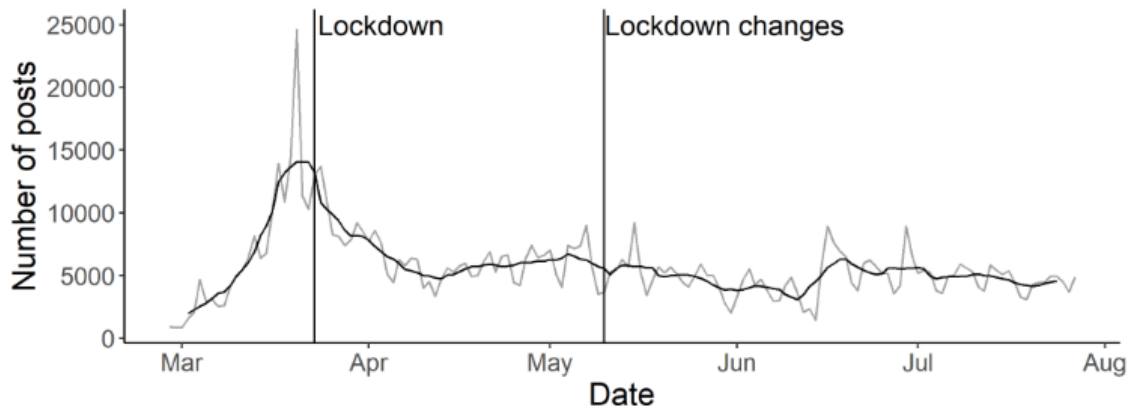


Figure 1: Number of daily social media posts with seven day rolling average from beginning of March to the end of July.

There is a surprising jump in post numbers on the 16<sup>th</sup> June, which coincides with the government's decision to extend the free school meal voucher scheme over summer on that day. After that, post numbers may have been higher due to new changes in lockdown restrictions, allowing certain businesses to reopen under certain circumstances.

There was a visible weekly pattern throughout the monitored period, with a lower number of posts over weekends and bank holidays. There was a clear peak a few days before the start of lockdown (23<sup>rd</sup> March 2020). The single day peak was present on 20<sup>th</sup> March, the day lockdown was announced. This was largely due to businesses and online news announcing restaurants and pub closures in compliance with lockdown rules, accounting for about 10,000 posts. The peak period from 18<sup>th</sup> to 24<sup>th</sup> March also included high numbers of posts on several key topics, mainly stockpiling in preparation for lockdown and the limited capacity of food delivery to shielding individuals.

With supermarket shelves empty and supermarket online delivery slots booked out, they key topic in March was food availability and accessibility. Numbers of posts mentioning stockpiling decreased quickly after the start of lockdown, while delivery remained one of the key topics through.

## Restaurants, pubs, and cafes

Businesses and online news used social media platforms to announce closure of restaurants, bars, pubs, and cafes as lockdown was announced. After lockdown restrictions eased, social media platforms were used to announce reopening or permanent / ongoing closure of places. During analysis, it was not possible to separate the more "factual" dialogue about opening hours from general concerns or opinions. There is some noticeable overlap between the terms open and closed, e.g. when used for opening times. Individual posts on twitter said that users were looking forward to going back to restaurants or pubs. Such statements were often more general and not necessarily linked to the time when food places were allowed to reopen. Other twitter users voiced their discomfort about the easing of lockdown and, consequently, going out for food. However, it was difficult to quantify those groups due to the diverse language used to express opinions.

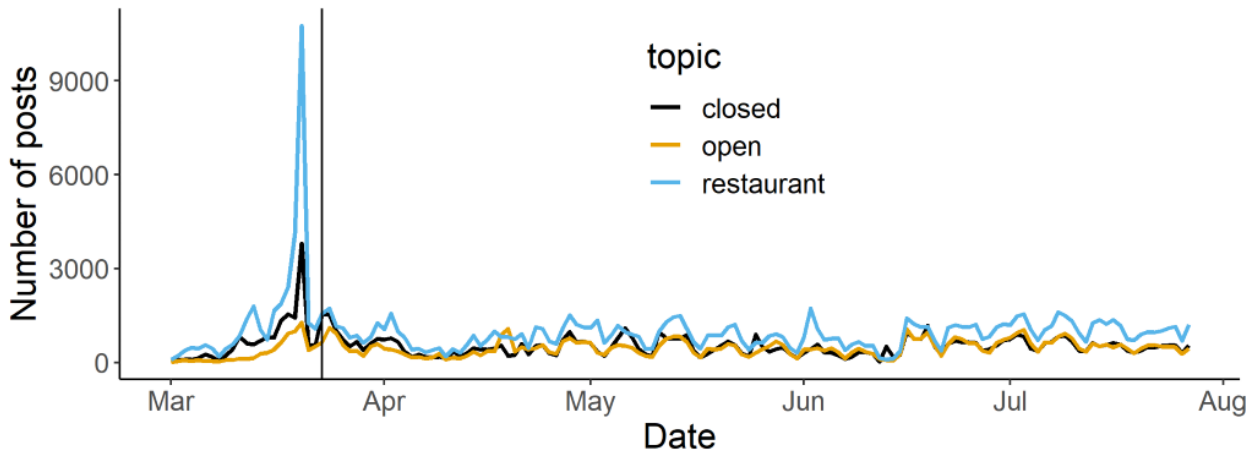


Figure 2: Number of daily posts containing the terms close, open or restaurant / pub / bar / café.

### Stockpiling and panic buying

Discussions on stockpiling and empty supermarket shelves peaked on the 20<sup>th</sup> March as people were worried about availability of food. Contributing to this peak, for example, was a widely shared video of a nurse breaking down in tears after a 48-hour shift when faced with empty supermarket shelves. This issue was picked up again retrospectively by a tweet shared over 4000 times on the 29<sup>th</sup> June, saying:

“That period in lockdown when there was no food in the supermarkets & people were fighting for tissue doesn't even seem real”

Small spikes in May and June generally related to discussions around local or global food supply chains. In June, this could also refer to the idea to “shorten food supply chains” in relation to Brexit.

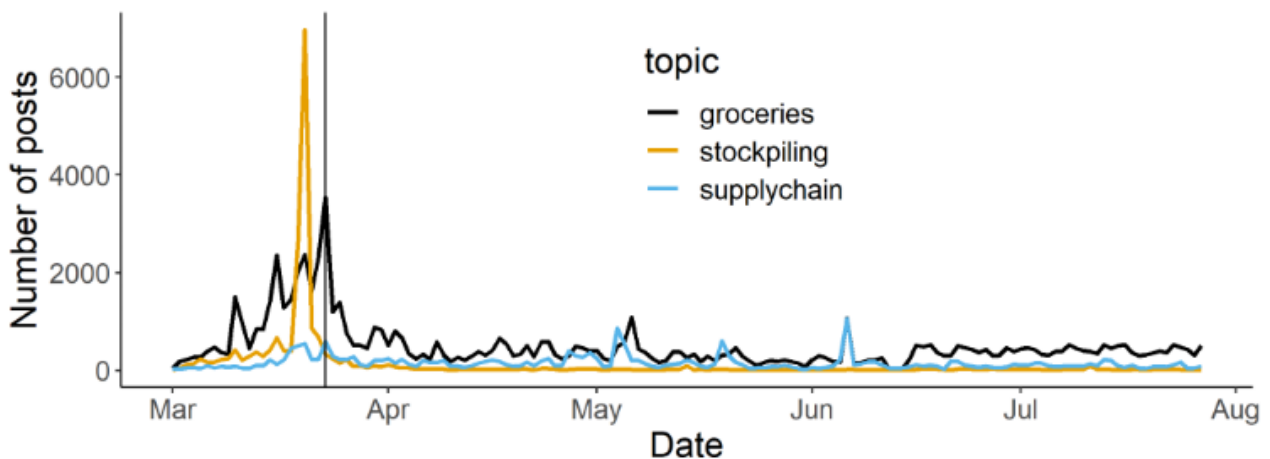


Figure 3: Number of daily posts containing the terms groceries, supply chain or stockpiling.

## Food insecurity

Food insecurity was a key theme on social media, especially during the build up to lockdown. Food banks were mentioned often and smaller spikes in post numbers were often linked to individuals or companies making large financial donations to support food banks. Discussion around free school meals peaked with the effort of Manchester United's Marcus Rashford raising £20m for charity and the subsequent decision of the government to extend meal vouchers over summer on the 16<sup>th</sup> June 2020.

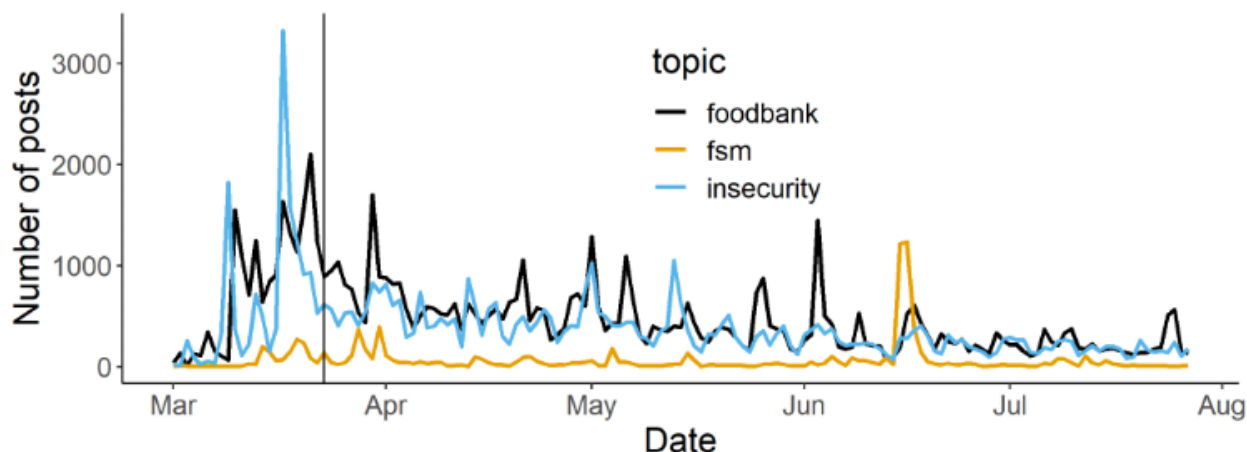


Figure 4: Number of daily posts containing the terms foodbanks, free school meals or other food insecurity topics.

## Other key topics: Delivery, local food, safety, cooking, meat and hygiene

Food delivery, local food and safety around food and eating out were also key topics through and after lockdown. From March to May, social media posts mentioning food and delivery were often concerned with online food shopping and limited availability for shielding and vulnerable people. However, concerns about food delivery for shielding people decreased during May, with an increase in restaurants or fast food places offering delivery.

The words 'local' and 'locally' were frequently and consistently used from March to July. There was interest within the FSA to understand how consumer behaviour had changed. With the challenges of lockdown (e.g. empty supermarket shelves and advice to avoid public transport), more people turned to buying increasingly locally. There was also a push to support local businesses and, after places started to reopen, local pubs, restaurants, and even 'local' branches of fast food chains such as McDonald's.

Another area of interest for the FSA was to understand how likely people were to return to pre-Covid eating out patterns and if there were any concerns about food safety that needed to be addressed. The theme of 'safety' became more noticeable after the initial lockdown phase, as other discussions started to decrease in numbers while the number of posts mentioning 'safety' remained prominent. As with posts mentioning restaurants, the clearest distinguishable message was from businesses reopening and promoting their new safety measures and to reassure customers that it was safe to return.

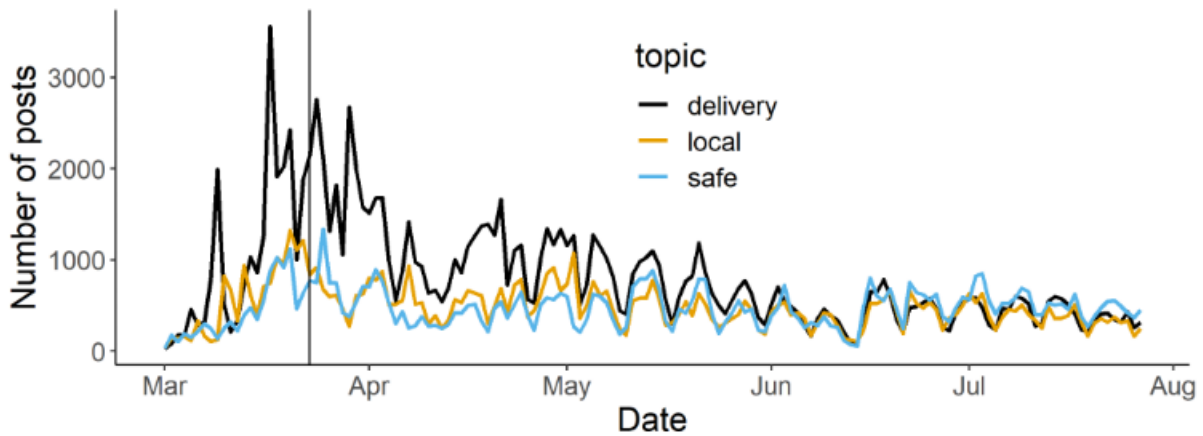


Figure 5: Number of daily posts containing the terms delivery, local or safe

There were several themes that occurred frequently during the period of listening, that were lower in overall numbers but of interest to the FSA. The themes of ‘cooking’ and ‘takeaway’ aimed to understand what the changes in consumer behaviour were during lockdown. Cooking was a popular lockdown hobby. However, home-cooked food could also be used as a term for restaurants to promote their menu. With the overall low volume of social media mentions, there was no indication of unsafe cooking behaviour that needed to be addressed. Takeaway became a popular topic during and after lockdown. As restaurants initially had to close during lockdown, many places decided to offer a takeaway-only service during this period.

Food hygiene is a main concern for the FSA but was not a key topic on social media. Peak in early June was generally concerned with food hygiene standards in relation to UK-US trade deals.

Meat was an interesting topic as some social media users connected the outbreak of covid, or more generally disease, to our consumption of meat and conditions at meat markets or ‘wet markets’ that are commonly thought to be the first hotspot for Covid in Wuhan. Dog and bat meat were mentioned as possible sources, while other twitter users used the situation to promote a vegetarian or vegan diet. However, this was present on a much smaller scale than other discussions, with less than 100 or so posts a day on average. Towards the end of June, there was a peak relating to outbreaks in meat factories. Analysis did not offer any insight in whether people were concerned about meat consumption as posts focused on conditions in food production factories, rather than the risk from food.

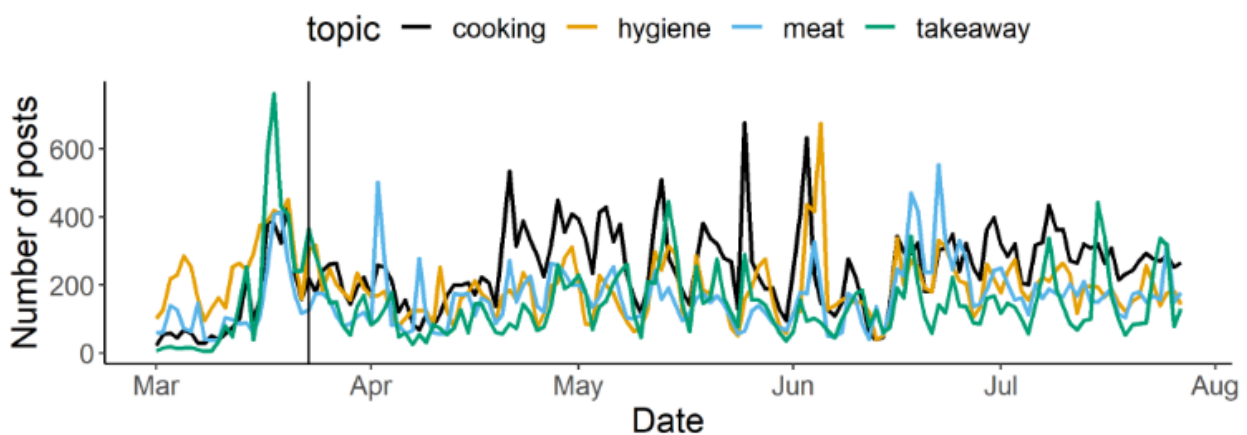


Figure 6: Number of daily posts containing the terms cooking, hygiene, meat (or vegetarian/vegan), takeaway (note different scales of figure Y-axes)

## Conclusion

This 5-month period of social media listening demonstrated the potential use and inherent limitations of using social media to gain insight into people's behaviour and attitudes. There are some clear benefits, as social media is available in near real time and can be analysed fast to get an indication of people's reaction to events. In some cases, listening can be used to identify emerging topics before an awareness of this topic is fully developed from other sources. While the advantages of social media listening are clear, there are also some significant limitations, as social media is not representative of real lives or real opinions. With this in mind, we concluded that social media analysis should be used to support other, more robust research and surveys.

This publication aims to help food businesses follow allergen labelling requirements. It will also help food officers enforce these measures.