



Retail trends for back-to-school 2020: Focus on safety, sales & steady engagement

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For retailers, back-to-school season has long been a major marketing and sales opportunity. And for many kids, the joyful experience of back-to-school shopping makes the end of summer sting a little less. 2020, however, has been markedly different in many ways—meaning back-to-school season this year will look different as well.

This year, the retail industry has faced major economic setbacks due to COVID-19, with [sales falling by 16.4%](#) in April in the U.S. As stores and states slowly begin to reopen, sales are starting to bounce back. In May, retail sales surged by [17.7%](#), showing that there is still an appetite for shopping, which is great news for retailers as the back-to-school season approaches.

Given concerns about social distancing requirements, school and in-store safety and what the school year will look like, retailers need to instill confidence and help consumers regain that sense of excitement for back-to-school shopping.

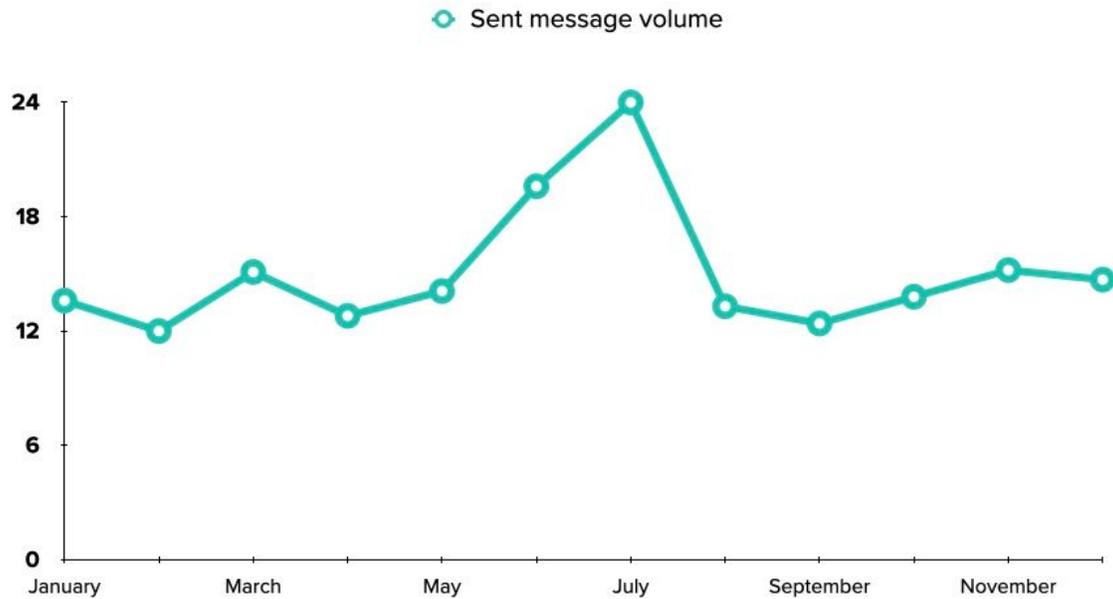
To understand how COVID-19 has changed consumers' interactions with retailers on social media and what that means for brands' back-to-school strategies, we turned to social data.

Sprout's data science team analyzed more than 9,100 social profiles across Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Pinterest and LinkedIn to explore retailer and consumer behavior between January 1, 2019 – June 30, 2020 and see what's changed since COVID-19. We also leveraged [social listening](#) for additional insights into consumers' expectations of retailers, their concerns and what they care about most when back-to-school shopping. Read on to learn about the trends we uncovered and how your brand can use data to drive your back-to-school approach.

Looking back on the 2019 back-to-school season

In 2019, June and July were the busiest months for retailers on social. The average number of unique social posts retailers sent daily reached 19.56 in June and peaked at 24 in July. Combined, those months represented a 54% increase in content published compared to the rest of the year.

Average social content published daily by retailers in 2019



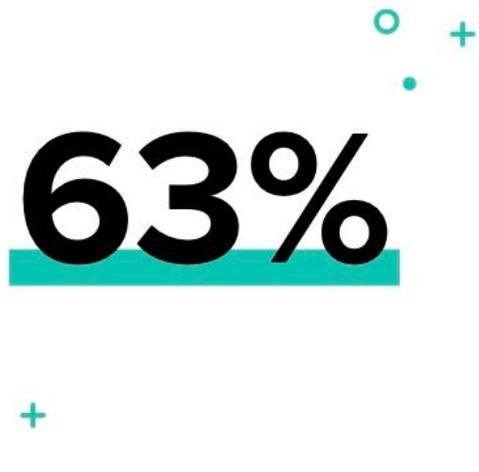
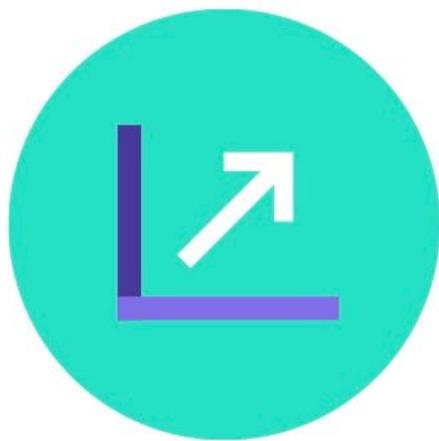
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Not only were brands posting more often during those months, but they were also actively engaging with their audience more. Across all industry segments, retailers' average number of outbound engagements (e.g. comments, Retweets and replies by a brand) in June and July was 63% higher than the rest of 2019.

Increase in daily social engagements sent by retailers in June & July 2019

Compared to the remainder of 2019



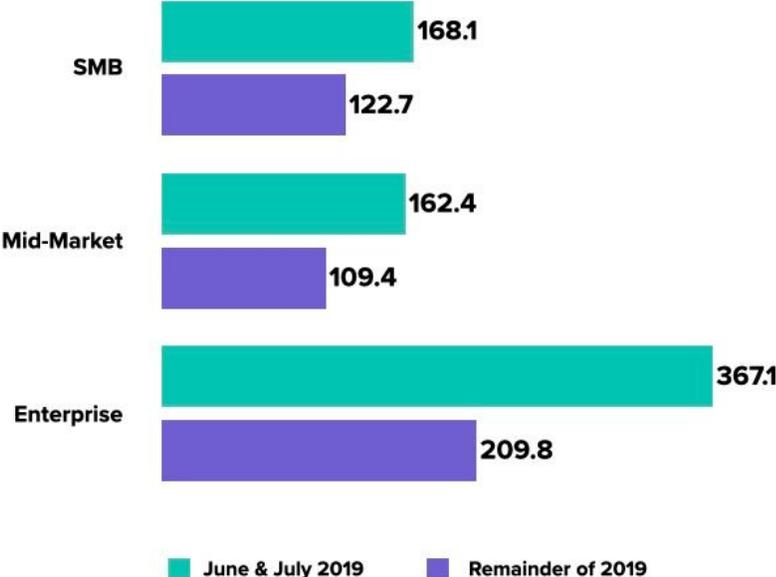
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Just as retailers stepped up their publishing and engagement in June and July 2019, consumers increased their engagement with retailers during these months. Consumers' engagements on retailers' social content increased significantly in June and July, up 53% compared to the rest of the year across all segments. This was especially true for enterprise retailers, which saw a 74% increase.

Whether consumers engage by simply liking content, asking product-related questions or commenting about recent purchases, this influx of engagement gives brands an opportunity to shape their strategy and optimize back-to-school campaigns based on consumer feedback, wants and needs.

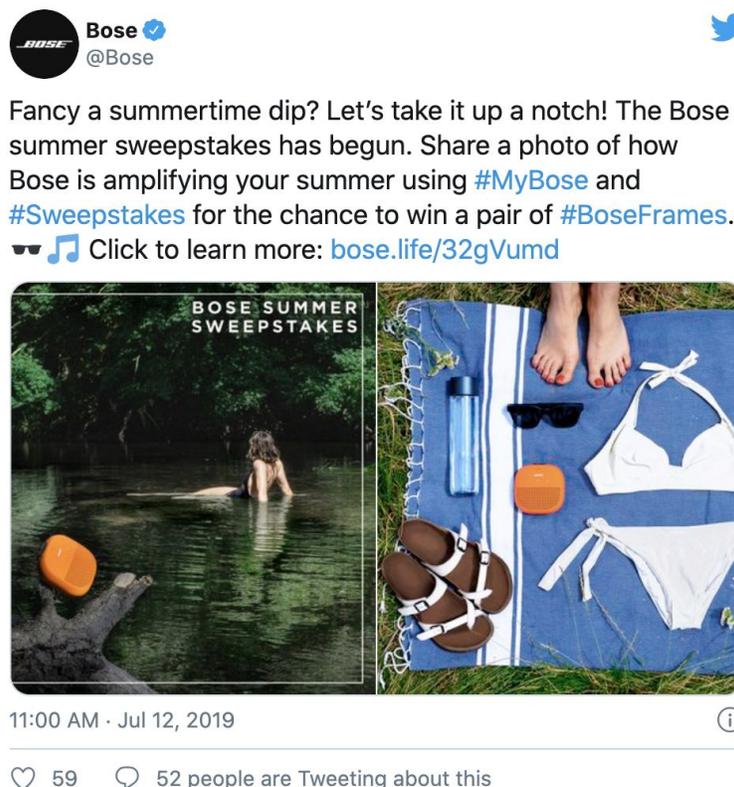
Average content engagements received by retailers on social, by segment



Summer is a time of high activity both on social and in day-to-day life. People take vacations and travel more frequently, spend more time outdoors, go camping and more. While people may not be partaking in these kinds of summer plans as much this year, [the activities people do engage in](#) will still dictate the products and services they seek.

Typically, back-to-school begins to take off in July and continues into August and September, but connecting with your audience around their summer activities early on helps to lay the foundation for receptivity and engagement with your back-to-school campaigns.

Last July, [Bose](#) launched a summertime sweepstakes campaign that called on their fans to share photos of the way they're spending their summer using the hashtag [#MyBose](#). The content generated a huge swell of UGC from people looking to “amplify their summer.”



One month later, Bose shared their back-to-school deals. With discounts on their products, students could keep listening to the soundtrack of their summer.



You thought summer would never end. At least you can bring the soundtrack with you. Click here to check out our [#BackToSchool](#) deals: bose.life/2YXiW9f [#StillSummer](#) [#QC35](#) 



9:00 AM · Aug 12, 2019



 27  See Bose's other Tweets

Leading up to back-to-school 2020

From January to mid-May this year, the conversation around [retail within the context of COVID-19](#) generated over 6.1 million social mentions across 2.6 million unique authors in [Sprout Listening's Featured Topic](#). The sheer volume of social messages shows that there are a lot of questions and curiosity about how retailers are navigating the pandemic. These questions are particularly important for retailers to address on social as they approach the back-to-school season.



STORE REOPENING | From the mouth-watering delights of the Food Halls to the equally mouth-watering treasures of Shoe Heaven, our Knightsbridge store is back. We can't wait to see you – plan your visit and find out about our safety measures here: on.harrods.com/2AGmlz4
[#Harrods](#)



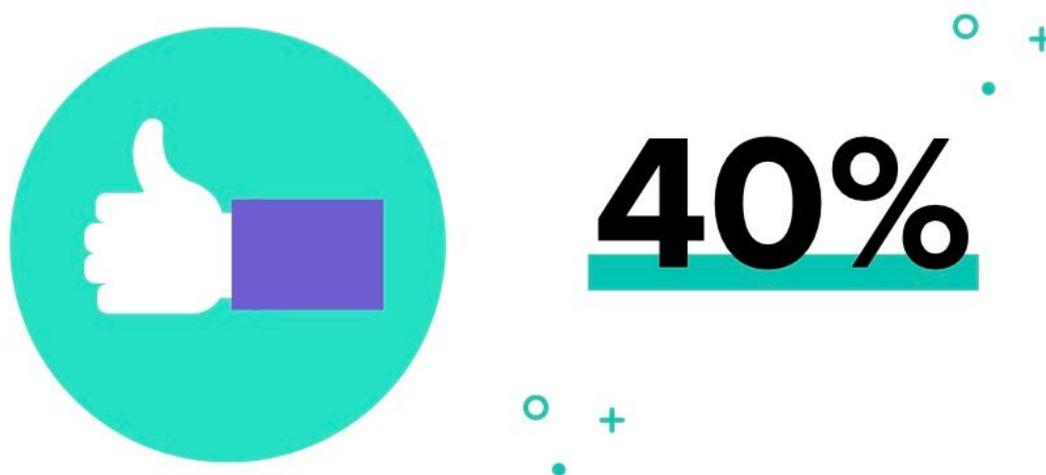
11:30 AM · Jun 18, 2020



♡ 47 ⚡ See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter

While many brands paused their ad campaigns or publishing calendars during the first half of 2020, retailers remained relatively consistent in terms of daily content volume. And yet, consumer engagement with retailers took off during this time. The average number of engagements retailers received on posts the same day they were published increased by 40% in Q2 2020 compared to Q2 2019.

Increase in average engagements retailers received per social post in Q2 2020 vs. Q2 2019

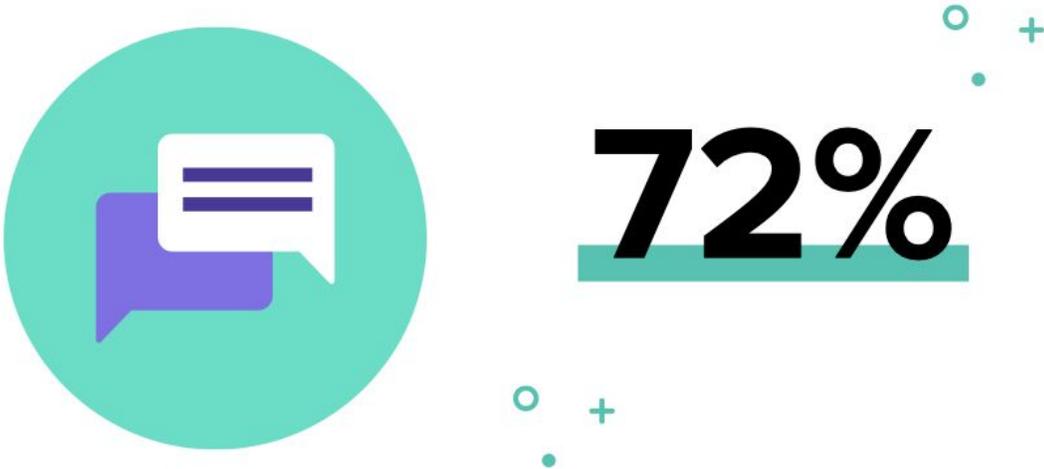


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As consumers reach out more often, it's more important than ever that retailers' social teams serving as the front lines of customer care. In Q2 2020, retailers saw a 72% increase in the average number of daily inbound messages compared to Q2 2019. Mid-market retailers, in particular, saw an 88% increase in inbound messages during the second quarter of 2020 compared to the same quarter in 2019

Increase in inbound messages received by retailers on social in Q2 2020 vs. Q2 2019



Knowing that retailers published the most social content in June and July last year, they will likely be fighting for share of voice going into back-to-school season more than ever. Brands will need to continue balancing the increase in engagements and messages, while also sharing high volumes of relevant messaging around consumers' back to school plans and expectations in the current climate.

Brands also need to be mindful of which platforms their customers are using to engage with them. While every brand's audience is different, in the first half of 2020 retailers received the highest average inbound comments per day on Instagram, followed by Facebook and Twitter, making it important for brands to be present, active and responsive on these platforms.

**Average comments/replies per day
received by retailers in 2020, by**

69

Instagram

64

Facebook

41

Twitter

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sproutsocial.com/insights/data

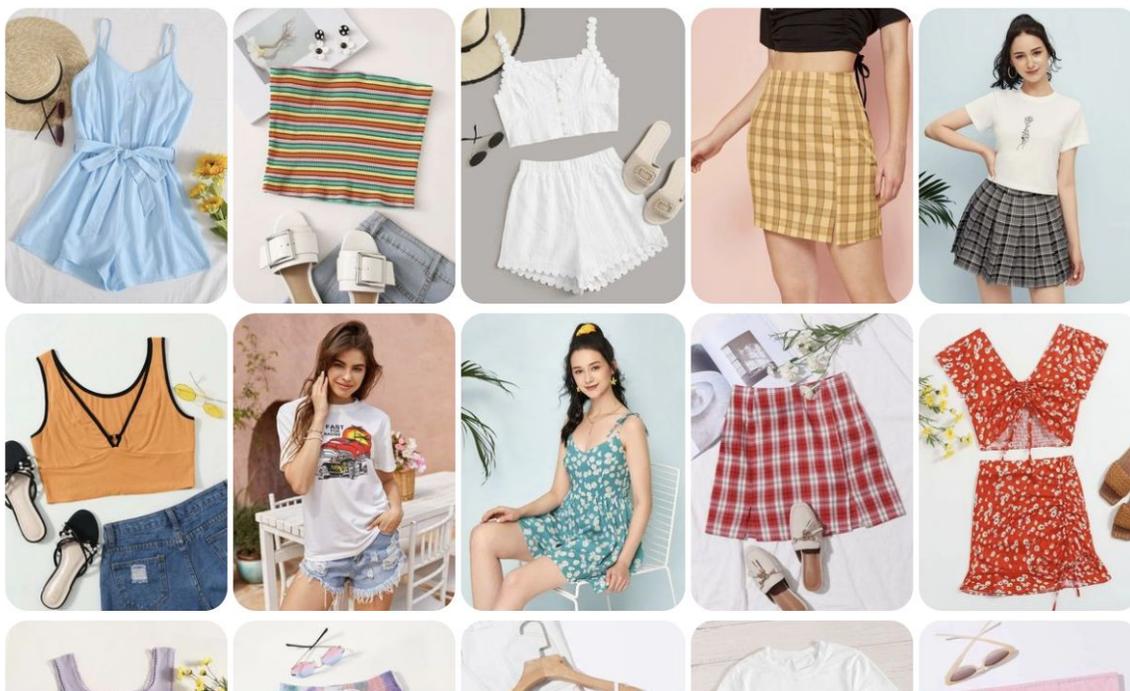
While it's unclear exactly what's in store for brands and consumers as businesses and schools reopen, people are still planning for the future. According to [Pinterest's SVP of technology](#), speaking to the National Retail Federation in May, "Last month, for instance, there was a 60% increase in the number of boards created compared with last year, and engagement with boards is up nearly 75% year over year."

While Pinterest honed in on users building and engaging with boards, Sprout's data found that retailers are posting significantly more Pins. In the first half of 2020, Pins shared by retailers increased by 104% YoY and Pins reposted by them increased by 84% YoY.



ROMWE

Back-To-School



Follow On  Pinterest

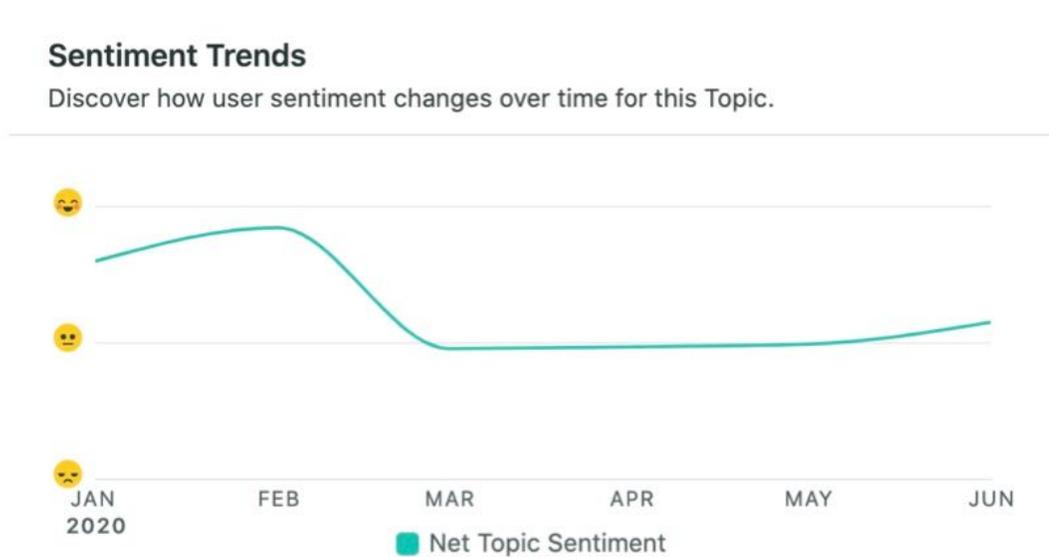
Pinterest is incredibly popular among [parents, teachers and millenials](#), especially when it comes to planning and seeking shopping inspiration. In preparation for back-to-school 2020, retailers can share product-focused, forward-looking content that inspires consumers to plan and shop for the future—not just on Pinterest, but across all platforms.

Trends taking shape for back-to-school season

Given the volatility of 2020 so far, we wanted to understand trends in the conversation on social and identify what consumers are most concerned about when it comes to shopping and returning to school. To accomplish this, we used Sprout's Advanced Listening feature to derive insights from the public conversation about back-to-school that brands can apply to their content strategies.

Overall, sentiment about back-to-school trended downward in the first half of 2020, but we're seeing positive sentiment increase slightly starting in June as retailers and states begin to reopen.

Back-to-school sentiment trends in 2020



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In the first six months of 2020, there were more than 657,000 social messages about the topic of going back-to-school. More than 436,000 unique authors contributed to the conversation, which garnered 4.7 billion potential impressions and 13.6 million engagements across Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit and the web.

Top hashtags used in conversations on social about back-to-school in 2020

#cute #learning #teachers #students
#stationery #college #education #style
#study #school #teacher
#art #kids #memes
#covid19 #fun #love #student
#fashion #teachersofinstagram
#friends #ootd #children #staysafe

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Safety concerns are still top of mind for consumers

Students ended their 2020 school year at home, and many may start the school year the same way. Looking ahead, the majority of social conversations reveal consumers are worried about COVID and whether schools will be able to reopen in the fall.

Safety is a major topic of discussion among shoppers, students and parents. Within the back-to-school Listening Topic, the volume of messages that included the keyword “safe” or “safety” reached over 40,300 and garnered a total of 596,300 engagements between January 1, 2020 - June 30, 2020.

GLS Educational Supplies
@gls_education

We want to help you get back to school ready with the equipment you need to keep your school safe. Quality assured products, with next day delivery and rated "Excellent" by SBM's on Trustpilot. Shop with a brand you can trust glsed.co.uk
[#sbmlife](#) [#sbm](#) [#backtoschool](#)

BACK TO SCHOOL READY
• Next Day Delivery
• High Stock Levels
• Planning Support

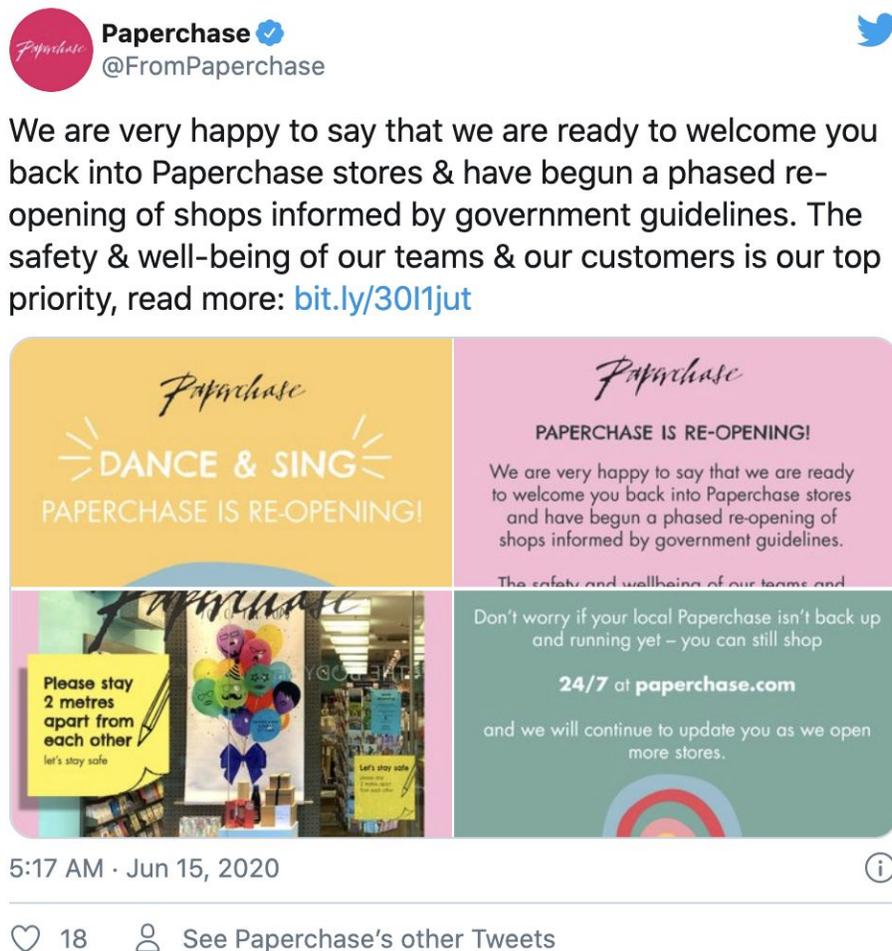
Experts in Educational Supplies
We have everything you need to keep your academy or school running, including stationery, school & ...
glsed.co.uk

3:32 AM · Jun 9, 2020

145 See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter

Looking closer at demographics, consumers from the United Kingdom made up just over 17% of that conversation. In the UK, some students returned to secondary school to wrap up the school year on June 15, the same date retail shops opened in England. The British government also recently announced that school will be open for full-time, in-person classes this fall.

Now that lockdown has lifted, UK retailers like Paperchase and the [Westfield Stratford City](#) shopping center are using social to share safety guidelines and requirements to make customers feel comfortable returning to their stores. Even with the necessary precautions in place, not everyone is ready to shop in-store, so retailers are also continuing to direct consumers to e-commerce options.



In 2019, school supplies being discussed on social were more standard items like backpacks, notebooks, and uniforms. This year, safety guidelines and concerns are influencing school supply lists around the world.

According to our listening data, consumers are back-to-school shopping for masks, hand sanitizer, thermometers and other safety and sanitation-focused products.

New additions to school supplies lists in 2020



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sproutsocial.com/insights/data

Partnerships with influencers and teachers help retailers reach target audiences

In Q2 2020, there were 10,500 unique authors discussing shopping in relation to back-to-school. Within that conversation, there are many influencers, teachers and smaller retailers contributing highly engaging content on Instagram in particular, where posts about back-to-school average 840 engagements per message.

As retail brands continue to shape their back-to-school strategies in the COVID-19 world, they may benefit from partnering with these kinds of influencers who give a more personal touch to back-to-school campaigns.

 **thatteachertaylor**
2,210 followers [View Profile](#)



[View More on Instagram](#)

♡ 💬 ↗ 📌

153 likes
thatteachertaylor

Michael's haul 🛒 I missed you Michael's!! I don't know about you but I love back to school shopping. Don't forget to use your 15% off teacher discount to stack on the sale price! All of this was only \$35. I can't wait to use the scrapbook cases to hold literacy centers and the fun pencils for writer of the week!

★ ★ ★
#michaels #michaelsstores #michaelsteachers #michaelsteacher #backtoschool #kindergarten #firstyearteacher #teachersofinstagram #teachersfollowteachers #teachersofinstagram #teacherlife #teachernetworkingfollowloop #teacherstyle #amazingteachersloop #youngteacher #kindergartenteacher #taskcards #taskcards#photoboxes #scooprockers #flexibleseating #centers #literacycenters #mathcenters

[view all 16 comments](#)

Add a comment... 

YouTube influencers in particular have the unique ability to reach and appeal to younger audiences since they are often part of a younger demographic. The most active age group on Youtube is **15-25-year-olds**. Within that group, 81% use YouTube regularly.

Some of the most popular content these influencers share are “hauls,” in which they discuss their recent purchases, try things on, describe how a product feels and in a lot of instances, share promo codes for products. For retailers that focus primarily on e-commerce or have yet to open their shops to the public, partnering with these influencers can get your back-to-school products in front of a lot of potential customers.

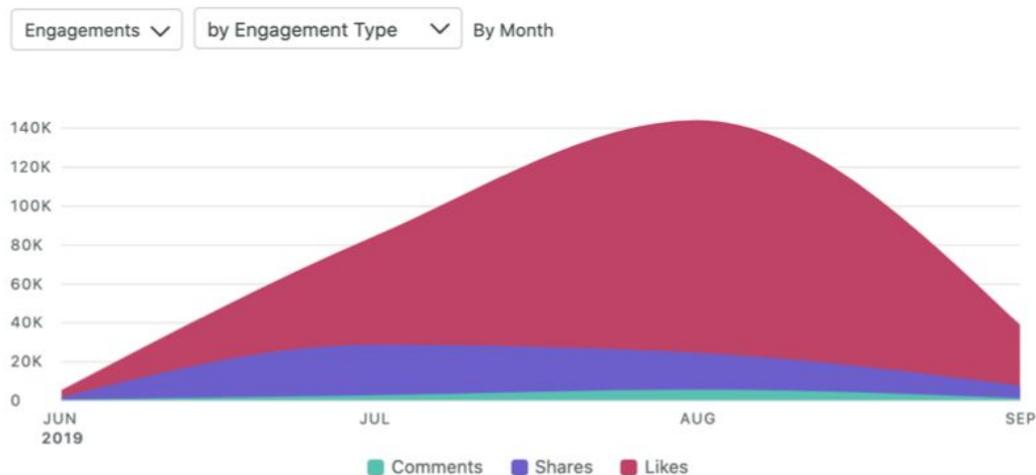


Consumers are looking for deals and ways to help those in need

One thing that appeals to all consumers is a good deal, and back-to-school is a season where retailers and influencers offer discounts far and wide. In our back-to-school listening topic, we found that nearly 29,000 messages across social media mentioned a “discount, sale or promo” between June 1, 2019 – September 30, 2019. We also see that consumers engaged with those messages more during those months than the rest of the year.

Engagement with social messages that mentioned “discount”, “sale” or “promo” in relation to back-to-school

June 1, 2019 - September 30, 2019



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As retailers begin to unveil their back-to-school campaigns, consumers will be eager to find the best deal. [Apple](#), which has an annual promotion for back-to-school, got a jump on the season this year to the delight of their fans. Retailers like Best Buy, Staples, Walmart and more also typically have back-to-school specials for technology, which could be essential this year if schools remain closed.



[#Apple](#) has launched its annual Back to School promotion, providing discounts and bonuses like free [#AirPods](#) to students and educators in preparation for a return to education. appleinsider.com/articles/20/06...



10:49 AM · Jun 15, 2020



71 19 people are Tweeting about this

Consumers aren't just looking for deals, they're also looking for ways to make donations to schools, teachers and students who struggle to afford school supplies. Between June 1, 2019 – September 30, 2019, 12,800 messages were shared mentioning "donate" or "donation" for back-to-school, and these messages garnered 94,704 engagements.

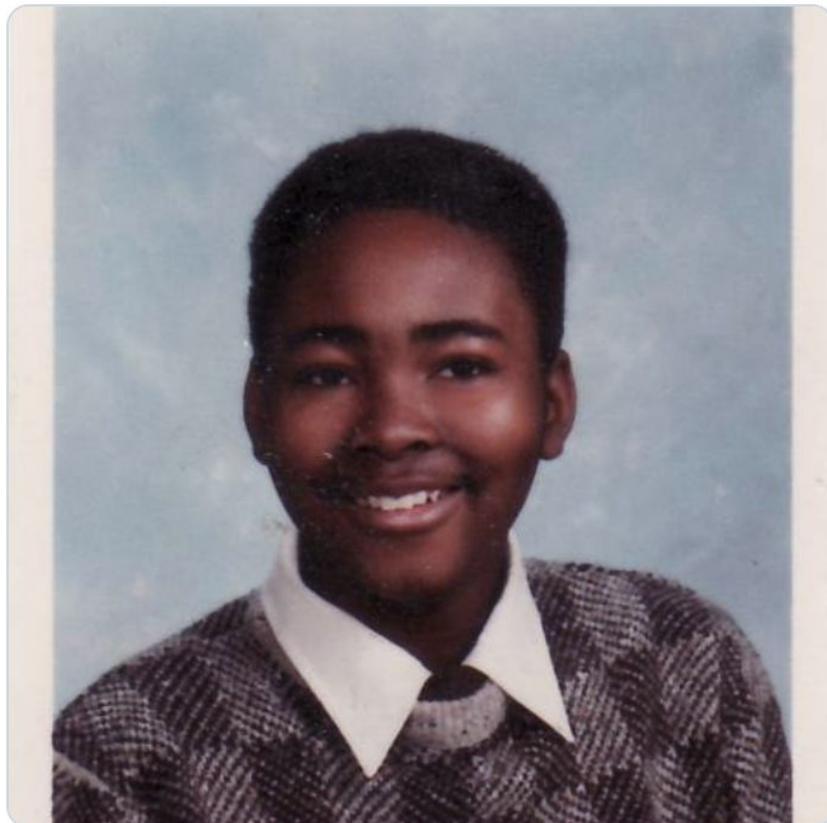


Jaime Harrison  @harrisonjaime
US Senate candidate, SC



Around back-to-school time, my eyes well up when I think about how hard my mom worked to make sure I had new clothes and school supplies as a kid.

That's why we're working to get school supplies to kids in Orangeburg. Donate >> bit.ly/33kqHFA



5:29 PM · Aug 8, 2019



 660  205 people are Tweeting about this

In 2020 so far, we've only seen 2,800 messages around the same keywords; however, they are picking up and message volume has increased by 5,770% in Q2 compared to Q1. Retailers with philanthropic goals or incentives that contribute funds to those in need during back-to-school season should share that across social. Make it known to customers where their money will go. Especially given the economic impact of COVID-19, people will be looking for ways to help out others.



While we don't know what the back-to-school season will bring, teachers are already getting prepared. Help educators get ready for the school year ahead: donorschoose.org/donors/search...



2:49 PM · Jun 22, 2020



♡ 39 👤 See DonorsChoose's other Tweets

Other conversation themes in relation to back-to-school that occurred between April 1, 2020 – June 3, 2020 include:

- 48,297 mentions of “parents” or “parenting,” 16% of which originated in the UK
- 17,311 mentions of “college” or “university,” 13% of which originated in the U.S.
- 13,994 mentions of “back to work”
- 9,982 mentions of “homeschool” or “homeschooling”

As these trends continue to evolve throughout the back-to-school season, marketing leaders should look to their social media team to understand what people want and how the conversation continues to evolve.

Key takeaways for back-to-school success on social

As the back-to-school season approaches, retailers have an opportunity to connect with their customers like never before. The increase in inbound engagements and messages in 2020 to date shows that people are seeking out content from retailers and looking to them for information, guidance and reassurance.

The expectations of brands are much higher than they used to be during this season. Quickly and effectively responding to followers, bringing customer insights from social to marketing leaders and using those insights to stay nimble will be crucial.

Developing a social strategy that focuses on what consumers care about most will not only build trust but also make them feel more connected to your brand. [Connection converts](#) into website visits, purchases, recommendations to friends and family and a competitive advantage. Here are our top three takeaways for retailers to ace this back-to-school season.

Stay relevant by listening to changing conversation trends

The start of the 2020 school year is still to be decided in many areas, and consumers are expressing their concerns on social. Listen to them, keep an eye on local and regional plans and tailor your content accordingly. According to the Sprout Social Index, **45% of customers** will unfollow a brand due to irrelevant content, so it's important to keep your finger on the pulse and adjust as necessary.

Retailers can use **social listening** to continually monitor the situation and make more informed decisions about their strategies and where their products and services fit into their customers' lives. For example, in the event of the second wave, consumers may have a renewed interest in retailers that sell technology or homeschooling resources.



Dr. Cassandra Quave
@QuaveEthnobot



Won't be sending my kids back to school until we have a **#COVID19** vaccine. Does anyone have recommendations on online homeschooling curricula (private or public) for the fall? Especially interested in any programs for gifted elementary/middle school and AP/IB high school. Thanks!

8:14 PM · May 19, 2020



19



See the latest COVID-19 information on Twitter

Staying on top of conversations that pertain to your brand, products and campaigns during back-to-school will be invaluable, and may even provide insights your brand can apply to its holiday and 2021 social strategy.

Focus on customer care

With all of the uncertainty around reopening, your customers will have a lot of questions and concerns. This makes it incredibly important to focus your efforts on making sure your customers are taken care of.

In the Sprout Social Index, we found that 49% of consumers will unfollow a brand due to poor customer service. On the other hand, consumers who are satisfied with a customer experience are likely to [post about it on social](#), like this happy customer we discovered in our back-to-school listening topic.



Tarnished
@TarnishedDragon



I just got merch from [@creatorinkhq](#) today, some was one of the back to school saving bundles. Part of it shipped wrong, but looking at my account, they'd already caught the error on their end & are sending the right thing out at no charge. Quality customer service! 🙌🙌

7:44 PM · Aug 20, 2019



See Tarnished's other Tweets

Those considerations coupled with the increase in inbound messages across the board show that retailers need to monitor their social inboxes closely, actively engage and respond to their audiences.

Introduce or increase influencer and brand partnerships

With what we know about the high levels of engagement with influencer content and consumer interest in donations, partnerships can be extremely valuable in back-to-school campaigns.



With a special assist from [@Walmart](#), [@kingjames](#) surprised 9-year-old LaRiyah with the ultimate back-to-school shopping spree to give her the confidence to start the year right. He also helped her pick up supplies for every student at the [@IPromiseSchool](#)

[#HeartOfSurprise](#)



12:00 PM · Aug 30, 2019



7.7K 2K people are Tweeting about this

Last year, Walmart, one of the major one-stop-shop back-to-school retailers, teamed up with LeBron James to give a nine-year-old the ultimate back-to-school shopping spree. While not every brand can partner with celebrities like LeBron, consider partnering with influencers in your community that are accessible, relatable, creative and able to create quality content remotely.

Conclusion

The lead up to back-to-school campaigns this year has been unique to say the least, but as we enter the peak season, social will continue to be a major touchpoint in the customer journey and drive purchases both in-store and online.

Brands that put their customers at the center of their strategies, focus on providing high-quality customer care, emphasize in-store safety measures and support their communities will be front-of-mind come back-to-school time.

About the data

All referenced data on average social messages sent and received per day is derived from 9,113 public social profiles (4,705 Facebook; 1,770 Twitter; 1,928 Instagram; 326 Pinterest; 384 LinkedIn) of active retailer accounts between January 1, 2019 and June 30, 2020. More than 76 million messages sent and received during that time were analyzed for the purposes of this report.

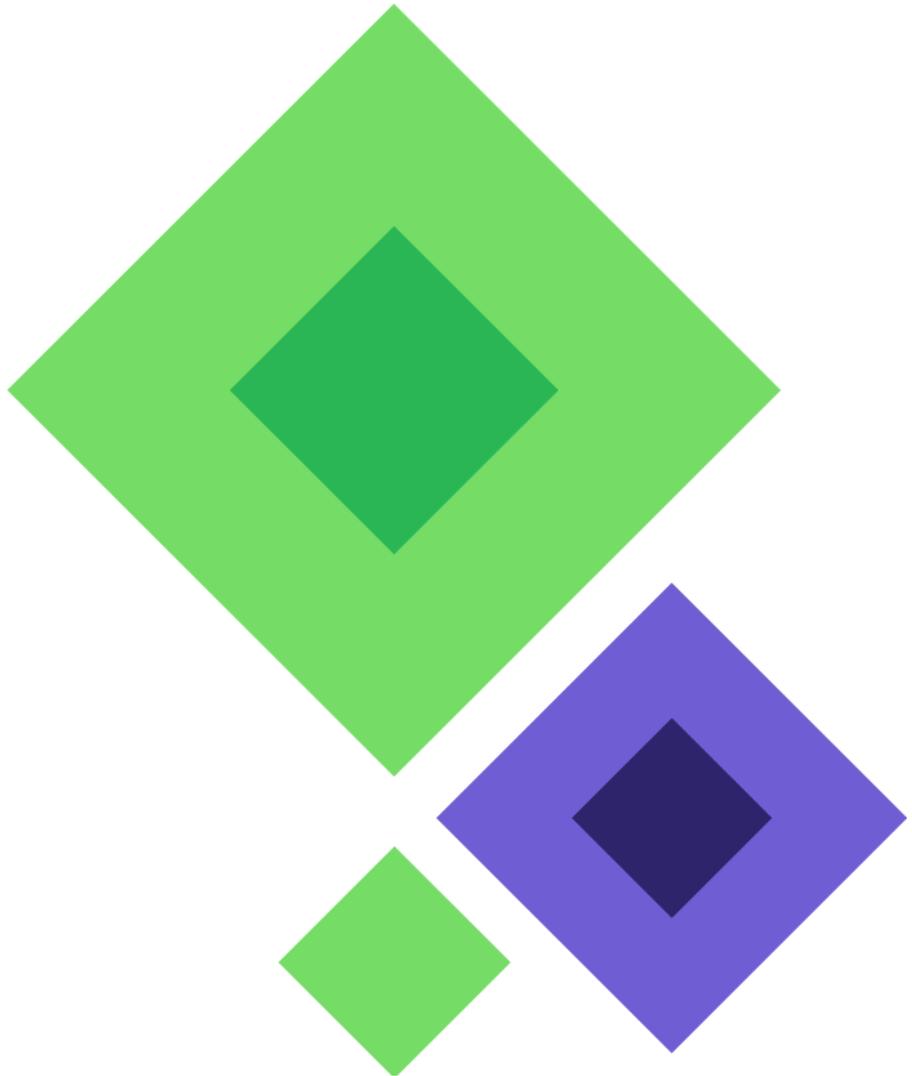
To represent that data most accurately, numbers were rounded to the nearest hundredth decimal place and then truncated for simplicity within the graphics.

The messages analyzed in Sprout's Social Listening tool were pulled from publicly available, global Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Reddit, YouTube and web data. Learn more about Sprout's [social listening offerings](#).

For questions about the data, please contact pr@sproutsocial.com.

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Sprout Social offers deep social media listening and analytics, social management, customer care, and advocacy solutions to more than 23,000 brands and agencies worldwide. Sprout's suite of solutions supports every aspect of a cohesive social program and enables organizations of all sizes to extend their reach, amplify their brand and create the kind of real connection with their consumers that drives their businesses forward. Headquartered in Chicago, Sprout operates across major social media networks, including Twitter, Facebook, Pinterest, Instagram and LinkedIn.

