

RIT 2.0 TRENDS ANALYSIS

LEBANON FEBRUARY 2023

INTRODUCTION TO ROOTED IN TRUST 2.0

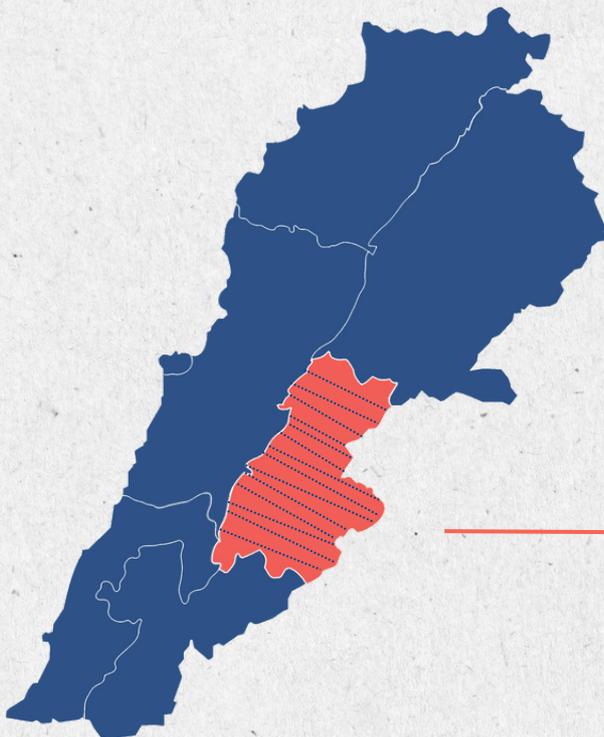
Rooted in Trust (RiT) is a USAID Bureau of Humanitarian Affairs (BHA)-funded project run by Internews to support humanitarian and public health agencies combat and manage the spread of health-related rumors and misinformation. The project was re-launched in September 2021 with its second chapter (RiT 2.0), expected to run until the end of March 2023.

RIT 1.0 2,774  **ONLINE RUMORS COLLECTED**

RIT 2.0 1,959   **ONLINE AND OFFLINE RUMORS COLLECTED**

In this Trends Analysis Report, Internews highlights commonly occurring rumor topics, trends, and their evolution across both online and offline platforms. Data collection of rumors was done in collaboration with the Internews Team and RiT 2.0 partners between 1 November 2021 and 30 November 2022.

The geographical scope of RiT 2.0 covered all of Lebanon. Maharat Foundation (hereby referred to as Maharat) engaged with online rumor collection across various communities and nationalities living across Lebanon, whereas Endless Medical Advantage (EMA) spearheaded offline rumor collection in the Bekaa region while focusing primarily on vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugee communities.



MAHARAT FOUNDATION

مهارات
Maharat

ENDLESS MEDICAL ADVANTAGE

 Endless Medical Advantage

ONLINE RUMORS OVERVIEW

Between 1 November 2021 and 30 November 2022, 913 total online rumors were collected on social media - Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, Instagram, Websites - where Social Media Monitors (SMMs) from Maharat joined both public and private platforms with high levels of user engagement.



OFFLINE RUMORS OVERVIEW

Between 1 April 2022 and 30 November 2022, 1,046 total offline rumors were collected through Social Listening activities by EMA with the aim of reaching population groups that are less active online and who tend to receive rumors through word of mouth.



METHODOLOGY

Between 1 November 2021 and 30 November 2022, the Internews Team with our partners, Maharat and EMA, collected a total of 1,959 rumors (913 online rumors and 1,046 offline rumors) using a Social Media Listening methodology, which was divided into two time-frames according to sub-themes.

RiT 2.0 amended its methodology from being solely COVID-19 focused halfway through the project to account for Lebanon's changing local context and the emergence of other health-related issues. While Hepatitis A and Cholera are not new diseases known to Lebanon, the way in which information was collected and shared between communities was novel - misinformation was widely spread, whether pertaining to their causes, spread, symptoms, prevention, and/or treatment.

The sudden onset of Hepatitis A, Monkeypox, and Cholera naturally altered the existing Lebanese rumor landscape that until that point in time had been dominated by COVID-19 rumors. The information gaps within communities allowed rumors to proliferate, which then prompted RiT 2.0 to expand its data-collection methodologies to accurately reflect people's most pressing health information needs and concerns. This was specifically noticeable between the months of June and October, 2022.

The RiT project defines a rumor as “unverified information”. This unverified information may be misinformation, but may also be information that is later found to be true.

ONLINE RUMORS

Online rumors were collected by the Internews Team between 1 November 2021 and 28 February 2022 and then by SMMs from Maharat between 1 March 2022 and 30 November 2022. SMMs were tasked with monitoring widely used social media platforms in Lebanon in order to help identify and understand hyper-local information needs surrounding COVID-19 and other health-related rumors and misinformation at the community level.



METHODOLOGY

Data Collection
1 November 2021 - 31 May 2022

318
Rumors

Themes and their relevant sub-themes

- COVID-19 General
- COVID-19 Vaccine



METHODOLOGY

Data Collection
1 June 2022 - 30 November 2022

595
Rumors

Themes and their relevant sub-themes

- COVID-19 General
- COVID-19 Vaccine
- Other Health Topic
- Other Non-Health Non-COVID-19

OFFLINE RUMORS

Offline rumors were collected by EMA in the Bekaa region between 1 April 2022 and 30 November 2022. EMA collected rumors using a tool deployed on KoboCollect through community meetings, door-to-door interviews, informal meetings, as well as listening groups / focus group discussions (FGDs). Participants were predominantly vulnerable Lebanese or Syrian refugees.



METHODOLOGY

Data Collection
1 April 2022 - 31 May 2022

489
Rumors

Themes and their relevant sub-themes

- COVID-19 General
- COVID-19 Vaccine



METHODOLOGY

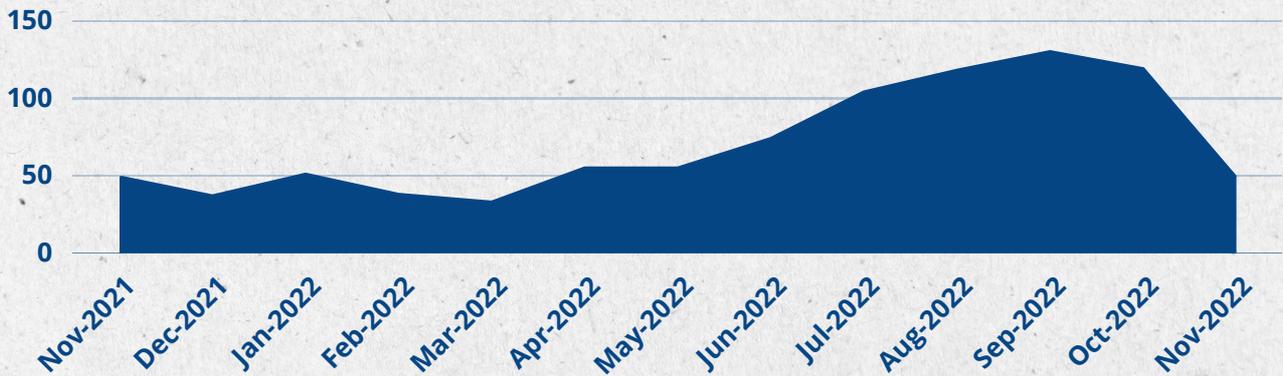
Data Collection
1 June 2022 - 30 November 2022

557
Rumors

Themes and their relevant sub-themes

- COVID-19 General
- COVID-19 Vaccine
- Other Health Topic
- Other Non-Health Non-COVID-19

ONLINE RUMORS

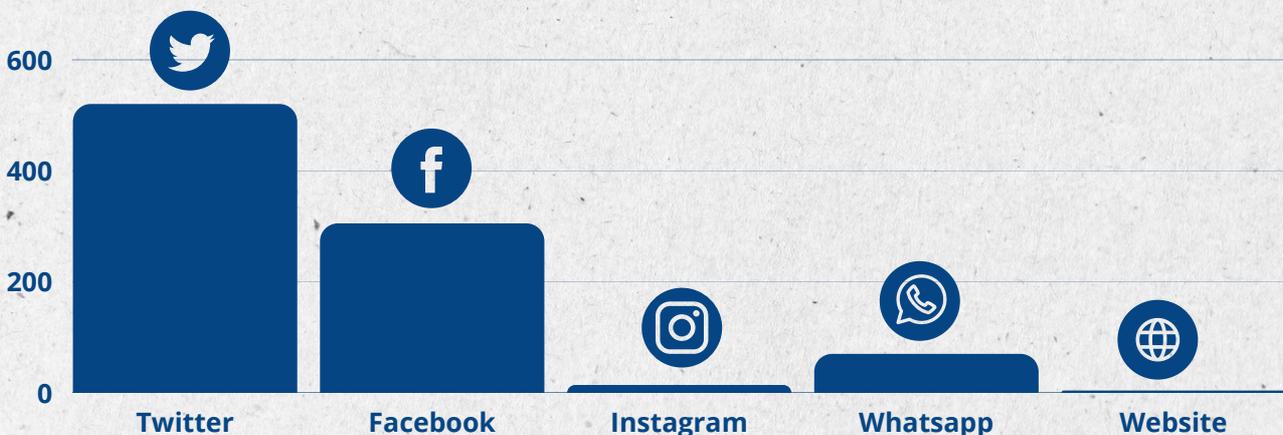


Total Number of Online Rumors Collected in RiT 2.0 Represented by Month and Year

Between 1 November 2021 - 30 November 2022, a total of 913 online rumors were collected by SMMs. The vast majority of the rumors collected were in Arabic (97%), followed by English (2%), and Arabizi (1%). For online rumors Methodology 1, a total of 318 rumors were collected between 1 November 2021 - 31 May 2022. For online rumors Methodology 2, a total of 595 rumors were collected between 1 June 2022 - 30 November 2022.



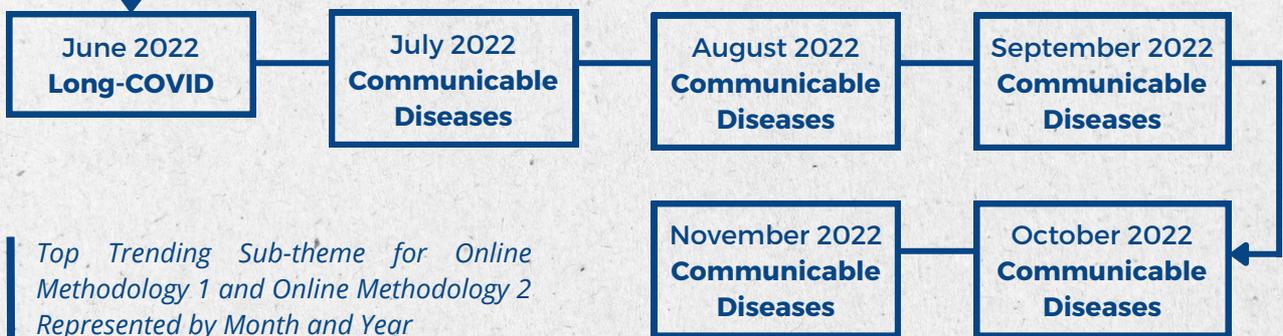
Looking at both methodology timelines, Twitter was the social media platform with the highest number of rumors comprising 53% of the total number of rumors collected. This was followed by Facebook (305 rumors), WhatsApp (70 rumors), Instagram (14 rumors), and Website (4 rumors).



ONLINE METHODOLOGY 1



ONLINE METHODOLOGY 2



Top Trending Sub-theme for Online Methodology 1 and Online Methodology 2 Represented by Month and Year

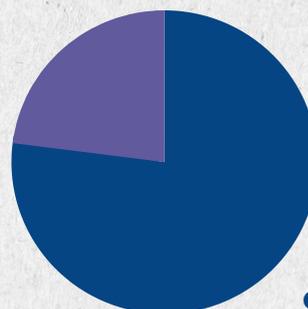
METHODOLOGY (1)

For the 318 online rumors collected for Methodology 1, the majority were COVID-19 General theme rumors (77%) with the sub-theme of Treatment/Cure (31 rumors) being the most prevalent followed by Symptoms (29 rumors). Treatment/Cure rumors focused on home remedies, specifically ones involving herbs and easily accessible food items such as garlic or yogurt.

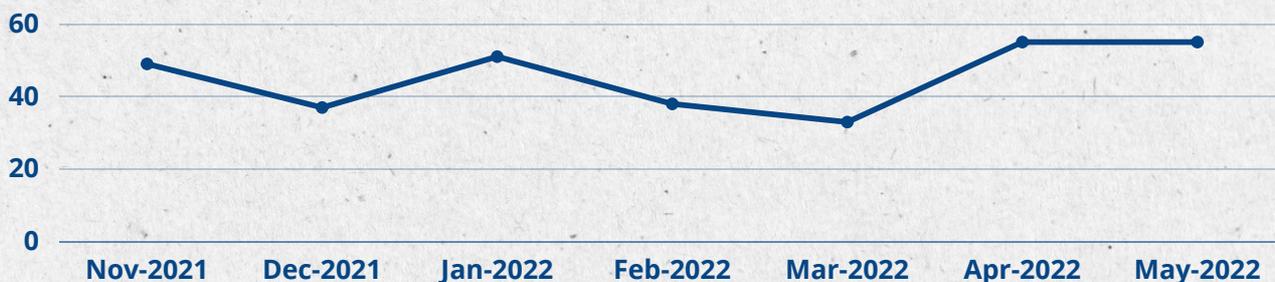
In fact, rumors containing notions of herbal remedies in treating COVID-19 become a significant trend in RiT 2.0, especially in relation to the collection of offline rumors by EMA. Examples of online rumors collected include the following: "Rosemary herb may contain a treatment for COVID-19", "Gargle water and salt when your temperature rises, take garlic and yogurt as a remedy", and "All we have to do to eliminate the virus is to consume more alkaline foods above the acidity level of the virus."

Percentage of Online Rumors by Theme for Methodology 1

COVID-19 Vaccine
23%



COVID-19 General
77%



Total Number of Online Rumors Collected for Methodology 1 Represented by Month and Year

In April, 43 online rumors collected were under the theme of COVID-19 General and 12 were under the theme of COVID-19 Vaccine. For the COVID-19 General theme, Long-COVID sub-theme rumors were the most common (23%), marking a substantial increase compared to previous months; November 2021 (1 rumor) and January 2022 (3 rumors). Most Long-COVID sub-theme rumors made direct reference to original-symptoms lasting for several months such as severe headaches while others touched upon long lasting secondary effects such as “A new study has found that patients who have overcome severe corona infection suffer from the same cognitive impairment that people generally experience between the ages of 50 and 70”, and “A new study found that people that had contracted the virus were 2.5% more likely to have a heart attack in the following year compared to those who did not have the virus”.

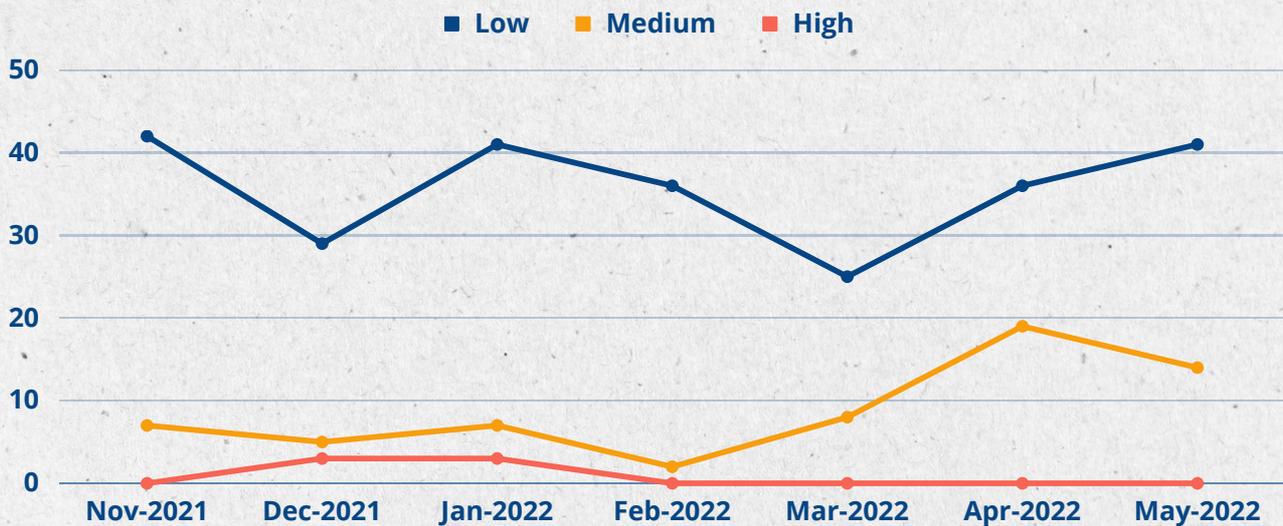
For the online COVID-19 Vaccine theme rumors in April, most were tagged under the sub-themes of Efficacy (33%) and Other (33%). Notably, rumors touching on the vaccine's efficacy became a recurring theme showing hesitancy from the beginning of data collection; November (5 rumors), December (4 rumors) and January (4 rumors). Quite a few rumors contained notions of sarcasm such as “Two new studies showed that people who received the full vaccine against the epidemic were subsequently infected, enjoy the greatest protection” and “When they found out that Johnson & Johnson is not effective, they sent it to Lebanon”. The trending sub-theme of Efficacy was not only significant in relation to the collection of online rumors, but also highly prominent in the collection of offline rumors by EMA as will be identified in coming sections of the report.

In May, 46 online rumors collected were under the theme of COVID-19 General and 9 were under the theme of COVID-19 Vaccine. For the COVID-19 General theme, as seen in April, Long-COVID (22%) was the top trending sub-theme.

Also in May, for the online COVID-19 Vaccine theme rumors, most rumors referred to the sub-themes of Doses (22%), Efficacy (22%) as seen in April, and then Product Development/Manufacturing (22%). Rumors related to the sub-theme of Product Development/Manufacturing have been noted in previous months as well; November (4 rumors), January (1 rumor), February (4 rumors) and April (1 rumor).

In March, only 33 online rumors were collected of which 22 were COVID-19 General theme rumors and 5 were COVID-19 Vaccine theme rumors. For the COVID-19 General theme, Hoax (50%) was the most popular sub-theme and was notably the first time Hoax-related rumors such as “Corona is a worldwide lie” were collected in Methodology 1 and continued to be seen going forward; April (3 rumors) and May (5 rumors).

For the online COVID-19 Vaccine theme rumors in March, Distribution (40%) was the most popular sub-theme with all of them making remarks about how the vaccines distributed in Lebanon were not up to international standards. This included rumors such as “Thousands of vaccines against the Coronavirus, which Lebanon receives as donations or pays for some of them, tend to perish due to the decline in the rate of vaccination in the centers, but also because of the ‘short life’ of the gifts that donating countries ‘throw’ to us instead of incurring the cost of destroying them”.



Total Number of Online Rumors Collected for Methodology 1 Represented by Risk and Month

For online rumors Methodology 1, the majority of rumors were tagged as being Low Risk (79%), while the remaining were Medium Risk (19%) and High Risk (2%). April 2022 saw the highest proportion of Medium Risk (35%) rumors collected relative to those tagged as Low Risk or High Risk for that month. Medium Risk rumors are ones that are very likely to be believed or may cause widespread action or panic. In April, this included rumors such as *"In less than 3 minutes a breath test that detects corona"*, *"Nasal vaccine against corona"*, and *"The American Embassy had provided the Moderna vaccine, but it was expired and arrived in Lebanon on January 9, 2022"*



79%
LOW RISK



19%
MEDIUM RISK



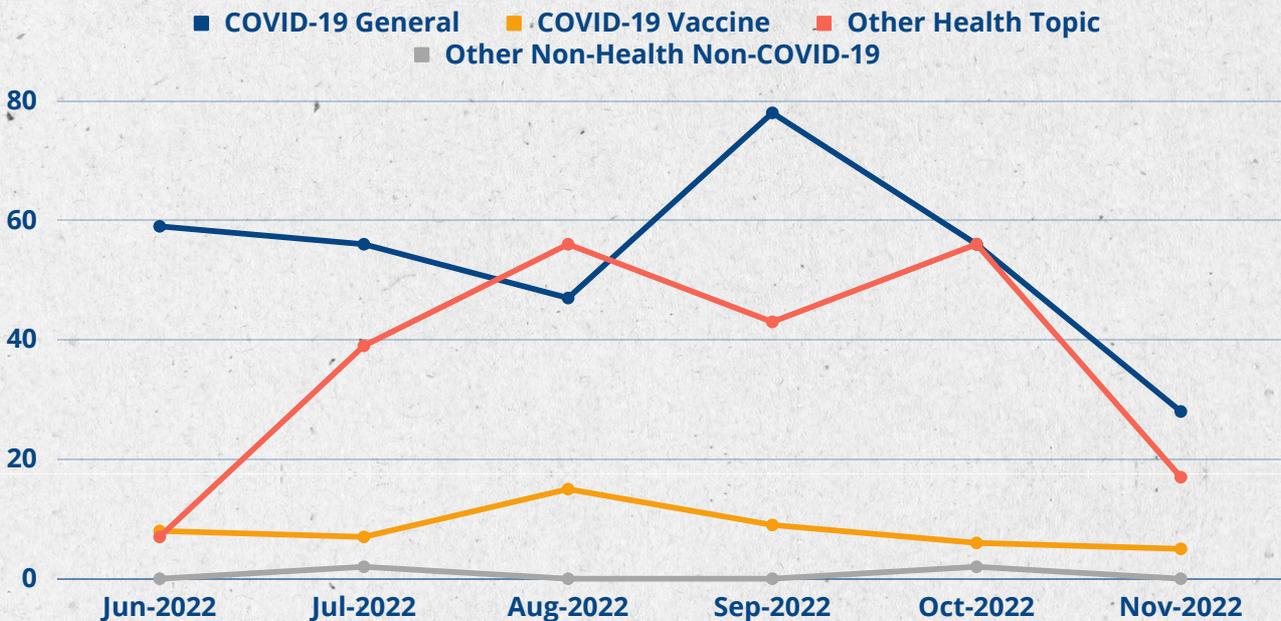
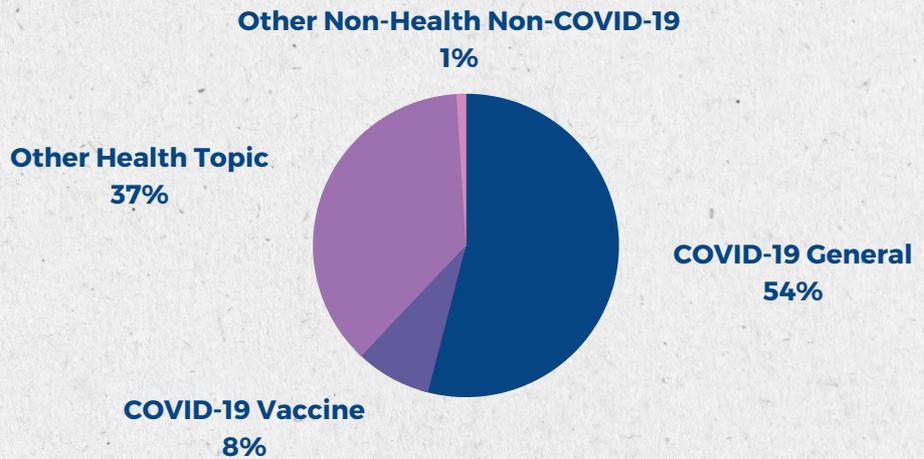
2%
HIGH RISK

December 2021 and January 2022 were the only two months in online rumors Methodology 1 that had rumors tagged as High Risk; December 2021 (8%) and January 2022 (6%).

High Risk rumors are ones that advocate for people to engage in harmful and potentially lethal behavior or encourage them to perpetrate violence against individuals or a specific community. Examples of High Risk rumors included *"Corona in Lebanon will not end unless the civil war returns and the earthen berms and barricades rise again"* and *"The muzzle must be strictly imposed inside public buses, and smoking should be prohibited, especially from non-Lebanese, Syrians, and Bangladeshis"*.

METHODOLOGY (2) 

Percentage of Online Rumors by Theme for Methodology 2 Represented by Month and Year

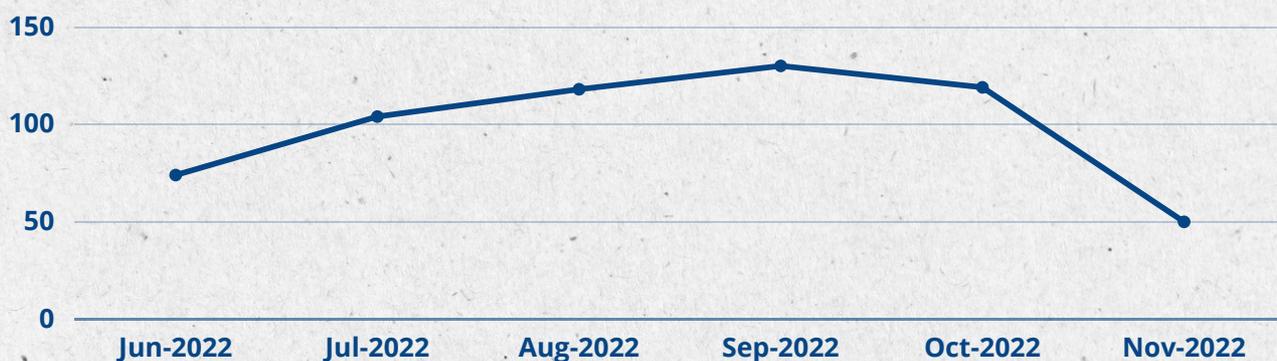


Total Number of Online Rumors by Theme for Methodology 2 Represented by Month and Year

For the 595 online rumors collected for online rumors Methodology 2, more than half were COVID-19 General theme rumors (54%) with the sub-theme of Long-COVID (19%) being the most prevalent followed by Variants (54 rumors) and Symptoms (46 rumors).

While the online Long-COVID sub-theme rumors were quite broad for online rumors Methodology 1, the last two quarters of 2022 were more focused on the long-term effects of COVID-19 on the brain and mental health.

Examples of rumors include the following: “Coronavirus can cause brain shrinkage, reduce gray matter in areas that control emotion and memory, and damage parts that control the sense of smell”, “People who have been infected with the new coronavirus face a greater risk of developing dementia, brain fog, and seizures”, and “Corona infection is related to brain disorders”.

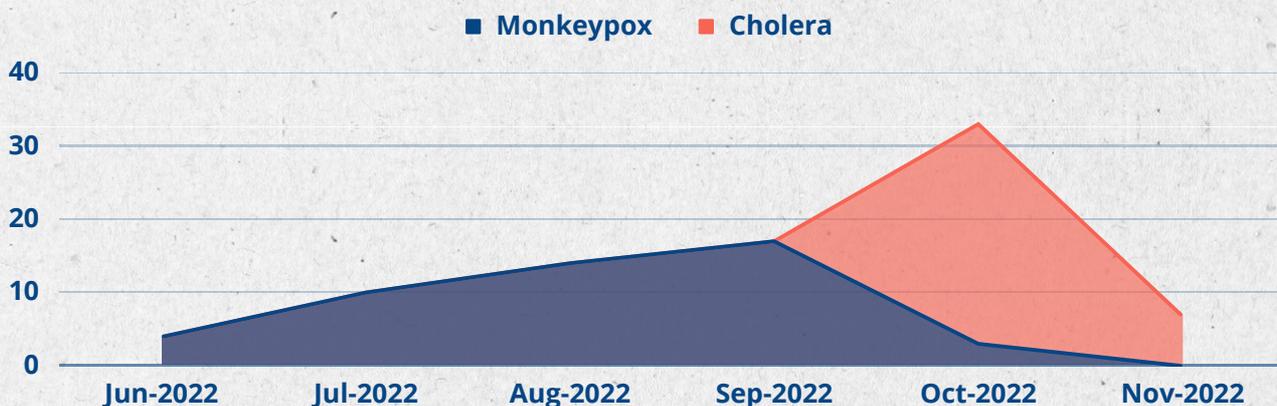


Total Number of Online Rumors Collected for Methodology 2 Represented by Month and Year

The highest number of online rumors were collected in September (130 rumors), October (119 rumors), and August (118 rumors) with the largest proportion of rumors for each month containing notions of fear.

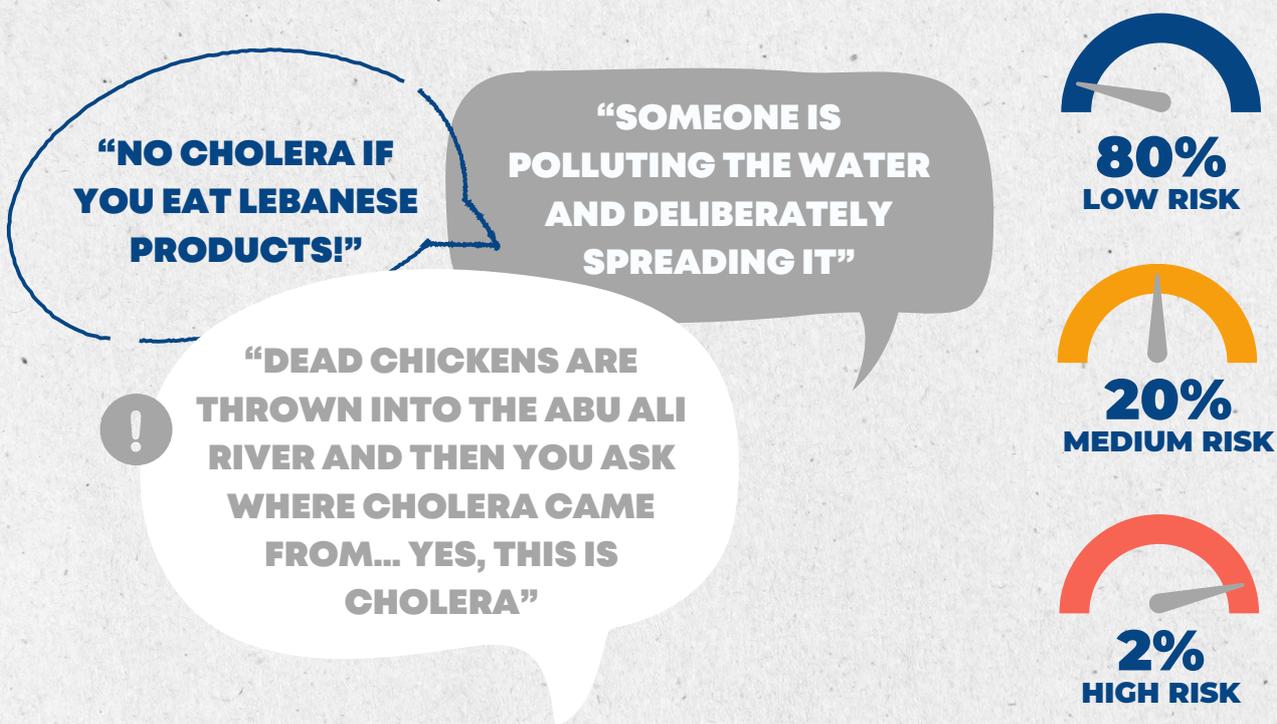
Despite the World Health Organization’s (WHO’s) announcement on 14 September 2022 that the end of the COVID-19 pandemic was in sight, the total number of COVID-19 General theme rumors peaked during this month at 78 rumors. The sub-themes of Long-COVID (13 rumors), Treatment/Cure (13 rumors), and Variants (13 rumors) were the most frequent.

August (56 rumors) and October (57 rumors) however saw the largest number of Other Health Topic rumors collected throughout online rumors Methodology 2. The high number of Other Health Topic rumors in August is directly linked to the WHO declaring the Monkeypox outbreak as a Public Health Emergency of International Concern on 23 July, 2022, whereas the high number of rumors in October are related to the Cholera outbreak in Lebanon declared on 6 October, 2022.

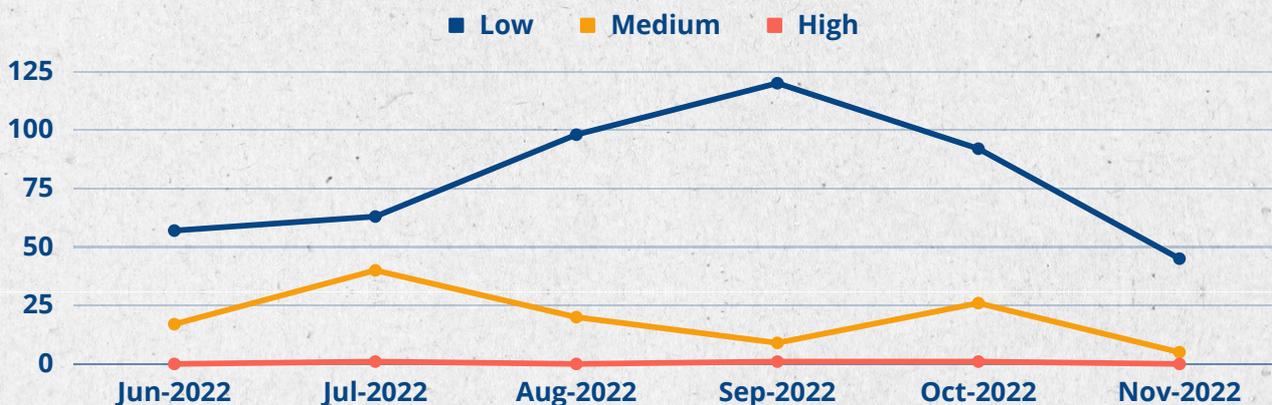


Top Trending Communicable Diseases for Online Methodology 2 Represented by Month and Year

Throughout RiT 2.0 Monkeypox-related rumors typically targeted and blamed the LGBTQIA+ community in Lebanon, but also worldwide. This included rumors such as the following: *“They are bringing these gay values from abroad, and it is literally destroying homes, causing diseases and spreading viruses. Where did HIV come from? Monkeypox?”*, *“Monkeypox only affects LGBT”*, and that *“All the cases of Monkeypox are gay men... this is definitely a punishment from God”*.



Cholera-related rumors followed similar trends previously seen with the emergence of new viruses (such as COVID-19 and Monkeypox) where rumors claimed it to be a hoax or that bleach should be used for sterilization purposes.

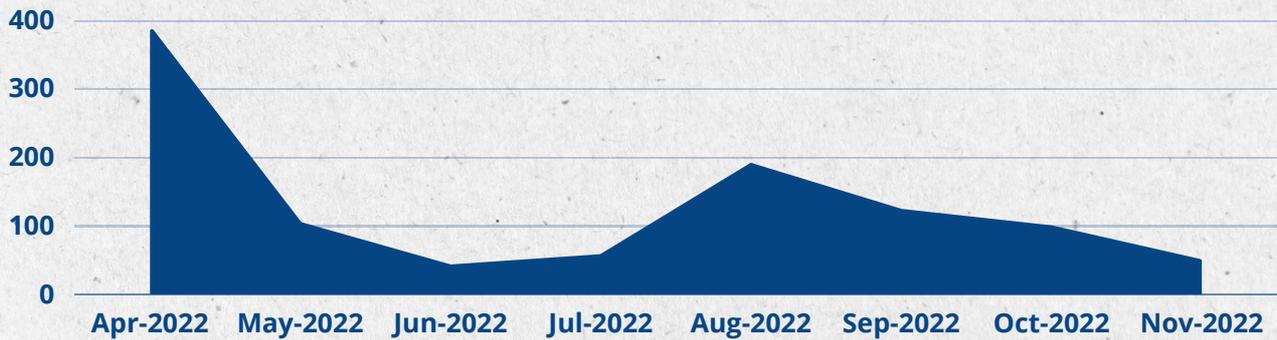


Total Number of Online Rumors Collected for Methodology 2 Represented by Risk and Month

For online rumors Methodology 2, the majority of rumors were tagged as being Low Risk (80%), while the remaining were Medium Risk (20%) and High Risk (2%). July 2022 saw the highest proportion of Medium Risk (38%) rumors collected relative to those tagged as Low or High Risk for that month. In July, this included rumors such as “Corona remains present for 30 days on refrigerated meat”, “headless creatures invade Lebanon”, and “The #Black_Death returns to #China and fears of the #spread of the #epidemic”.

July, September, and October 2022 were the only months in online rumors Methodology 2 that had rumors tagged as High Risk; 1 High Risk rumor for each month. The High Risk rumor in July was linked to hate speech towards the LGBTQI+ community and Monkeypox. The one in September was “There is no cure for it and it leads to death... rabies is spreading in Lebanon!” as this encouraged an increase in killing of stray animals using poison. The October High Risk rumor was “If you want to use vegetables, you must soak them in bleach for half an hour first”, which can prove fatal if ingested.

OFFLINE RUMORS



Total Number of Offline Rumors Collected in RiT 2.0 Represented by Month and Year

Between 1 April 2022 - 30 November 2022, a total of 1,046 offline rumors were collected by EMA. During this time period, all rumors were collected in the Bekaa except for one that was collected in Akkar. For offline rumors Methodology 1, a total of 489 rumors were collected between 1 April 2022 - 31 May 2022. For offline rumors Methodology 2, a total of 557 rumors were collected between 1 June 2022 - 30 November 2022.

OFFLINE METHODOLOGY 1



OFFLINE METHODOLOGY 2

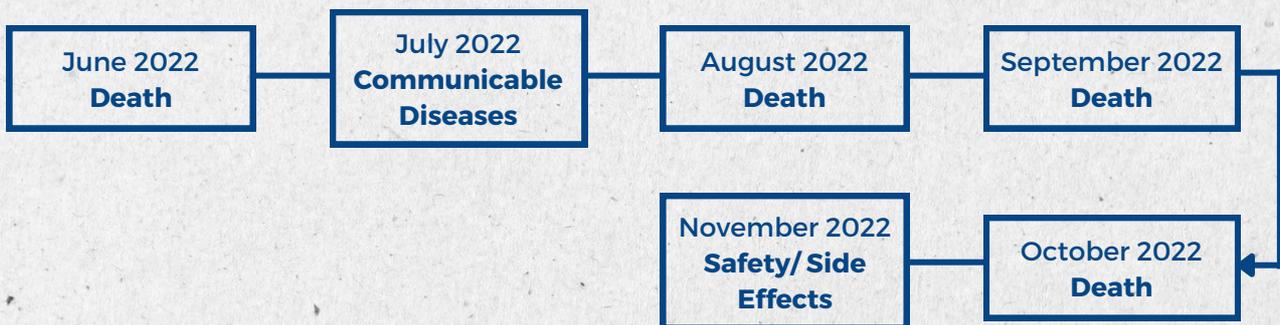


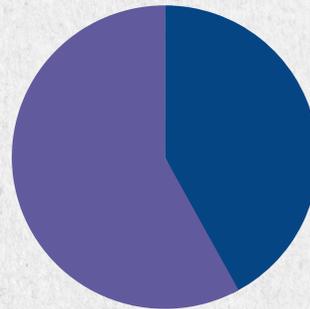
Figure 13: Top Trending Sub-theme for Offline Methodology 1 and Offline Methodology 2 Represented by Month and Year

For offline rumors Methodology 1, all rumors were collected through community meetings, whereas for offline rumors Methodology 2, the majority of rumors were primarily collected through listening groups / FGDs (238 rumors), followed by community meetings (232), door-to-door interviews (84), and then informal meetings (3 rumors).



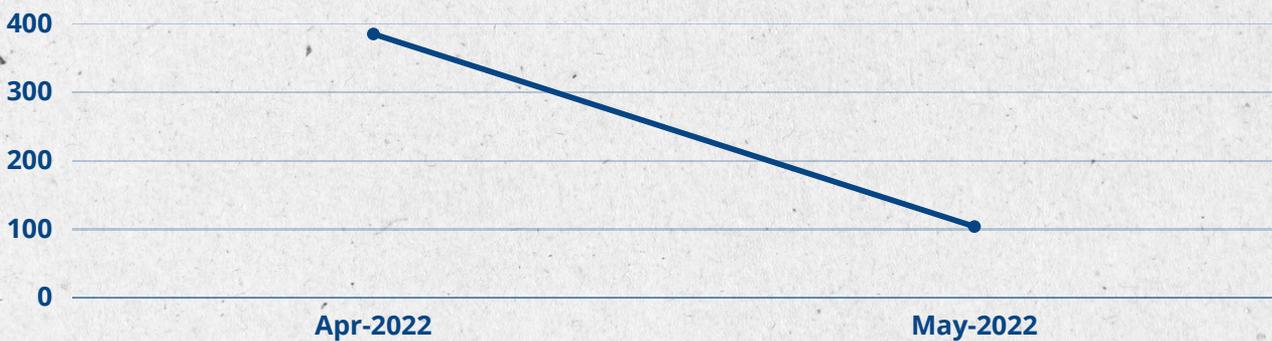
Percentage of Offline Rumors by Theme for Methodology 1

COVID-19 Vaccine
58%



COVID-19 General
42%

For the 489 rumors collected for offline rumors Methodology 1, the majority were **COVID-19 Vaccine (58%)** theme rumors unlike those collected under online rumors Methodology 1 where the **COVID-19 General** theme was the most prevalent. For the COVID-19 Vaccine theme rumors, almost half of all rumors were tagged under the sub-theme of **Death (48%)**, then **Safety/Side Effects (14%)**, and **Pregnancy/Fertility (13%)**.



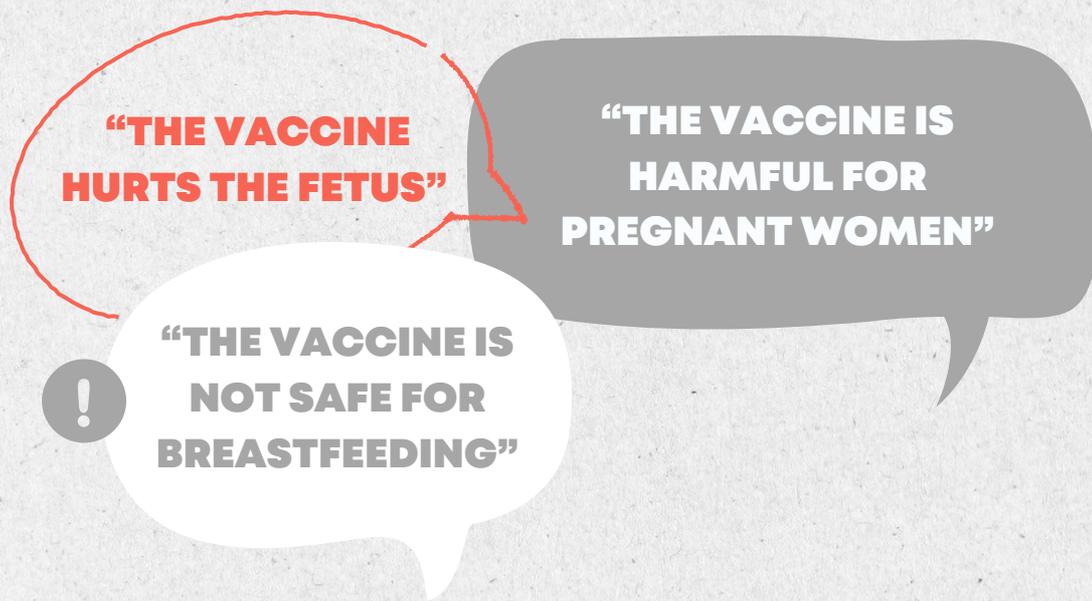
Total Number of Offline Rumors Collected in RiT 2.0 Represented by Month and Year

An exceptionally large number of offline rumors were collected in April 2022 (385 rumors) followed by a steep decline in May 2022 (104 rumors). For both months, the sub-theme of Death had the most widespread number of rumors, setting the precedent for what will become a recurring sub-theme throughout all offline rumors collected under RiT 2.0 as will be evidenced under offline rumors Methodology 2 between 1 June 2022 - 30 November 2022.

Offline rumors began mentioning the COVID-19 vaccine as causing death within an unspecified time period, but this rumor quickly cemented itself into "*causing death within two years post-inoculation.*" Rumors evolved along the lines of "*I heard that it is harmful, deadly, and dangerous*", to "*The vaccine is dangerous causing death*", and then finally that "*The vaccine kills two years later*".

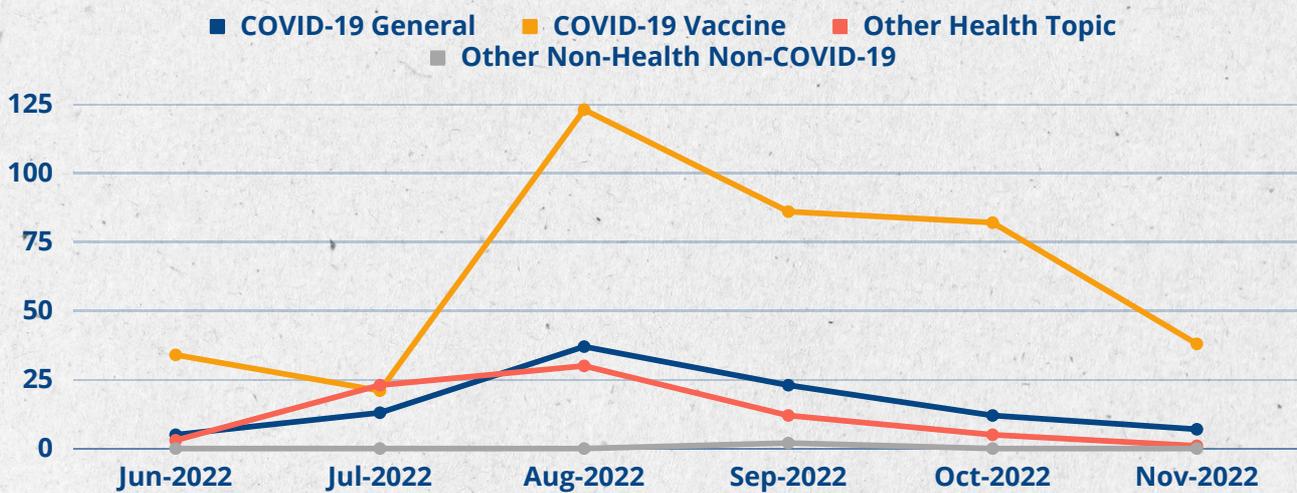
As a whole, many **offline vaccine-related rumors** mentioned concerns around the sub-theme of **Safety/Side Effects** with 29 rumors collected in April 2022 and 11 collected in May. These rumors mentioned possible side effects such as causing blood clots, heart attacks or heart disease, as well as the COVID-19 vaccine itself leading to different diseases and infections.

Linked to the sub-theme of **Safety/Side Effects** is the emergence of the sub-theme of **Pregnancy/Fertility** with **25 offline rumors** in April and **13 rumors in May**. These offline rumors primarily focused on how the vaccine is harmful to pregnant women and that the vaccine lowers people’s sex drive and can cause infertility.



Of the **173 offline rumors** collected in **April 2022 under the COVID-19 General theme**, many rumors took the forefront under the sub-theme of **Treatment/Cure (20%)**, which like the overall sub-theme of **Death** will become a trend throughout RiT 2.0. The Treatment/Cure sub-theme rumors concentrated on homemade herbal remedies, including drinking anise, lemon, ginger, and mint teas.

METHODOLOGY (2) 



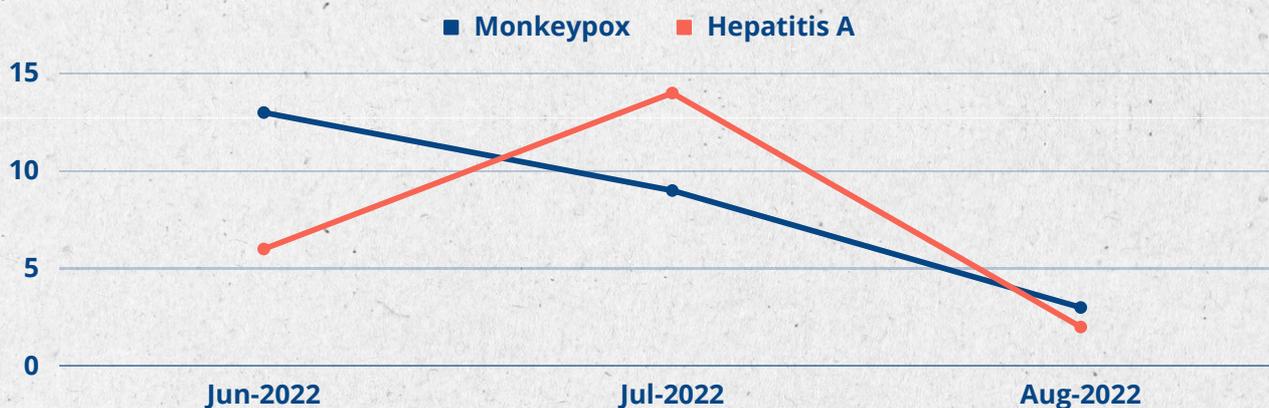
Percentage of Offline Rumors by Theme for Methodology 2



Total Number of Offline Rumors Collected for Methodology 2 Represented by Month and Year

Between 1 June 2022 - 30 November 2022, the highest number of **offline rumors** collected for offline rumors Methodology 2 were observed in August, September, and October. Following trends seen for offline rumors Methodology 1 between 1 April 2022 - 31 May 2022, **the sub-theme of Death remained the highest proportion of offline rumors collected each month** with 40 rumors collected in August, 35 rumors in September, and 27 rumors in October. Examples of such rumors included the following: "People said that it can cause death within 2 years and causes diseases and they started to scare us from going to vaccination centers", "I got vaccinated with the first dose of the vaccine and then I started to hear that the vaccine can cause death, therefore I decided not to take the second dose", and "The pharmacist told me not to take the vaccine because it's not good".

In **July**, the largest proportion of offline rumors collected that month were logged under the sub-theme of **Communicable Disease (40%)** under the theme of Other Health Topic with most rumors making reference to Monkeypox. Many rumors struggled to differentiate between general flu, Smallpox, COVID-19, and Monkeypox symptoms.



Top Trending Communicable Diseases for Online Methodology 2 Represented by Month and Year

Unlike online rumors where **Monkeypox** and **Cholera** were the most reported **communicable diseases**, **Monkeypox** and **Hepatitis** were the **most frequently discussed offline rumors**. The spike in Hepatitis A-related rumors observed in July are directly linked to the outbreak at the time in Tripoli, Zahleh, and Nabatieh and people's growing concerns that it would spread to the Bekaa region.

CONCLUSION

This Trends Analysis Report identified and outlined the real-time changes in people's health concerns, and more broadly, how they understand and share news about pressing health issues in Lebanon.

The online rumors collected in RiT 2.0 were predominantly tagged under the sub-themes of Long-COVID and Communicable Disease, highlighting the continued presence and lingering effects of the COVID-19 pandemic in Lebanon while at the same time showing the emergence of other viruses such as Monkeypox and Cholera, which shifted the predominantly COVID-19 rumor discourse towards other health-related topics.

The offline rumors collected in RiT 2.0 were predominantly tagged under the sub-theme of Death, showcasing that fear and confusion around the COVID-19 vaccine persists in Lebanon. This indicates a large information gap within the vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugee communities.

Rumors are not random pieces of information, but rather, they offer insight on the realities of people's health knowledge, and how that influences their behaviors, attitudes, practices, and the health choices that they make. Most importantly, rumors can be a "defense mechanism" for communities, a way to ensure they are practicing "protection" over each other, especially among the most vulnerable communities, many of whom are very often overlooked in health responses and/or health communications.

How can we use rumors as a tool to help us really reach communities where, how, and when it matters?

Active listening: Rumors are a unique, often overlooked way communities share information that they do not share elsewhere about their information and service needs, as well as their most pressing concerns and fears.

Localization: Rumors offer insights about the specific information needs of communities, and can be used to make communication responses more hyper-local, and more effective and relevant to these communities. Different rumor trends observed spreading online and offline acknowledge that not only communities, but their sub-communities as well, have different ways in which they share, access, and trust information.

Inclusivity: Since rumors can be shared by anyone, anywhere, at any time, they are a tool allowing different communities to be inclusive.

Timeliness: Rumors are dynamic and quickly influenced by real-time events of importance to communities, and by monitoring and responding to rumors in a timely manner, we can ensure that our projects are always up-to-date and relevant.

Accountability & Evaluation: The nature of rumors being fast-informed by "gaps" in knowledge among communities, allows us to use rumors as a tool that identifies and evaluates communication structures - assessing what works and what does not.

Centering localized languages: As reflected in this report, most online rumors (97%) were shared in Arabic, with only a small percentage of rumors in English (2%), and 1% in Arabizi. This does not mean that any one language is more important than the other when it comes to monitoring rumors online, but rather, it show-cases the variety of languages used by different communities living in Lebanon, and who is left-out from online communications and online spaces that relate to Lebanon. As evidenced by our Migrant Workers IEA report, communities tend to trust information tailored to them in their own languages and dialects.

Community-centered engagement: Rumors are "organic" and bottom-up, as in they don't follow mandates nor plans set at coordination clusters. In fact, coordination clusters could greatly benefit from regular rumor-based input and analysis.