In April, there were a total of 2099 new COVID-19 cases as reported by the WHO. While Lebanon remains at a Level 3 of community transmission, prevailing socio-economic hardships continue to be at the forefront of people’s day-to-day lives. Not only are people struggling to make ends meet, but at the start of the month their access to online information was also affected following the Lebanese Telecommunications Authority’s strike. More recently the Government of Lebanon has detained and deported Syrian refugees from their homes, making international headlines with growing concern spreading across social media platforms.
SITUATION REPORT: OVERVIEW OF RUMOR TRENDS

153 Total Rumors

100 Online Rumors

53 Offline Rumors

In April, a total of 153 rumors were collected of which 100 were online rumors and 53 were offline rumors. Inverse to what was observed in March, Social Media Monitors predominantly captured online rumors on WhatsApp (37%) followed by Twitter (27%). The theme of “Other Health Topic” (68%) continues to be top-trending, followed by “Food Security” (25%), “COVID-19 General” (4%), “COVID-19 Vaccine” (2%), and “Other Non-Health Non-COVID-19” (1%). As seen since the start of 2023, the majority of online rumors came from Ordinary People (61%), followed by Influencers (33%), and supposed Healthcare Professionals (6%).

The sub-themes with the highest number of rumors collected were “Other” (26 rumors) and “Chronic Diseases” (12), both of which were found under the theme of “Other Health Topic”. The former set of rumors cannot be grouped into one specific subject matter, but rather encompass a vast array of rumors ranging from the effective treatment of diseases using natural herbs and ingredients such as blueberries, figs, and bitter gourd oil, to the causes of kidney disease, as well as the potential interference of electronics with medical devices. With regards to the latter set of rumors, more than half were cancer-related.

For the theme of “Food Security”, the most prevalent sub-theme was “Individual Access / Affordability” (9 rumors). This included rumors such as the rich only having the means to buy bread and that prisons are experiencing a food crisis.

The 53 offline rumors were collected through Focus Group Discussions in Aaiyat and Tell Sebael. More than three thirds of the offline rumors were from the theme of “Other Health Topic” (74%), followed by “COVID-19 Vaccine” (19%), and lastly “COVID-19 General” (7%). As seen in March, the top sub-theme for the “Other Health Topic” theme was “Other” (12 rumors). This was closely followed by “Communicable Diseases” (9 rumors) and “Chronic Diseases” (7 rumors), which included rumors stating that vegetables grown in greenhouses are causing cancer and that cholera is an airborne disease.
While Lebanon continues to encounter daily confirmed COVID-19 cases, people’s attention continues to be focused elsewhere across both the online social media landscape, but also offline between people within their local communities. The continued deteriorating socio-economic situation in Lebanon means that many people are not making ends meet, especially the already vulnerable Lebanese and Syrian refugees across the country. This is reflected in the rumors collected in March, which focus on other health-related issues and people’s individual access to healthcare services or medicine, as well as basic food items.

As was seen in March, many online and offline rumors revolved around the topic of cancer with a total of 16 rumors collected in April. These contained rumors stating that the early detection of breast cancer is a hoax just like the PCR test and that pollution causes cancer. Since protests by cancer patients in Riad Al-Solh Square on World Cancer Day in February, it is likely that cancer-related rumors continue to be trending given the increased difficulty in accessing healthcare services and expensive ongoing treatment being more prevalent.

No new cholera cases have been confirmed since 7 January 2023, yet the number of suspected or under reported cases remain high. This likely explains why 4% of all rumors collected in April made reference to cholera as it is still persisting within certain communities despite the reported official figures.