

RiT2.0 LEBANON RUMOR BULLETIN

1 to 15 December 2021

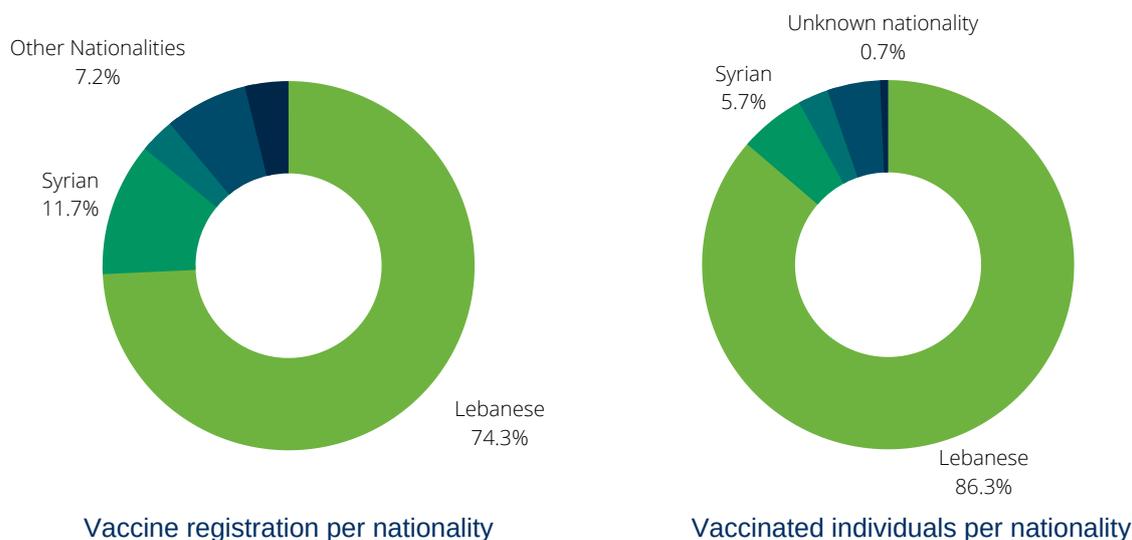
INTRODUCTION TO ROOTED IN TRUST

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 rumors and misinformation about COVID-19. The first chapter (RiT1) ran from October 2020 to February 2021 with more than 2774 rumors collected in Lebanon.(1) The project was recently renewed in September 2021 with its second chapter (RiT2.0) expected to run until end of 2022.

In this bulletin, Internews profiles commonly occurring rumors across social media sites in Lebanon between 1 and 15 December 2021. More than 16 rumors were collected in total. The featured rumors fall under two recurring themes of Transmission and Efficiency/Disinformation. Data was collected from Facebook, WhatsApp, Twitter, and Instagram pages, private groups, and accounts that have a relatively high user engagement.

COVID-19 SITUATION & SOCIO-ECONOMIC CONTEXT IN LEBANON

Since January 2020, there have been 692,315 cases of COVID-19 in Lebanon in addition to 8,873 deaths.(2) The number of vaccinated people has reached 1,873,223 – assuming every person needs 2 doses, that’s enough to have vaccinated about 34.4% of the country’s population.(3) The Ministry of Public Health (MOPH)’s plans to reach 40% of the population by end of 2021. Meanwhile, Syrian refugees represent only 5.74% of those who received at least one vaccine dose, while other non-Lebanese – including migrant workers and Palestinian refugees – represent only 7.94%.(4) The third booster shot is now available to anyone who has received their second vaccine dose at least five months ago.



Two suspected cases of the new Omicron variant have been identified in the country but health authorities are still awaiting confirmation that the variant is indeed in circulation. According to WHO, the transmission risk level has also recently increased from Level 3 to Level 4, therefore requiring renewed vigilance from the public.

A larger number of positive cases has been recorded in the past couple of weeks, with the highest daily average recorded in almost 5 months by 1,800 cases per day in the period early December 2021. The MOPH is focusing on reinforcing prevention measures, boosting vaccination campaigns, and increasing the preparedness of the healthcare sector. New measures introduced by the government include limiting the mobility of unvaccinated people through a night curfew. However, it is not being properly enforced in many areas. Nevertheless, some promising improvements have been made regarding vaccination, as more than 20,000 individuals per day have been registering, compared to around 5,000 previously.⁽⁵⁾

RUMORS
16

16 rumors unique rumors were collected during this period. The **3 rumors** below were the most critical in terms of risk.

Transmission:



"Why isn't PCR testing used for children under 12 years old? Are they not exposed? Many schools are blocking children's classes because there are covid positive children #Coronavirus! A reminder: Those under the age of 12 are not vaccinated!! I hope there will be clarification on this issue from the concerned authorities."

(Shared on Twitter in Arabic with 1200 followers, 25 likes and 10 shares on 6/12/2021).

Impacts on education and health sectors:

Since the beginning of the school year, the education sector has faced several challenges in managing the spread of COVID-19. Parents are increasingly worried and confused about the risks and probability of a third wave of the virus, particularly with the emergence of the Omicron variant. In turn, this may cause schools to close once again and children to miss out on important classes and exams. Additionally, these rumors highlight the growing lack of trust between the local population and the public education

and health sectors, which has been exacerbated by socio-political instability and economic crisis.

Healthcare workers and misinformation:

COVID-19 related information shared by medical professionals is always perceived as credible by the local population, even though in the past health care workers

"A Lebanese medical doctor shared his opinion and analysis on a local Radio show, it is now being spread on WhatsApp as follows: "We have entered a more severe state of transmission, even more severe than the Delta variant, and people should take additional precautions as the new variant can be more deadly. Luckily, we are seeing increased registration on the vaccine platform, but again the case numbers are very alarming."

(Shared in Arabic on radio and multiple WhatsApp groups with over 1000 members in total on 8/12/2021)



have been known to spread misinformation. Although the Omicron variant has shown to be less deadly than previous variants, health care professionals have been spreading fear related to Omicron, even though it has yet to be fully analyzed and understood by scientists.

Hoax:

A Lebanese influencer with more than 2000 followers said: "The vaccine is a lie and Corona is lie, I advise people to treat themselves at home. I didn't take my daughter to a doctor when she got sick. She went out and didn't wear warm clothes, but she felt okay after I gave her some Profinal. This is a conspiracy, and they are planting these thoughts in our minds."

(Shared with more than 2000 followers in addition to a dozen shares on Twitter with anti-vaccine rhetoric in Arabic on 10/12/2021)



Vaccine skepticism and social media influencers:

Despite the rise in COVID-19 infections in Lebanon, some individuals are still skeptical about the existence of the virus and therefore do not abide by social distancing



Vaccine skepticism and social media influencers:

(Continued)

measures, refuse to get vaccinated, and discourage their families from receiving the vaccine. These negative coping mechanisms have resulted in the continuous spread of misleading information and rumors amongst different social media groups. Social media influencers are particularly capable of fueling vaccine hesitancy and skepticism about the virus among their followers, who usually perceive them as role models.

How Do We Define Risk at Internews



Risk is measured by Rooted In Trust (RiT) data analysts, information managers, and social media monitors based on a range of factors including:

- a) Cultural relevance
- b) Timing
- c) Online engagement
- d) The "believability" of a rumor, and most importantly...
- e) The potential negative impact a rumor may have on the health, well-being, and safety of local communities or service providers.

High Risk

A rumor that is very likely be believed among the larger community with potentially severe impacts resulting in serious harm to an individual or group such as inciting violence or creating widespread fear or panic. High risk rumors may encourage avoidance of testing and treatment, or even harm towards health workers and other service providers.

Medium Risk

A rumor that has the potential to be believed among the larger community which poses moderate negative impacts to a community or an individual's health, well-being, or safety. Medium risk rumors may also have a moderate impact on health-seeking behaviors.

Low Risk

A rumor that is either unlikely to be believed among the community or which would cause very minimal negative repercussions if it is spread.

What are the facts

For fact-checked information about the COVID-19 vaccine please refer to the official FAQ published by the MOPH, MOI, WHO and UNICEF. (6) Keep in mind that social media platforms – such as Facebook, Twitter, and WhatsApp – allow anyone to publish their thoughts or share their stories with the world. This has led to a flood of fake news and the spread of rumors and misinformation.

Always take into consideration the below when reading news or any type of information on social media:

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- ✓ Identify the news outlet;
 - ✓ Check if other official local or international news outlets are reporting on the same story;
 - ✓ Double check if the WHO or MOPH have corroborated the information;
 - ✓ Compare the information presented across different sources to ensure the story is based on scientific facts;
 - ✓ Do not rely solely on Facebook groups, Twitter accounts or WhatsApp groups for news on COVID-19. Instead, make sure any news you hear on social media is confirmed by trusted sources such as the WHO;
 - ✓ Keep in mind that videos and photos can be easily manipulated;
 - ✓ Check the date and origin of the story to identify whether it is still valid!

Contact Us

For more information, or to submit rumors, please contact Internews' Lebanon RiT Project Manager (emouawad@internews.org) and/or Program Officer (rajami@internews.org).

Sources

- (1) <https://internews.org/resource/rooted-trust-rumor-bulletins-lebanon/>
- (2) <https://www.moph.gov.lb/en>
- (3) Same as above.
- (4) <https://impact.gov.lb/home?dashboardName=vaccine>
- (5) RCEE Task Force Meeting of 9 December 2021.
- (6) <https://www.moph.gov.lb/userfiles/files/Prevention/COVID-19%20Vaccine/COVID-19VaccineFAQ-EN.pdf>