What is Up on WhatsApp?

A STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF WHATSAPP ON TENSIONS
in Lebanon

UNDP

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

UNDP's Tensions Monitoring System serves to collect and analyse data to better understand tensions and communal relations in Lebanon and to ultimately provide recommendations and support to UN, NGO, Government, and donor partners for early action, a conflict-sensitive response, and programmatic prioritization. In 2022, as part of the Tensions Monitoring System, UNDP in Lebanon commissioned MAGENTA to study whether and how people used WhatsApp to create or contribute to incidents and tensions in Lebanon. The study was commissioned in large part based on strong indicators that the nature of information circulated on social media has drastically evolved in the past few years. Field-based monitoring also indicates that the usage of WhatsApp was indeed contributing to incidents and broader tensions.

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It is crucial to acknowledge that the unique nature of WhatsApp, with its end-to-end encryption and role as a seemingly private space even within public groups, contributes significantly to the challenges in studying its dynamics. The prevalence of negative sentiments on WhatsApp is likely rooted in the very reasons that make it challenging to study. The platform's widespread usage, coupled with its encrypted nature, creates an environment where misinformation and disinformation can proliferate across various segments of society. Unlike other platforms, WhatsApp serves as a tool where content can reach the fringes of society, spreading within diverse groups, rather than being confined to more niche and tailored audiences, and this distinct characteristic amplifies the potential impact of misinformation. Using a mixed-methods methodology for this study, our research resulted in a few overarching insights into how WhatsApp is being used in Lebanon, found below:

WhatsApp is a Pivotal Platform in Lebanon

WhatsApp is a pivotal platform in Lebanon for everybody, used to obtain and share information (sometimes directly and solely on WhatsApp and sometimes cross-sharing on other platforms such as Facebook or YouTube or recordings in the physical world). Users tend to think of the platform as a tool of free, convenient, rapid, and flexible communication. The perception of WhatsApp as a trustworthy platform likely contributes to its popularity and the ease with which information is shared among its users. This means that WhatsApp has great potential to influence both negative and positive sentiments.

WhatsApp Groups Mirror Users' Offline Lives

WhatsApp groups in Lebanon reflect and reinforce the reality of people's offline, physical lives. WhatsApp is used to organize daily life, run businesses, and keep abreast of news and developments. Small, closed groups may consist of limited members with offline familiarity and trust. Larger open groups may consist of members who have never met. User behaviour differs between groups.

WhatsApp is a Significant Source of Incorrect Information in Lebanon

WhatsApp is a significant source of incorrect or incomplete information in Lebanon. In our study, we identified a great amount of propaganda, disinformation, misinformation, contextless information, and exacerbating information that may contribute to negative sentiments and tensions.

The Majority of Information Shared on WhatsApp in Lebanon is Negative

We determined that the majority of information shared on WhatsApp in Lebanon is negative, with a quarter of the information being positive, and a quarter of the information being neutral. It's important to note that our assessment primarily pertains to specific groups under investigation in this study, where the dynamics of information sharing and reception may differ from general conversations on the platform. The study focused specifically on these groups, recognizing that they often serve a distinct purpose.

Frequently, these WhatsApp groups are created with a specific objective in mind, such as organizing a collective response to an incident, mobilizing for potential clashes, or coordinating actions related to ongoing events. This specialized nature of group formation contributes to the nuanced nature of information sharing within them. Consequently, the seemingly neutral information within these groups may carry a more negative net impact than initially apparent, as it is often intricately linked to the specific goals or motives behind the group's formation. This insight underscores the importance of understanding the context and purpose behind information exchange on WhatsApp to accurately assess its impact on tensions and communal relations in Lebanon.

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WhatsApp User Behaviour is Complex and Lends Itself to Driving Negative Sentiments in Groups

WhatsApp users in Lebanon behave differently in groups of different sizes and scope. Users in small, closed groups communicated more openly than those in larger groups. Overall, people have higher degrees of comfort, trust, and openness in smaller groups — even, or especially, when disagreeing. Users assume a high trust, unity or at least dispositions among other small group members, believing that the risks of leaks, attacks, misunderstandings, and judgments are lower, which lends itself to sharing more negative information. Users also often join groups that align with their existing beliefs and values, creating echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and biases.

Factions and Organisations Use WhatsApp Consistently, Deliberately, and in Different Ways

Organisations, factions, political parties, and transnational organisations use WhatsApp to cultivate, influence, and shape political and societal sentiment in their favour, against rivals, or to promote or undermine ideological or communal perspectives. They have turned WhatsApp into "an ecosystem" in Lebanon: a complex and interconnected network of individuals, groups, and entities operating within the platform, while creating and cultivating their own subsystems.

Comprehensive Crises Triggering Tensions on WhatsApp in Lebanon

The WhatsApp platform plays a critical role in ensuring users may communicate with one another and be adequately informed of current events. This critical role means the platform can and does contribute to tensions across Lebanon in a variety of ways.

People in Lebanon are creating or contributing to incidents or otherwise triggering tensions on and through WhatsApp in Lebanon. Although WhatsApp is not usually the creator of tensions, understood holistically, it often contributes to such tensions generally and different incidents specifically. WhatsApp in Lebanon has played a significant role in shaping events since the October protests of 2019. It has been used extensively before, during, and after various incidents, ranging from peaceful protests to organised attacks. In that time, people in Lebanon have shared more negative and negative-impact information than positive ones. Against that backdrop, people in Lebanon have consistently discussed the compounding crises more than any other subject, discussing the socioeconomic collapse constantly while also debating different manifestations, consequences, and proxy issues. While their concerns are consistent, the manifestations—and related incidents, tensions, and triggers—may differ from time to time.

Information Boomerangs on WhatsApp Have A High Ability of Triggering Tensions

WhatsApp users have described different boomerangs of information, during which information is shared in one group, and then is shared across the platform until it occasionally appears again in the originating group. While boomerangs are not inherently more important than other information, they demonstrate general information flow and how WhatsApp is capable of aggravating tensions. For example, respondents mentioned instances of rival factional fights where WhatsApp has played a role in exacerbating tensions through the rapid circulation of inflammatory content including provocative videos, voice notes, and messages. Above all, the boomerangs are an interesting indicator of the pace of which information flows on the platform — with interlocutors declaring they observed such boomerangs in as little as 24, 48, or even two hours.[1]

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1.   Interviews with former advisor to Lebanese premiers, advisors to two political parties, and Lebanese-origin conflict analyst, October-November 2022.

# Looking Forward: UNDP's Programmatic Recommendations

Aware of their behaviour and concerned about longer-range consequences, users feel that they cannot escape WhatsApp, in particular in Lebanon where WhatsApp is indeed the main tool to organize daily lives. Many recognized that due to its nature and wide usage, WhatsApp influences both negative and positive sentiments. It is particularly because of user behaviours that WhatsApp users both intentionally and unintentionally use the app to reinforce their perspectives, deepen their beliefs, and spread these perspectives and beliefs to influence other users.

Already concerned that the platform warps their sense of cause and effect, people worry about how WhatsApp user behaviour will change how they think and feel. This concern is particularly heightened given the users' tendency to self-select and participate in narrow groups that reinforce how they think and behave. However, despite the pitfalls of how WhatsApp is being used, users in Lebanon still value how the platform can be used to contribute positively to the Lebanese society, particularly how it affords to freely communicate with others. This indicates that there is a strong potential to explore usage of WhatsApp as a source of influence, and it is thus a pivotal platform to consider in both immediate research initiatives and longer-range policies in and towards Lebanon.

As part of UNDP's work to prevent and address tensions, fake news, and hate speech, in response to this study, UNDP has developed a programmatic response package which seeks to mitigate how social media tools, including WhatsApp, are used to drive negative sentiments and tensions.

UNDP will focus on supporting preventative capacities including for networks and infrastructures for peace, encouraging inclusive engagement and dialogue, and promoting the important role of youth, influencers and journalists in the media and social media space. Future research of user behaviours and narratives will provide additional insights into the exact nature of WhatsApp's impact on Lebanon and provide UNDP and other stakeholders with ways to possibly counter the application's negative impact and better utilize it as a tool for positive influence.

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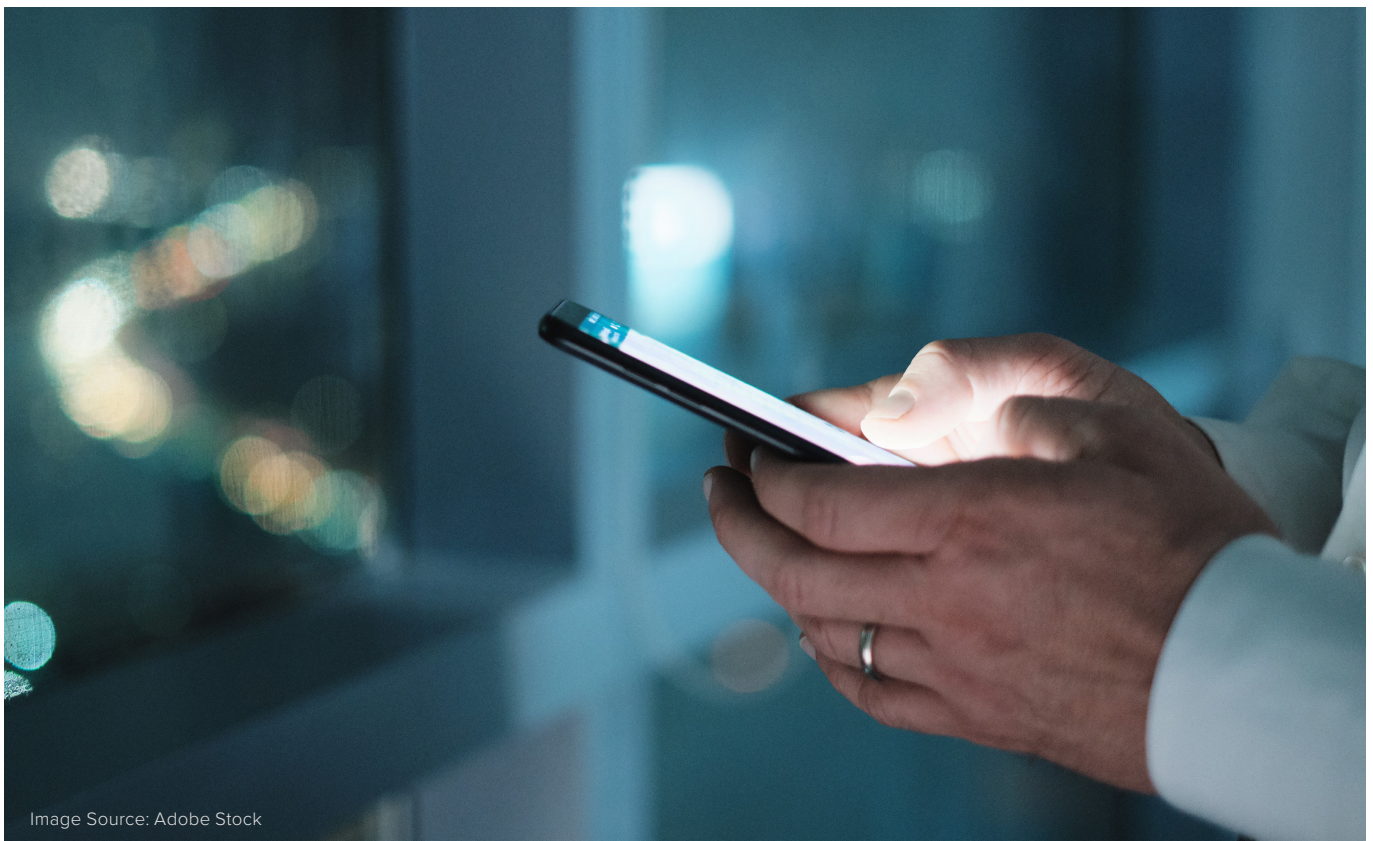
INTRODUCTION & BACKGROUND

Communal Relations and Tensions in Lebanon Today

Since 2019, Lebanon has been in the midst of numerous and compounding crises that have led to the deterioration of previously stable aspects of its economy and society, including education and healthcare. These crises have exacerbated long-standing structural issues such as poor power supply, inadequate water systems, and decaying public infrastructure.

The frustrations and tensions stemming from these concurrent crises in Lebanon have, in the last several years, contributed to deteriorating communal relations, tensions, and instances of violence across the country. In fact, UNDP's Tensions Monitoring System regularly provides data and evidence of the strong correlation between economic competition such as unemployment, deteriorating services, and increased tensions and incidents.

The deteriorating situation has contributed to broadening and deepening existing tensions and has created new ones. It has also increasingly lead to incidents, such as clashes, social unrest, sectarian conflict, political violence, and crime. Protesters or rioters have taken to the streets on various occasions, as they did in Tripoli in January 2021, Beirut in March 2021, and different parts of Lebanon in the summers of 2021 and 2022.[2] Instances of different party partisans and supporters engaging in directed and/or organised violence were also observed at these times. Others in Lebanon have engaged in negative coping mechanisms and self-harm, such as suicide, attempting to self-immolate, or using force to retrieve frozen bank deposits. Disputes have escalated into shootings and brawling at gas stations, supermarkets, grocery stores, and elsewhere over competition for goods and services.[3] There has also been an increase in clashes within and between communities, such as competition of resources within Lebanese communities and between Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian communities, all of which have attacked or antagonised each other in an environment of scarcity, insecurity, and socio-political scapegoating.

Evidence of the impact of these interlocking crises, rising tensions, and escalating violence on the Lebanese people is apparent in the regular perception surveys conducted by UNDP/ARK. Over the past five years, Lebanese and Syrian households have reported increasing intercommunal and intracommunal tensions—in March 2023, 46 percent of respondents reported intercommunal tensions, a significant increase from 21 percent reported in July 2018.[4] Over 50 percent of Lebanese and Syrian survey respondents attribute these tensions to intercommunal competition for jobs, while 60 percent of Lebanese survey respondents believe that various factional, political, and communal differences drive tensions further between Lebanese communities.[5] While these tensions occasionally manifest in instances of violence, they also negatively impact communal perceptions of social stability, security, and safety. For instance, 68 percent of Lebanese and Syrians reported feeling "unsafe" in their "area or neighbourhood at night," a five-fold increase from 2019.[6]

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2.   The 2021 Lebanon protests were a series of demonstrations that took place across the country, beginning in late 2020 and continuing through 2021. The protests were sparked by the worsening economic conditions in Lebanon, including high inflation, unemployment, and shortages of basic goods such as fuel and medicine. The protesters demanded an end to the government's inaction and called for solutions to address the economic crisis.

3.   For example, March to July 2022 was marked by an increase in bread-related incidents and tensions as Lebanon was experiencing severe bread shortage, with discriminatory measures against refugees surfacing.

4.   See UNDP regular perception surveys, including Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon, UNDP/ARK, August 2022.

5.   Regular Perception Surveys on Social Tensions throughout Lebanon, UNDP/ARK, August 2022.

6.   Ibid.

Why WhatsApp?

In 2019, UNDP conducted a comprehensive study of social media in Lebanon which revealed that platforms like Facebook and Twitter, whilst being powerful tools of communication and information sharing, also act as magnifying glasses of Lebanon's societal tensions and appear to have a real impact on perceptions on tensions.[7] The study provided some important insights which have informed UNDP's work to monitoring and mitigating social tensions, including social media monitoring. It also provided the basis for UNDP to develop a full-fledged, automated social media monitoring of Facebook and Twitter powered by Artificial Intelligence. It also highlighted that different social media channels have important differences in usage and that there was a need to better understand how WhatsApp is being used in this context.

WhatsApp is an exceptionally important application in Lebanon but remains widely unstudied compared to other platforms. According to a 2018 survey, WhatsApp is the preferred messaging platform of the majority of Lebanese adults, with a usage rate of 84 percent, and it is more popular than other social networks and messaging platforms, such as Facebook and Instagram.[8] WhatsApp is also commonly used amongst non-Lebanese communities in Lebanon. A study from 2020 suggests that 78 percent of Syrian households use WhatsApp for daily communication; with the number likely to be similar for Palestine refugees.[9] The nature in which users utilise the app points to the fact that it is viewed as a trusted source of information. Most users use WhatsApp to regularly communicate with their friends and family, and according to the UNDP/ARK regular survey on tensions, 80 percent of respondents in Lebanon said they trusted their family and friends to give them accurate news on important topics such as the 2022 Lebanese parliamentary election.[10]

WhatsApp's easy access and prevalence as a source of information in Lebanon makes it a valuable tool for all kinds of communication (e.g., for learning or running a business). But, as documented through UNDP's field monitoring under the Tensions Monitoring System, the app is also frequently used to drive negative sentiments and tensions. Since 2019, social media monitoring conducted through the Tensions Monitoring System strongly indicate that the platform was contributing to tensions as well as incidents of both inter-communal and intra-communal nature. This is evident through its facilitation of the dissemination of fake news, misinformation, and disinformation. For example, during the bread crisis, photos of Syrians carrying bread bags circulated on WhatsApp which fueled online and offline tensions, coupled with voice notes by Lebanese claiming that they were not able to get bread while refugees were able to. Another example is the frequent creation of closed WhatsApp groups aimed at mobilizing and providing mutual support in response to disputes and incidents. However, there is a need to better understand how information shared through this platform is contributing or can contribute to tensions and incidents in Lebanon. Therefore, in 2022, as part of the Tensions Monitoring System, UNDP in Lebanon commissioned MAGENTA to study the extent and nature of WhatsApp usage in Lebanon. Of particular interest was determining the *if* and *how* WhatsApp is being used to instigate incidents or contribute to tensions within the country.

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7. See "Analysing Refugee-Host Community Narrative on Social Media in Lebanon", UNDP, 2019.

8. "Most Lebanese adults use WhatsApp", Pew Research Centre, 2019. "WhatsApp is the most commonly used platform in Lebanon", Pew Research Centre, 2019.

9. "Nothing and Everything to Lose: Results from a Qualitative WhatsApp Survey of Palestinian Camps and Gatherings in Lebanon," UNDP.

10. Please note that people's interaction with information is complex. In our study, different individuals indicated that they had different reasons for trusting others or the information shared. Moreover, social scientists studying states around the world have identified different trust-related behaviours. See, for instance, "The Digital Worlds of Displacement-Affected Communities," UNHCR and GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation, 2022.

METHODOLOGY

Study Objectives and Methodological Approach

This study's overarching objective was to determine whether, how, and to what extent the usage of WhatsApp contributes to tensions in Lebanon. To achieve this objective, we adopted and applied a mixed-methodology approach, utilising both qualitative and quantitative research and analytic methods. A review of our sources, theoretical frameworks, and analytical methods is provided below.

Secondary Source Research

We reviewed reports and studies relevant to social media monitoring in Lebanon, WhatsApp use, and the country's broader economic, political, sectarian, and social tensions.

Initial Stakeholder Consultations

We conducted extensive conversations with individuals who are currently or were previously affiliated with different international organisations, international institutions, non-governmental organisations, and governments. In this initial phase of the study, we completed 26 stakeholder consultations in order to:

o Improve our preliminary understanding of WhatsApp's impact on tensions in Lebanon;

o Gather ideas and insights to further hone and develop methodology of the study, and;

o Define study parameters and consider creative approaches for further engagement and research.

In-depth Interviews, Focus Groups, and Conversations

We conducted interviews, focus groups discussions, and conversations with officials, advisors, organisers, and intermediaries; professors and students; civil society members from non-governmental organisations or informal networks; and former municipal representatives, business owners, employees, and unemployed individuals from across Lebanon. This primary research consisted of formal, structured interviews with 41 individuals and two formal focus groups with students, businesspeople, and employees. We also held more than 30 free-flowing, informal conversations to quickly learn or confirm information, develop our understanding of issues surfaced during interviews or in quantitative analysis, or to better understand the broader context across Lebanon.

In interviews, focus groups, and conversations, our researchers considered the following questions among others, contingent on the respondent and the context:

o What WhatsApp groups and channels people in Lebanon use to obtain and share information, including but not limited to news;

o Whether there are different types of WhatsApp groups, and if so, what they are;

o What issues users discuss on WhatsApp;

o Which of the discussed issues may contribute to offline tensions and/or incidents;

o How these discussed issues may impact offline tensions;

o Whether and how WhatsApp group users instigate incidents or trigger tensions, either intentionally or unintentionally;

o Whether and how users leverage the platform after an incident has occurred, possibly in ways that address or aggravate incidents or tensions;

o What kinds of information users obtain and/or share on WhatsApp, including propaganda, misinformation, disinformation, and more; and

o What forms of information users have encountered on WhatsApp, including texts, voice notes, videos, and links.

Underpinning our understanding of tensions in Lebanon and in turn informing the structure and substance of our interviews, focus groups, and conversations is a typology of tension classifications used in UNDP's Tensions Monitoring System, provided below. By providing an overview of previously identified vectors of tension within Lebanon, the classification served as a point of reference throughout the structuring and execution of our primary research. Both the UNDP framework and our study's respondents agree that the primary typologies of tensions within Lebanon consist of the following:

Vector of Tension	Definition
Community Insecurity	Tensions involving general crime, insecurity, and deteriorating rule of law, such as theft, murder, kidnapping, and criminal violence.
Economic and Labour	Tensions reflective of economic drivers, such as the lifting of subsidies and rising prices of staple goods, and labour-related factors, such as demands for salary and benefit modifications.
Existing System Supporters vs. Alternative System Supporters	Tensions reflective of anger/resentment directed at the state, state institutions, other symbols of central authority, including banks, and demands to change the structure of Lebanese political institutions.
Service Related	Tensions reflective of or arising from a lack of service provision, disputed resource allocation, or conflicts between service providers and recipients.
Inter-Sectarian	Tensions between different sectarian groups.
Intra-Sectarian	Tensions within a sectarian group.
Inter-Communal	Tensions between host and refugee communities.
Geopolitical	Tensions reflective of geopolitical developments and conflict that cause groups of people to align themselves according to regional powers. These may intersect with sectarian tensions but have their origins in conflict or other dynamics outside of Lebanon.

Figure 1: Typology of Tensions (Real-Time Monitoring and Mapping of Tensions-related Incidents in Lebanon, UNDP)

Data-Driven Research and Analysis of Platform Content

The data from our interviews, focus groups, and conversations was supplemented with data from and analysis of the WhatsApp platform. This included extracted content from 26 open WhatsApp groups, most of which were groups used to proliferate news. We conducted quantitative textual analysis of 19,000 total messages from these groups, identifying important issues for further monitoring and determining positive, negative, or neutral sentiment within these messages. Our extraction and analysis of content from these open groups were conducted in accordance with substantive, legal, policy, prudential, and ethical considerations, described in further detail in the next section.

To ensure a comprehensive understanding of the dynamics at play, the selection of these groups was a deliberate process aimed at capturing a wide range of audiences and topics. Our objective was to gain insights from groups covering different political and social affiliations, as well as those that were not explicitly socio-political. The groups were meticulously chosen to ensure a meaningful sample, with many being medium-sized groups recommended by Key Informants during the scoping stage of the project.

To enhance the diversity of our sample, we conducted an Internet search for WhatsApp news groups and subscribed to all those that were open or accepted our request to join. This approach aimed to represent the majority of WhatsApp groups broadcasting news for the public, offering a comprehensive snapshot of the information landscape. It's important to note that the 19,000 messages analysed in this study represent a substantial portion—approximately 70 to 80%—of all the news information shared during the study period. This statistically significant sample size strengthens the reliability and relevance of our findings in reflecting the broader trends within the WhatsApp platform during the duration of the research. Our analytic methods of WhatsApp content were two-fold:

o Manual and Automated Processing and Analysis: Using manual and automated methods, we gathered, processed, analysed, and contextualised the platform data, using the ensuing findings to conduct follow-up or refined research as needed. Publicly available software and a custom, project-specific artificial intelligence program were used to identify, gather, process, and analyse the information.

o Sentiment Analysis: Using quantitative textual analysis, we categorised sentiments within the extracted WhatsApp content as positive, negative, or neutral. To do so, researchers first coded relevant text and words, factoring in possibly confounding aspects such as tone, punctuation, placement, and context in their coding. Using an Orange Data Mining workflow, we trained a program to extrapolate our categorisations to all usable/analysable information in our dataset. Our factoring in of possibly confounding variables allowed our program to use and analyse information that may otherwise have been too complex or inconclusive to glean any additional insights beyond whether the sentiment is neutral, negative, or positive.

Study Limitations

Our research process accounted for and was adapted to general and specific limitations, challenges, and concerns. The biggest limitation to our research was time, which we determined may have constrained our study in two distinct ways.

Limited Timespan and Specific Research Timeframe

Our study may have been constrained by both a limited time span to collect data and the specific research timeframe. Our quantitative results may have been impacted by the research timeframe, as we began our quantitative information gathering efforts on October 2, 2022 and concluded them on November 20, 2022. Researchers were not able to observe or analyse messages made to open WhatsApp groups prior to joining and after leaving such groups, meaning that, for practical purposes, they were blind to any messages posted before and after the research timeframe. While a constraint, this limitation is not unique to our research, and we determined that the research timeframe was an appropriate length to mitigate possible impacts posed by being unable to view messages outside of the accepted timeframe. Our qualitative results may have been impacted by the research timeframe, as we conducted interviews in from October 2022 to March 2023, as our results may have naturally skewed towards events and patterns that occurred either within that timeframe or were post-hoc deemed relevant by interview respondents. However, the likelihood of the specific research window directly impacting our qualitative data collection appears to be low, as interview respondents were able to recall specific events, thematic issues, and messages sent outside of the research timeframe.

Research Design and Implementation Refinement

Our study's integrative design and implementation may also have been constrained by time. The design and sequencing of research phases were completed and implemented in parallel as opposed to refining and subsequently integrating study findings. Specifically, our team routinely improved our quantitative and qualitative research processes by constantly integrating new findings, such as using interview results to refine key terms and sentiment analysis, and using data analysis to improve interview questions. We determined that the impact of parallel integration of research findings on our research was minimal. Additionally, time may have constrained our study by preventing us from utilising more complex quantitative analytic approaches. However, our use of quantitative textual analysis and sentiment analysis on messages gathered from open WhatsApp groups is a novel use of emerging analytic technologies, thereby ensuring that our research still contributes to the broader literature despite possible time constraints.

Standards and Ethics

We ensured that the execution of our study adhered to all pertinent legal, ethical, and prudential practices. Over the course of our quantitative analysis of WhatsApp chats, our researchers did not enter or gather data from small or closed WhatsApp groups, limiting our report to analysis of larger and open groups where users would be aware of and accept the possibility of unknown parties viewing their messages. While this report provides an overview of the topics discussed and the total number of messages analysed, all identifiable information has been anonymised and no individual user or metadata has been included. During our qualitative interviews, focus groups, and conversations, our researchers conducted due diligence to ensure that our study did not cause undue harm to participants, declining to interview those who although may have provided useful information, could be put at risk due to their involvement in the study. All subjects agreed in advance on interview parameters and were told that the specifics of their personal or professional WhatsApp usage would be obscured.

DISCUSSION & FINDINGS

Our research found that although WhatsApp usage in Lebanon has the potential to influence both positive and negative sentiments, it is evident that usage in its current form, in particular in groups, has contributed to increased tensions broadly and to specific instances of tensions escalating into violence. Our research resulted in five overarching findings regarding WhatsApp usage and impact in Lebanon. Two of these findings pertain to types of groups and related user behaviour, one pertains to the nature of information being shared, and the remaining two pertain to possible risks.
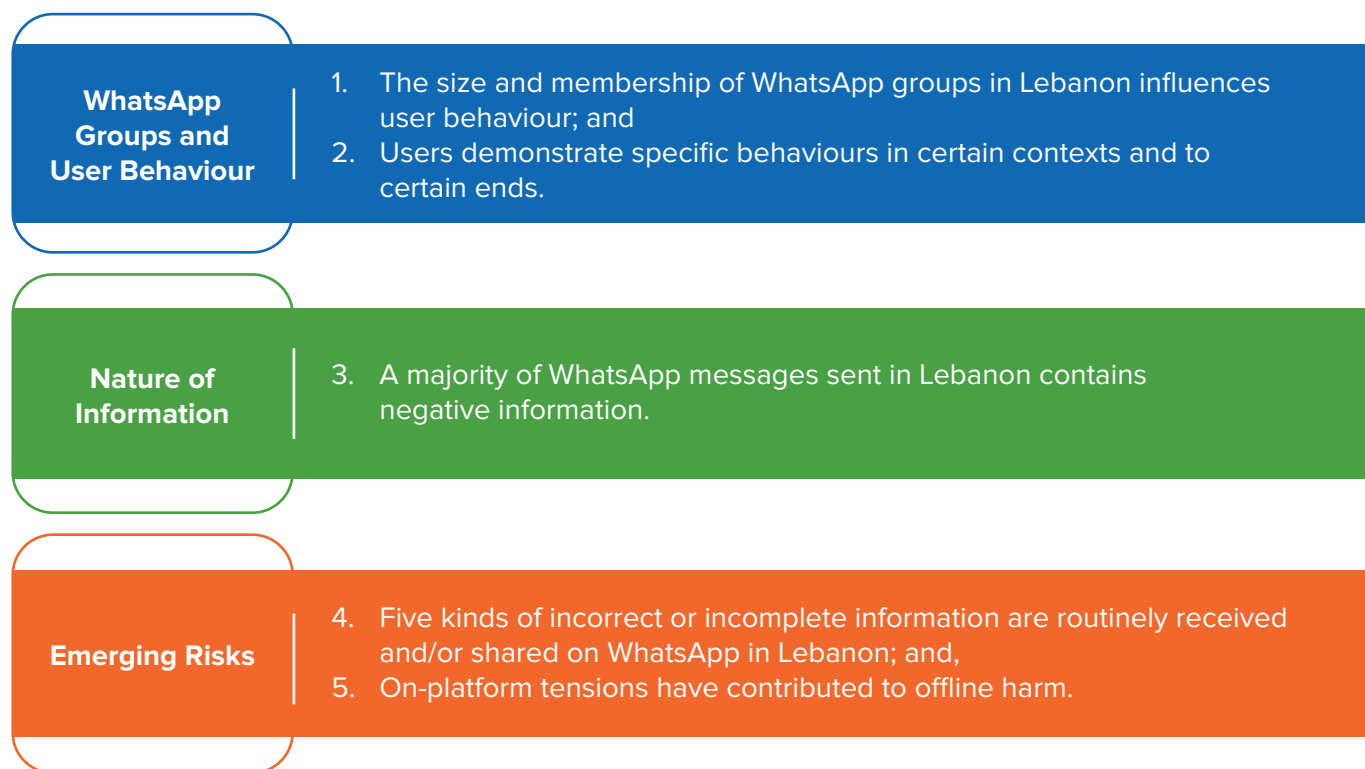
WhatsApp Groups and Users' Behaviours

WhatsApp Groups and User Behaviour	1. The size and membership of WhatsApp groups in Lebanon influences user behaviour; and 2. Users demonstrate specific behaviours in certain contexts and to certain ends.
Nature of Information	3. A majority of WhatsApp messages sent in Lebanon contains negative information.
Emerging Risks	4. Five kinds of incorrect or incomplete information are routinely received and/or shared on WhatsApp in Lebanon; and, 5. On-platform tensions have contributed to offline harm.

Figure 2: Five Overarching Findings

People in Lebanon tend to trust WhatsApp as a source, sometimes as if the platform is the originator and validator of information, and often do so because they share and receive information with family, friends, and members of their community which in Lebanon is the main source people turn to for trusted information (for example, about 80 percent of respondents to an UNDP/ARK Regular Perception Survey on Social Tensions stated that they trusted friends and family for news about parliamentary elections in 2022).[11]

Indeed, interviewees stated that their trust in the information and candidness towards other group members was contingent on the size and familiarity of the WhatsApp group. The smallest and therefore most trusted groups usually included no more than three, five, or eight individuals—though people tended to agree that small groups could include a dozen people. The size of the group also contributed to the nature of the conversation and its candidness. Since user behaviour differs between different groups, we created a typology of WhatsApp groups

that users in Lebanon may possibly be members of. The next section discusses these groups, specifically their structure, size, scope, and connections to offline tensions.

WhatsApp groups reflect and reinforce user's offline realities. Users consider their membership in different WhatsApp groups to be indicative of their primary social groups and their personal and professional lives. In small, closed WhatsApp groups containing a dozen or few members, close relationship dynamics are repeated among members who likely have built extensive familiarity and trust offline. Mid-sized open WhatsApp groups, such as those including 20 members or more, may include members who have never met in person, blurring the lines of familiarity between users as some may have never met in person. Large WhatsApp groups consist of 50 members or more according to interview respondents, many of whom have likely not met in person.

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11. Please note that people's interaction with information is complex. In our study, different individuals indicated that they had different reasons for trusting others or the information shared. Moreover, social scientists studying states around the world have identified different trust-related behaviours. See, for instance, "The Digital Worlds of Displacement-Affected Communities," UNHCR and GSMA Mobile for Humanitarian Innovation, 2022.

Typology of WhatsApp Groups

Family Groups	People in Lebanon are in WhatsApp groups with their family members in every segment of society or geographic area. These groups are almost always small in comparison to other types of groups and closed to outside members (regardless of whether one family member or a few family members are administrators of a given group);
Type	Closed Group;
Typical Size	Small;
Primary Analysis	Interviews;
Example	One undergraduate student from a focus group discussion, for instance, is in different WhatsApp groups with her parents, her siblings, her nuclear family, cousins, and other relatives in each of her paternal and maternal families. Like others in Lebanon, the student receives—and thinks about or acts upon—difWferent information from her family related to confirmed or possible tensions and incidents. From 2019 to 2022, for instance, she repeatedly received information about how political parties or other communities—including other Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians— were or may have been closing roads, disrupting business, or using violence against each other. She also received correct, incorrect, and muddled information about environmental events such as flooding or safety concerns such as accidents—sometimes from relatives who lived in distant areas, with neither eyewitness knowledge nor professional familiarity, who turned out to be "so wrong that it [was] funny."

Friend Groups	People in Lebanon frequently use WhatsApp groups to communicate with friends regarding news, politics, security, socioeconomic issues, and more.
Type	Closed Group;
Typical Size	Small Groups;
Primary Analysis	Interviews;
Example	One small business owner is in a group with five other business owners who own or operate businesses in the central and southern Bekaa. They discuss the purchase price of different goods, speculate about the Lebanese currency, and share updates or rumours about safety-related concerns (including "increasing crime by Lebanese and Syrians in the area, a fact even if not polite or pleasant").[12]
	One Lebanese intermediary is in a group with five friends from high school who are now medical doctors, business owners, and staffers at international organisations and institutions in the Middle East. They routinely discuss Lebanese, Levantine, and world politics, while sharing and debating information—including propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation. They sometimes do so daily. The intermediary is also in a larger group consisting of school alumni and former players on sports teams, with a membership of more than 50 people. Over time, people in the larger group created three separate groups: one for people looking to remain in touch; another for people to exchange memes, jokes, and other information regardless of propriety; and a group for those with families and professional networking needs. They discuss politics occasionally in all of these groups.

12. Interviews and focus group with small business owners, December 2022-March 2023. The quote is from an interview with a business owner in

Political Groups	All political parties and their respective leaders, advisors, members, supporters, and sympathisers use WhatsApp in Lebanon.[13] Although political parties differ in their organisation, sophistication, resources, and influence, they all work through at least some official groups, dedicated hybrid groups, or ad-hoc groups.[14] Through interviews, we found that in these groups, factions, and parties may contribute to tensions or incidents. They may do so by creating, agreeing, or deciding to boost messaging, talking points, or responses to information they believe is incomplete or incorrect. Conversely, they also use these groups to prevent, manage, or resolve conflict, such as by dissuading partisans and supporters from triggering incidents or aggravating tensions at particularly sensitive moments.
Type	Closed, Open, or Hybrid;
Typical Size	Varies;
Primary Analysis	Interviews;
Example	One political party advisor is in at least one WhatsApp group consisting of six senior leaders/advisors to the party leader. The party also has internal party groups, such as leadership groups, committee groups, and ad-hoc groups; role-based groups, such as for Lebanese parliamentarians, Lebanese mayors, or party functionaries; area offices or looser coordinating committees; mixed groups including advisors, experts, and observers; external groups including members and others in its core constituency, including for security-related and service-related concerns; and more;
	A third political party uses WhatsApp groups internally, in external relations, and for mixed or hybrid interactions. It runs or is connected—through members and supporters—to other groups for security-related or service-related concerns (for instance, the negotiation or facilitation of healthcare and education costs).

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the central Bekaa Valley.

13. Conversations with representatives of different Lebanese political parties, including four of the parties with the largest coalitions in parliament and reformist parties, October-December 2022.

14. Leaders and advisors of different Lebanese political parties have, while excluding other groups such as those for their friends, professional associations, or broad networks, noted that relevant WhatsApp groups include internal party groups, such as leadership groups, committee groups, and ad-hoc groups; role-based groups, such as for Lebanese parliamentarians, Lebanese mayors, or party functionaries; area offices or looser coordinating committees; specific groups for, or including, advisors, experts, and observers. They have also noted that external party groups exist. Some groups created by political parties are open for others to join, provided that they're invited and/or approved by others. Other groups may be open, with people in Lebanon able to join through an available or posted link. Other groups are essentially shadow groups. In mixed and hybrid groups, moreover, party leaders, advisors, or coordinators may be in groups with media members, consultants, service providers, or friends of the party; partisans, supporters, and sympathisers; or leaders in different areas.

News Groups	WhatsApp users in Lebanon create, operate, and join news groups. Media companies, journalists, political parties, and influential individuals have created these groups repeatedly, as have others who are interested in staying well-informed.
Type	Closed, Open, or Hybrid;
	Media Companies: Media companies in Lebanon maintain official or otherwise connected WhatsApp groups. They may each maintain many groups, with different levels of overlap, specificity, and redundancy, possibly due to group size limits on the application or to tailor news for different segments of an audience.[15]
	Journalist Groups: Journalists maintain different WhatsApp groups to share information, provide referrals, exchange professional courtesies, network professionally, and more.
	Other News Groups: Different news groups have long existed online in Lebanon, since proliferating in the mid-2000s. WhatsApp news groups in Lebanon are diverse in nature, having "very different outlooks, reputations, and levels of reliability and usefulness."[16]
	Ad-Hoc Groups for Updates: These groups include incident alert groups for events such as road closures or protests, and deaths and condolences groups.
Typical Size	Varies, Often Large;
Primary Analysis	Data-driven analysis, interviews;
Membership Parameters	Unlike small, closed groups, the membership of which is usually through direct, deliberate choice and/or through the additions of a few already-acquainted administrators, membership in news groups may occur in numerous ways.[17] Some groups included membership by links, of which at least three types exist on WhatsApp in Lebanon: groups directly available from the news media websites, such as the "ICI Beyrouth" WhatsApp Group; links available through group lists on the Internet; and links that require a written, usually directed, request by and through another WhatsApp message, including the WhatsApp groups run by media connected to political parties like the Free Patriotic Movement ("OTV"), non-state actors like Hezbollah ("Al Manar"), and individuals seeking to influence opinion ("Lebanon Debate").
Example	Megaphone News: Megaphone News is an example of a nascent media organisation founded in 2017 and gained prominence during the October Revolt of 2019. For some, Megaphone News is another entity created during times of political unrest, such as those created during the Cedar Revolution of 2005 and indeed those created during the founding of Greater Lebanon in 1920. For others, Megaphone News represents a new type of news entity in Lebanon in which creators openly and overtly blend reporting and activism while engaging primarily or solely in the digital domain. Its WhatsApp group, which is relatively large and open, exists in such a setting.
	OTV: Different political parties have created, owned, operated, or influenced media in Lebanon for generations. OTV's media efforts began in the television era, with the Free Patriotic Movement creating the network and associated entities after the end of the Syrian occupation of Lebanon in 2007. Its name, "Orange," and that of associated networks and chatrooms, including "Clementine," come from the party's branding colour, orange. OTV and associated entities have created different WhatsApp groups, of different types and sizes, which people may either join openly or join only through direct invitations. These are therefore hybrid groups and help highlight the possible distinctions between large and open WhatsApp groups.

15.   Interviews with communications consultant and with journalist, December 2022.

16.   Interviews with Lebanese government representative in North Lebanon and with Lebanese intermediary working in South Lebanon and Bekaa Valley, November 2022. The quote is from the Lebanese government representative; the intermediary shared similar insights.

17.   Please note that other large groups may have similar processes. We focus on the news groups and similar groups in this report because they formed the pool of groups examined in data-driven research.

International and/or Non-Governmental Organisations

Non-governmental organisations and their respective stakeholders, donors, partners, intermediaries, and beneficiaries commonly use WhatsApp in Lebanon.[18] They all work through at least some official groups, dedicated hybrid groups, or ad-hoc groups.

Type	Closed, Open, or Hybrid;
Typical Size	Varies;
Primary Analysis	Interviews;
Example	One Lebanese staffer at an international organisation maintains a WhatsApp group with six other colleagues, who in turn liaise with as many as 80 employees, consultants, and other individuals. A Lebanese peacebuilder reported maintaining a WhatsApp group with about a dozen Lebanese and Syrians who worked with different networks across the Levant. In addition to using these groups to learn about incidents, tensions, and context across Lebanon, people—including Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian intermediaries—use such groups to attempt to correct incorrect information or prevent, manage, or resolve conflicts.[19]

University and University-related groups

University students are utilising the convenience of WhatsApp groups to connect with their peers and discuss various issues. Discussions in these groups may range from academic topics to extra-curricular activities. In some cases, these WhatsApp groups may reflect the sectarian and political affiliations of their members and may become spaces for like-minded individuals to express their views and opinions on social and political issues. Some of these groups continue to exist after the end of the academic term and are utilised by alumni to maintain connections with their former classmates.

Type	Closed, Open, or Hybrid;
Typical Size	Varies;
Primary Analysis	Interviews;
Example	Alumni of a university in Beirut have different official and unofficial WhatsApp groups around the world. In one European capital, alumni have formed ad-hoc WhatsApp groups that reflect factional political preferences and have used that group to organise protests there, trips to Beirut, and different ventures in the diaspora and at home. While faculty, students, and alumni discuss different issues on such groups, they have focused generally on the crises and specifically on "hot-button issues" such as elections—especially with "establishment and reformist rivalry in [the] diaspora."[20] Even so, members of such groups have also worked to organise the shipment of medical supplies from abroad to Lebanon or donate U.S. dollars to individuals and organisations (including, but not limited to, students).[21]

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18. Conversations with representatives of different non-governmental organisations, including Americans, Europeans, Arabs, and Lebanese, October-December 2022.

19. Interviews with Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian intermediaries, peacebuilders, and others, October 2022-March 2023.

20. Interviews with academics, focus group with students, and conversations with alumni in Levant and Levantine diasporas, October 2022-March 2023. The quote is from a Lebanese-Palestinian alumnus of a Lebanese university now living in London, U.K.

21. Direct observation of closed and open WhatsApp groups, since onset of crises in 2019.

Other	Other important and interesting WhatsApp groups exist in Lebanon, including sectoral groups such as those for syndicates, associations, and ad-hoc groups; religious and related institutional groups, including churches, mosques, charitable foundations, and non-governmental organisations; interest groups for sports, school, music, culture, food, and more; and various community groups. We note that we have identified, researched, and analysed groups that were mentioned by interviewees during the study and that we may improve, expand, and otherwise modify this initial typology over time. Even so, we include beloww examples of other important groups for awareness and consideration.
Example	Municipalities: People in Lebanon create and join different WhatsApp groups based on their residential municipalities and/or neighbourhoods. They also create ad-hoc groups for municipal issues, regardless of official awareness or involvement. At least one municipality in North Lebanon created a WhatsApp group for different healthcare-related alerts at the height of the global COVID-19 pandemic. In the Bekaa, residents of different towns may use WhatsApp groups to monitor and influence municipal initiatives such as the planting or cutting of trees in Zahle or organise informal security patrols in various towns and villages.[22] Civil Society: People in Lebanon are in different WhatsApp groups created and run by individuals or institutions involved in civil society beyond formal civil society organisations, which may not be representative of Lebanese society writ large.

Analysis of User Behaviour

In addition to the "typology of groups" on WhatsApp in Lebanon, we examined how user behaviour manifests across the platform and within different group typologies. We were able to determine various mechanisms and behaviours through which users coordinate, obtain, and share information in groups. In this section, we uncover different user behaviours on WhatsApp.

Users Communicate More Openly in Informal Small Groups vs. Formal Large Groups

WhatsApp users behave differently in different groups, with almost all interviewees saying they behave more openly in small, closed groups than larger groups—especially, larger open groups. Overall, users trust fellow members more in smaller, closed groups, assuming a unity of purpose and believing the risk of leaks, attacks, misunderstandings, and judgments to be lower.[23] Comparatively, members of larger groups appear to feel that the size of the group may increase the likelihood of leaks, attacks, misunderstandings, or judgments. For example, interviewed political party advisors noted that they might agree on messaging in smaller groups, some of which were created formally for message coordination, before sharing information or responding to messages in larger groups. Interviewed students behave similarly, chatting privately with one another to agree on points that they then express individually in larger groups. This behaviour was also reported among employees across business sectors, including college campuses, large businesses, non-governmental organisations, political parties, and international organisations such as the United Nations.

Users Tend to Join Multiple and Overlapping Groups

Most WhatsApp users in Lebanon are members of multiple and overlapping groups. They may be part of different groups that cover specific topics or interests. For example, a communications consultant is in "too many groups to count," having specific groups for her subordinates or representatives, for each of her commercial and political clients, and for different end users and beneficiaries. Beyond the political sphere, small business owners are in different groups for

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22. Interviews with current and former members of municipalities in North Lebanon and Central Bekaa and with political intermediary in Beirut, October-December 2022.

23. Interviews with officials, advisors, academics, and journalists in Lebanon, October-December 2022.

"Neighbourhood A" and "Updates B," including outside of Tripoli and in central Bekaa with subjects ranging from the labour market to basic goods and the currency exchange. They join different groups for different neighbourhoods or areas because the issues and concerns may vary based on location. Membership in multiple WhatsApp groups may also mirror organisational hierarchies and structures, allowing users to compartmentalise both membership and relevant information based on the group in question.[24] An advisor to a political party is in at least three "vital" WhatsApp groups: the Prime Group, which has included as few as five to as many as eight high-level advisors to the party leader; the Organisation Group, a group of dozens of party leaders and organisers across Lebanon; and the Squid Group, which includes "more than 100" like-minded individuals in rival political parties, non-governmental organisations, media companies, and private corporations engaged in everything from strategic communications to construction.

WhatsApp as a Tool to Cultivate a Political "Ecosystem"

Factions, political parties, and transnational organisations use WhatsApp to cultivate and maintain influence in different segments of Lebanese society. They are all using the platform to create and cultivate their own subsystems, making it a broader political "ecosystem"[25] in Lebanon. Political actors, for example, have campaigned on and via the application, targeting their constituents with political messaging before, during, and after key events. Interview respondents reported that during the parliamentary elections of 2022 political actors targeted members of different communities via WhatsApp campaigns.

This included sending private, personal messages directly to individual users as opposed to larger groups. These messages attacked or defended different leaders, factions, segments of society, and communities in Lebanon, sometimes doing so along ideological or communitarian lines or based on specific incidents.

WhatsApp's Role in Sensationalising Media Coverage and Spreading Mis- and Disinformation

Media organisations and journalists also utilise the platform as well, to intentionally and unintentionally, directly and indirectly "excite the street" or fan the flames of conflict or mistrust.[26] This behaviour is not limited solely to "incompetent journalists" [journalists who lack the necessary skills, knowledge, or professionalism required for effective and responsible journalism],[27] "mercenary pens" [a journalistic approach driven by financial motives rather than a commitment to journalistic integrity], and "propagandists to be journalists" [individuals who engage in propaganda—spreading biased or misleading information to promote a particular agenda—while adopting the guise of journalists] as members of the professional media have also sensationalized coverage, used misleading headlines, and declined or failed to cover news or share their work with adequate context or due sensitivity.[28] Often times individual journalists are also on WhatsApp "as individuals, sometimes working through groups that include their fans and followers and of course engaging on the platform just like [other people] in Lebanon," meaning that individual journalists may themselves be consuming unverified or inaccurate content.[29]

24. Interviews with advisors to political parties, Lebanese-origin conflict analyst, Lebanese intermediaries, and Palestinian analyst-activist, October-December 2022. In focus groups and conversations, Lebanese, Syrian, and South Asian business owners, shopkeepers, construction, and factory workers indicated they behave differently in different groups—including by leaving them, muting them, or declining invitations to join them.

25. Interviews with peacebuilders, analysts, political party advisors, and communications consultant, October-December 2022.

26. Interviews with Lebanese intermediary in AkkarWwith Palestinian activist-analyst, November-December 2022. Interview with Lebanese intermediary, December 2022. A municipal official in the Bekaa shared similar sentiments.

27. Interview with Lebanese intermediary in North Lebanon, November 2022.

28. Interview with Lebanese academic, December 2022.

29. Interview with Palestinian analyst, December 2022.

Corroboration Over Verification

WhatsApp users reported looking for content that corroborated their existing worldviews over content that was verified. Interview respondents specifically reported that users tend to "search or shop for information they already agree with rather than allowing themselves to think in [an evidence-based/less rigid] way about information different sources could present in principle."[30] Indeed, WhatsApp users often join groups that align with their existing beliefs and values, creating echo chambers that reinforce pre-existing beliefs and biases.

Information Boomerangs

WhatsApp users have described different boomerangs of information, during which information is shared in one group, and then is shared across the platform until it occasionally appears again in the originating group. For instance, members of a small, closed group may share information that other members post—or encourage them to post—in different, larger, open, and perhaps public groups. Weeks, days, or even hours later, other members of the closed groups will reshare the information with the same members who created it via the originating group/channel where it was first introduced.[31] While boomerangs are not inherently more important than other information, they are useful as proxies to demonstrate general information flow and how WhatsApp is capable of aggravating tensions. For example, respondents mentioned instances of rival factional fights where WhatsApp has played a role in exacerbating tensions through the rapid circulation of inflammatory content including provocative videos, voice notes, and messages. Above all, the boomerangs are an interesting indicator of the pace of which information flows on the platform—with interlocutors declaring they observed such boomerangs in as little as 24, 48, or even two hours.[32]

Considering the consequences of these user behaviours, we assess that WhatsApp users both intentionally and unintentionally use the app to reinforce their perspectives, deepen their beliefs, and spread these perspectives and beliefs to influence other users.[33] Indeed, the results of our qualitative interviews suggest that WhatsApp users in Lebanon are not using the app to challenge their beliefs or change their minds.[34] Attempts at changing others' opinions or instances in which contradictory information is obtained are apparently compartmentalised by WhatsApp users, who instead more frequently utilise the app to project their perspectives, defend themselves, and rally around different factions, communities, and places of origin.[35] Some users police the content and sentiments shared within their own groups or have experienced this form of group policing, both explicitly and implicitly. Although members of smaller and closed groups generally behave more candidly and honestly than members of large, open groups, even in smaller groups, certain sentiments or beliefs may either be promoted or policed. Additionally, differences of opinion may lead to group fictionalisation, during which parallel groups are created to either maintain a group's original purpose, promote cohesion among members that may not be found in other iterations of the group, or to avoid "bickering."[36]

30. Interview with Lebanese government official and intercommunal intermediary, November 2022. A Palestinian analyst and an advisor to Lebanese political parties shared similar insights. Others, including students, small business owners, and service sector workers, also shared such sentiments with—although they did not always expressly connect the bias-reinforcing behaviour of people on WhatsApp to so-called "multi-sourcing." Indeed, others seemed to make the more intuitive point that people confirming their biases did not search or shop much for new sources of information. Moreover, others noted that WhatsApp sometimes became a source unto itself and emphasised that people might be exposed to bias-reinforcing sources by people on the application.

31. Interviews with former advisor to Lebanese premier, Lebanese intermediaries, and advisors to three Lebanese political parties, October-December 2022.

32. Interviews with former advisor to Lebanese premiers, advisors to two political parties, and Lebanese-origin conflict analyst, October-November 2022.

33. We note that interlocutors expressed concern about the potential of WhatsApp (and other platforms) to transform or warp people's minds or at least their interaction with information in deeper ways. We note that the longer-range consequences of WhatsApp engagement in Lebanon may require longer-range study in the future, including attempts to approximate an understanding of past usage and monitoring future usage drawing on lessons from this study and surveys of WhatsApp in other states.

34. Interviews with Lebanese intermediaries, communication consultant, and focus group with students, November-December 2022.

35. Interviews with Lebanese intermediaries and focus group with students, November 2022.

36. Interviews with Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian interlocutors, October-December 2022. The quote is from a Lebanese academic.

Nature of Information on WhatsApp

Our research found that WhatsApp users in Lebanon share more negative information than positive or neutral information on the platform—and far more negative-impact information than positive-impact or neutral-impact information. Our data-driven quantitative analysis of 19,000 messages from 26 open WhatsApp groups revealed that half of the information shared within was negative, a quarter positive, and a quarter neutral. These findings were corroborated by our qualitative interviews, during which respondents unanimously assessed that they and others share negative information more than other forms of information on WhatsApp.

It's essential to emphasize that these findings specifically pertain to the groups studied, recognising that the bulk of WhatsApp use likely revolves around daily life. In the context of the selected groups, which span a diverse range of audiences and topics, the prevalence of negative information is particularly notable. Recognising the prominence of daily life discussions within the studied groups, the inclination towards sharing negative content sheds light on the broader dynamics of information dissemination within these social circles.

Neutral Information, Negative Impact

Integrating the findings of our quantitative and qualitative assessments, we found that information categorised by our manual and automated textual analysis as being neutral or even positive may still have a net negative impact on tensions in Lebanon.[37] For instance, sharing the dollar rate alone may seem neutral, but when accompanied by negative terms such as "collapse" or "black market," it can evoke negative sentiments. Moreover, the use of punctuation can alter the tone of a fact, portraying it as positive or negative ("the dollar rate decreases." vs. "the dollar rate decreases!"). Another component could also be the group in which it is being discussed (for example journalists vs. money exchangers).

> *الليرة اللبنانية في حالة انهيار، دولار السوق السوداء يسجل 38600 ليرة*
>
> *The Lebanese lira is in a state of collapse, the dollar rate in the black market is 38,600 LBP*

This finding was further corroborated by our qualitative interview respondents, who assessed that some instances of otherwise neutral information was likely to have negative net impacts in Lebanon.[38]

Topics of Conversation

Our finding that negative information is more often shared and received on WhatsApp in Lebanon than other forms of information is corroborated by our analysis of topics of discussion within open WhatsApp groups. Textual analysis of the 19,000 gathered WhatsApp messages revealed that the various crises facing Lebanon are the most frequently discussed topic within WhatsApp groups. Qualitative research indicated that this has been the case since 2019.[39] The individual crises being discussed vary–some are long-term crises, such as discussions of the Lebanese lira's ongoing devaluation against the US dollar, while others pertain to single and short incidents such as protests or riots. Long-term crises, given their nature, made more frequent appearances in discussion over the course of our research period, while short-term crises were discussed as they occurred.[40] After crises, the other most frequently discussed topics within Lebanese WhatsApp groups included discussions of events impacting the broader region, such as the Syrian regime and the influx of Syrian refugees to Lebanon, and Lebanese politics, such as the 2022 elections.[41] All of these topics may easily become sources of negative sentiment or information, suggesting that the topics that WhatsApp users in Lebanon are most interested in discussing may have

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37. We were unable to ask all interlocutors about the net impact of information. Please note that this was another limitation and consequence of the tight timeframe, as we only completed quantitative textual analysis and integrated framing and consideration at the end of the research period.

38. Ibid.

39. Integrated research, including interviews and data-driven analysis, October-December 2022.

40. Ibid.

41. Interlocutors indicated, clearly and across the board, the most significant issue on WhatsApp has been the comprehensive crisis in Lebanon. Even so, they sometimes struggled to speak about broad patterns while also isolating incidents or events or exchanges that may have seemed especially important in a given moment. In our quantitative textual analysis, we discovered that about 17 percent of extracted and processed text messages pertained to the crises—or to closely connected issues such as the socioeconomic conditions, Lebanese lira, or U.S. Dollar.

the capacity to negatively impact tensions within the country. A full review of the topics of discussion identified in Lebanese WhatsApp groups is provided in Figure 2, below, in order of their frequency.

The concurrent crises occurring in Lebanon, coupled with user behaviours such as sharing negative and negative-impact information, have caused some WhatsApp users to express concern about consequences of the app's usage. Interviewed users reported that the usage of the app "warps [their] sense of cause and effect," while others worry that over time "WhatsApp will change how we think and feel because we're all in [self-selecting], narrow groups reinforcing how we all already think and behave."[42]
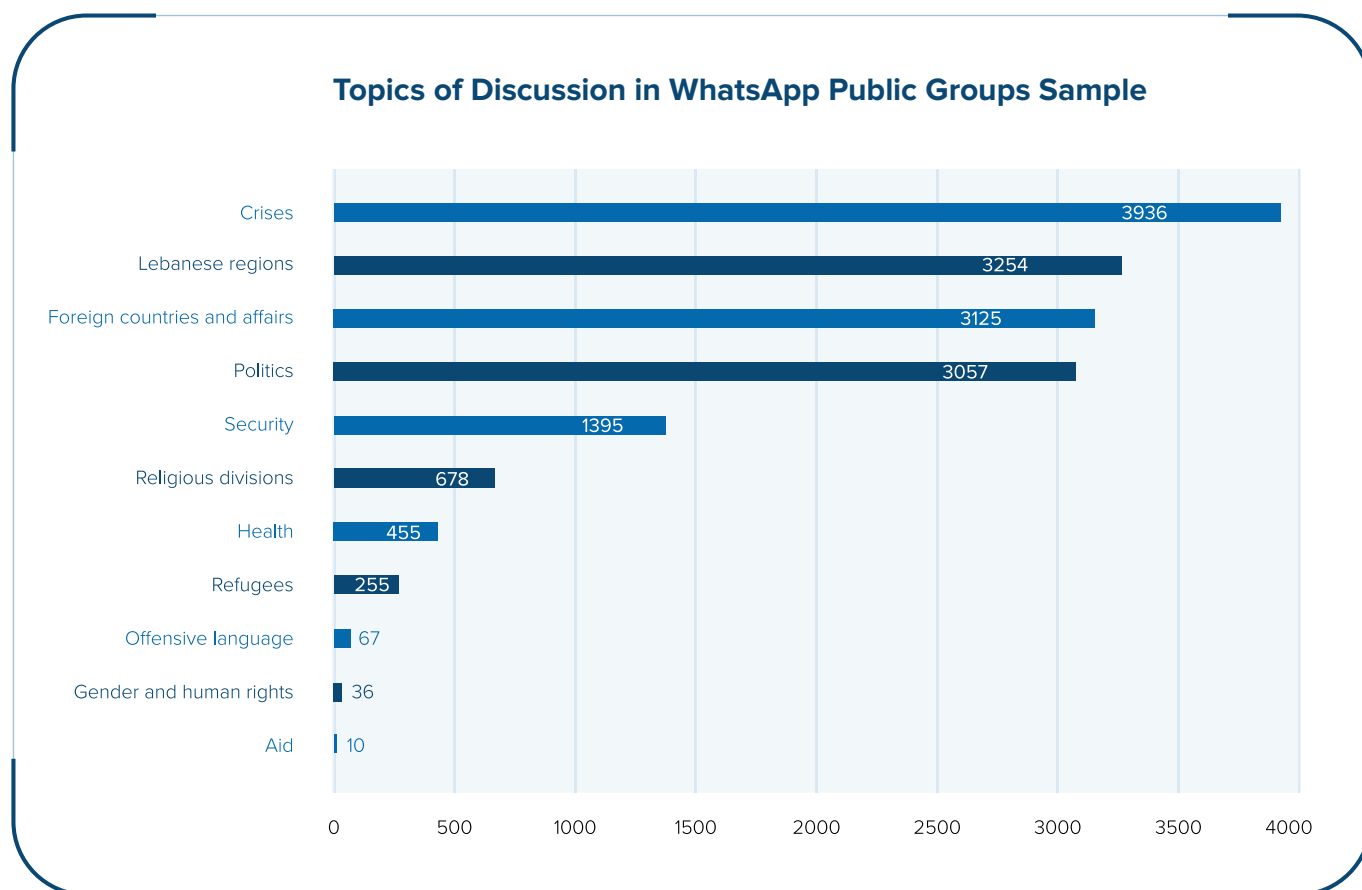
Topics of Discussion in WhatsApp Public Groups Sample

Topic	Value
Crises	3936
Lebanese regions	3254
Foreign countries and affairs	3125
Politics	3057
Security	1395
Religious divisions	678
Health	455
Refugees	255
Offensive language	67
Gender and human rights	36
Aid	10

Figure 3: Topics of Discussion in WhatsApp Public Groups Sample[43]

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42. Interviews with Lebanese peacebuilder in Mount Lebanon and Lebanese intermediary working in South Lebanon and the Bekaa Valley, November 2022. In two different focus groups, students and small business owners shared similar insights.

43. The "crisis" category encompasses discussions related to call for protests, the economic collapse, the Lebanese fuel crisis, the Lebanese judicial system, the revolution or even the Beirut port explosion. "Lebanese regions" encompasses references to Beirut, Bekaa, Mount Lebanon, North Lebanon, and South Lebanon. "Foreign affairs" includes topics related to external affairs/diplomacy, references to Syria, Palestine and Israel, international organisations, amongst others. "Politics" refers to topics related elections, political parties, government, and opposition. "Security" relates to discussions related to arrests, crimes, security forces/army, and smuggling. "Religious divisions" covers discussions around sectarian divisions and religious figures. "Health" includes topics such as cholera, COVID-19 and the Lebanese healthcare system. "Gender and human rights" refers to topics related to gender based violence and reproductive and sexual rights. "Refugees" covers discussions related to refugees and return of refugees. "Aid" includes key words and references to aid/NGO assistance, support, and programmes.

Possible Risks

Incorrect and Incomplete Information on WhatsApp

In all groups—and about various topics—WhatsApp users share "utterly false misinformation."[44] Having outlined a typology of typical groups and analysed instances of user behaviour, we have also examined the ways in which information shared on WhatsApp may be incorrect or incomplete. Integrating our qualitative and quantitative research, including extensive follow-up questioning of interview respondents and manual and automated textual analysis, we determined that at least five kinds of incorrect or incomplete information are routinely obtained and/or shared on WhatsApp in Lebanon: propaganda, disinformation, misinformation, contextless information, and exacerbating information. How these terms are being used for the purpose of our study are further explained in the below:

Propaganda	Refers to (1) information that people or entities use to [purposely] promote or publicise a particular view, cause, or agenda or (2) a systematic effort, by an individual or group, to manipulate people's beliefs, attitudes, or actions with words or other information.

People in Lebanon have routinely encountered propaganda or information that they believe is propaganda on WhatsApp.[45] For example, our respondents reported frequently receiving and sharing videos, music, or text that support individual Lebanese political parties and their various mythologies, narratives, and talking points while threatening or discrediting their rivals.[46] Others reported seeing various videos and texts within WhatsApp groups in 2022 that purported to show groups of men attacking other groups or engaging in personally-motivated criminal acts.[47] During the research period, the use of propaganda for political purposes was particularly pronounced. Affiliates of different political parties actively generated and shared positive propaganda to claim credit for diplomatic deals, celebrate accomplishments of a particular administration, or discredit and mock incoming parliamentarians and the outgoing president.[48]

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44. Interview with communication consultant, December 2022.

45. While they've also encountered baseline campaigning and communications, they have distinguished those in terms of substance, form, intent, and impact.

46. Interview with political party booster, December 2022.

47. Interview with Lebanese government employee in North Lebanon, November 2022.

48. Interviews with officials, advisors, academics, and journalists in Lebanon, October 2022-December 2022. Interview with building manager, regarding content of residents' WhatsApp groups, February 2023.

Disinformation	Refers to false information that people or entities purposefully create and/or spread to deceive or mislead others—usually, though not necessarily, by fabricating facts to characterise others negatively or to seed a specific sentiment.

People in Lebanon have also routinely encountered and shared disinformation on WhatsApp.[49] During the parliamentary elections of 2022, political factions across Lebanon created and propagated disinformation on WhatsApp about each other and their respective candidates. In Beirut, for instance, one political faction created, seeded, and disseminated disinformation regarding a former Lebanese premier, while another political faction spread disinformation regarding a then-candidate, now-parliamentarian who had been attempting to cultivate influence in the faction's core constituency.[50] Lebanese individuals and political factions were reported to have targeted Syrian communities in Lebanon with disinformation, in a likely attempt at sowing tensions towards the community.[51]

Misinformation	Refers to incorrect information that people or entities may share without an intent to manipulate opinion or deceive others—and, indeed, sometimes without a broader intent at all.

People in Lebanon have frequently encountered and shared misinformation on WhatsApp.[52] Health misinformation is particularly prevalent in WhatsApp groups in the country. Users have shared misinformation regarding both COVID-19 and the 2022 cholera outbreak, spreading information that misrepresents the nature of the two diseases or discusses ineffective or even dangerous medical treatments.[53] Other topics of misinformation in Lebanon include the Syrian community and their alleged contributions to the various crises Lebanon is experiencing,[54] misinterpreted or mischaracterised information regarding the strain on services and infrastructure that the prolonged presence of non-Lebanese communities is alleged to have caused, and inaccurate descriptions of Lebanese healthcare companies as being owned by elites and conspiratorially connected multi-lateral organisations like the United Nations and the World Bank.[55]

49. Interviews with Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian interlocutors, October 2022-January 2023. See, also, Lebanese Citizens, Disinformation, and News Sharing Behaviour, The Samir Kassir Foundation, January 2023.

50. Interviews with officials, advisors, academics, and journalists in Lebanon, October-December 2022. Interview with communications advisor to Lebanese political parties, December 2022.

51. Interviews with Lebanese intermediaries, including in Beirut and north Lebanon, October-December 2022.

52. Interviews with Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian interlocutors, October 2022-January 2023. See, also, Lebanese Citizens, Disinformation, and News Sharing Behaviour, The Samir Kassir Foundation, January 2023.

53. Interview with small business owner, March 2023.

54. Focus groups with students, small business owners, and service sector employees, October 2022-March 2023.

55. Please note that at least two interlocutors have assessed that one Lebanese faction created disinformation that doubled as misinformation about the United Nations or international community more broadly. If the interlocutors are correct, though we were unable to determine so independently, then people in Lebanon were sharing a sort of misinformation that may have been seeded deliberately as disinformation.

Contextless Information	Refers to information that is missing key context.

People in Lebanon frequently encounter contextless information or information that is missing key context on WhatsApp. Viewers of such information are often unaware of the lacking or missing context until otherwise notified. According to interview respondents, during intermittent shortages and price increases of bread and flour in 2022, WhatsApp users in Lebanon shared and viewed videos, sent and listened to voice notes, and wrote and read text messages regarding Syrians in bread lines. Respondents acknowledged that these messages often lacked critical context, an assertion corroborated by our quantitative analysis of WhatsApp content. While Syrians were in fact waiting in bread lines during these shortages, few of these messages acknowledged the various underlying reasons for the shortages, instead implying that Syrians were at least partly responsible for the shortages.[56] In some instances, the addition of context may still not prevent such content from contributing to tensions and possible instances of offline harm. Even so, interview respondents resoundingly agreed that a lack of context "clearly makes already difficult news worse" and undermines social stability.[57]

Exacerbating Information[58]	Refers to information that may or may not be true but broadly contributes to tensions or increases likelihood of offline harms.

WhatsApp users in Lebanon routinely encounter various forms of exacerbating information, meaning information that may or may not be true, but broadly contributes to exacerbating tensions or increases the likelihood of offline harms. Examples of such information that have circulated within WhatsApp groups in Lebanon are provided below, delineated by their veracity.

- **Correct and Exacerbating**: During the 2022 parliamentary elections, WhatsApp users in Lebanon shared videos of young men fighting in Zahle. In 2020 and 2021, WhatsApp users in Lebanon shared videos of armed clashes in Khaldeh. Both circumstances did occur, and in both instances, correct information exacerbated incidents and tensions. Upon learning of the fights taking place in their community via WhatsApp, young men in Zahle rushed to participate. In Khaldeh, members of different communities engaged in or planned tit-for-tat attacks in response to the armed clashes. This planning occurred spontaneously among motivated individuals, and amongst directed groups, and in some cases may have occurred via WhatsApp itself.[59]

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56. Focus group with students, November 2022.

57. Quote is from an interview with an interlocutor who has advised large and reformist political parties over the past two decades, December 2022. Other interlocutors, including Lebanese, Palestinians, and Syrians, shared similar sentiments or assessments.

58. We considered such information carefully and contextually in all general, indicative subcategories. Any information may be exacerbating, if and when shared in certain contexts: for instance, amid heightened emotions around a skirmish, or a during a political campaign, or around some commemorative or other calendar event; amid longer-running factionalism sectarianism, xenophobia; or during long-running sectoral struggle, acute crises, and resource-related insecurity. Such information may be factually correct, incorrect, mixed, or uncertain.

59. Interviews with peacebuilders, advisors to political parties, and a communications consultant, November-December 2022.

- **Incorrect and Exacerbating**: Incorrect information, such as lies, rumours, and other forms of disinformation, has the potential to exacerbate tensions. Prior to the 2022 parliamentary elections, Lebanese political factions spread incorrect information regarding the former Lebanese president, the Lebanese government and international response to Lebanon's public health issues, and the Lebanese lira's collapse, all of which exacerbated tensions within Lebanon.

- **Mixed and Exacerbating**: Some exacerbating information can be classified as both partially correct and partially incorrect. WhatsApp users have shared correct and incorrect information about their own communities, political factions, and others that may exacerbate existing tensions. A common example involves users sharing videos of a current conflict or incident, then sharing videos of a past conflict, alleging that the second video is in fact another video from the current conflict. Lebanese living in Beirut and the Bekaa have conducted similar tactics.

- **Uncertain and Exacerbating**: People in Lebanon often share and receive information on WhatsApp without knowing whether it is correct. They may do so haphazardly or, as a security analyst said, to just "spit and stick"[60] anything. For example, in North Lebanon, Zahle, and the broader Bekaa, some WhatsApp users have speculated on the platform that state, area, and private power providers have been running electricity randomly at night to deter—or literally "shock"—people trying to steal parts of the plants and sell it as scrap.[61] While the different areas had been experiencing changes in electricity availability, it remains uncertain if the power providers were attempting to deter thieves from their plants, particularly in that manner. Regardless, the users were sharing information of uncertain accuracy as examples of truth.[62]

On the Impact on Tensions

User behaviour on WhatsApp in Lebanon has negatively impacted tensions in two different ways: via the sharing of false and negative information that subsequently contributes to tensions, and the escalation of on-platform tensions into instances of offline harm.

Our overarching assessment of WhatsApp usage in Lebanon is that the platform plays a critical role in ensuring users may communicate with one another and be adequately informed of current events. This critical role means the platform can and does contribute to tensions across Lebanon in a variety of ways. Individual users may: create new or aggravate existing societal tensions by using the platform in the wake of a dispute or violent clash; knowingly or unknowingly share information that is incorrect, outdated, or lacking context thus increasing societal tensions; and share factually correct information, that despite its veracity, is inflammatory and further exacerbates tensions. At the same time, it also means that the platform also has potential to be a positive source of influence too.

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60. Interview with Lebanese-origin security analyst, December 2022. He was using a colloquial term for sloppy work. The usage is uncommon but is appropriate enough. Lebanese government officials, a retired LAF officer, and a Lebanese intermediary shared similar perspectives in interviews conducted from October 2022 to December 2022.

61. Interviews and focus groups with Lebanese small business owners, November-December 2022.

62. Ibid.

Linking Negative Information and Tensions

The primary form of information shared on WhatsApp in Lebanon is negative and may contribute to tensions in the country. The below chart shows that a significant amount of information shared on WhatsApp in Lebanon is not only negative, but also has a negative impact. Additionally, Table 1 demonstrates that this negative impact may occur regardless of the information's form, whether it can be classified as news, propaganda, or disinformation, and regardless of the type of WhatsApp group it has been shared to.

Information	Information Form	Information Type	WhatsApp Group	Notes	Overall Assessment
"For this reason… the U.S. dollar rose [in value against the Lebanese lira]."	Text and Link	News	News Group	Clickbait Headline	Negative Impact
Skirmishes, riots, and protests in Lebanon in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022[63]	Video, Voice, Text	Propaganda, Disinformation, Misinformation, Contextless Information, Exacerbating Information	Many Group Types	Organised, Spontaneous, Intentional, Innocent	Negative Impact
People in Lebanon circulating videos of elites dining in Beirut and abroad	Video, Voice, Text	Exacerbating Information	Family Groups, Political Groups, News Groups	Spontaneous, then Organised	Uncertain/ Complex
Maronite and Melchite Christians and Shia Muslims fighting in Zahle	Video, Voice, Text	Propaganda, Contextless Information, Misinformation, Exacerbating Information	Many Group Types	Spontaneous, then Organised	Negative Impact
Young Christian and Muslim men clashing in Beirut after Morocco-Portugal World Cup game	Video, Voice, Text	Contextless Information, Exacerbating Information	Many Group Types	Spontaneous	Negative Impact
Factions fabricating information about rivals in Beirut and Mount Lebanon during the 2022 parliamentary elections	Text (Primarily)	Propaganda, Disinformation, Misinformation, Contextless Information, Exacerbating Information	Many Group Types	Organised, then Spontaneous	Complex (Net Negative)
Syrian man attacking a Lebanese in Beirut's Hamra neighbourhood, with other Lebanese complaining about Syrians and blaming United Nations	Video, Voice, Text	Misinformation, Contextless Information, Exacerbating Information	Family Groups Friends Groups Neighbourhood Groups	Spontaneous	Negative Impact

Table 1: Information Assessments

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63. We include different specific examples in this row, to be complete and concise, of peaceful protests, violent riots, and different spontaneous and organised skirmishes from 2019 to 2022.

The veracity of information shared on WhatsApp does not always indicate whether information will have a negative impact on broader tensions in Lebanon. Correct information, depending on the topic, may also have a negative impact on tensions in Lebanon—for example, discussions on WhatsApp regarding Maronite and Melchite Christians and Shia Muslims fighting one another in Zahle are based in actual events, but are likely to negatively impact social stability. Table 2 shows the veracity of information being shared, in addition to the numerous implicated issues and triggered tensions posed by these examples of information.

Information	Information Form	Method	Veracity	Implicated Issues and Themes and/or Triggered Tensions[64]				
"For this reason… the U.S. dollar rose [in value against the Lebanese lira]."	Text and Link	Quantitative	Mixed	Crises	Identity	Politics	Resources	Foreign countries/ affairs
				X	--	?	X	--
People sharing disinformation and misinformation that U.N. agencies in Lebanon are paying Syrians in U.S. dollars	Text	Qualitative	Incorrect	Crises	Identity	Politics	Resources	Foreign countries/ affairs
				X	X	X	X	X
Skirmishes, riots, and protests in Lebanon in 2019, 2020, 2021, and 2022[65]	Video, Voice, Text	Integrated	Correct	Crises	Identity	Politics	Resources	Foreign countries/ affairs
				X	X	X	X	X
"Gasoline and [cooking] gas up… What about diesel?"	Text	Quantitative	Correct	Crises	Identity	Politics	Resources	Foreign countries/ affairs
				X	X	?	X	X
Factions fabricating information about rivals in Beirut and Mount Lebanon during the 2022 parliamentary elections	Video, Voice, Text	Qualitative	Incorrect	Crises	Identity	Politics	Resources	Foreign countries/ affairs
				?	X	X	X	--
Maronite and Melchite Christians and Shia Muslims fighting in Zahle	Video, Voice, Text	Qualitative	Correct	Crises	Identity	Politics	Resources	Foreign countries/ affairs
				X	X	X	--	--

64. We've used the following symbols/convention represent complex information: "x" means that the information implicates the issue; "?" means that the information may or may not implicate the issue, depending on other information or context unavailable to us at this stage; "--" means that the information does not clearly implicate the issue.

65. We include different specific examples in this row, to be complete and concise, of peaceful protests, violent riots, and different spontaneous and organised skirmishes from 2019 to 2022.

Lebanese discussing shortages, gauging, and hoarding during ongoing socioeconomic crises	Video and Text	Quantitative	Mixed	Crises	Identity	Politics	Resources	Foreign countries/ affairs
				x	?	?	x	?
Syrian man attacking a Lebanese in Beirut's Hamra neighbourhood, with other Lebanese complaining about Syrians and blaming United Nations	Video, Voice, Text	Qualitative	Mixed	Crises	Identity	Politics	Resources	Foreign countries/ affairs
				x	x	x	?	x
Young Christian and Muslim men clashing in Beirut after Morocco-Portugal World Cup game	Video, Voice, Text	Integrated	Mixed	Crises	Identity	Politics	Resources	Foreign countries/ affairs
				--	x	x	--	x

Table 2: Information Implicating Issues and/or Triggered Tensions

Table 1 and Table 2 suggest that information shared on WhatsApp can have a negative impact regardless of its form, type, the nature of the group it has been shared to, its veracity, or its implicated issues and tensions. The overarching challenge posed by WhatsApp usage in Lebanon is therefore not specific to the information itself, the ways in which it is shared, or even its veracity. Instead, by holding a critical position in Lebanon's information and communication landscape, the current challenge posed by WhatsApp is that it facilitates the creation of "information overload, threat-hyping, fearmongering, and tensions of all kinds."[66] This position and its negative impact on Lebanon is further aided by the various crises the country is experiencing, which in turn become relevant topics of discussion for WhatsApp users and contribute to the proliferation of negative information.

On-Platform Tensions and Offline Incidents

In our monitoring, WhatsApp's facilitation of information overload has in some cases caused users in Lebanon to create or contribute to offline tensions or incidents via the app. The platform has been directly used to organise and plan protests, violent riots, and various other demonstrations. The platform's role within Lebanon ensures that users may also indirectly use the platform to exacerbate offline tensions, as the platform is the primary tool used before, during, and after various incidents in Lebanon and allows for exacerbating narratives to proliferate to wide audiences.[67] Over the past three years, WhatsApp has played a role in offline incidents and violence in Lebanon, examples of which are provided below.

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66.   Interview with former advisor to large political party who now works with other established parties and smaller reformist parties, December 2022.

67.   Integrated research, including interviews and data-driven analysis, October-December 2022.

October Protests of 2019

WhatsApp's primary usage during the October protests of 2019 consisted of informing people regarding protests, road closures, and other events relevant to the revolt.[68] WhatsApp was used "for everything and at all times."[69] Protesters used WhatsApp to organise their activities,[70] while others used the platform to coordinate violent counter-campaigns against protesters.[71] False or confusing information was frequently shared on the platform, including information designed to misinform Lebanese authorities about planned protest dates and locations.[72]

Image Source: Adobe Stock

Photo 1: Protests in Beirut Downtown

Beirut Port Explosions of August 2020

Image Source: Adobe Stock

Photo 2: Destroyed buildings from Beirut's port explosion

People in Lebanon shared propaganda, disinformation, misinformation, contextless information, and exacerbating information immediately after the Beirut port explosions and throughout the rest of 2020. Some users shared videos and claimed to have seen Israeli fighter planes strike the port, while others speculated that foreign states or Lebanese factions had assassinated a Lebanese leader. Content created by domestic and international news outlets was also shared, often without consideration for possible source bias.[73] In the weeks after the blast, people shared videos, voice notes, and text messages about funerals of the blast victim's while attacking rival factional leaders. Others shared information of leaders' whereabouts and videos of individuals verbally attacking political leaders and at least one minister. Tensions surrounding the blast and who is responsible for it continue to proliferate on and offline. A year after the blast, young men affiliated with different factions began fighting across Beirut, likely using WhatsApp to plan the clashes. A young man affiliated with one faction shared videos of an attack on another faction's office on WhatsApp, causing the attacked faction to then use WhatsApp to organise a rapid response. Spontaneous instances of factional violence also occurred, likely due to the sharing of violent videos and rumours related to the clashes.[74]

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68. Interviews with Lebanese, Syrian, and Palestinian interlocutors, as well as focus groups with students and small business owners, October 2022-March 2023.

69. Interviews with officials, advisors, academics, and journalists in Lebanon, October-December 2022.

70. Protesters used WhatsApp to organise peaceful protests in Beirut, Tripoli, and towns across Lebanon. However, others used WhatsApp to (1) to organise violent unrest, including riots in Beirut and/or (2) share clips, without context or even with propagandising purposes, "in ways that further undermined trust in authority, painted all soldiers and police with the same brush, and [lionised] any protest action." Interview with Lebanese reformist, December 2022.

71. Members of different gyms, including in Beirut and the coastal strip stretching from Beirut to Byblos, may have used WhatsApp to block key thoroughfares, to organise peaceful protests, and to direct unarmed, violent jockeying with members of security forces. Interviews with former advisor to Lebanese premier and with political advisor to political party, November 2022.

72. Interviews with retired LAF officer, communications consultant, reformist political party leader, October-December 2022.

73. Interviews with officials, advisors, academics, and journalists in Lebanon, October-December 2022.

74. Interviews with advisors to political parties, October-December 2022.

Chouf, Aley, and South Lebanon Exchanges in Summer 2021

WhatsApp was used to organise responses to instances of intra-communal violence in 2021. After previous instances of carjacking and detainment of an organisational leader, two communities in Lebanon began to engage in different acts of violence or intimidation towards each other. Van drivers began assaulting roadside produce vendors in different parts of Lebanon, including the Beirut-Damascus highway; in turn, others used WhatsApp to organise reprisals, specifically rallying volunteers to stop bus or van drivers on the highway.[75]

Tayyouneh Clashes of 2021

In October 2021, factions fought in the Tayyouneh area of Beirut. Fighters shot at each other during concurrent peaceful protests, violent riots, and planned—or at least contemplated—directed violence around the ongoing, impeded domestic investigation into the Beirut Port explosions. Containing and countering some of the fighters, at least seven people were killed and more than 30 others wounded during a complex clash that lasted much of the day. People certainly used WhatsApp during and after the skirmishes, circulating videos, voice notes, and text messages—including rampant speculation, calls for participation, political spin, and misinformed or misleading purported facts such as on the identity of shooters and participants.[76] They showed fighters—some clearly affiliated with certain factions, others possibly in the military, police, or other factions—along with sidearms, hunting rifles, sniper rifles, automatic weapons, and rocket-propelled grenade launchers. They also circulated videos on WhatsApp, showing what people speculated were snipers leaving in sports-utility vehicles.[77] Others likely used WhatsApp to send and respond to specific alerts, including to leave their places of employment and join the skirmishes or stand by in different neighbourhoods.[78]
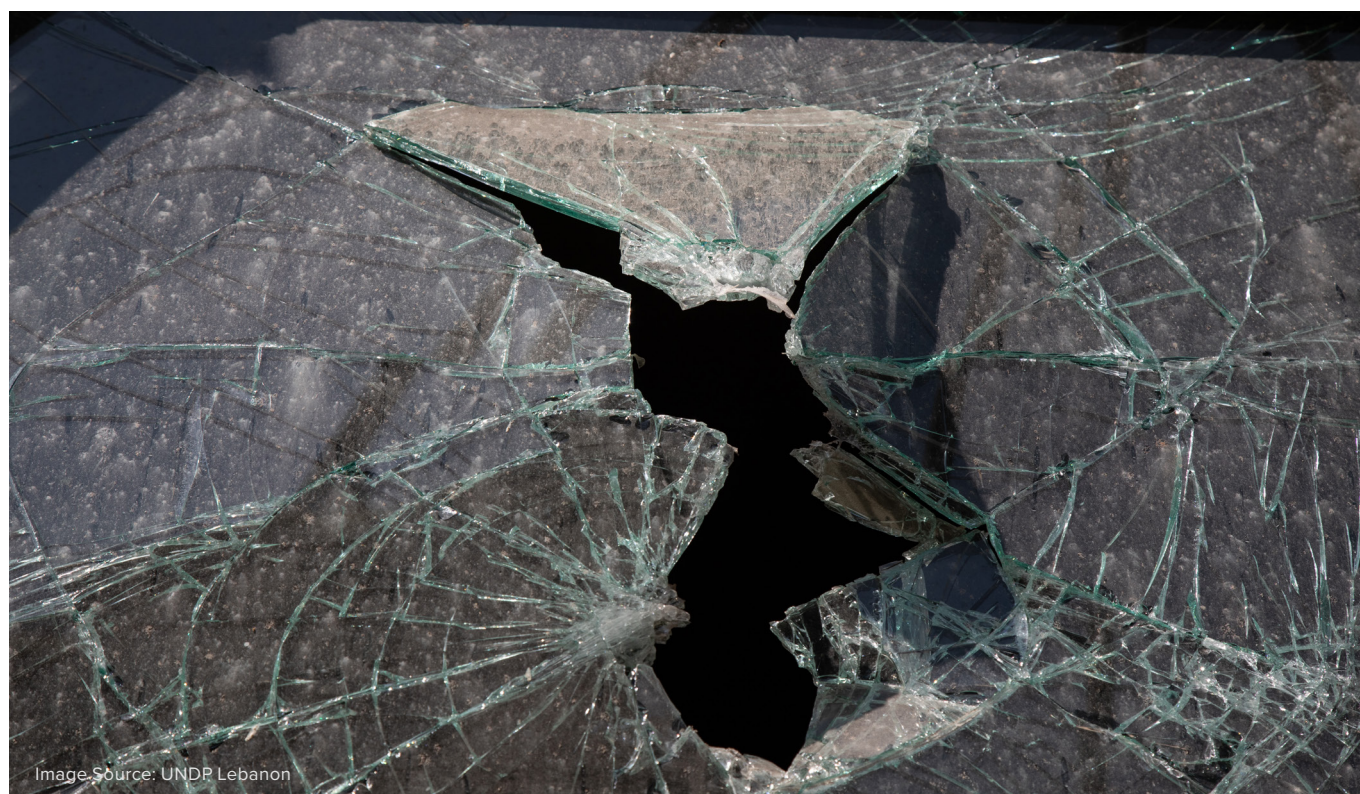

Image Source: UNDP Lebanon

Photo 3: Car windshield shattered by bullets during 2021 Tayyouneh clashes

75. Interviews with Lebanese peacebuilder and with advisor to political party, November 2022.

76. Interview with retired LAF officer interview and with advisor to political party, November 2022.

77. Interviews with Lebanese-origin security analyst and advisors to political parties, November-December 2022.

78. Interview with a Lebanese interlocutor, whose details we have here scrubbed further upon specific request, who noted that some of his colleagues were likely involved with three of the factions in the fights, received messages about an hour into the half-day skirmishes and left "basically en masse or in rapid succession."

Parliamentary Elections and Presidential Controversies

WhatsApp played a large role in outbreaks of violence in Lebanon during the 2021 Syrian Presidential Elections, the 2022 Lebanese Parliamentary Elections, and the ensuing political disruption that occurred in Lebanon at the end of 2022.

- During the 2021 Syrian Presidential Elections, WhatsApp users reportedly used the app to organise and coordinate responses to incidents of violence between Syrians and Lebanese.[79]

- During the 2022 Lebanese Parliamentary Election, during which Lebanese factions attacked each other's offices and clashed across the country, WhatsApp users shared videos of faction supporters attacking other parties' election booths in southern Lebanon and videos, voice notes, and texts about brawls in Mount Lebanon, Zahle, the Bekaa, and Beirut. Political factions also leveraged the app, using it to spread propaganda and targeted campaigns in places such as Beirut, where members of rival factions likely disseminated planned propaganda throughout the 2022 parliamentary election cycle.[80] Political factions also engaged in garden-variety campaigning and politicking—overtly or covertly sending messages for and against different leaders, policies, foreign states, and more.[81]

- During the political disruption and constitutional crisis that occurred in Lebanon at the end of 2022, WhatsApp users shared propaganda, disinformation, and misinformation regarding former president Michel Aoun.[82] In areas like Keserouan, Zahle, the Chouf, and Aley, different factions[83] tried to pre-empt violent clashes by sending messages to area officers and constituents requesting that they refrain from provocative statements and behaviour when dealing with fellow Lebanese—"regardless of what we might think of him and his faction."[84]

Image Source: Adobe Stock

Photo 4: The Lebanese flag in the centre of Jbeil

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79. Interviews with international observer, Palestinian activist, Lebanese communications advisor, November-December 2022.

80. Interviews with former advisor to Lebanese premier and with reformist party leader, December 2022.

81. Interviews with advisors to political parties, October-December 2022.

82. Integrated research, including interviews and data-driven analysis, October-December 2022.

83. Interview with advisors to political parties, October-December 2022.

84. Interview with advisor to political party, November 2022.

Ongoing Crises and Acute Resource Shortages

WhatsApp can and does exacerbate the impact of Lebanon's various ongoing crises and resource shortages. WhatsApp discussions of gasoline and electricity shortages have led to respective instances of offline violence and increases of inter and intra-communal tensions, while health-related mis- and disinformation strained an already weakened healthcare system.

- **Gasoline Shortages:** During intermittent gas shortages in 2021 and 2022, including a particularly acute crisis in the summer of 2021, men from Zahle and a nearby village beat and shot at each other. A gas station owner had been using a closed WhatsApp group to communicate with friends who helped him manage long lines, deal with angry customers, and protect the facility during nights—including after hours, or when receiving deliveries of gasoline. After men from a nearby village hijacked their gas truck and detained the driver, the owner and others used WhatsApp to coordinate their response, retrieve the driver, and "remove that truck before the army or police arrived on the scene."[85] Other uses of WhatsApp that pertain to gasoline shortages do not consist of such negative impacts on broader tensions. People in Lebanon routinely use WhatsApp to share videos, voice notes, texts, and photos of long lines or fights at gas stations and spread information about attacks against owners and operators of gas stations in northern Lebanon, southern Lebanon, and the Bekaa. In some instances, it is believed that some of those messages could have, to an extent, contributed to panic buying and longer queues in front of gas stations, notably in the summer of 2021.

- **Electricity Shortages:** People in Lebanon frequently discuss power generators and electricity shortages on WhatsApp. Historically, Lebanese political leaders and their supporters have blamed one another for electricity shortages, particularly after clashes and protests, such as the 2020 Khaldeh clashes and the 2021 Tayyouneh clashes.[86]

- **Healthcare:** People in Lebanon have used WhatsApp to spread disinformation and misinformation about medicine in Lebanon. While much of the misinformation is similar to that which is seen all over the world, including useless or reckless misapplications of different medicines or other substances, WhatsApp users in Lebanon have used the app to discuss medicine shortages during Lebanon's crises. Some users in Lebanon have used the app to share information about health-related initiatives or assistance programs, as well as to perpetrate fraudulent activities targeting vulnerable individuals. While some use the app to genuinely help others, there have been cases of individuals using it to exploit people in need by soliciting confidential information or falsely claiming to be intermediaries or facilitators of aid.[87] WhatsApp users in Lebanon have shared misinformation about the global COVID-19 pandemic, including incorrect information about vaccines, the Lebanese state's response, and propaganda from different factions who responded to the pandemic in different areas of influence. Users also shared exacerbating information about how religious services and diaspora returns were contributing to the pandemic, while others shared misinformation claiming different Christian saints or Muslim prayers could cure or prevent illness. In the pandemic's later stages, WhatsApp users shared exacerbating information claiming Lebanese leaders had rigged international institutional vaccination programs and blasted relevant institutions such as the World Bank for being complicit or weak. In addition to the COVID-19 pandemic, Lebanon experienced a cholera outbreak in 2022, during which WhatsApp users shared incorrect or incomplete information about the outbreak, in addition to disinformation that blamed Syrians for cholera, attributing the outbreak to both the number of Syrians in Lebanon and allegations of poor hygiene.[88]

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85. Interviews with Lebanese businesspersons and workers, December 2022.

86. Interviews with Lebanese-origin security analyst and focus group with students, November 2022.

87. Interview with Lebanese intermediary working in South Lebanon and Bekaa Valley, November 2022.

88. Interview with Lebanese intermediary, November 2022, and quantitative textual analysis, October-December 2022.

- **Basic Goods:** For years, now, the Lebanese have used WhatsApp and other platforms to share information and speculation about shortages in basic goods (including staples). During intermittent shortages and price spikes of bread and flour in 2022, people around Lebanon shared and saw videos, sent and listened to voice notes, and wrote and read text messages on WhatsApp about Syrians in bread lines. They've also repeatedly shared information about the availability of subsidised bread, rice, poultry, dairy, cooking oil, and more—then videos, voice notes, and texts of people in Beirut, Tripoli, the Bekaa, and beyond fighting over limited supplies.[89] Moreover, Lebanese, Syrians, and Palestinians circulated videos of speeches or highlights of comments made by officials or other prominent figures, such as Lebanese state officials expressing frustration with the presence of, and discourse by and around, Syrians in Lebanon.[90] Beyond that, they often cross-share information posted for one purpose to achieve another: for instance, taking posts from Facebook and other marketplace applications and websites and sharing them to highlight the extent of desperation, or to use as a prop against members of other factions or groups, or to castigate this or that leader. They may also recirculate posts on platforms like Instagram to highlight the consequences of acute crisis on an already-stratified society.[91]
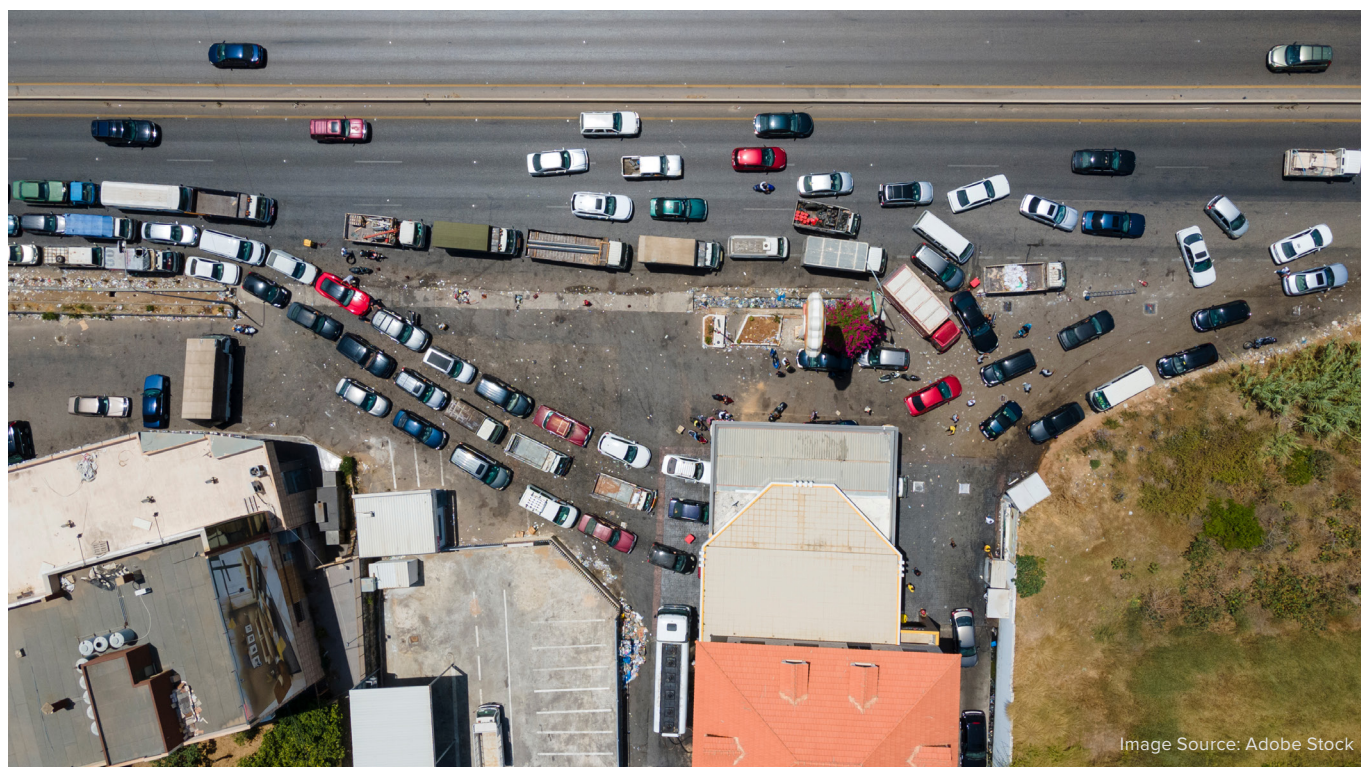

Image Source: Adobe Stock

Photo 5: Tens of cars line up near the very few open gas stations in Lebanon

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89. Interviews with officials, advisors, academics, and journalists in Lebanon, October-December 2022.

90. Interviews with Lebanese intermediary, Syrian service sector employee, and Palestinian analyst, October 2022-March 2023.

91. Interviews with Lebanese businesspersons and workers, December 2022.

Concluding Discussion

Almost all respondents of our qualitative interviews expressed concern about how WhatsApp is being used in Lebanon, noting that the same reasons it is prevalent and popular are also the reasons it can be harmful or misused.[92] Particularly since the crisis in 2019, the platform plays a critical role in ensuring users communicate with one another and be adequately informed of current events.

While the platform's prevalence and privacy allows users to share information in ways that are rapid, untraceable, and accessible, these same qualities allow users to exacerbate tensions in Lebanon, as information spreads rapidly and privately, information origins are not easily traced, and negative information outpaces all other kinds of information.

Despite the pitfalls of how WhatsApp is being used, users in Lebanon still value how the platform can be used to contribute positively to the Lebanese society, particularly the ability it provides to freely communicate with others. This indicates that there is a strong potential to explore usage of WhatsApp as a source of influence. Here, behavioural science has emerged as an effective antidote to online and offline misinformation, helping us to understand the mechanisms that drive information spread and design solutions to curb these negative influences.

One interview respondent said that "this is still better than other Arab states, including but not only Gulf Arab states. Take the freedom of expression and basic privacy over all the problems. And, let me tell you: The real problems in Lebanon are not about WhatsApp or a platform."[93] Although they acknowledged that so-called "electronic armies" are prevalent on public platforms such as Twitter, respondents were divided on the issue of whether WhatsApp or more public platforms are preferable. They were similarly divided on the merits and demerits of responding to incorrect or incomplete information, with some believing that sharing, replying to, or otherwise trying to manage disinformation and misinformation inevitably boosted that content.

Others, though, believe that incorrect information must be corrected, and that debates between differing viewpoints is important.[94] Ultimately, respondents were broadly concerned with the combined consequences of WhatsApp's convenience, user laziness, general innocence, and the speed of information exchanges—so fast that falsehoods become truth before the truth is public while theories become fact before a fact is public. Despite being aware of the risks, challenges, limits, and problems of WhatsApp use, people in the study reluctantly assessed that they may all be being used by WhatsApp and problematic information, just as they use WhatsApp.

This study served as a preliminary assessment of how usage of WhatsApp's impact is or can impact tensions in Lebanon. We determined that the nature of the information being shared, the prevalence of the app, and the various crises currently facing Lebanon collectively cause WhatsApp usage to contribute to both increased tensions and instances of offline harm. Future research of individual narratives, information mechanics, and user behaviours would likely provide additional insights into the exact nature of WhatsApp's impact on Lebanon and provide UNDP and other stakeholders with ways in which to possibly counter the application's negative impact and better utilize it as a tool for positive influence.

According to a former political party office liaison, "WhatsApp probably contributes to the problems more than it can contribute to solutions, if [we] are discussing this in the narrow sense. A solution may include WhatsApp, but [obviously/certainly] goes beyond it," thereby demonstrating the need for additional research and solutions that exist outside of the platform itself.[95]

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92. See, also, Lebanese Citizens, Disinformation, and News Sharing Behaviour, The Samir Kassir Foundation, January 2023.

93. Interview with communications consultant, December 2022.

94. Interlocutors did not necessarily have the same views regarding their own behaviour and the behaviour of others or their behaviour on one platform and on another platform.

95. Interview with a former party office liaison in Bekaa Valley, December 2022.

UNDP'S PROGRAMMATIC RESPONSE

UNDP in Lebanon has developed a programmatic response plan, which is informed by the *"What is Up on WhatsApp"* study and our experience. The plan, powered by data, analysis, and early action, seeks to address causes of tensions and conflict in the country. It was developed in collaboration with MAGENTA and drawn from the study's analysis of key behaviours contributing to the spread of negative and false information in Lebanon.

Photo Source: Adobe Stock

Our approach forms part of an organization-wide effort, rooted in tensions monitoring, peacebuilding, and communication approaches, all key components of UNDP's new Country Programme Document for Lebanon (2023-2025). Interventions include data collection and analysis, supporting preventative capacities including for national and local institutions, networks and infrastructures for peace, encouraging inclusive engagement and dialogue, and promoting the important role of youth, influencers, and journalists in the media and social media space. Key components include:

Continue to Monitor and Analyse Tensions and Behaviours on Social Media

- Continue current work to fully automate social media monitoring by using an objective, commercial social listening platform.

- Integrate findings from the report into the regular WhatsApp monitoring by tensions field teams.

- Expand the work on coupling social media monitoring with early action for mitigation.

- Continue behavioural science research and utilize the outcomes of this research as an effective antidote to online and offline misinformation in Lebanon.

- Regularly share recommendations with partners to ensure early action, a conflict-sensitive response and programmatic prioritization.

Boost Capacities for Fact-Checking

- Scale-up support to third-party fact-checking tools to a wider coverage of available resources.

- Train fact-checkers to look for specific issues such as anti-refugee rhetoric.

- Ensure that available fact-checking tools are accessible and have the capacity to receive requests from social media users. Continue to use Artificial Intelligence where possible.

- Continue to function as a key integrator for such interventions across the UN system.

Capacity Building and Accountability of Media to Ensure that Media Takes Social Responsibility, and Ensures Accuracy of Information and Objectivity in News

- Carry on training students and reporters on fact-checking and hate speech.

- Continue developing and scaling up online campaigns to tackle issues and raise awareness of the importance of fact-checking, the dangers of misinformation and disinformation, and to limit the spread of hate speech online.

- Engage fact-checking and youth groups in discussions related to misinformation, disinformation, and hate speech online to ensure that programmatic recommendations are developed inclusively.

- Ensure proper targeting of populations that are most susceptible to consumption and/or spreading of misinformation (e.g., elderly). Renew the UNDP Peacebuilding media pact whose purpose is to ensure that journalists and social media influencers engage ethically on social media platforms.

43

A STUDY ON THE IMPACT OF WHATSAPP ON TENSIONS IN LEBANON — What is Up on WhatsApp?

Addressing Negative Behaviours and Encouraging Positive Behaviours on WhatsApp

Through this study, UNDP and MAGENTA have worked to develop a hypothesised behavioural journey map (see below) of the psychological physical steps a user needs to take to stop trusting and sharing misleading information. Our recommendations focus primarily on individual-level interventions, which encourage users to recognize, identify, discern and challenge misleading information:

AWARENESS

Realisation that information shared online can be misleading, fake or negatively framed

ABILITY

Being able to discern the veracity of information:
- Remembering to check accuracy
- Checking the source
- Critical ignorance

BELIEF CORRECTION

Uptake beliefs based on new information

NO BELIEF CORRECTION

Do not change their beliefs but question the accuracy of information

ACTION

Do not share information in online or offline settings without checking the accuracy

CHAMPION
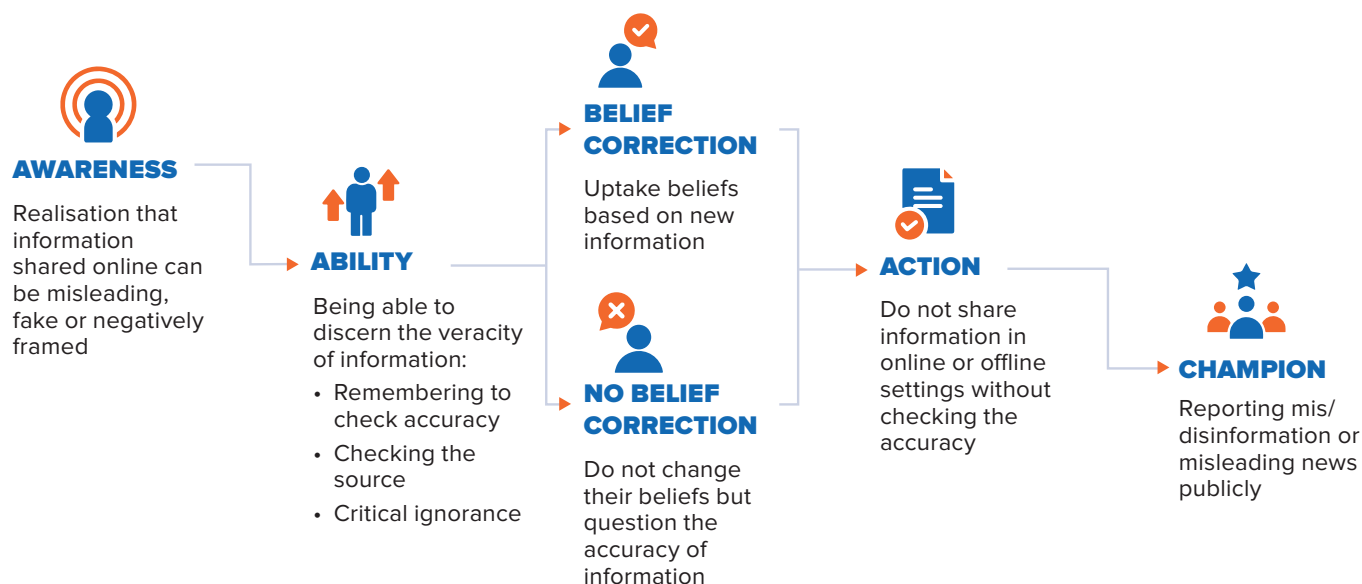
Reporting mis/disinformation or misleading news publicly

Figure 4: Behavioural Journey Map

Specific recommendations include:

AWARENESS	ABILITY	ACTION
• Raise awareness about malicious content and the mis/disinformation crisis though mass/social media	• Make accuracy salient through warning labels for false, misleading, or negative information • Boost digital literacy • Identify local trusted sources to spread verified and neutral information within communities	• Add friction to the sharing process to discourage wide circulation of information, like requiring additional clicks or making it harder to share forwarded messages • Debunk misinformation by providing factual corrections and exposing individuals to alternative viewpoints through multiple channels

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UNDP is the leading United Nations organization fighting to end the injustice of poverty, inequality, and climate change. Working with our broad network of experts and partners in 170 countries, we help nations to build integrated, lasting solutions for people and planet.