The Digital Worlds of Syrian Refugees and Host Communities in Northern Lebanon

Introduction

As mobile phones have become nearly ubiquitous globally, digitalisation has affected almost every aspect of modern life. Humanitarian contexts are no exception. For people affected by war, displacement and the increasingly severe impacts of climate change, mobile phones play a vital role in connecting them to lifesaving information and to loved ones in times of crisis.

Through mobile phones, individuals and communities create their own digital worlds. While accessing humanitarian services and information might be part of that world, it almost always extends much further to the personal preferences and activities of users.

This case study is part of a larger research study conducted in partnership with UNHCR that explored how people affected by displacement use and relate to their mobile phones. The research team conducted both in-depth qualitative research activities and a representative survey in three locations: Iowara, Papua New Guinea, Bor, South Sudan and northern Lebanon.

The full report, including details on methodology and findings from the other humanitarian contexts, can be found **here** ➡

Key findings:

- Lebanon has a developed mobile ecosystem, but fuel shortages in Tripoli and Akkar cause regular power outages and a declining economic situation is making it more challenging to access and use mobile phones.

- Still, mobile phones are important for connecting with others and for digital entertainment. Syrian refugees spend time every day connecting with friends and family, especially those at home in Syria.

- Concerns about surveillance, as well as scams and hate speech have led many people to use aliases online or to limit their interactions to close friends and family.

- Both Syrian refugees and the Lebanese host community told us that the most important app was WhatsApp for communication, news and online education. Syrians also used their phones to find information about humanitarian services.

Population

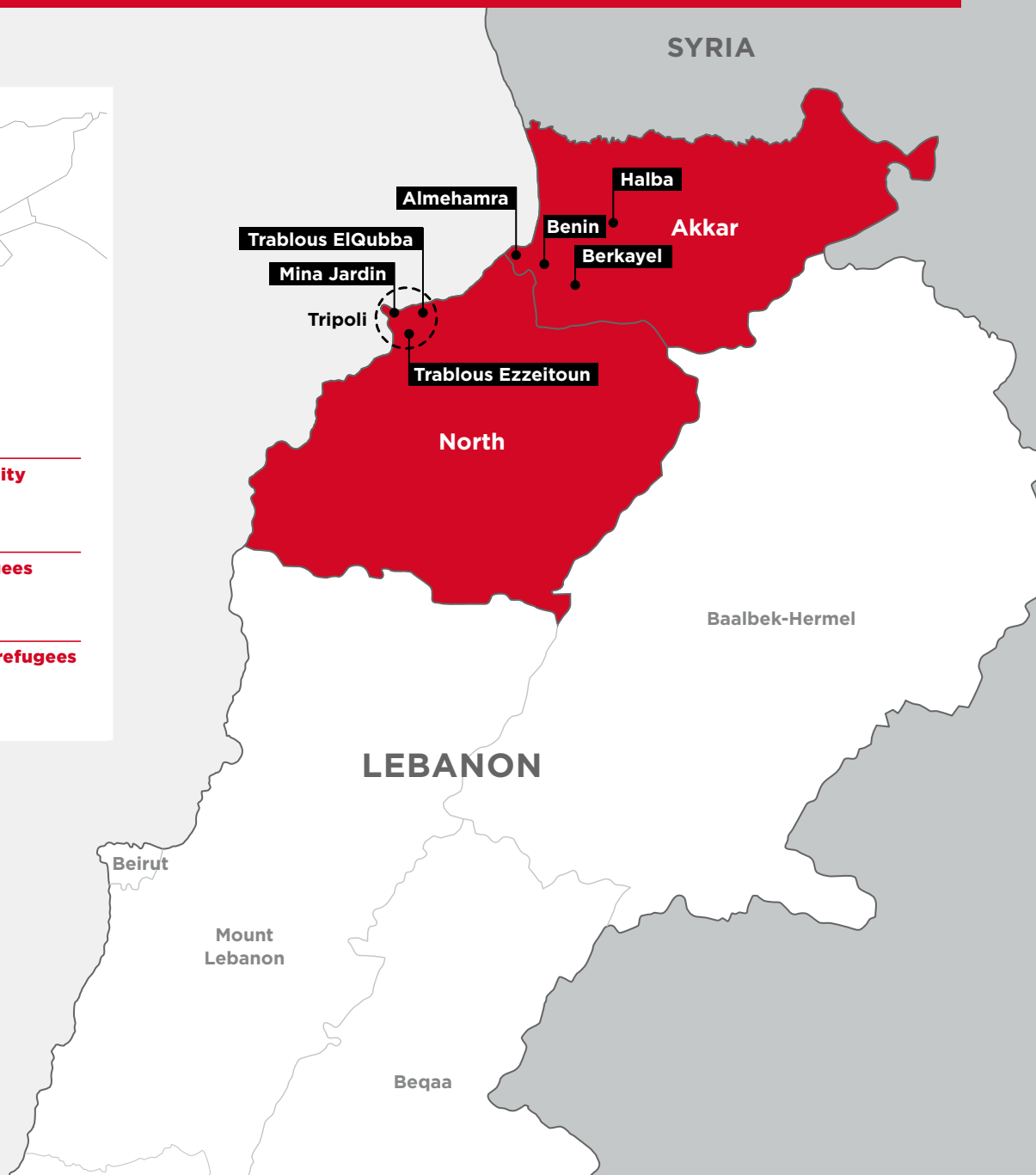📍 **North and Akkar Governorates**

Lebanese host community
820,882

Registered Syrian refugees
251,537

Registered Palestinian refugees
76,871

SYRIA

Halba
Almehamra
Benin
Akkar
Trablous ElQubba
Berkayel
Mina Jardin
Tripoli
Trablous Ezzeitoun

North

Baalbek-Hermel

LEBANON

Beirut

Mount Lebanon

Beqaa

Context

Lebanon is a lower-middle-income country facing a complex humanitarian crisis. For a decade, the country has hosted the most refugees per capita in the world, including an estimated 1.5 million people displaced by the conflict in Syria. Nine in 10 Syrian families and one in three Lebanese families currently live in extreme poverty,[1] and since 2019 the economic crisis has been compounded by a deteriorating currency, inflation, political instability, an explosion in the Beirut port and COVID-19. For Syrians, these challenging conditions have created an increasingly volatile environment. Since 2015, at the instruction of the Lebanese Government, UNHCR suspended registration of Syrian refugees,[2] and even registered refugees are finding it more difficult to renew their residency permits and face threats of deportation and forced return. This environment affects their access to basic services, movement and safety, and heightens safety and security risks.

This research captured the perspectives of Syrian refugees and members of the Lebanese communities that host them in the Tripoli Metropolitan Area and Akkar Governorate, across seven urban locations.[3] Both the North Governorate (where Tripoli is located) and the Akkar Governorate are underdeveloped and economically fragile, with less infrastructure and higher poverty rates than the rest of the country. It is estimated that a quarter of residents are refugees, and Akkar hosts the highest number of vulnerable refugees in Lebanon.[4] Unemployment is high – 32 per cent in the North Governorate and 27 per cent in Akkar[5] – and in 2021, 71 per cent and 51 per cent of Syrian households, respectively, had at least one working member.[6] More than one in four Lebanese households in the North Governorate are food insecure,[7] and Syrian refugees are heavily reliant on humanitarian assistance, including cash and vouchers, as well as informal credit and loans from shops and friends.

Mobile context

Lebanon has a developed mobile ecosystem with two mobile network operators (MNOs), Alfa and MTC Touch, roughly splitting market share.[8] There are 4.5 million unique mobile subscribers (65 per cent penetration) and 2.9 million unique mobile internet subscribers (45 per cent penetration) in a population of 6.9 million.[9]

SIM registration is overseen by the Telecommunications Regulatory Agency (TRA), which requires subscribers to present a valid ID card or passport and have a photo taken to purchase a SIM. Survey respondents do not currently view the availability of valid legal documents as a barrier to mobile ownership, but this may change.

The country's mobile ecosystem has challenges. Internet connectivity is among the most expensive in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), compounded by a deteriorating currency[10] and repricing in July 2022 that increased tariffs by up to four times.[11] Nationwide fuel shortages have led to some mobile towers losing power and caused outages in Tripoli and Akkar, and in 2022 the government announced a plan to phase out 2G networks, leaving 3G and 4G.[12] This will likely impact around 240,000 people who only have a 2G connection.[13] Given the financial barriers to accessing 3G- and 4G-enabled handsets, this is likely to have a disproportionate impact on Syrian refugees and vulnerable Lebanese citizens.

1   UN OCHA. (2021) Lebanon Emergency Response Plan 2021–2022.
2   UNHCR. (2019). Operational updates in Lebanon (January–December 2019).
3   Tripoli (Mina Jardin, Trablous-Ezzeitoun and Trablous-Alqubba); Akkar (Halaba, Berkayel, AlMehamara and Benien).
4   REACH. (2014). Livelihoods Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Akkar Governorate.
5   CASS and ILO. (2022). Lebanon follow-up Labour Force Survey: January 2022.
6   IAC Lebanon, UNHCR, WFP and UNICEF. (2022). Vulnerability Assessment of Syrian Refugees in Lebanon.
7   UN OCHA. (2021). Lebanon Emergency Response Plan 2021–2022.
8   GSMA Intelligence.
9   GSMA Intelligence.
10   UNHCR. (2020). Displaced and Disconnected. p.22
11   Reuters, Beirut. (2022). "Lebanon telecom price hikes threatens migrants' link to jobs, safety". Al Arabiya News.
12   The research was conducted before these changes were implemented.
13   GSMA Intelligence.

Mobile access

In interviews, Syrian refugees said that mobile phones were central to their lives, and that they purchased their phone soon after moving to Lebanon to communicate with friends and family or to register for humanitarian services. Similar research has found that households rank their phones as important an asset as identity documents.[14]
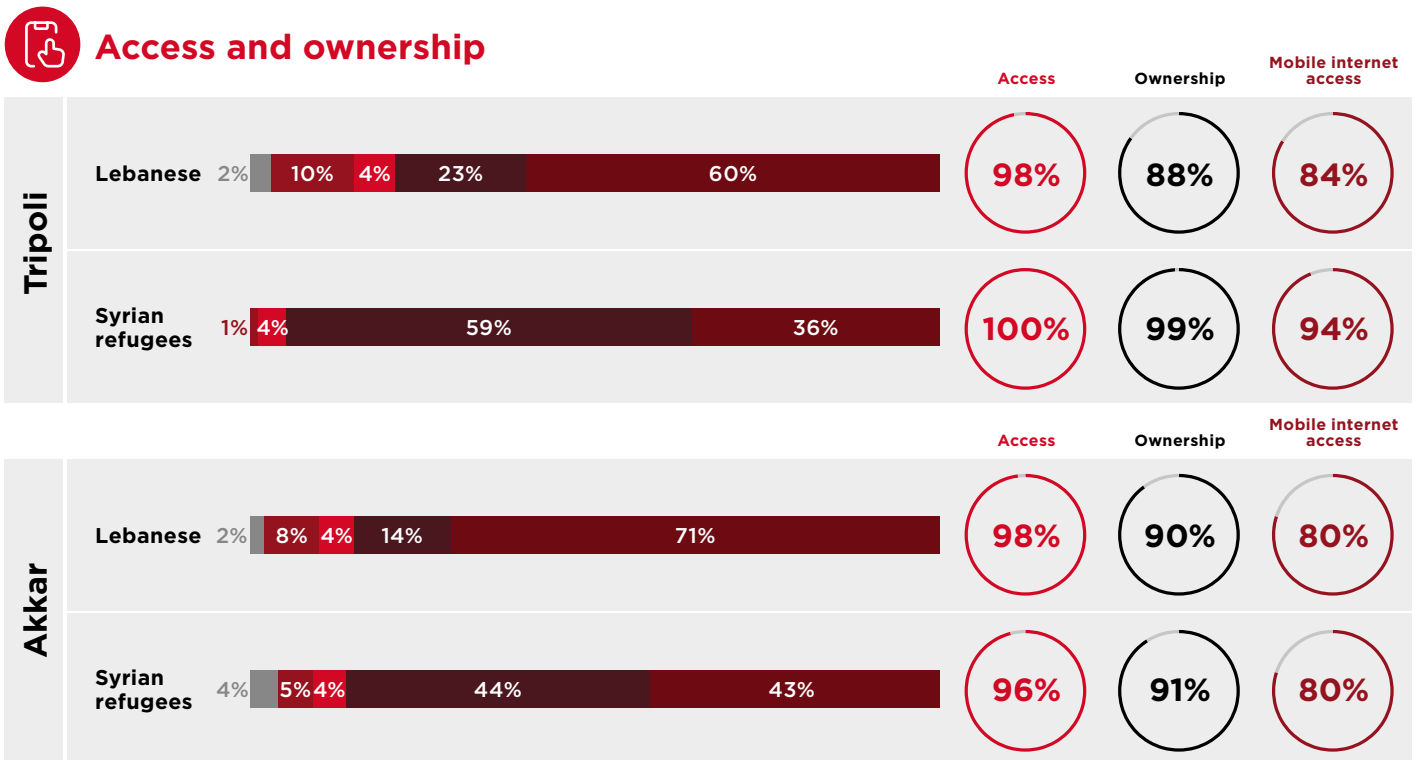
> "As soon as I arrived to Lebanon, I got a phone to be able to register with the UN – I came in early 2013."
>
> **– Female Syrian refugee, Akkar.**

Households typically owned two to three mobile phones on average for every five people, and members of the household took turns using them.

While sharing mobile phones between households was rare, it was more common to share a Wi-Fi connection between families. People told us that sometimes an entire building will purchase a single internet subscription or residents will use the Wi-Fi from a nearby café to keep costs down.

Similarly, most people owned an internet-enabled handset (a feature phone or a smartphone) (Figure 1). Host community members were much more likely to own a smartphone than Syrian refugees, which means refugees are disproportionately excluded from more advanced phone uses, apps and services. If 2G networks are shut down as planned, the four per cent of respondents who still rely on basic phones will likely be cut off from connectivity if they are unable to upgrade to 3G- or 4G-enabled handsets.

Figure 1

Mobile ownership and access, by research location

Access and ownership

Tripoli

Lebanese: No access 2%, Can borrow 10%, Basic phone 4%, Feature phone 23%, Smartphone 60% — Access 98%, Ownership 88%, Mobile internet access 84%

Syrian refugees: No access 1%, Basic phone 4%, Feature phone 59%, Smartphone 36% — Access 100%, Ownership 99%, Mobile internet access 94%

Akkar

Lebanese: No access 2%, Can borrow 8%, Basic phone 4%, Feature phone 14%, Smartphone 71% — Access 98%, Ownership 90%, Mobile internet access 80%

Syrian refugees: No access 4%, Can borrow 5%, Basic phone 4%, Feature phone 44%, Smartphone 43% — Access 96%, Ownership 91%, Mobile internet access 80%

Legend: No access, Can borrow, Basic phone, Feature phone, Smartphone

Q: What kind of phone do you personally own? (None, Basic phone, Feature phone, Smartphone);
Q: Do you have access to someone else's mobile phone?
Q: Do you use mobile internet (social media, apps and websites like WhatsApp, Messenger, Facebook, etc.)?
Base: All respondents: Akkar (Refugees: 210, Lebanese: 210), Tripoli (Refugee: 209, Lebanese: 211)

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14   Uzelac, A. et al. (2018). The untapped resource: Protecting and leveraging refugee social capital in protracted displacement. Clingendael.

According to research, Syrians who live close to the Lebanon-Syria border use Syrian SIM cards to make cheaper calls within Syria.[15] While only 9 per cent of Syrians in this study used a Syrian SIM, some people reported keeping a Syrian SIM card even if they do not use it frequently.

SIM registration was not perceived as a barrier to mobile use in this study, but it was notable that many did not have a SIM registered in their own name. For example, only 40 per cent of refugees in Tripoli had a SIM in their own name.

Digital exclusion

High levels of mobile access and ownership in northern Lebanon masked underlying digital exclusion. For most groups in the survey, there was a small gender gap in mobile ownership, in line with or below average for the region (9 per cent).[16] However, there are more pronounced differences in smartphone ownership and internet use. For example, Syrian women in Tripoli were 80 per cent less likely to own a smartphone, and Lebanese women in Akkar were 20 per cent less likely to use the internet than their male counterparts. Notably, only a third of Syrians with a SIM in their own name, and all those whose SIMs were registered in the name of an NGO, were women. This points to the critical role of humanitarian organisations in enabling digital inclusion for some Syrian women.

Figure 2

Mobile ownership by status, research location and gender
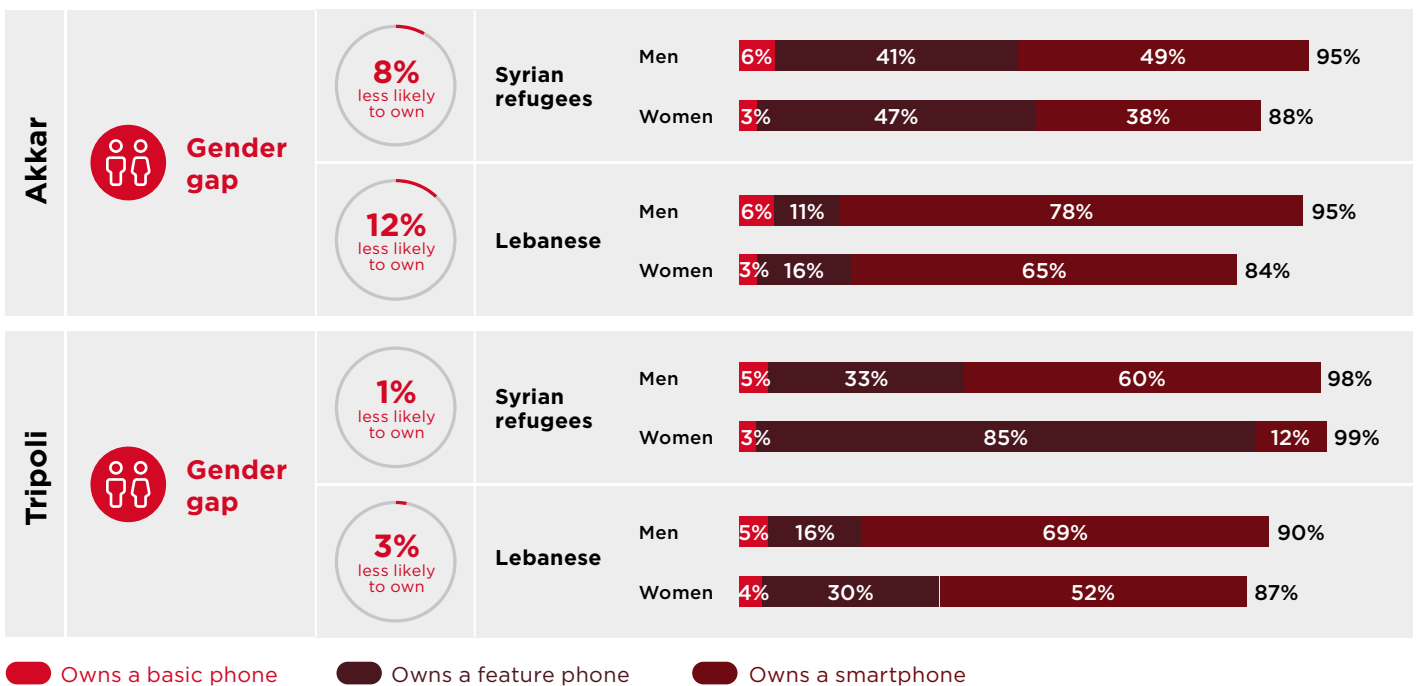
Owns a basic phone   Owns a feature phone   Owns a smartphone

Q: What kind of phone do you personally own? (None, Basic, Feature, Smart)
Base: All respondents: Akkar, Syrians (Men: 105, Women: 105); Akkar, Lebanese (Men: 105, Women: 105); Tripoli, Syrians (Men: 106, Women: 103); Tripoli, Lebanese (Men: 105, Women: 106)
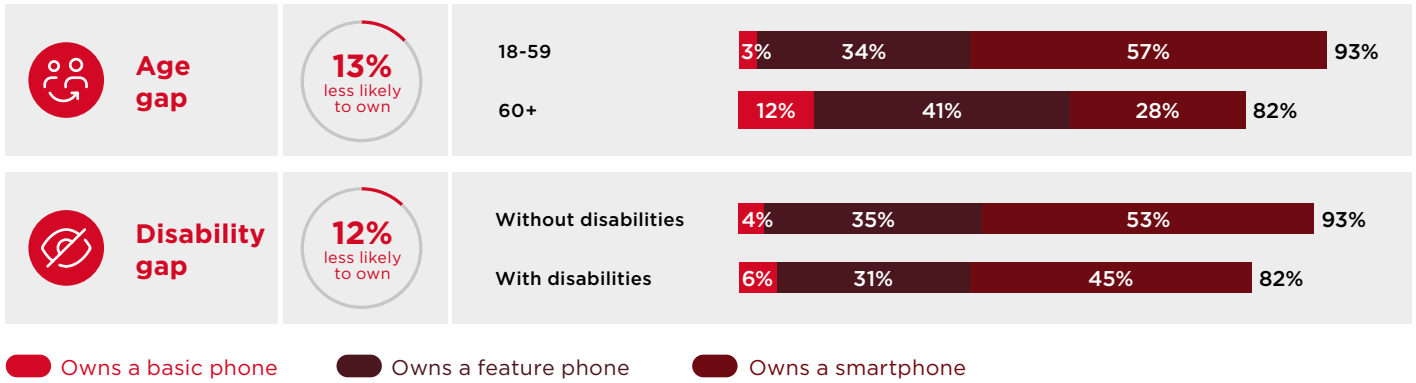
15 Göransson, M., Hultin, L. and Mähring, M. (2020). "'The phone means everything': Mobile phones, livelihoods and social capital among Syrian refugees in informal tented settlements in Lebanon". Migration and Development. 9 (3).
16 GSMA. (2022). The Mobile Gender Gap Report 2022.

Across the entire sample,[17] both older people and people with disabilities were less likely to own a mobile phone than younger people or those without disabilities (Figure 3). While rates of phone sharing were high among households in these groups, people who do not own a phone are less able to access information, communicate with friends and family at home, or access assistance whenever they need or want to.

Figure 3

Mobile ownership by disability status and age

Age gap	**13%** less likely to own	18-59	3%	34%	57%	93%
		60+	12%	41%	28%	82%
Disability gap	**12%** less likely to own	Without disabilities	4%	35%	53%	93%
		With disabilities	6%	31%	45%	82%

● Owns a basic phone   ● Owns a feature phone   ● Owns a smartphone

Q: What kind of phone do you personally own? (None, Basic, Feature, Smart)
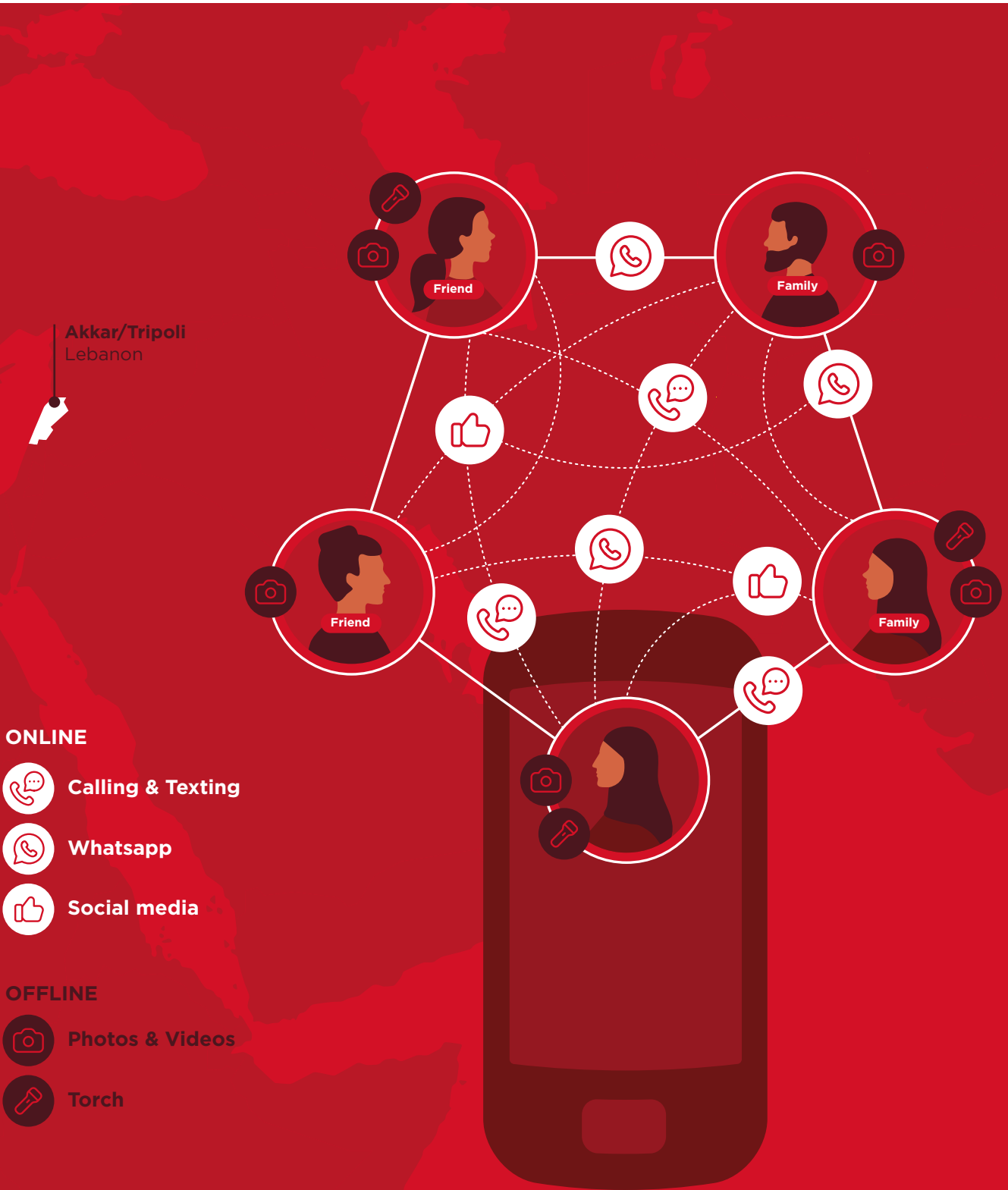Base: All respondents: Persons with disabilities: 49; Persons without disabilities: 791; 18 to 59: 731; 60+: 109
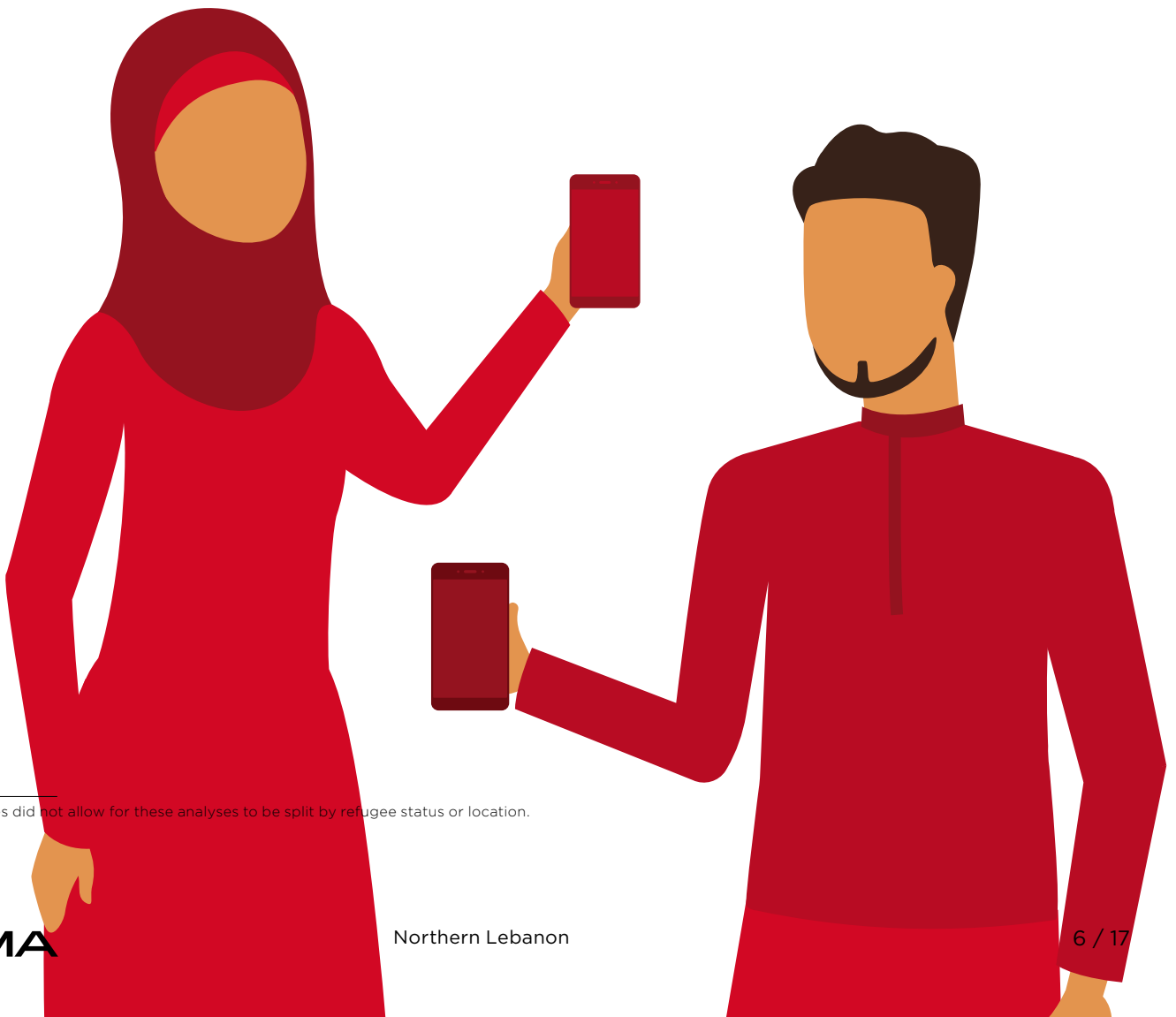
17   Sample sizes did not allow for these analyses to be split by refugee status or location.

Mobile use

Figure 4

Mobile use among Syrian refugees in Akkar and Tripoli

Akkar/Tripoli
Lebanon

ONLINE

Calling & Texting

Whatsapp

Social media

OFFLINE

Photos & Videos

Torch

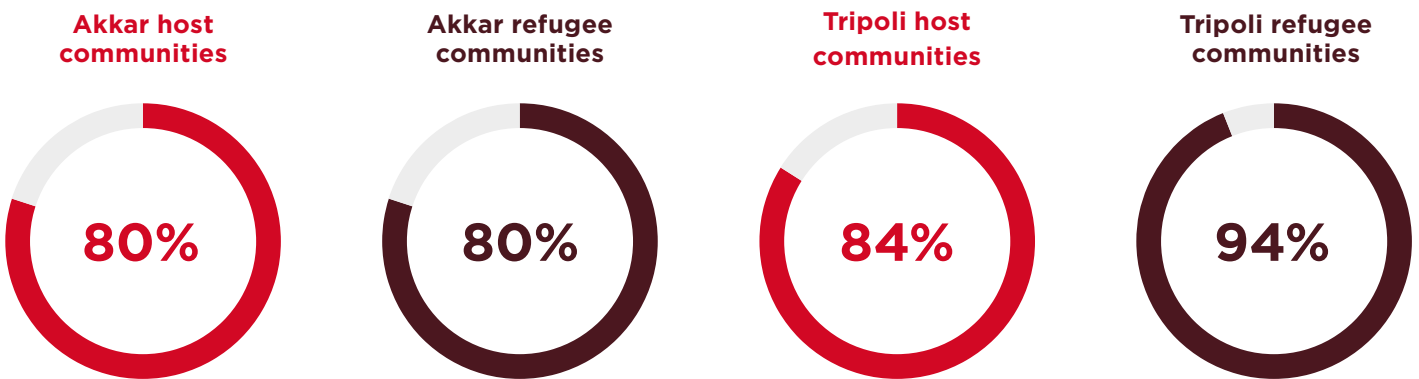Friend

Family

Friend

Family

The study identified a broad range of mobile uses, including calling, video calling or messaging friends and family, taking photos and videos and using the handset as a torch (flashlight). On average, people reported using their mobile phone for more than five different things. The top three use cases were communicating with friends and family, taking photos and videos and using phones as a light source. Given the high rate of ownership of internet-enabled handsets, many people reported using the internet and related uses such as social media. However, internet use was neither ubiquitous nor always available. Forty-one per cent of Syrian refugees and 24 per cent of host community members surveyed would like to use the internet more than they currently do. This was a source of frustration, especially for young people who explained that restricted internet access made them feel disconnected and isolated:

"The negative side (of mobile phones) would be the frustration of not having a phone and not being able to communicate with the outside world as I need to always have direct contact with my family and friends, and that keeps me awake and frustrated most of the time."

– Male Syrian refugee, Tripoli

Figure 5
Internet use by status and research location

Akkar host communities	**Akkar refugee communities**	**Tripoli host communities**	**Tripoli refugee communities**
80%	**80%**	**84%**	**94%**

Q: Do you use mobile internet (social media, apps and websites like WhatsApp, Messenger, Facebook, etc.)?
Base: All respondents: Akkar (Refugees: 210, Lebanese: 210), Tripoli (Refugees: 209, Lebanese: 211)

Communication

Mobile phones were used primarily for communication. For the most part this was with friends and family, which was especially important during COVID-19 lockdowns. Many Syrians spent hours every day calling, texting and video calling, allowing them to maintain day-to-day relationships with family members in Syria. This was the most cited use of mobile phones in the survey, reported by more than 80 per cent of all groups. For many, this communication was online, including via Facebook, YouTube, Facebook Messenger, TikTok and email. WhatsApp was the most widely used and popular mode of communication for both Syrian and Lebanese respondents. They liked it because it was free, operated on slow connections, allowed them to leave voice note messages and because it was "simple" and "easy to use", particularly for older people and people with disabilities.

Mobile phones were also used to interact with humanitarian service providers. At least 31 humanitarian organisations used SMS to communicate directly with Syrian refugees or gather feedback.[18] UNHCR uses SMS for their registration process to confirm registration and provide information on assistance and services.[19] People stated that they were happy to receive SMS messages from humanitarian organisations because they were free of charge. However, they preferred to respond using WhatsApp whenever possible. Several organisations have created WhatsApp platforms, such as communication trees or chatbots, Facebook pages or webpages for sharing messages. Syrian refugees told us they prefer to access humanitarian information on social media platforms or through personal communication rather than official websites.
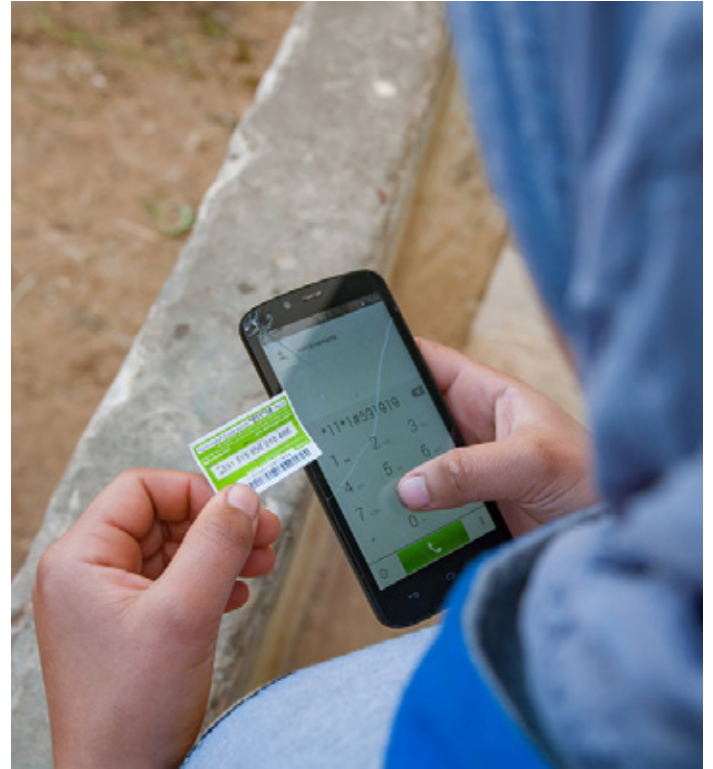
Social media

Both the refugee and host communities were active on social media, although the ways they use it seem to be quite different. Syrians tended to have a small public digital footprint and fewer contacts (see the Concerns and frustrations section). Still, 36 per cent of Syrians and 39 per cent of Lebanese respondents told us they share messages with people they do not know on social media platforms, such as public Facebook groups and pages. Many used an alias or nickname (such as "Abu Fares", the father of Fares) to conceal their identity.

Many Syrians told us that most of their online activity was focused on their own communities, and that they can spend weeks without any social interaction with the Lebanese host community. This limited social interaction was exacerbated by a feeling of growing hostility, online misinformation and hate speech, as well as by the COVID-19 pandemic (see Box 2).

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18   UN OCHA. (2021). Lebanon: Complaints and feedback mechanisms.
19   Uzelac, A. et al. (2018). The untapped resource: Protecting and leveraging refugee social capital in protracted displacement. Clingendael.

Entertainment

Frequent electricity cuts have prevented many people from regularly using their TVs and pushed them to rely increasingly on their mobile phones for entertainment, including to watch series, news and sports. Both the refugee and host communities commonly used Facebook and YouTube for entertainment, learning languages, watching motivational videos and finding out about science, life hacks and skills. Young Syrians and Lebanese consumed content from Instagram and TikTok, which were generally not well regarded by the older generation. Parents used their mobile phones to show cartoons to their children. Intermittent electricity has meant people have learned ways to conserve their phone batteries for as long as possible.

Education

The use of online education in Lebanon increased with the COVID-19 lockdown between December 2020 and March 2022, when education shifted to being remote (see Box 2). In interviews, Syrian women explained they were generally responsible for facilitating and following up on their children's education. Children used their mother's phone or the household phone for classes, to collect instructions and to share their handwritten homework with their teacher over WhatsApp. Families said that downloading the teacher's WhatsApp voice notes could take a long time given the weak internet connection.

Work

Finally, a small number of people, mostly men, used their phones to find work. For example, Syrian men described using their mobile phones to view or follow up on job advertisements, mainly for seasonal work, construction work and work in the informal sector. Syrian women were sceptical about using mobile phones to find work opportunities, including online work, mainly because of concerns over scams or abuse from potential employers.

Box 1

Digital diary of a Syrian refugee in northern Lebanon

Fatema* is a 36-year-old Syrian woman with a smartphone (Samsung 21C) who lives with her family in Akkar. She is the primary caregiver for her son who lives with a disability. She recently started a home-based small business making dairy products. Her diary captures the different ways mobile phones are used in her community for communication, education, seeking humanitarian assistance and building a new business.

*Not her real name

Day 1

	How you used your phone	Detail
Morning	I used WhatsApp.	When I first woke up, I communicated with my family and relatives on WhatsApp. I also spent a bit of time on Facebook checking some posts.
Afternoon	My son had school online, so he used my phone to study.	I helped him read as well because he has some eyesight issues. Similarly, my daughter also has her online lessons.
Evening	Spent some of my free time on WhatsApp and Facebook.	I was able to get in touch with friends and family. Also, because I recently started working on a new project for myself – making dairy and cheese products – I was told that it would help to promote it and share about it on Facebook, so I spent some time doing that.

Day 2

	How you used your phone	Detail
Morning	When I woke up today, I sent some good morning messages and greeting texts. After that I opened Facebook where I read a bit about the economy.	My morning reading is very important to stay updated on what is happening in the country and to stay informed, especially about the economy and the USD/Lira rate, which is changing day by day.
Afternoon	I tried this afternoon to get in touch with the UN.	I think I tried around 40 times to call, but unfortunately no one answered back. The call never connected. It can be frustrating to want to connect and talk to someone that you can't reach.
Evening	I connected a bit with friends and family over Facebook and WhatsApp.	It is very good that we are able to connect and communicate with the people that are close and far. However, what is making it harder is that the coverage is becoming weaker by the day because of the electricity problems. We get it for an hour in the morning, and at night it will be gone soon. This is causing us a lot of issues, as we can't charge our phone or use the internet.

Day 3

|	How you used your phone	Detail
Morning	In the morning when I woke up, I spoke with my relatives over WhatsApp.	I also contacted some relatives of mine to go over and visit them. When I was at their place, I was able to connect to the internet again and I used my phone there to talk to some friends.
Afternoon	In the afternoon, I called my husband.	I was also asked to open a page on Facebook and Instagram for the new project that I am hoping to embark on.
Evening	I spent some time on Facebook and WhatsApp.	I looked at different pages to check how my project page should look, I also communicate with friends and family.

Concerns, frustrations and barriers

As mentioned, there was a sense of frustration that limited connectivity was leading to isolation and disconnectedness. This was felt both by those who could not access a handset easily and by mobile phone owners affected by intermittent network downtime due to the ongoing economic and energy crises in Lebanon.

Many Syrian refugees, especially those from rural areas, were suspicious of social media[20] due to the long history of censorship and surveillance of traditional and social media in Syria. Concerns over being watched online have led some to only engage heavily with a limited number of people, and to maintain a small public digital footprint and low profile, both online and offline. They felt that they are under surveillance and that public social media networks were being monitored by the authorities. Syrian women were particularly concerned about revealing their names, photos or identity on social media.

Many research participants, especially Syrian women, discussed fears of experiencing abuse, confrontation or hate speech while using their phone, specifically on social media and/or the internet. This led to them restricting the size and shape of their digital world, such as limiting the number of people they interact with and the amount they reveal about themselves online.

There were also concerns about the negative consequences of using mobile phones. These concerns were well founded: more than 20 per cent of users had been targeted by scammers, almost two-thirds of whom have experienced direct harm. People were already adapting their mobile use and behaviour to protect themselves. Many Syrians, especially women, told us they only share their mobile number with family members and humanitarian agencies.

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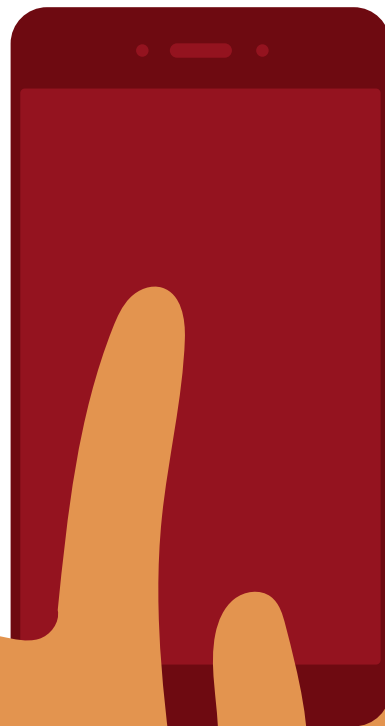
20 Internews. (2013). Lost: Syrian refugees and the information gap. p. 2.

Despite high mobile penetration in both the refugee and host communities, there were persistent barriers to mobile ownership, internet access and use among some groups. These barriers included:

Costs

The deteriorating economic situation and widespread poverty in northern Lebanon have increased financial barriers to mobile access, ownership and use. Of the 9 per cent of survey respondents who did not own a mobile phone, more than half identified the costs of buying a phone and airtime as their most significant barrier. Among mobile phone users, the costs of buying airtime and data bundles were their main challenge (20 per cent). This is likely to increase, as this study was conducted before repricing that has increased some tariffs by up to four times.

Connectivity

Only 54 per cent of survey respondents had mobile network coverage at home (43 per cent in Akkar; 73 per cent in Tripoli). The fuel crisis had also had an impact on mobile network towers, interrupting coverage (for 11 per cent of respondents) and slowing mobile internet access (for 13 per cent of respondents), particularly in Akkar. Slow networks were cited as a key barrier to internet use in both locations and by all groups.

Charging

Fuel shortages and frequent electricity cuts have made it more difficult for users to charge their mobile phone batteries reliably. Only 62 per cent of users could charge their batteries reliably at home, and 70 per cent of Lebanese respondents in Tripoli said that a key barrier to using the internet was that it used too much battery power.

Literacy and digital literacy

For a small number of users, a lack of literacy and digital literacy skills limited their access to and use of mobile phones, particularly older people.

Social barriers

For women, particularly Lebanese women in the host communities, family approval was the second greatest barrier to using a mobile phone. In interviews, it became clear that men were largely responsible for financing, charging and topping up household mobile phones, and few of the women interviewed knew the monthly costs of their phone packages. Several added that their husband or male figure in their household decides which apps they can use and explained that they are cautious about downloading apps that might access their private information.

"My husband usually deals with the information source and if it is right. As for the hate speech, that's one of the reasons why we don't have Facebook because it exists there. We saw a lot of hate speech between refugees and Lebanese and that escalated a lot. We don't want any problems, so we are not involved at all."

– Female Syrian refugee, Akkar, Lebanon

The importance of connectivity during COVID-19

COVID-19 had a severe impact on Lebanon. Beyond the health effects, economic hardship pushed tens of thousands into extreme poverty.[21] Mobile technology, however, played a critical role in helping people cope during the pandemic.

Importance of mobile technology

Restrictions on movement were in place in both Tripoli and Akkar during the pandemic, which meant mobile technology became a vital part of everyday life. Six in 10 people reported increased phone use during the lockdowns. Schools moved online. Some used their mobile phones to request help from family or friends with shopping for their basic needs while those who could afford to ordered from online food delivery services. Many Syrians and Lebanese reported that using mobile phones for digital leisure contributed to their well-being and reduced stress.

> ## "It helps me relax and teaches me new things."
>
> **– Male Syrian refugee, Akkar, Lebanon**

The pandemic exacerbated the risk of digital exclusion. This was evident among people who struggled to afford to charge or buy data for their phones and was felt more acutely in Syrian households. For example, despite reliance on mobile education during lockdowns, only 22 per cent of Syrian households accessed it compared to 42 per cent of Lebanese households.

Mobile technology in humanitarian services

As COVID-19 spread, the humanitarian sector had to change how it operated. In Lebanon, in-person humanitarian activities were suspended, except for essential services. Many Syrian refugees felt confused about how to access remote services, which was likely made worse by interrupted connectivity. Eleven per cent used mobile phones to actively look for information from humanitarian organisations, but most waited for direct communication on new ways to access services. Still, Syrians reported new and widespread use of WhatsApp groups to engage with their neighbourhood and community or humanitarian organisations.

Information, vaccines and services

Many Syrians and Lebanese had limited options for COVID-19 testing or treatment, making online information vital. Most people used their phones to seek information. Humanitarian agencies shared information on common signs and symptoms via SMS and WhatsApp, and many Syrians reported sharing information on prevention and protection with their families back home. A great deal of information about COVID-19 on social media was believed to be misinformation. Syrians said they had trusted UNHCR and other humanitarian organisations as their main source of information, rather than national authorities or public news.

The lockdown, which imposed restrictions on movement for unvaccinated people, encouraged many to seek vaccination but, for refugees, a significant gap remains.[22] Almost everyone we interviewed had received information on their mobile phone from humanitarian organisations, particularly UNHCR, promoting the COVID-19 vaccine and providing instructions on how to register.

> ## "UN directly sent us the information messages, and they were sent via both WhatsApp and direct SMS services. There was also an email that was shared and spread over Facebook whose main source was also the UN, so we were able to directly trust it."
>
> **– Male Syrian refugee, Akkar, Lebanon**

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21   World Bank. (2020). Compounding misfortunes.

22   Kaloti R. and Fouad, F.M. (2022). "The politics of COVID-19 vaccine equity among refugee populations in Lebanon". Journal of Global Health Economics and Policy, 2.

Conclusions and recommendations

Mobile technology was readily available and widely used in northern Lebanon, both by Syrian refugees and the Lebanese communities that host them. Access was not uniform, however. Groups traditionally at risk of being marginalised were less likely to have digital access, and the increasingly fraught economic situation has been pricing people out of connectivity. Those who have a mobile phone considered them a vital part of their day-to-day lives, and have created digital worlds in which they can connect with friends and family far away, enjoy leisure or down time and engage with humanitarian services and information, especially in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic (see Box 2).

While people were keen to use the internet to find information, spend down time and access services, there was a great deal of concern and hesitation about the potential risks and harms of being online. This was especially true among those in the Syrian refugee community who worried about sharing too much information about themselves online and deliberately curtailed the boundaries of their digital worlds. Since this protective behaviour is a response to broader concerns about personal security and intercommunal harmony, it is not something that is likely to be resolved online.

Recommendations

For humanitarian organisations:

- **Humanitarians** should consider the ways in which they share information with people in need of their services. In particular, they should recognise the concerns of Syrian refugees about the types of information they feel comfortable or uncomfortable sharing online, and communicate with communities through preferred channels, such as WhatsApp. It is particularly important that people have the choice to access humanitarian assistance through offline channels without being required to share personal information online.

- Similarly, **humanitarians** should explore ways to ensure that preferred communication channels are used. WhatsApp used free over Wi-Fi is the preferred mode of communication for both refugee and host communities, rather than traditional hotlines that require the use of increasingly expensive networks. An example from Lebanon is the Solidarités International Solis bot, which uses WhatsApp as an automated messaging platform for the communities they serve.

- Importantly, **humanitarians** should coordinate communication across all sectors to ensure a range of channels are harmonized and consistent for those receiving assistance. This could be done through the various sector Working Groups'

- **Humanitarians** should acknowledge the role they could play in supporting the digital inclusion of Syrian women, given that every survey respondent whose SIM card was registered in the name of an NGO was a woman.

- **Humanitarians** should consider what programming they could implement to increase digital access and inclusion in the communities they serve. Examples may include digital literacy training (it would be important to include training on recognising and responding to online harms) or provide sites where communities can charge their phones and access free Wi-Fi. This would help to overcome some of the key barriers identified in the research.

For donors:

- **Donors** should investigate ways to provide funding to programmes that facilitate digital access and inclusion in Syrian refugee and Lebanese host communities. Funding earmarked specifically for digital development and inclusion could have significant positive impacts on the lives of people who are digitally excluded.

For humanitarians and MNOs:

- **Humanitarians and MNOs** should consider partnerships to raise awareness of digital risks and how to mitigate them, especially scams and online harms. For example, humanitarians could monitor and track rumours to identify common scams and share information about them with communities, both online and offline.[23]

For government/regulators and MNOs:

- **Regulators and MNOs** should investigate how they could provide more predictable connectivity within current economic constraints. As the 2G network is phased out, it will be vital that connectivity remains reliable and predictable for all customers.

For all stakeholders:

- **Government/regulators, MNOs, humanitarians and donors** should consider ways that barriers to affordability can be overcome, particularly given increasing economic pressures and the recent rise in tariff prices. This might include reducing some taxes, providing tailored bundles for people receiving humanitarian assistance or using donor funds to cover some costs for those most in need.

- **Humanitarians, MNOs, digital providers and government/regulators** should work together to identify who will be affected by the phase out of the 2G network and limit the repercussions of this decision. It will be essential that this is communicated to affected mobile customers as early as possible. It may also present a commercial opportunity for MNOs if customers are given the opportunity to upgrade to 3G- and 4G-enabled handsets through tailored packages and bundles.

- All **stakeholders** should understand who has access to mobile phones and who does not, especially internet-enabled ones. Only paying attention to the high overall access figures masks disparities among groups already at risk of being marginalised.

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23 Internews. (2019). Managing Misinformation in a Humanitarian Context Internews Rumour Tracking Methodology.