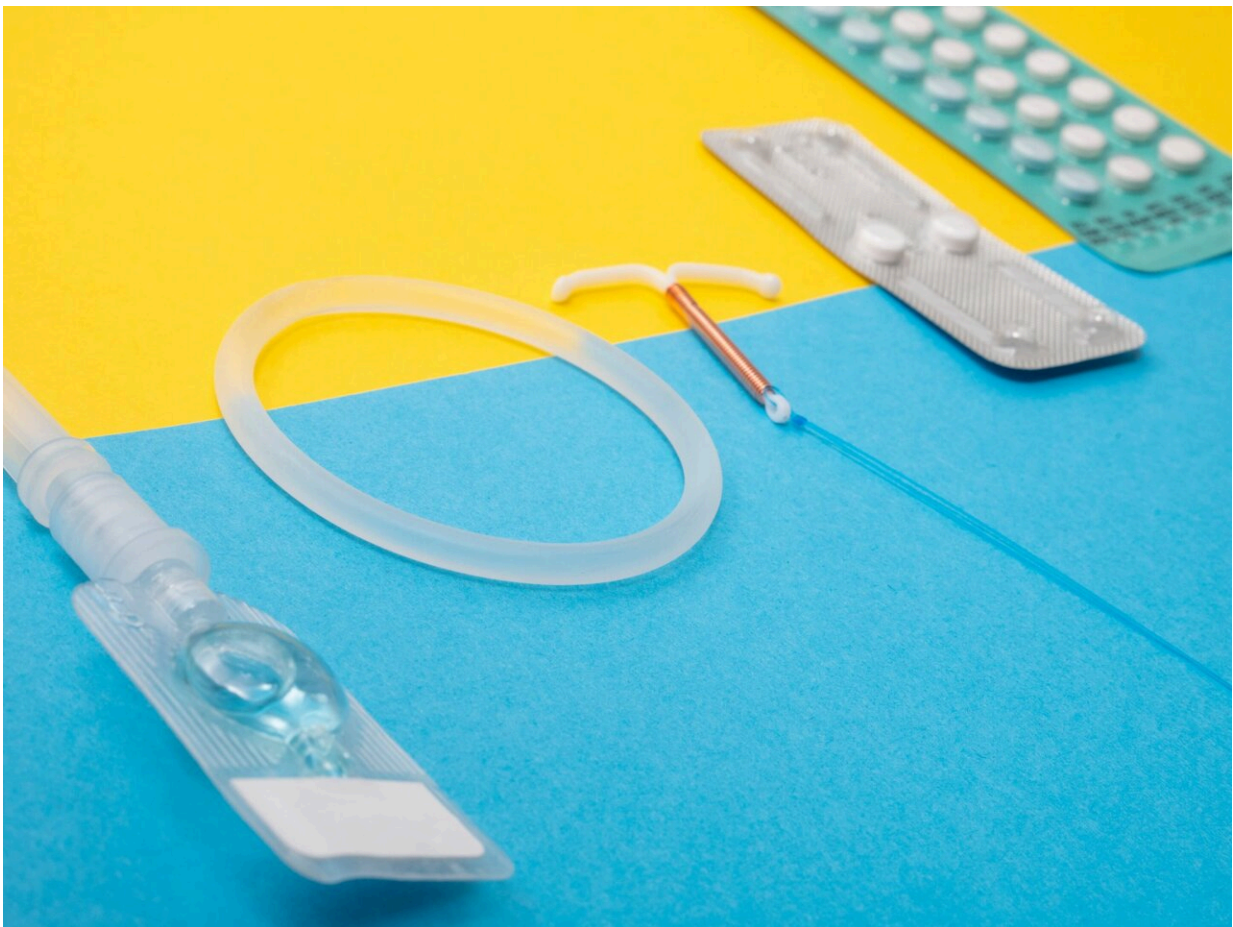


TikTok is full of misleading information about birth control—wellness influencers are helping drive these narratives

April 24 2024, by Stephanie Alice Baker



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There's been an [increase in content](#) posted on TikTok and Instagram recently discussing the alleged dangers of birth control. Content creators have shared concerns about the pill's side-effects ranging from weight gain to low libido and fluctuating moods. Other claims are misleading because they [exaggerate the risks](#) associated with contraception, cancer and infertility.

Many of these posts and videos are created by wellness influencers who foster the impression of authenticity by sharing their personal lives with their followers. This presents them as trustworthy, despite lacking medical qualifications, making it difficult for people to discern what to believe and who to trust.

The [wellness movement](#) first emerged in the US in the 1970s as an alternative to the standard medical treatment model. Rather than framing health as the absence of disease, pioneers of the wellness movement conceived of wellness as a lifestyle driven towards the pursuit of optimal health and vitality.

The movement was inspired by [High Level Wellness](#), a book published in 1961 by statistician and medical doctor Halbert L. Dunn. Dunn believed wellness involved a holistic approach to health, encompassing the mind, body and spirit to maximize a person's potential.

The ethos and alternative lifestyle practices associated with the wellness movement resonated with [the hippy movement](#). It also coalesced with [other countercultural movements](#)—such as [the civil rights movement](#) and [the women's movement](#).

The women's movement championed a woman's right to bodily autonomy, critiquing what they perceived to be a [patriarchal medical system](#) in post-war America. Activists fought for a woman's right to be involved in decisions about her health and the treatments she received.

Women's rights activists also fought for reproductive rights, including the right of unmarried women to [legally be prescribed contraceptives](#).

But today's online backlash to birth control occurs in a context where [women's reproductive rights](#) have been curtailed. If natural contraceptive methods result in an unwanted pregnancy, some women no longer have the right to choose. This raises questions about how the pill has been re-framed from a source of liberation to harmful by some female wellness influencers.

The role of social media

Social media has changed how we connect and communicate online. It's also lowered the barrier to achieving fame, enabling [content creators](#) to [establish personal brands](#) and large followings by sharing their experiences and lifestyle advice.

Unlike the doctor-patient relationship, which is characterized by [professional distance](#), influencers establish trust and intimacy by fostering the [impression of accessibility](#) with their followers. This typically involves providing backstage access to their personal lives and being vulnerable with their audience by sharing personal failures and triumphs.

There's a tendency to [trust those we perceive to be like us](#). This is why many women may consult friends and relatives for [health information](#). People trust influencers because they appear [accessible, authentic and autonomous](#)—independent from the media and the political and

commercial interests associated with traditional experts and authority figures.

The inclination to look beyond institutional expertise for health information is not new. Scientific knowledge has always been constructed through a combination of expert and non-expert voices. What has changed is that [science communication is happening online](#), with [social media](#) enabling people to create and broadcast content publicly on these sites—regardless of whether they're an expert or not. In some cases, disinformation is being [collectively created and shared online](#).

Where the wellness movement was once primarily associated with liberal ideologies, many journalists and researchers have recently observed an intersection between wellness discussions and [far-right politics](#). This shift was [accentuated by the pandemic](#), when wellness became a gateway to [misinformation and conspiracy theories](#).

Despite this convergence, the backlash against contraception cannot be reduced solely to politics. While some conservative influencers encourage [natural contraceptive methods](#) (such as timing sex to [menstrual cycles](#)) instead of synthetic hormonal contraception, many influencers have more generic concerns about the [financial and political incentives](#) of corporations and pharmaceuticals companies that have persisted for decades.

These concerns often manifest in critiques of experts and elites, who they see as compromised by money and power.

Instead, wellness influencers commonly prioritize what my colleague and I previously termed ["native expertise"](#)—knowledge derived from intuition and experience rather than professionals. This often manifests in the promotion of lifestyles depicted as natural, ancestral or primal.

The experts and doctors these influencers trust tend to be those [rejected by the establishment](#).

Many wellness influencers today share similar concerns as the [women's movement in the 1970s](#) about male doctors telling women what to do with their bodies. They want to be heard, believed and gain control over their body. But one of the striking differences between the women's movement and the female entrepreneurs championing women's health online, is that the advice influencers share is often monetised. Most influencers appear to be less interested in political change and more interested in promoting a specific lifestyle, product or service.

Why this matters

In the late 20th century, the wellness movement gave way to [the wellness industry](#). Wellness became a commodity.

Social media has further commodified wellness, with influencers using wellness to [create lucrative personal brands](#). The financial gains that can be made from sowing distrust and establishing oneself as a credible alternative make women's wellness a [confusing space for consumers to navigate](#).

Influencers typically [share opinions rather than facts](#), making their content difficult to regulate as they often use disclaimers to legally protect themselves. Rather than diminish their authority, these anecdotes are central to it—with influencers trading on their apparent ordinariness.

Those critical of contraception could be motivated by a variety of different factors and experiences and it would be a mistake to reduce all criticisms to misinformation. But who we trust influences what we believe. If the backlash to contraception highlights anything, it's that misinformation is more about trust, identity and relationships than

information.

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Provided by The Conversation

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