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## ADVERTISING IN THE AGE OF DISINFORMATION: INFLUENCERS AND NATURAL CONTRACEPTION

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### Introduction

Since COVID-19, the presence of health mis- and disinformation online has been widely examined (Chou et al., 2020; Suarez-Aledo & Alvarez-Galvez, 2021; Gisondi et al., 2022). With studies showing that people are increasingly getting health information from social media (Neely et al., 2021; Sforza, 2024), a rupture in how knowledge about health and the body is disseminated has emerged as less authority is conferred onto traditional medicine. Part of this growing disinformation phenomenon is a backlash against hormonal contraception (Hlavinka, 2024; Mihaila, 2024) and a rise in the promotion of natural contraceptive methods.

In this paper, I explore this landscape of contraceptive disinformation to understand the context within which *Natural Cycles* is advertised. *Natural Cycles* is a contraceptive app that uses body temperature data to predict and confirm ovulation. Using this, it tells users whether they are fertile or not each day, which can be harnessed for contraception or to attempt to conceive. Online, it is popularised as a natural, side-effect free contraceptive, and the brand relies heavily on social media influencer advertising to promote its product. In this paper, I show that contraceptive disinformation feeds into wider wellness and right-wing ‘tradwife’ social media trends, which are evoked by the *Natural Cycles* influencer advertisements. I show that while the adverts themselves do not explicitly contain disinformation, they operate within a disinformation context which is evoked to promote the product while also avoiding scrutiny and criticism.

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## Method/ology

This paper draws on the idea that lived experiences are co-opted online for commercial purposes. I extend work on platform economies, the commercialisation of authenticity and influencers (Arriagada & Bishop, 2021; Baker & Rojek, 2020; Hund, 2023) by analysing multiple adverts for the same product, thus shifting the focus onto the brand rather than individual influencers.

The paper comes out of a project investigating how *Natural Cycles* is advertised and operates, incorporating data from a year-long walkthrough and digital ethnography of the app, as well as influencer advertisements. While the findings of this paper are contextualised by the walkthrough, its focus is on the adverts. I ask:

- (1) What is the landscape of contraceptive disinformation on social media?
- (2) What elements of this disinformation are reproduced in the advertisements?
- (3) How is lived experience co-opted for commercial purposes?

In early 2025, I collected the data, building on a smaller pilot study from 2023. I reviewed 217 posts that tagged the *Natural Cycles* Instagram account over a 2-year period (2023 and 2024). Using several criteria - including that the post was marked as an 'ad' and promoting the contraceptive product - I formed a dataset of 46 posts (29 photos and 17 reels). I am currently in the early stages of analysis, recording the main features of each post's caption, image/video and voiceover. From here, I will perform a close reading of the textual (Lazar, 2007; Belsey, 2013) and visual (Rose, 2016; Kress & van Leeuwen, 2020) elements. At the forefront of this analysis is that the posts are adverts, and as such their commercial purpose will be considered (Williamson, 2005).

## Disinformation landscape

The negative experience of users of hormonal and invasive contraception has been widely reported for several decades, but recent social media trends are spreading disinformation on the topic (Hlavinka, 2024; Mihaila, 2024). This social media content has been directly linked to discontinuation of the pill in favour of alternatives like *Natural Cycles* (McNee et al., 2025) as it connects contraception to negative side effects including weight gain, depression, anxiety, autoimmune conditions, liver failure and pelvic floor dysfunction (Weber & Malhi, 2024 ; Hlavinka, 2024). While much of it is framed as the personal experience of individuals, its central claims about the link between these symptoms and contraception is unproven in scientific literature, and the sheer volume of this content, combined with its algorithmic promotion has created a realm of disinformation intended to create fear and confusion.

The disinformation is linked to other social media trends, including wellness trends associated with so-called 'clean' products which promote organic, chemical- and hormone-free lifestyles. Popular press commentators (Weber & Malhi, 2024) have noted the roots of contraceptive disinformation in right-wing discourses online, especially in 'tradwife' content which emphasises traditional feminine values of a woman's role as mother and homemaker (Rottenberg & Orgad, 2020). These values are closely aligned with Christianity and can include a rejection of abortion and traditional contraception, using technologies including *Natural Cycles* to facilitate natural family planning.

## Initial findings

Analysis of the advertisements shows that in many, influencers discussed previous negative experiences with hormonal or invasive contraceptive methods:

*"I was on conventional birth control for almost a decade, wreaking havoc on my hormones and making me feel super out of tune with my body"*

*"I was so unhappy on the pill for 10 years"*

*"I never got back on hormonal birth control after having [my baby] because of the way it made my body feel"*

While staying firmly on the side of personal opinion, these quotes clearly co-opt influencers' lived experiences to vilify traditional contraceptive methods. When menstruators constantly see negative opinions about traditional contraception from multiple online sources, it creates confusion and fear which can lead to them switching to natural options.

The wellness-focus of the adverts is evident, both by using wellness influencers and through the language used to construct *Natural Cycles*. There is an enormous focus on the embodied knowledge and empowerment that is achieved by using digital contraception:

*"Having information about my body and cycle at my disposal has been so empowering!"*

*"It's also been so informative to learn about ALL of the phases of my cycle and to better understand how I can best take care of myself"*

*"I've gained so much understanding and knowledge about my cycle, my fertility and more"*

This characterisation feeds into the wider wellness landscape and how the movement towards natural and 'clean' products allows one to be more 'in tune' with their body.

Combined with the negative characterisation of traditional contraception, this serves to imply that natural methods are superior as they allow one to reach a state of wellness.

Visually, many of the advertisements employ natural imagery, including content staged outside, by windows or with plants. In some cases, influencers wear casual athleisure and minimal makeup to further the visual quality of naturalness. This reinforces the association of *Natural Cycles* with 'clean' wellness cultures that stress the superiority of hormone-free products. Otherwise, the vast majority of the content takes place in the home, often integrated into other formats like morning routines and cooking. The inherent domesticity of this content feeds into right-wing 'tradwife' trends which promote a woman's place as in the home (Sykes & Hopner, 2024). As such, the visual elements serve to reinforce the adverts' links to contraceptive disinformation trends.

## Conclusion

Taken together, these findings show that while *Natural Cycles* influencer advertisements do not directly contain disinformation, the techniques employed evoke similar messages as the trends that do contain disinformation. In so doing, the advertisements co-opt influencers' lived experiences to present *Natural Cycles* as a superior alternative to hormonal contraception. Thus, *Natural Cycles* effectively promotes its product while avoiding the scrutiny and criticism levelled at contraceptive disinformation.

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