# Social media shadow banning limits access to women’s health education



A recent study involving 4,000 adults has highlighted a concerning trend in how social media platforms manage content related to women's health compared to men's. The survey found that while 77% of respondents aged 18 to 34 use social media for health education, a significant portion faces difficulties accessing relevant information on women's health topics. Specifically, 34% of users aged 18-24 and 21% of those aged 25-34 reported challenges in finding what they sought. This issue is compounded by widespread awareness of "shadow banning," a practice that limits content visibility, which 77% of young adults admitted knowing about.

Social media platforms like Instagram and Facebook have come under fire for inaccurately classifying essential health-related content as adult material, even when users adhere to anatomical terminology. The implications of this censorship are profound; not only does it restrict educational discussions about critical topics such as menstrual health and menopause, but it also sends a message that these subjects are taboo.

Engagement trends reveal that a considerable number of young adults are actively seeking this type of information. Three in ten spend over five hours daily on social media, using the platforms to explore health topics including erectile dysfunction and menstruation. Despite this, 33% of younger users, particularly within the 18-24 age group, believe that women's health content is often obscured or stifled. The campaign led by Essity, a hygiene and health giant, alongside advocacy groups like CensHERship, underscores the need for change. They argue that unrestricted access to health education is vital for empowerment and wellbeing.

Kate Prince, a spokesperson for Essity, noted, “Social media plays a pivotal role as a resource for young people to educate themselves.” However, she indicated that the algorithms controlling visibility often act as barriers, preventing access to critical health information. The campaign aims to challenge these restrictive practices and push for policy changes that harmonise social media standards with health education needs.

Public sentiment also mirrors these concerns. A survey revealed that 52% of adults believe there are justifiable reasons for shadow banning, predominantly around content that could incite violence or include sexually explicit material. However, a considerable 45% feel that anatomical and medically accurate language should not be censored. There is a growing recognition that terms like "vagina" and "periods" should be freely used in educational contexts, with nearly 77% of adults agreeing on this point.

Additionally, the broader implications of content suppression on women's health mirror issues observed in other regions, such as Latin America. Nonprofit organisations in those areas, which provide reproductive health services, have reported increased censorship from Meta platforms. This trend indicates systemic challenges affecting women's health dialogue across diverse contexts and geography. The practices employed often disproportionately impact organisations that aim to provide legal and confidential abortion information.

Nuria Antoja, a spokesperson for Bodyform, indicated her brand's struggle against automated censorship on popular platforms, highlighting challenges faced when discussing menstrual health. “If we're serious about breaking taboos… we've got to have the freedom to have open discussions on social media without censorship.” Such sentiments resonate with many health advocates who view public dialogue as essential for dismantling harmful stigmas.

Recent findings illustrate that the demographic most engaged in health discussions—ages 25 to 34—actively seeks to share information online. Yet, this group also experiences a high level of censorship, particularly concerning women's health. Among those aware of shadow banning, 34% reported their content had been restricted, predominantly while discussing women’s health issues.

Charlotte Emily, a prominent influencer on Instagram, echoes these findings, noting how engagement differs when discussing “taboo” topics like menstruation. Her experience reflects the challenges many face in striving for open conversations about vital health topics. Such discrepancies fuel the efforts of organisations like CensHERship, empowering individuals to advocate for equitable content on social media.

As more voices join the call for change, it becomes increasingly clear that equal access to health information—free from censorship—is not just a matter of personal choice, but a societal necessity. The call for reform on social media platforms is not merely about stopping shadow banning; it's about fostering an environment where health education flourishes unencumbered.

In conclusion, the intersection of health education, social media, and platform accountability presents an urgent challenge. As public discourse continues to develop, the fight against the shadow banning of women's health content remains a critical frontier in achieving equality in health education for all.

## Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/health/social-media-women-health-content-35272995), [[2]](https://www.apnews.com/article/ef425bc0e77fcd279be09559c35b1663)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/health/social-media-women-health-content-35272995), [[4]](https://www.axios.com/2022/10/18/abortion-misinformation-social-media-losing-ground), [[5]](https://www.theconversation.com/social-media-continues-to-censor-womens-health-posts-as-pornography-and-it-may-cause-serious-harm-224200)
* Paragraph 3 – [[3]](https://www.time.com/6181162/abortion-pill-access-roe-v-wade/), [[6]](https://www.axios.com/2022/07/01/roe-battlefield-online-abortion-information)
* Paragraph 4 – [[7]](https://www.mmm-online.com/home/channel/how-womens-health-brands-communicate-on-social-media-they-cant/)
* Paragraph 5 – [[4]](https://www.axios.com/2022/10/18/abortion-misinformation-social-media-losing-ground), [[6]](https://www.axios.com/2022/07/01/roe-battlefield-online-abortion-information)
* Paragraph 6 – [[2]](https://www.apnews.com/article/ef425bc0e77fcd279be09559c35b1663), [[5]](https://www.theconversation.com/social-media-continues-to-censor-womens-health-posts-as-pornography-and-it-may-cause-serious-harm-224200)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.mirror.co.uk/news/health/social-media-women-health-content-35272995> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://www.apnews.com/article/ef425bc0e77fcd279be09559c35b1663> - Abortion-rights groups across Latin America and beyond are raising concerns over increasing digital censorship by Meta-owned platforms, such as WhatsApp, Instagram, and Facebook. Nonprofits assisting women with reproductive health services, including Mexico's MSI Foundation and Colombia’s Oriéntame, have faced sudden suspensions of their WhatsApp Business accounts—critical tools for providing confidential and legal abortion information. These organizations argue that recent policy changes and automated moderation—possibly influenced by coordinated reporting from anti-abortion groups—are resulting in disproportionate enforcement against lawful content. Meta claims the affected accounts violated policies, often citing vague violations like “spam” or “dangerous content,” and denies connection to its policy changes. Despite abortion being decriminalized in countries like Mexico and Colombia, the organizations report increasing challenges in disseminating health information and receiving little transparency or recourse in appealing these restrictions. Activists indicate the need for more robust complaint resolution mechanisms and see these developments as a chilling effect on reproductive rights advocacy. Many groups have turned to creative solutions, such as multiple backup accounts and reworded messaging, to continue operating. Reports also show that this trend is not limited to Latin America, with similar incidents occurring globally, compounding fears of systemic suppression of reproductive health dialogue online.
3. <https://www.time.com/6181162/abortion-pill-access-roe-v-wade/> - If the Supreme Court overturns Roe v. Wade, abortion may be heavily restricted or banned in about half of the U.S. However, abortion pills, which can be ordered online and taken at home, have changed reproductive rights. Despite their convenience, there are significant obstacles in accessing these pills due to various legal, regulatory, and societal issues. Eighteen states have imposed restrictions on telemedicine for abortion. Advocates are racing to educate people and expand access to abortion pills before such restrictive laws come into effect. They are raising awareness through online guides, advertisements, online courses, privacy protection toolkits, and hotlines. Telehealth companies are using creative ways to ensure access. However, misinformation and stigma are major challenges. Social media and search engines have been problematic for advocates due to disinformation and censorship. Physicians and medical professionals are being encouraged to familiarize themselves with administering these medications. Despite the uncertainty, the availability of abortion pills is expected to play a crucial role in providing safe abortion options even in states with tight restrictions.
4. <https://www.axios.com/2022/10/18/abortion-misinformation-social-media-losing-ground> - More than 100 days after the Supreme Court overturned Roe v. Wade, social media platforms have struggled to adapt to the new legal landscape regarding abortion rights. These platforms have been blocking information about abortion-pill distribution while allowing misinformation about abortion to spread. Abortion rights advocates report that misinformation around reproductive health has worsened since the decision, with major platforms lacking abortion-specific misinformation policies. YouTube has implemented an abortion-related policy, but other platforms like TikTok include broader medical misinformation policies. Following the ruling, over 200 medical organizations and non-profits warned Meta, YouTube, TikTok, and Twitter about the risk of medical disinformation to public health. Misinformation, including claims that abortion pills' effects can be reversed, poses significant dangers. Advocates call for platforms to enhance their algorithms and moderation systems to better manage abortion-related information.
5. <https://www.theconversation.com/social-media-continues-to-censor-womens-health-posts-as-pornography-and-it-may-cause-serious-harm-224200> - Social media users aren’t used to seeing this – men’s nipples and even pubic hair aren’t censored but posts about women’s bodies are assumed to be pornographic. Over the last few years, there have been numerous reports of censorship of women’s posts about issues from sexual health to breastfeeding and cesarean sections. This is sad, but not surprising: women’s bodies are often perceived as sexual, regardless of circumstances. The labelling her image as pornography overrides the woman’s own view of her body and replaces it with an outsider’s view. This makes it easier to see what is going wrong. Sometimes it can be more difficult to recognise objectification. Consider, for instance, the improvement in attitudes towards breastfeeding in public. In 2015, 72% of people said they supported breastfeeding in public. Nonetheless, some people still see breastfeeding as sexual and research from 2022 shows that this perception continues to deter some mothers from breastfeeding in public. Again, this involves prioritising how a viewer may see women’s bodies over the woman’s own attitudes and aims. However, as social media censorship shows, there’s still significant stigma around women’s bodies – and it’s harmful. Researchers have explored the effects of objectification on women’s mental health. Studies have found that women may begin to view their own bodies primarily as objects for the use of others, and to see themselves as failures if they do not match up to whatever is currently regarded as the “ideal” body shape. Common effects include shame, anxiety, depression, disordered eating and reduced productivity.
6. <https://www.axios.com/2022/07/01/roe-battlefield-online-abortion-information> - Conservative activists are now focusing on limiting or banning online information-sharing about abortion after successfully pushing for the criminalization of the procedure. The Supreme Court's Dobbs ruling that overturned Roe v. Wade has led to struggles for tech platforms in moderating abortion-related content and curbing misinformation. Individuals seeking to share or access information on abortion online face potential restrictions due to state laws and shifting social media policies. Concerns about censorship on social media have been voiced, with instances of misinformation like misleading search results on Google Maps also highlighted. Conservative legislatures might pass laws criminalizing online speech about abortion, potentially violating the First Amendment and Section 230 of the Communications Decency Act. In such a challenging environment, neither the government nor private companies are well-positioned to protect online speech effectively.
7. <https://www.mmm-online.com/home/channel/how-womens-health-brands-communicate-on-social-media-they-cant/> - How do you market a product on social media that you can’t describe, post images of or even name? Well, you can’t, according to the founders of women’s health brands and PR pros. A three-year study by the nonprofit Center for Intimacy Justice shows women’s health ads are disproportionately blocked on social platforms including Facebook and Instagram. Of the 60 health startups surveyed, all say they have faced censorship on Facebook on at least one occasion, even as very suggestive ads for male-focused products were allowed. Advertising products related to menopause, pelvic pain, postpartum health, menstrual health, sexual wellness and breastfeeding can be flagged as “adult content.” Facebook defines the term as including “nudity, depictions of people in explicit or suggestive positions, or activities that are overly suggestive or sexually provocative.” But products that refer to women’s health are disproportionately flagged even without other elements that could violate the policy, said Desiree Natali, senior social media manager at feminine-hygiene company The Honey Pot.