

Politicisation and polarisation of health during COVID-19

A digital ethnography of alternative health influencers

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Abstract

This article explores how public health information was contested on social media during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through digital ethnography of four Finnish alternative health influencers, we examine their role in politicising and polarising health attitudes and pandemic governance, and how these dynamics evolved from the early to later stages of the crisis.

Drawing on social media content from three key periods – early pandemic (January–June 2020), late pandemic (October–December 2021), and post-pandemic (March–April 2025) – the study reveals that influencers amplified politicisation and polarisation of health and distrust in authorities by leveraging: 1) lay expertise rooted in personal pre-pandemic healing narratives, 2) alternative immunological framings, 3) explicit political opposition to public health measures, and 4) engagement with conspiracy narratives.

Influencer communication was characterised by opportunism, blending political activism, commercial interests, and personal wellness branding. By aligning with values of authenticity and trust, influencers cultivated belonging within alternative or conspiratorial health communities. Yet, their trajectories varied in terms of politicisation and conspiratoriality, illustrating how pandemic-driven polarisation unfolded within the alternative health scene. This study offers critical insights into the evolving dynamics of the health politicisation and the role of social media in shaping public trust in medical expertise.

Keywords: social media influencers, alternative health advocates, mistrust, distrust, nutrition, health populism, lay immunology, COVID-19 pandemic

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic intensified polarisation of health-related opinions, especially in Europe and North America (Jungkunz 2021). Public attitudes towards the pandemic became central to identity formation and fuelled affective polarisation – marked by intergroup comparison and negative sentiments

(see Iyengar et al. 2019). Politicization of health choices deepened as governments imposed strict public health measures such as lockdowns, travel restrictions, and vaccine passes.

This dynamic was compounded by rising mistrust and distrust, which undermined compliance with public health policies, even in high-trust societies such as the Nordic countries (Borin et al. 2024; Jallinoja et al. 2021). Understanding how politicisation, polarisation and trust evolve across diverse social contexts, including influencer-driven communities, is critical for strengthening societal resilience.

The pandemic sparked a heightened quest for health information (Dow et al. 2021) amid an information landscape marked by epistemic instability (Harambam 2020). Social media became both a key source of information and a driver of polarisation, amplifying voices critical of governmental policies (Verbalyte & Eigmüller 2022). In this context, many health influencers shifted to pandemic related content creation – some contesting public health recommendations and others even monetising misinformation (Moran et al. 2024; Baker 2022; Dow et al. 2020).

This article analyses how alternative health influencers¹ contested public health information during the COVID-19 pandemic and contributed to the politicisation of health, the polarisation of health-related opinions, and growing distrust and mistrust in public health authorities. Using digital ethnography, we analyse four Finnish alternative health influencers who, prior to the pandemic, focused on diet and nutrition. We trace how their content evolved across three periods between early 2020 and June 2025, highlighting shifts in politicised distrust, conspiracy narratives, and spiritual discourses. These developments are interpreted within literature on politicisation and polarisation of health, conspiracy thinking and *conspirituality*. Our findings demonstrate how alternative influencers reconfigured public discourse on health and health authorities during the pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic marked a pivotal moment for examining the role of social media influencers as key information brokers. With large follower bases, influencers have long leveraged their popularity for promotional purposes (Truman 2022: 149). Their persuasive power stems from parasocial, friendship-like relationships with followers (Bond 2016), which foster a sense of authenticity, credibility, and relatability. These qualities set influencers apart from traditional celebrities and public authorities, often making them appear more trustworthy (Baker 2022; Schouten et al. 2020). Identification with influencers is further reinforced by their perceived similarity and ordinariness (Schouten et al. 2020), enabling them to shape public opinion effectively. Even prior to the pandemic, many influencers had begun to act as ‘ideological intermediaries’, broadening their content beyond lifestyle themes to encompass political and ideological topics (Riedl et al. 2021; Arnesson 2023).

The pandemic amplified these dynamics. Alternative health influencers, in particular, challenged the credibility of public health experts and created new arenas for lay expertise (Au & Eyal 2021). Consequently, they were publicly identified as major conduits of COVID-19 misinformation (Maloy & De Wynck 2021). The parasocial trust they cultivated with followers meant that their messages retained high perceived credibility - even when those messages propagated misinformation (Mena et al. 2020).

Our study design is unique in that it spans multiple phases of the COVID-19 pandemic: we began fieldwork prior to the outbreak, continued during the early pandemic in 2020, collected materials from the later stages in 2021, and extended into the post-pandemic period in 2025. This longitudinal approach enables us to trace how influencers content evolved as they engaged in increasingly polarised and politicised debates around COVID-19. We ask: *How did alternative health influencers’ communication reflect the politicisation and polarisation of health issues and pandemic management across different stages of the pandemic? What transformations occurred in the ways influencers contested public health expertise?*

¹ We use the term ‘alternative’ to highlight that, before and during the pandemic, these influencers’ posts contested public health expertise. Likewise, we use the term ‘health’ because, while their pre-pandemic content centred mainly on nutrition, the pandemic broadened their focus to encompass a wider health discourse landscape.

In the following, we situate our study within the broader context of the pandemic and pandemic-related conspiracy theories. We then describe our research materials and methods, before presenting and discussing the findings.

2. Trust, politicisation and polarisation of health during the pandemic

Finland, like other Nordic countries, is characterised by high levels of social and political trust. During the pandemic, many European countries, including Finland, experienced a sudden surge in political trust (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al. 2022). Trust in public health experts also remained high throughout the pandemic, with trust in the major public health institution, the Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare even increasing (Jallinoja et al. 2021; Jallinoja et al. 2025). Health experts and health care professionals were the most trusted sources of COVID-19 information, and this trust continued to grow during the pandemic (Malinen & Koivula 2024). Institutional trust was also associated with compliance with public health recommendations (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al. 2022) and was reflected in high vaccination uptake (Borin et al. 2024).

At the same time, a smaller proportion of Finns expressed distrust towards public health institutions and their vaccination information, indicating increasingly polarised attitudes (Jallinoja et al. 2025). For example, 22–31% of Finns expressed some mistrust towards government COVID-19 measures, with 9–14% reporting strong suspicion (Jallinoja et al. 2021). Although only a small minority trusted pandemic-related information from social media influencers, such trust correlated with more negative attitudes towards COVID-19 vaccines (Malinen & Koivula 2024).

While opinion polarisation during the COVID-19 pandemic is well documented (e.g. Allcott et al. 2020; Block et al. 2022; Freira et al. 2021), the dynamics of affective polarisation remain underexplored. Existing studies have primarily focused on two-party systems and relied heavily on survey-based approaches (e.g. Allcott et al. 2020; Block et al. 2022; Freira et al. 2021; Pennycook et al. 2022), with limited attention to multiparty, high-trust contexts (Reiljan & Ryan 2021).

The politicisation of public health – where issues traditionally regarded as scientific or neutral become entangled with political ideologies or identities – was clearly visible during the COVID-19 pandemic. In Finland, this was reflected in a pattern where supporters of the right-wing populist Finns Party were more likely than supporters of other major parties to express scepticism towards public health authorities (Jallinoja et al. 2025). Voting intention for the Finns Party emerged as a significant predictor of institutional distrust, aligning with broader patterns of science scepticism among the party's base. Comparable patterns were observed elsewhere, for instance, in the United States, where political conservatism strongly correlated with distrust in science during the pandemic (Latkin et al. 2022).

Criticism and resistance to pandemic management intensified civic distrust, often manifesting as counter-democratic, populist forms of political engagement (Borin et al. 2024). It is useful to distinguish between *mistrust*—a cautious scepticism—and *distrust*—a deeper, more enduring belief in institutional untrustworthiness (Jennings et al. 2021; Lenard 2008; Sztompka 1999: 26). During the COVID-19 pandemic, both were associated with lower compliance with health guidelines, stronger belief in conspiracy theories, and increased reliance on social media over official sources (Schmuck & Harff 2023).

3. Conspiracy, conspirituality and authenticity in the alternative health scene

Conspiracy theories gained heightened visibility in mainstream media during the COVID-19 pandemic, although their gradual shift towards the mainstream predates it (Knight 2000: 6; Fenster 2008). Often pathologized or framed as cultural coping mechanisms in late modernity (e.g. Knight 2000; see Harambam 2020), conspiracy thinking during the pandemic can be more accurately understood as an intensified expression of distrust towards elites and experts (see Darius and Urquhart 2021).

Globally, conspiracy theories during the pandemic questioned the very existence of the virus, the motives behind vaccine development, and the legitimacy of pandemic governance. Prominent narratives included claims that COVID-19 was a bioweapon leaked from a laboratory or that the pandemic was deliberately orchestrated by actors such as the Gates Foundation to reduce the global population. Others alleged that a secret global government – sometimes referred to as the “New World Order” – intended to use vaccination to implant microchips, control individuals, and erode civil liberties. The pandemic was also framed as a plot by a small economic elite to trigger “The Great Reset”, involving global economic collapse and the abolition of private property. In the United States, widely circulated claims portrayed the pandemic as a “deep state” or Democrat hoax aimed at undermining Donald Trump’s 2020 presidential campaign, while QAnon narratives suggested Trump was using the pandemic as cover to arrest members of the “deep state”. (Butter & Knight 2023; Frejborg & Pettersson 2023.) These and similar theories gained traction within conspiracy circles in the Nordic countries as well (Dyrendal 2023).

Distinguishing between accurate knowledge and misinformation is often complex and context-dependent (Harambam 2021). This complexity became particularly pronounced during the pandemic, a period defined by the rapid evolution of scientific understanding. In such a volatile epistemic environment, societal, economic, and political critiques of pandemic management were frequently dismissed as conspiratorial disinformation, effectively excluding them from legitimate political discourse (Harambam & Voss 2023). While conspiracy theories are commonly framed as expressions of distrust, they also signal deeper struggles over the production and authority of knowledge. During the pandemic, these struggles were not merely epistemic but inherently political, materializing in everyday political practices and debates – especially within social media spaces (Harambam & Voss 2023).

While conspiracy thinking became particularly prominent in alternative health circles during the pandemic, these spaces also cultivate ideals of spiritual growth and authenticity. The convergence of conspiracy narratives and new spiritualities has been conceptualized as *conspirituality* (Ward & Voas 2011). In the Nordic context, this phenomenon has historical roots in esoterism and, more recently, in yoga and alternative health cultures (e.g. Dyrendal 2015; Dyrendal & Tøllefsen 2022). This emphasis on authenticity is unsurprising in late modernity, where individualism, self-expression, and emotional fulfilment increasingly take precedence over conformity and deference to authority (Inglehart 2018: 39, 84; Reckwitz 2023: 69). As countercultural values have moved closer to the mainstream, expressions of uniqueness and authenticity have become forms of social and economic capital – especially within the dynamics of ‘attention economy’.

4. Data and methods

This study is a part of *Mediating Expertise and Scientific Knowledge in Public Debates on Health* research consortium (MEX) funded by the Academy of Finland, Grant no: 320279, exploring debates on healthy nutrition in the mainstream media, counter-media, and social media.

We chose the studied influencers so that they fit the following criteria: 1) their content was in Finnish and related to food and nutrition 2) they contradicted official expert recommendations on food and nutrition, and 3) they had a following of at least a thousand people. Several Finnish influencers fit these criteria, but to facilitate in-depth qualitative analysis we limited the number of influencers to four. To analyse the diversity of the alternative health scene, we chose the influencers so that they represented various alternative diets or views on nutrition. For instance, we only chose one influencer representing ketogenic diet, although several would have fit the criteria. With the focus on the politicization of health and the contestation public health expertise, we chose influencers who, when talking about their background, did not mention having formal qualifications in the fields of nutrition, medicine, or public health. Based on follower numbers, the influencers we studied could be classified as micro-influencers (1,000–10,000 followers; influencer C) or macro-influencers (10,000–100,000 followers; influencers A, B and D) (Oliveira et al. 2019).

Influencer A specialised in superfoods and unprocessed food. Initially gaining visibility through his blog, he expanded into coaching and public lectures, collaborating with health food brands, and published two books.

Influencer B became a wellness coach after discovering that a ketogenic diet improved her health. She launched an online coaching business that grew in popularity.

Influencer C promoted a plant-based diet through coaching, recipe books, and online courses. Her content combined dietary information with spiritual themes – initially New Age spirituality and later Christianity.

Influencer D was a popular blogger who criticised official recommendations related to food additives and chemicals. Her work blended journalistic content on chemicals in foods and other products with advertorials and brand collaborations.

We analysed selected social media content from the influencers across three study periods. The first period (January 2020 – June 2020) captured the onset of the pandemic. The second period (October – December 2021) coincided with intense public discussion about COVID-19 vaccines and the introduction of the “COVID pass” (proof of vaccination or negative test) in Finland. The third period (March – April 2025) was included to assess the durability of the changes observed in the influencers’ content.² The extended intervals between data collection points enabled us to identify shifts over time. We examined content on one or two social media platforms where each influencer was most active and incorporated additional relevant materials (see Table 1). In addition, influencer D participated in an interview in May 2020. The other influencers declined interviews, which may reflect mistrust towards institutionalised science and the polarisation of opinions during the pandemic.

We reviewed all content posted by the influencers. For the first two study periods, we selected only content related to nutrition, immunity, COVID-19 and expertise for further analysis (see table 1). Posts that consisted of service advertisements, inspirational quotes, or personal life updates unrelated to the study topic were excluded. In contrast, for the third study period – designed to capture the post-pandemic evolution of content – we analysed all the published material to assess broader shifts in themes and tone.

Table 1. Research materials.

Influencer	Facebook			Instagram			Additional materials
	2020	2021	2025	2020	2021	2025	
A	44	159	153				Mainstream media interviews 2009-2019 (N=9) Podcast interviews in 2022, 2024 Book published in 2019
B		9		45	8	11	YouTube-videos 2017-2020 (N=29) Free webinar on ketogenic diet 2020 Mainstream media interviews 2014-2019 (N=6) Podcast interview 2022
C	23	10	3		4		Free online course on plant-based diet (2020)
D	67	8	6		5	19	Mainstream media interviews 2011-2020 (N=6) Book published in 2011 Research interview

Number of analysed posts related to nutrition, immunity, COVID-19 and expertise per social media platform in the first (2020, 6 months), second (2021, 3 months) and third (2025, 2 months) study periods, and other materials used in the study. For the first and second study periods, only posts related to nutrition, immunity, COVID-19 and expertise are reported in this table.

The first author conducted digital ethnographic observation of the influencers’ social media content, reading through all the content (including text, videos and photos) and other materials and taking detailed

² The frames of the study periods were somewhat flexible: if the influencer experienced a significant event near these time frames, we considered content related to it in the analysis. For example, influencer D changed her stance on COVID-19 vaccination and decided to get vaccinated, which sparked intense reactions within the alternative health scene. Although this occurred a few weeks before the second study period in 2021, we included related posts in the study materials.

notes of content related to nutrition, immunity, COVID-19, science and expertise. Comments on social media posts were also documented. This process resulted in 115 pages of field notes. During the first study period, observation was conducted in real time. Content from the second study period was collected and analysed retrospectively in 2023, while materials for the third period were gathered in June 2025. Consequently, some posts, particularly from 2021, may have been deleted by influencers before data collection. Although post deletion is possible even shortly after publication, this delay represents a limitation of the analysis. To mitigate this, we sourced content from multiple platforms wherever feasible. For example, in 2021, influencer B cross-posted identical content on Instagram and Facebook; while some Instagram posts were later removed, we were able to retrieve them from Facebook.

The present study does not fall under the scope of the Finnish Medical Research Act and Decree. Furthermore, Tampere University does not require ethics board review for research that does not involve medical procedures or research methods. Consequently, an ethical review was deemed unlikely to provide substantial added value regarding the ethicality of this research. While public content can be used as research data without consent (e.g. Wilkinson & Thelwall 2011), and only publicly available material was analysed in this study, certain ethical concerns remain. Although the influencers' texts and identities are public, we have chosen not to disclose the names. In addition, all quoted material has been translated into English and edited to prevent retrieval through online search engines. Nevertheless, we acknowledge that our description may render the influencers recognisable to some readers.

Despite the ethical challenges, social media influencers play a significant role in shaping public perceptions of health recommendations, making the study of their work essential. In this research, influencers are approached as representatives of the Finnish alternative health scene, with the focus placed on broader cultural dynamics rather than individual personalities. Their position is inherently ambiguous: while they function as micro-celebrities within alternative health communities, they are often discredited in mainstream public discourse. Consequently, power relations between influencers and researchers are complex and far from clear-cut.

The materials were analysed using an abductive qualitative approach (Timmermans & Tavory 2012), in which themes were formed both from the data, and using the theoretical framework. After multiple readings of the field notes, the data were coded in NVivo into seven thematic categories: (1) healing narratives, (2) influencer work, (3) COVID-19, (4) knowledge and evidence, (5) public health institutions, government, and healthcare, (6) political action, and (7) conspiracy theories. Particular attention was given to themes 1 and 5-7, which were further interpreted within the pandemic context and in relation to the politicisation and polarisation of health attitudes. In the second phase of the analysis, we traced trajectories and transitions in influencers' content creation, which are outlined in the first four sections of the results. Finally, we compared the first two study periods with the post-pandemic sample to evaluate whether the observed changes persisted over time.

5. Results

5.1 *Personal healing narratives*

None of the studied influencers had formal training in nutrition or healthcare, yet all shared personal narratives about how they became interested in these topics. We begin with these pre-pandemic stories because they served as a foundation for their later contestation of public health expertise during the pandemic.

The narratives – developed over several years of content creating – followed a storyline in which personal health problems prompted a search for knowledge on health and nutrition. A recurring theme was the perceptions that biomedicine had failed to provide adequate solutions, leading them to explore complementary and alternative medicine (CAM) therapies, though not necessarily to abandon biomedical care altogether.

Influencer A reported suffering from autoimmune diseases, which led him to study nutrition independently and modify his diet. Influencer B struggled with crippling stomach pains, prompting her to experiment with various dietary approaches. Influencer C suffered from chronic symptoms related to skin, digestion and hormonal balance. Influencer D was diagnosed with stress-related IBS but found symptom relief by avoiding certain foods.

These narratives culminated in the discovery of a diet – ketogenic, plant-based, or a personalized diet – that improved their wellbeing. Through these experiences, the influencers began to question official nutrition guidelines. Finding healing practices without biomedical help inspired them to start sharing information about diet, nutrition and health, either through blogs (A and D) or coaching businesses (B and C). These personal healing narratives functioned as key mechanisms for establishing credibility as lay experts capable of offering health advice to others.

The influencers often referred to their healing narratives to legitimise views of theirs that challenged public health expertise:

“Many times, I have faced impossible health challenges. A few times I even thought I would die (...) In those times, getting access to strengthening, empowering information has helped me the most. I will say this frankly: I’ve never found anything very empowering from official sources. You know, the kind of information that would help your own power glow and flourish.” (A, 29.3.2020)

As this quote illustrates, healing narratives provided the foundation upon which the influencers constructed mistrust and distrust towards public health institutions during the pandemic. These personal narratives fostered trust through a sense of intimacy with followers – many of whom were likely seeking ways to improve their health. By sharing their own experiences, influencers ensured that their content resonated with audiences throughout the pandemic and across the subsequent shifts in their messaging.

5.2 Early pandemic: shared goals and lay immunologies

COVID-19 first appeared in the influencers’ content between 6 and 16 March, 2020. Initial reactions were moderate. Influencer B took the emerging virus quite seriously, noting that although she had resisted joining the media’s fearmongering bandwagon, the escalating “*corona situation*” was beginning to feel alarming (B, 12.3.2020). She kept her children home from school and self-quarantined ahead of official recommendations. In contrast, the other influencers did not express concern about the virus at this stage.

Notably, the influencers’ relationship with public health expertise at the onset of the pandemic appeared relatively neutral and toned down compared to their usual, stark criticism, for which influencers A and B in particular were known for. During the early pandemic (March–May 2020), the influencers expressed willingness to cooperate with public health to “flatten the curve” of COVID-19 infections. With the exception of influencer A, they endorsed official recommendations for social distancing. Although their content continued to emphasize immunity strengthening – a theme absent from the official agenda – they shared the goal of mitigating the pandemic alongside public health institutions and the government: “*It is really important now to keep up with quarantine but also to work on your immune system*” (C, 24.3.2020). In late March, 2020, the Finnish government engaged social media influencers in sharing information on COVID-19, and influencer D was involved in this collaboration.

While aligning with some of the goals of public health experts, the influencers promoted their own approaches, often blending official guidance with alternative practices, such as preventing COVID-19 infection with nutrition and supplements. For instance, influencer B shared an extensive list that included recommendations from public health authorities – such as social distancing and handwashing – alongside advice like taking vitamin D, getting sun exposure, using sauna, exercising, eating animal products, managing stress and avoiding mainstream media (B 13.3.2020). Similarly, within four days, influencer D shared both an online “Flu guide” by a Finnish biohacker group and a press release from the Finnish Institute of Health and Welfare on COVID-19 prevention.

By aligning themselves with the overarching goals of official pandemic management, the influencers were able to intertwine their alternative lay expertise with the discourse of institutional health governance (see Au & Eyal 2021 on the entangling lay and expert discourses during COVID-19). Their content reflected a form of *lay immunology* (Enticott 2003; Nurmi 2021), which gained prominence in the early pandemic. Within this framework, strengthening immunity was understood as a matter of optimisation of nutrition, supplement use, exercise, outdoor exposure, and maintaining a positive mindset – practices positioned as essential for confronting the novel virus. Drawing on alternative health expertise cultivated through personal healing narratives, influencers interpreted the pandemic through their own lens and offered advice that resonated with their following.

Simultaneously, these lay immunologies conveyed a subtle mistrust (though not yet distrust) towards public health expertise and its recommendations. For instance, influencers A and D challenged statements from public health authorities that advised against using vitamins to alleviate COVID-19 symptoms³:

“Many health-conscious individuals wonder why sufficiently high doses of vitamins C and D are not officially recommended as a treatment for COVID” (D, 14.4.2020)

“I read in the news that vitamin C doesn’t work [against COVID-19 infection] in Finland, even though it works in other countries. So now is the time for us to share ideas that can help people help themselves and others. Optimising your own immunity right now is a great service to the whole healthcare system. (A, 29.3.2020)

In the latter quote, influencer A offered a critique of expert recommendations, ironically noting that vitamins do not work in Finland if public health authorities say so. Yet, he ultimately returned to the shared goal of safeguarding healthcare system capacity. Importantly, at this stage, he did not reject the necessity of taking certain precautions against the virus, both at the individual and institutional levels.

5.3 Late pandemic: politicisation and growing distrust

During the second study period in late 2021, we observed a shift from lay immunology towards heightened politicisation and increasing distrust in the content of three influencers. Influencers A and B, along with C to a lesser extent, began prioritising themes of freedom and individual rights over earlier emphasis of immunity and nutrition. Influencer A’s posts, in particular, focused on opposing COVID-19 restrictions, mask mandates, vaccines, and especially the COVID pass (proof of vaccination or recent negative COVID-19 test). He repeatedly argued that the COVID pass, introduced in Finland on October 16, 2021, infringed upon individual freedoms and violated both the Finnish constitution and human rights:

“We have forgotten what for a short period in history made the Western countries such a free and secure place to live; for a while, people had almost equal opportunities for happiness and success. We had freedom of speech, equality, personal integrity, privacy, domestic privacy, freedom of assembly, freedom to engage in commercial activities, and human rights. Then we gave it all away because we were more interested in TV shows.” (A, 17.10.2021)

Influencers A, B and C encouraged their followers to choose sides on the issues of pandemic policies and vaccination. We interpret this as indicative of politicisation and affective, opinion-driven polarisation surrounding health issues that emerged in Finland (Kestilä-Kekkonen et al. 2022) and other countries (e.g. Block et al. 2022; Pennycook et al. 2022).

Calls to action often accompanied the political criticism voiced by influencers A and B. They urged their followers to resist the COVID pass, which they framed as the greatest threat to citizens’ freedom since World War II (A, 8.10.2021). Their appeals included boycotting businesses that implemented the pass, joining demonstrations against it, and signing petitions and citizens’ legal initiatives:

³ Although the potential effects of vitamins C and D in the prevention and treatment of COVID-19 were discussed in the media in 2020, public health experts remained cautious in recommending high doses of these vitamins, as there was no conclusive evidence to support their efficacy (Finnish Institute for Health and Welfare 2020, Knuuti 2020/2021).

“I still plan to go to restaurants, concerts and events. But not to ones that demand this RIDICULOUS health pass that has nothing to do with our health. You do the same! Let’s show our support for the businesses that don’t discriminate against anyone.” (B, 15.10.2021)

“It’s time to sue all actors that participate in this illegal discrimination [the COVID pass]. If a doorman takes part in illegal discrimination, take their name, take their picture, post their name and picture on social media, and ask for their contact info so your community’s lawyer can be in touch with them.” (A, 17.10.2021)

Political action thus ranged from contacting policymakers to engaging in civil disobedience, as well as expressing resistance through individual health choices, such as refusing vaccination.

Influencer A emerged as a prominent figure in the opposition to COVID-19 measures, positioning himself as a vocal critic of both the Finnish government and the European Union. His resistance shifted from a framework rooted in alternative lay immunology to one grounded in constitutional and human rights discourse. He argued that the derogation laws enacted during the pandemic constituted violations of these rights. In his content, health became a more distant ideal, primarily referenced through discussions of COVID-19 vaccine side-effects. These side-effects were framed as a human rights issue, particularly in cases where individuals coerced into vaccination reportedly experienced long-term adverse effects.

Influencer B likewise framed her opposition to pandemic measures as a political stance against perceived threats to individual freedom: “*Nothing is more important to me than defending the right to choose and the right to be free*” (B, 27.10.2021). Her critique centred on COVID-vaccines and vaccine mandates. She expressed a preference for the possibility of illness and recovery (“*trusting my own immune system*”) over “*reluctantly putting something in my body that carries risks and the possibility of crippling side-effects*”. Furthermore, she emphasised that she would not compromise her principles merely to “*eat, dance, sing or travel*”, asserting: “*This has nothing to do with my health. We were all born free, and no one can take that away from me, even if that means I’ll be left out of society*” (B, 21.11.2021).

Although influencer C posted less frequently during the later stage of the pandemic, she articulated resistance to the perceived pressure to get vaccinated against COVID-19. She attributed this pressure to public health authorities and mainstream media, stating: “*The official information (...) only aims to get every one of us to take the shots, not for us to weigh the pros and cons or to give us the whole truth.*” (C, 9.1.2022). In similar terms, influencers A and B voiced distrust towards government and public health actors, questioning their motives in health communication and pandemic management.

In contrast to the other influencers, influencer D positioned herself as a critical collaborator rather than an outright opponent of public health authorities. In her interview, she described a continuous balancing act, seeking to build bridges between “mainstream” and “alternative” health communities. Despite this mediating stance, she retained a critical perspective, for example regarding face masks and the chemicals they might contain. Overall, her content largely aligned with official pandemic recommendations, with notable exceptions concerning dietary supplements and COVID-19 vaccines, towards which she initially expressed considerable hesitation.

Over the course of the pandemic, influencer D’s stance on vaccination shifted. Initially expressing concerns about both vaccine side effects and the risks of COVID-19 infection, she ultimately decided to get vaccinated. When she disclosed this on social media, she faced significant backlash, including targeted criticism from another alternative health influencer and their followers. Some members of her own audience accused her of betrayal or inconsistency – particularly given her earlier advocacy for “chemical-free” lifestyle and her prior criticism of H1N1-pandemic vaccines. This experience prompted influencer D to publicly denounce “anti-vaccine content” on social media. She urged her followers to critically examine “*the background and links*” of those opposing COVID-19 vaccines, asking: “*Who pays for the ‘speaker of truth’ to dedicate time to their mission? Be critical, also towards those who criticise*” (D, 25.9.2021).

5.4 Conspiracy thinking

As the pandemic unfolded, the influencers' content increasingly reflected a deepening distrust and the politicisation of COVID-19. This shift manifested not only in calls to action but also through the circulation of conspiracy narratives surrounding the pandemic.

Three influencers (A, B and C) shared or alluded to conspiracy theories in their content, though the scope and intensity varied. Influencer B only hinted that pandemic restrictions served as a means to curtail individual freedoms. In contrast, influencer A actively disseminated well-established COVID-19 conspiracy narratives. As early as mid-March 2020, he shared a YouTube video claiming the virus had been deliberately engineered to trigger a global pandemic (A, 15.3.2020). By the second study period in 2021, his references to conspiracy theories - such as "The New World Order" or "The Great Reset" - had become frequent, appearing several times a week. He employed these narratives to frame pandemic restrictions and vaccine mandates as "irrational" and coercive. According to him, pandemic management was part of a broader strategy to increase control of individuals, beginning with COVID-19 vaccination: "In all likelihood, next year you won't be able to go to work, school or the grocery store, and you won't get social benefits if you haven't taken the fifth jab" (A, 20.10.2021).

Influencer C made only one explicit reference to COVID-19 conspiracy theories during the very late stages of the pandemic. However, her earlier posts had already signalled distrust towards government authorities, suggesting that officials were "not telling the whole truth". In a blog post published in January 2022, she went further, proposing that the pandemic was intentional. Echoing common COVID-19 conspiracy narratives, she argued that certain actors were exploiting the pandemic to exert control over individuals. According to her, this was so extensive that democracy itself was at risk: "they have now managed to spread this illness widely. (...) I'm motivated by a desire to make people see how wrongly we are being led now, so that we will not be driven from democracy to totalitarianism." (C, 9.1.2022)

Influencer C framed her criticism of pandemic recommendations in explicitly political terms, presenting it as a defence of democracy. Her argument aligns with cultural theorists' interpretation of conspiracy thinking and conspiracy theories as dissenting forms of political knowledge - responses to rapidly changing societal conditions and instruments of political contestation (Knight 2000; Harambam 2020). When conventional avenues for political action appear inaccessible or ineffective - as was seemingly the case for many alternative health influencers and their followers during the pandemic - conspiracy narratives can serve as a means to express resistance. In our material, we interpret conspiracy thinking as a manifestation of the politicisation of health and the alternative health sphere under unprecedented pandemic conditions. Conspiracy narratives were frequently accompanied by politicisation, whether in abstract forms of raising awareness or through concrete calls to action.

Alongside growing distrust towards state authorities and pandemic measures, the influencers reported feeling pressured to align with official pandemic management. They described facing criticism and experiencing restrictions of their content and social media accounts. Such experiences likely reinforced a perception of being controlled, or even persecuted, under the guise of pandemic governance. For example, one of influencer A's social media accounts, which had 17,000 followers at the time, was closed by the platform in late 2021. He interpreted this as evidence of "tightening censorship" (A, 28.10.2021).

While many followers supported the influencers' views, including those aligned with conspiracy narratives, their comment sections also became sites of debate - typically among followers, as the influencers themselves rarely engaged. Although such controversial content may have amplified their visibility during the pandemic (see e.g. Valaskivi 2022), it also provoked backlash and unwanted labels. These reactions came not only from public health authorities and their supporters but also from within the alternative health community. Influencers reported losing followers, collaborations, and income as a consequence of criticising COVID-19 policies. For instance, in March 2020, influencer A noted that half of his income derived from product design partnerships with health brands; six months later, he had lost

at least one major collaboration due to his controversial content (for similar findings in Denmark, see Mortensen & Kristensen 2023). Influencer B likewise reflected on the risks associated with publicly opposing pandemic measures:

“I have been told I’m ruining my career and that I could no longer be taken seriously in matters relating to diet because I’m a “conspiracy lunatic” (...) I want to emphasise that there’s no personal benefit for me in talking about COVID, quite the contrary. (...) If I lose something because I speak authentically from my own truth, so be it.” (B, 27.10.2021)

Reflecting the conspiratorial tendencies within the alternative health scene, influencer B underscored her commitment to “speaking the truth” regardless of potential consequences. Posts incorporating conspiracy theories and expressions of radical distrust towards government authorities elicited mixed reactions among her followers.

5.5 After the Pandemic: continuing political criticism or return to business as usual

The third study period, spring 2025, marked five years since the onset of the pandemic and two years since the WHO declared its end in May, 2023. The influencers had continued producing their content to varying degrees. By spring, 2025, influencers B, C, and D made no mention of COVID-19 in any of their posts, while influencer A referred to it only a few times.

Influencer A maintained the controversial trajectory of political criticism intertwined with conspiracy thinking that he had adopted during the pandemic. He remained highly active across four social media platforms - Facebook, Instagram, X, and TikTok – posting frequently⁴. The majority of his Facebook content (85 posts) focused on political topics, with a strong emphasis on celebrating Donald Trump’s second term in office. Additional themes included censorship and cancel culture, as well as the war in Ukraine, which he approached from a pro-Russian perspective, alongside continued criticism of Finnish politics and the European Union. Although pandemic-related conspiracy theories and pro-Russian war narratives are not inherently connected, they often appeal to similar audiences, particularly individuals who harbour distrust towards their national governments and public media institutions (Grygarová et al. 2025).

Influencer A continued to operate within a conspiratorial framework, asserting that “*information control agencies are hiding and distorting [truth and information] from us Finns*” (A, 11.3.2025). While he still shared conspiracy-related content, these narratives were now primarily tied to global politics rather than the pandemic. His posts frequently intertwined populist right-wing political views with conspiracy thinking. For instance, he circulated claims that global elites seek to control populations through science, mainstream media, and vaccines, alongside multiple posts alleging corruption of politicians and political elites. He amplified narratives portraying Ukraine as responsible for the 2022 escalation of war with Russia and accusing Ukraine of committing genocide against its Russian population. Health remained a marginal theme, appearing in only 23 of his 153 posts during this period, mostly in relation to supplements and vaccines.

Across all study periods, a consistent motif in his content was valorisation of authenticity and the courage to voice controversial views - often accompanied by allusions to conspiracy theories:

“Someone was wondering how “you don't care about other people's opinions; you say whatever you want.” In fact, I'm probably more sensitive than most. But the benefits of speaking out outweigh the disadvantages many times over, they always have. (...) I must take into account the spiritual joys and gifts: they are greater the more severely the world punishes me for my lack of self-censorship.” (A, 13.4.2025)

⁴⁴ We analysed the posts on Facebook, as in earlier study periods.

Influencer A thus continued to operate within the conspiratorial framework, where conspiracy narratives merged with new spirituality and ideals of authenticity and truth-seeking, regardless of backlash. In a podcast interview in 2024, he acknowledged that his controversial content had led to professional isolation. Nevertheless, consistent with the authenticity ideal, he asserted that remaining silent would have been untenable, stating that it would have made him unhappy to “sell his soul” merely to preserve collaborations or affiliate marketing opportunities.

In contrast with influencer A, the other influencers had largely returned to their pre-pandemic content. Influencer B primarily shared health-related posts and promoted her coaching business. As before, many posts highlighted her personal healing journey, focusing on weight, nutrition, exercise, and overall health. However, her coaching had shifted from ketogenic and metabolic flexibility diets to a holistic model tailored for women in (peri)menopause. Notably, no political content appeared in her 2025 posts. Similarly, influencer C returned to her core theme of nutrition, though her activity was minimal during the third study period, with only two Facebook posts: one discussing the benefits of her plant-based diet, and another promoting an online course.

Influencer D’s content during the third period largely mirrored earlier periods, except for pandemic-related posts notably absent. She shared 19 posts focused on cosmetics and commercial collaborations, including promoting a new cosmetic brand launched by her startup and a curated collection for teenagers. Her content also featured domestic travel partnerships. Occasional political content persisted, primarily addressing environmental issues.

Overall, the other three influencers concentrated on topics aligned with their business ventures, with influencer D intermittently incorporating environmental political content consistent with her established profile. For influencers B and C, political engagement and conspiracy thinking appear to have been temporary deviations, likely driven by the heightened politicisation of health during the late pandemic period.

6. Conclusion

This study explored how four Finnish alternative health influencers contributed to the politicisation of COVID-19 knowledge, restrictions and recommendations. It identified two sociological dynamics that characterize these influencers and, more broadly, social media-driven narratives in late modernity.

The first dynamic concerns framing pandemic management decisions and the scientific and public health expertise behind them as inherently political. This framing fostered criticism, mistrust and distrust towards decision-makers and public health authorities and experts. The second dynamic reveals an entanglement of personal wellbeing, entrepreneurial activity and political activism in influencers’ content and activities. For three of the influencers, this convergence aligned with the concept of conspiratoriness, where “political cynicism is tempered with spiritual optimism” (Ward & Voas 2011). This conspiratoriness framing was strongly tied to ideals of truth and authenticity. The influencers often stressed being “true to oneself”, even under pressure to conform to mainstream norms, thereby legitimising perspectives that challenge those norms. Authenticity is also a key principle for influencers striving for trustworthiness and relatability on social media (Arnesson 2023).

These dynamics evolved over time. Influencers initially established lay expert status through pre-pandemic healing narratives. During the early pandemic, they introduced lay immunologies that challenged the mainstream medical understandings of COVID-19 and amplified mistrust in public health expertise. As the pandemic progressed, three influencers adopted overt political opposition and distrust of public health expertise, drawing on popular COVID-19 conspiracy narratives to articulate radical political distrust. Five years after the pandemic broke out, these influencers had largely moved beyond COVID-related content, continuing their activities in other domains.

These transformations in content were not uniform. Before and during the early pandemic, all four influencers shared a relatively similar stance, questioning public health recommendations on diet and

nutrition. However, during the second study period, two influencers (A, B) adopted increasingly radical positions opposing pandemic-related public health expertise, while one (C) maintained a more cautious approach, and another (D) shifted towards supporting official pandemic management. In the post-pandemic period, influencer A continued to disseminate radical political critique intertwined with conspiracy thinking, whereas the others returned to their coaching and wellness-oriented content.

Several factors shaped these shifts. While individualism has long been a core value in modernity, late modernity places heightened emphasis on “the ideals of subjective self-development, creativity, authenticity, and emotional fulfilment” contrasting with earlier forms that prioritised conformity to mass culture and rigid structures (Reckwitz 2023: 67-73). The four influencers examined here exemplify this culture of uniqueness and the associated struggles for recognition and visibility. At the same time, they operate within alternative health and conspiratorial cultures that valorise “speaking the truth” and performing authenticity.

Within the content of alternative health influencers, this cultural backdrop of individualism and authenticity intersects with populist post-truth narratives that were gaining traction even before the pandemic. Globally, these included discourses surrounding Brexit and Trump’s first term, while in Finland they coincided with the growing influence of the right-wing populist The Finns Party (Norris & Inglehart 2019). These trends amplified anti-establishment rhetoric and created fertile ground for scepticism towards expertise. Influencer A embraced this trajectory most fully, positioning himself as a figurehead of ‘alternative thinking’ on the issues ranging from COVID-19 to EU politics and the war in Ukraine – a role further reinforced by the Finnish mainstream media coverage of his content.

The pandemic also politicized individual health choices and health attitudes, intensifying affective opinion polarisation (Allcott et al. 2020; Jungkunz 2021). Surveys illustrate this polarisation: broad trust in public health authorities coexisted with a smaller segment questioning them (Jallinoja et al. 2025; Malinen & Koivula 2024). In Finland, even mainstream media adopted adversarial framings (Mäkinen 2023). Controversial topics – especially vaccines – guaranteed attention and visibility, proving profitable for influencers (Valaskivi 2022).

Prolonged pandemic restrictions, vaccination campaigns, and the introduction of the COVID-19 pass intensified civic frustration (Värttö 2025). Influencers who tapped into these sentiments with politicised and radical content gained significant traction, likely encouraging some audiences to adopt more extreme views – whether controversial or aligned with mainstream narratives. As the pandemic ended, urgency and frustration diminished, and media attention waned. Consequently, three influencers (B, C, and D) shifted away from COVID-related topics, while influencer A continued to focus on divisive political topics.

In the post-pandemic landscape, alternative health and conspiratorial cultures have redirected their attention to new themes. Yet, their influence during the crisis revealed their ability to mobilise political protest by channelling public discontent and distrust. Post-pandemic observation suggests that conspiracy theories and their advocates have not vanished. Instead, engagement with one conspiracy narrative often acts as a gateway to others, even when the topics are unrelated (Granados Samayoa et al. 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic generated a volatile socio-political environment – one that is likely to recur in future health crises. Scholars have called for the need for stronger integration of social science into public health preparedness (e.g. Bardosh et al. 2020), particularly to understand how trust and polarisation influence compliance with health measures (Bargain & Aminjonov 2020). Our analysis contributes to this effort by providing a nuanced sociological account of alternative health influencers – key actors yet often overlooked in public discourse. Rather than vilifying or celebrating them, we advocate for public health strategies that foster dialogue and collaboration toward shared goals.

During the pandemic, alternative health communities exhibited both opinion diversity and polarization. Recognizing this heterogeneity is essential to avoid stigmatisation and marginalisation, as exclusion risks deepening polarisation and eroding institutional trust – even in high-trust Nordic societies. The COVID-19 experience underscores the importance of incorporating diverse voices into respectful public

deliberation (see e.g. Sverdljuk & Bruinsma 2024) and fostering openness to differing views and institutional critique under conditions of uncertainty.

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