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Feature Article

### **How Influencers Are Shaping Fiji's New Consumer Habits**

In the vibrant and rapidly evolving landscape of Fiji's digital economy, a new force is shaping consumer habits with unprecedented influence, the social media influencer. With aspirational lifestyles, polished aesthetics, and persuasive endorsements, influencers have become a powerful marketing tool, often blurring the lines between personal opinion and paid promotion. As more Fijians connect to the internet and immerse themselves in the world of TikTok trends, Instagram reels, and Facebook stories, the purchasing decisions of everyday consumers are increasingly dictated by digital personalities rather than traditional advertising.

However, this growing phenomenon carries hidden risks. While influencer marketing has revolutionised the way businesses reach their audiences, it has also given rise to impulsive purchasing, consumer regret, and, in many cases, financial strain — particularly among young and impressionable buyers.

### **The Rise of Influencer Culture in Fiji**

Over the past years, Fiji has experienced a notable rise in homegrown social media influencers. From beauty bloggers, fitness gurus to travel vloggers and fashion-forward trendsetters, these online personalities command thousands of followers and wield considerable sway over public opinion and consumer behaviour.

In a country where over 70% of the population now has access to mobile internet, platforms such as Instagram, TikTok, and Facebook have become central to everyday life. These platforms are not only sources of entertainment and communication but also powerful avenues for product discovery and lifestyle aspiration. Influencers, once seen as hobbyists, are now seen as trusted voices, and often serve as unofficial brand ambassadors for both local and international products.

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Mobile App

While many influencers promote authentic experiences and collaborate with credible businesses, a concerning trend is emerging: the indistinct boundary between sponsored content and personal opinion. Consumers are often left guessing whether a product endorsement is based on genuine experience or financial incentive.

### **The Emotional Pull: Selling a Lifestyle, Not Just a Product**

For many Fijians, particularly young adults, the appeal of influencer-promoted products is deeply emotional. Purchasing these products is not merely a transactional act; it is an attempt to access a desirable lifestyle portrayed on screen.

For example: “When we see influencers in perfect makeup, drinking iced coffee in luxury resorts or unboxing the latest gadgets, it feels like we can be part of that world too.”. “It gives me something to look forward to, even if it’s just for a little while.”

Psychologists refer to this as the “aspirational trap” — where consumers make frequent and impulsive purchases to bridge the gap between their real lives and the idealised version of life portrayed online. This pattern is compounded by the dopamine rush associated with online shopping and the gratification of receiving a new item in the mail.

### **The Consequences of Impulse Buying**

In the 2023–2024 financial year alone, the Consumer Council of Fiji recorded a significant increase in complaints related to online purchases. Many of these cases involved products that were either promoted by influencers or purchased through links shared by them. Complaints ranged from defective items and unresponsive sellers to misleading advertisements and missing refunds.

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## **Lack of Transparency and Accountability**

While some influencers maintain ethical standards and disclose when they are being paid to promote products, many do not. In countries such as Australia and the United States, advertising standards authorities mandate clear disclosures when content is sponsored. In Fiji, however, there is currently no formal regulatory framework specific to influencer advertising.

Still, misleading promotions and false advertising can fall under existing consumer protection laws. As such, influencers may still be held accountable if their endorsements result in consumer harm. The Council is concerned that some influencers either knowingly or unknowingly endorse products without verifying the legitimacy or safety of what they are promoting. In many instances, influencers themselves receive free products or monetary incentives, which creates a bias that is rarely disclosed to their audience.

One growing area of concern involves herbal or “natural” products promoted by influencers, which may not be certified by health authorities. Consumers often assume these products are safe because they are endorsed by trusted personalities, yet many of these items lack proper regulation or approval from relevant health bodies — raising significant health and safety risks. In many instances, influencers receive free products or monetary incentives, which creates a bias that is rarely disclosed to their audience.

## **Debt, Stress, and Regret**

Beyond product dissatisfaction, there are deeper financial implications associated with compulsive online shopping triggered by influencer marketing. Many young Fijians are resorting to mobile credit purchases, buy-now-pay-later services, and informal borrowing to keep up with the latest trends. Such habits can contribute to mounting debt, poor credit, and long-term financial instability. Additionally, the emotional toll of regret and stress over wasted

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money can affect one's mental well-being, particularly for young adults who are still learning to manage their finances.

### How Consumers Can Protect Themselves

To reduce the risk of falling victim to misleading influencer promotions, the Consumer Council of Fiji encourages consumers to exercise caution and adopt the following protective strategies:

1. **Think Before You Buy:** Ask yourself whether the product is a necessity or simply a desire created by online hype.
2. **Research Thoroughly:** Check the credibility of the seller and read genuine reviews from other customers.
3. **Check for Return Policies:** Do not purchase from vendors who fail to provide clear policies on returns, refunds, and warranties.
4. **Beware of Paid Content:** Learn to recognise when a product endorsement may be financially motivated. Influencers should disclose this information, but when they don't, consumers must remain sceptical.
5. **Track Your Spending:** Keep a log of your monthly online purchases to avoid overspending and identify patterns in your shopping behaviour.

### Moving Toward Ethical Digital Marketing

The Consumer Council of Fiji is calling for stronger accountability and ethical standards in the local influencer marketing space. This includes urging influencers to be transparent about sponsored content, encouraging businesses to verify the quality and authenticity of their products, and advocating for legal frameworks that address misleading promotions on social media.

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Moreover, the Council believes that early education on digital literacy and consumer rights is crucial. Schools, tertiary institutions, and community organisations should incorporate online consumer education into their programmes to empower young Fijians to make informed and responsible choices.

## Conclusion

In an era where every hop on your screen and swipe of your finger leads to another purchase opportunity, Fijian consumers must be more vigilant than ever. The rise of influencer marketing has transformed the way people engage with products and services, turning social media platforms into powerful digital marketplaces. However, with this transformation comes the responsibility to think critically and act prudently.

Influencers, whether local or international, present curated lives that often blur the line between aspiration and reality. Their endorsements can be compelling, but not every product they promote is backed by quality, credibility, or consumer protections. As Fiji continues to embrace the digital age, consumers must build resilience through awareness and education. This includes understanding the motivations behind influencer promotions, verifying the legitimacy of online sellers, and resisting the urge to spend impulsively based on social media trends. It is also essential that influencers, businesses, and policymakers recognise their roles in promoting ethical practices, transparency, and accountability within the digital economy.

The Council remains committed to protecting the rights of all consumers and calls on every Fijian to take ownership of their digital choices. Let us not allow fleeting online trends to dictate our financial well-being. Because behind every influencer's glossy recommendation may lie a hidden cost — and only an informed, cautious consumer can avoid paying the price.

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