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FEATURE ARTICLE

The Hidden Dangers of Counterfeit Cosmetics

Mere was ecstatic when she saw her favourite high-end lipstick brand selling for just \$10 at a local pop-up market in Suva. It looked identical — same sleek packaging, same brand logo, same shade she had seen online for ten times the price. Without a second thought, she bought it. The next morning, Mere's excitement turned into panic. Her lips began to swell painfully. They blistered, peeled, and left her in discomfort for days. She later learned the harsh truth: the lipstick wasn't authentic — it was a counterfeit. And Mere is not alone.

Across Fiji, the rise in counterfeit cosmetics — fake versions of popular international beauty products — is exposing consumers to dangerous health risks, economic loss, and a growing wave of deceptive online and retail practices. This feature delves into the growing threat of counterfeit beauty products in Fiji, the legal risks involved, the health implications for consumers, and what you can do to protect yourself and your loved ones. Because when it comes to your body, your money, and your health — fake is never worth it.

A Silent Threat in Plain Sight

In recent months, the Consumer Council of Fiji has received increasing reports from concerned consumers who have unknowingly purchased counterfeit cosmetics. In one instance, a young Fijian woman discovered on social media that a local online seller was offering luxury-brand lip kits and internationally known cosmetic products at prices that seemed too good to be true. She was right to be suspicious — the pricing was nearly impossible given the genuine retail value of these products.

Another consumer came forward after purchasing what she believed to be a well-known beauty oil from a small shop, only to experience allergic reactions. Upon closer inspection, she

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discovered the oil was a counterfeit version of the real product, with questionable packaging and no safety or authenticity markings.

These are not isolated cases. The Council's investigations reveal a troubling pattern of online sellers and informal retailers distributing counterfeit personal care items — sometimes unknowingly, but often with full awareness of their illicit nature.

Why Counterfeit Cosmetics Are Booming

Fiji's growing interest in beauty and skincare — driven by social media trends, celebrity endorsements, and evolving beauty standards — has created a lucrative market for fake goods. Counterfeiters prey on consumers' desire for luxury and affordability, selling imitation cosmetics through online platforms, social media pages, flea markets, and even some storefronts. These fake items often mimic popular brands down to the smallest detail. At first glance, they appear authentic — complete with printed logos, familiar colors, and promotional claims. But beneath the attractive exterior lies a dangerous secret: counterfeit cosmetics are unregulated, untested, and often toxic.

The Law Is Clear: Fakes Are Illegal

Selling counterfeit goods in Fiji is not only unethical — it's illegal. Under the Trademarks Act 1933, it is an offence to:

- Reproduce or imitate a registered trademark,
- Sell or distribute goods bearing a counterfeit mark, and
- Mislead consumers into believing a fake product is genuine.

Violations can result in hefty fines and even imprisonment for sellers and importers. The FCCC Act 2010 also prohibits businesses from engaging in misleading or deceptive conduct. The sale

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and importation of counterfeit makeup in Fiji is prohibited under a combination of the Trade-Marks Act 1933 and the Customs (Prohibited Imports and Exports) Regulations 1986. Section 3 of the Trade-Marks Act 1933 makes it an offence to forge or falsely apply trademarks, sell goods bearing counterfeit marks, or use false trade descriptions. Although cosmetics are not explicitly listed in the Customs Regulations, Schedule 5 of the Customs (Prohibited Imports and Exports) Regulations 1986 prohibits the importation of goods that contravene any law in force in Fiji. As counterfeit makeup breaches the Trade-Marks Act 1933, it becomes a prohibited import under Schedule 5. Therefore, customs officers are empowered to seize such goods at the border, and offenders may be prosecuted under the 1933 Act, facing penalties including fines, imprisonment, and forfeiture of the counterfeit goods.

Selling counterfeit cosmetics — often falsely labeled and marketed — is a clear breach of this legislation. But beyond legality, there's a more immediate concern: the health and safety of consumers.

A Cocktail of Chemicals: What's Really in Fakes?

Unlike regulated cosmetics, which undergo rigorous testing and quality control, counterfeit products are made in unlicensed facilities with no oversight. Reports from international regulatory agencies have uncovered fake makeup containing:

- **Lead** – linked to infertility, brain damage, and kidney problems,
- **Mercury** – known to cause skin rashes, kidney dysfunction, and nervous system damage,
- **Arsenic** – a carcinogen,
- **Animal waste** – used as filler material,
- **Bacteria** – from unsterilized tools and unhygienic environments.

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In one global case, counterfeit eyeliners contained lead levels 19 times higher than legal limits. Such contaminants can cause allergic reactions, burns, rashes, infections, or even long-term health damage. Fijian consumers, particularly young women and teenagers, are especially vulnerable due to social media trends promoting unverified sellers. Many trust that the product is safe simply because it's packaged well and endorsed by influencers. But good packaging doesn't guarantee quality or safety.

The Price of a Bargain

Why do so many fall for fake beauty products? The answer is simple: the illusion of affordability. In times of financial strain, a \$15 knockoff seems better than a \$90 original. For many, especially students and low-income earners, the temptation to opt for the cheaper option is understandable. But the real cost of using counterfeit cosmetics is far higher. Medical bills for treating allergic reactions, loss of confidence due to visible damage, and the emotional toll of being misled — all weigh heavily on the consumer.

A counterfeit cosmetic is not just a bad purchase. It's a risk to your health, your wallet, and your dignity as a consumer.

How to Protect Yourself and Others

While regulators and enforcement agencies work to identify and stop the flow of counterfeit goods, consumers have a critical role to play in protecting themselves. Here's how:

1. Don't judge by packaging alone.

Fake products often look just like the real thing. Check for misspellings, missing expiry dates, unusually low prices, or packaging that feels cheap or inconsistent with the original brand.

2. Avoid “too good to be true” deals.

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If a high-end brand is being sold at a fraction of its usual price, it's likely a fake.

3. Buy from trusted sources.

Only purchase cosmetics from pharmacies, licensed retailers, or verified online platforms. Avoid buying beauty products from unregulated social media pages or informal markets.

4. Know the brand's usual price.

Visit the brand's official website to compare prices and packaging before purchasing. If the local product differs significantly, it's a red flag.

5. Speak up.

If you've encountered a suspicious product or experienced harm from a counterfeit, report it to the Council. Your action could help others avoid the same mistake.

Our Collective Responsibility

Combatting counterfeit cosmetics is not just about protecting yourself — it's about protecting others in your community. Every purchase you make sends a message. When you refuse to buy fakes, you undermine the counterfeit market and support ethical businesses that prioritise consumer health.

Parents should educate their children, especially teenagers, about the dangers of fake makeup. Influencers and online sellers have a duty to verify the authenticity of what they promote. And authorities must continue their efforts to investigate and penalise those selling dangerous products.

Final Word: Don't Be Fooled

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Mobile App

It's easy to get lured by a beautiful label and an attractive price. But when it comes to what you put on your skin — and into your body — there can be no compromise. A fake lipstick isn't just a cheaper version of the real thing. It's a chemical cocktail that could scar you for life. A counterfeit serum might not only fail to deliver its promise but might leave you with painful, permanent damage.

As Mere learned the hard way: if it's fake, it's not a deal — it's a danger. Protect your skin. Protect your health. Know your rights — and don't fall for the fakes.

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