Social media ecology in an influencer group
A closer look at Chat (Fiji) as a case study

Abstract: Social media use in Fiji has expanded in recent years and has become a ubiquitous feature in wider society. Social media ecology focuses and examines the dimensions of an online environment and its interplay with human experiences in user engagement. These dimensions with human experiences in user engagement can provide an insight into how influential social media groups can become in shaping discourses and views. To examine and discuss the social media ecology of an influencer group, the article details one of Fiji's largest and most influential online groups. To do this, the paper uses digital ethnography, supplemented with social media analytics. This study provides key findings in the social media ecology of influencer groups and online behavior. These findings may have implications for further research in media, citizen journalism, viral content creation and online political campaigning.

Keywords: case studies, citizen journalism, Fiji, digital ethnography, influencer groups, media, media analytics, social media, social media ecology

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Introduction

THE USE of social media in Fiji continues to rise due to the deregulated telecommunications market, expansion of undersea internet cables and the increasing affordability of digital devices and data plans (Cave, 2012; Minges & Stork, 2015; Watson, 2021). Active mobile devices with cellular subscriptions is estimated to be more than a million, in a country recently estimated to have a population of 864,132 (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Kemp, 2023). There are literally more mobile devices in Fiji than Fijians themselves. This makes the majority of Fijians' engagement and interaction with and around technology, digital devices and online presence inevitable. Related studies in the Pacific have examined the use of mobile phones and its moral economy, underlying the relationship between digital devices and human experiences (Foster & Horst, 2018; Watson, 2011). Apart from this, other studies have moved into social media use and practice, examining political communications, campaigning, advocacy, religion and

regulation (Cave, 2012; Ryle & Tarai, 2020; Tarai, 2018a, 2018b, 2019, 2023; Tarai et al., 2015a, 2015b, Tarai & Eliki, 2018). These interconnected studies have laid foundations in social media and related media research, but have yet to broach social media ecology and the related influencer culture.

The expansion of social media use has also been underpinned by the controls and restrictions placed on the traditional media landscape, largely due to the legacy of the Bainimarama coup era (Robie, 2014; Singh, 2015, 2021; Tarai, 2020, 2022a). These include the recently repealed *Media Industry Development Act* (MIDA, 2010), which cast a cloud of fear over journalists in Fiji because of the heavy penalties it carried (Krishant & Narayan, 2023; Robie, 2014; Singh, 2015, 2021). The restrictive conditions facilitated by draconian laws, provided conducive conditions for Fijians to drift onto social media to engage in wide ranging debates and access information (Tarai, 2018a, 2019, Tarai et al., 2015a, 2015b).

Social media ecology is an examination and detailing of an online space or environment, where users exhibit varieties of experiences, engagement and interactions within the technology and outside of it (Poell, 2014; Zhao, Lampe & Ellison, 2016). These experiences are informed by the users' offline lived realities, such as socio-economic conditions, culture, religious, political beliefs, education and psychological predisposition (Fuchs, 2021). Within the technology and more specifically online groups, the clash and coalescing of these experiences and engagements can be amplified into creating influence. Influencer groups then exhibit the ability to shape discourses and views within social media (Khamis, Ang & Welling, 2017; Zhou, et. al., 2021).

In this article, social media ecology of an influencer group focusses on detailing the dimensions of the online group and its interplay with the human experiences in user engagement. As such, this article seeks to detail and discuss the magnitude, composition and activity of an influencer group in Fiji's digital landscape. To do this, the research uses digital ethnography, complemented with social media analytics, focusing on one of Fiji's largest social media groups.

This social media group is a Facebook group called Chat (fiji). Chat (fiji) is one of the largest hyperactive social media groups in Fiji. It accommodates over a quarter of a million online users majority of whom are based in Fiji. This social media group has generated enough attention and focus that it has been at the centre of controversy and concern over time (Bolatiki, 2018; Radinibaravi, 2023; Tarai, & Eliki, 2018). It has demonstrated its ability to generate viral content, which has subsequently shaped and influenced online and offline discourses and views.

Methodology
Digital ethnography encompasses the observation and examination of lived realities, instances and events in digital spaces, over an extended period of time

(Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017). This approach may involve participant observations in a mediated form of contact, while at the same time recognizing the researcher's role in the context and space being observed (Horst, et. al., 2015; Kaur-Gill & Dutta, 2017).

For this research, digital ethnographic qualitative observations have been ongoing since 2018. This involved a regular review of the social media group's discussions and confidential informant interviews were conducted over the years with administrators and moderators. This has been supplemented through quantitative social media analytics data. The analytics data was derived from Facebook Audience Insights covering early 2024 and late 2018. Social media analytics data covered the period from 17 October 2018 to 12 November 2018. The mixed method approach used under digital ethnography has provided rich and insightful data in examining the social media ecology of an influencer group like Chat (fiji).

Dominant social media platform in Fiji

Internet use in 2023 was estimated at 87.7 percent of the 864,132 total Fiji population (Fiji Bureau of Statistics, 2021; Kemp, 2023). In the lead up to the 2022 national elections, the estimated total social media users were 649,000, with around 556,000 users on Facebook (Tarai, 2023). Facebook as a platform continues to be the most dominant social networking site (Tarai, 2019, 2023; Tarai et al., 2015b). As seen in Figure 1 (StatCounter, 2024), Fiji's social media use

Figure 1: Social media statistics of Fiji, 2009-2024
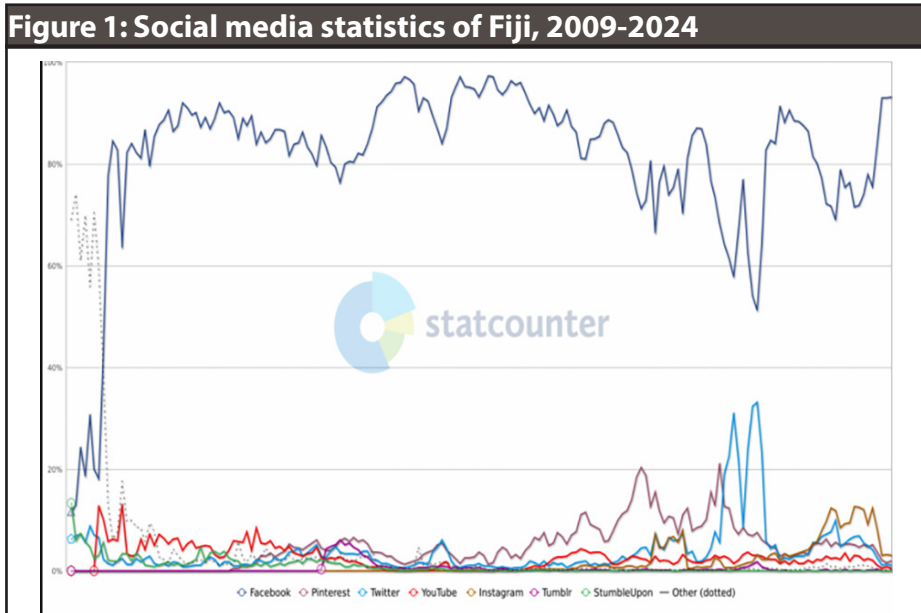
Source: StatCounter Global Statistics - Dark blue line indicates Facebook's larger audience engagement compared to other platforms

may vary among platforms but Facebook continues to be the highest and most consistently engaged platform since 2009.

However, it is instructive to note that during the COVID-19 global pandemic, especially in 2021 Facebook declined in audience engagement, while Twitter/X (now referred to as X) activity and engagement increased slightly. This was due to the news and government informational content which was easily made available at the time. In addition, seasoned journalists and development actors began hosting a new Twitter feature at the time, called 'Twitter space'. Since most people were under lockdown, Twitter spaces brought more Fijians closer together through enabling them to verbally address one another and discuss the pandemic related challenges. Post-COVID-19, Twitter/X audience engagement declined, while Facebook audience engagement began to rise once again and stabilise. Twitter/X audience is estimated to be more than 30,000 active Fiji users, which is the second most active platform for political discussions and debates(Kemp, 2024). Apart from Facebook and Twitter, Instagram is the other platform that constitutes over 200,000 active users (Kemp, 2024). However, Instagram's platform engagement is not as political or interactive as Facebook and Twitter in Fiji.

Facebook in Fiji

Analytics data in 2024 indicate that out of the more than 550,000 active Facebook accounts, women identified accounts stand at around 52.4 percent, with men at 47.6 percent (See Figure 2). This marks an interesting shift from the previous years in the lead up to COVID 19, where male identified accounts dominated Fiji's social media landscape (Tarai, 2019; Tarai et al., 2015b). This creates a number of interesting questions for further research such as: where have all the men gone? Can Fiji's social media landscape be akin to a matriarchal digital society? What can this mean for political social media campaigning in Fiji? The largest age cohort includes those aged 25-34, with an estimated 28.8 percent of the total recorded users, while those in the 65 and over cohort constitute the lowest membership with around 4.5 percent (see Figure 2). Given Fiji's legislated youth age of 15-35 (Fiji Government, 2011, 2023), the 18-35 age group is estimated to be at least 58 percent of the total Facebook audience (Meta Insights, 2024).

The majority of this engagement is centered around the urban centers such as the capital city of Suva, and the towns of Nausori, Nadi and Lautoka in the Western Division and Labasa town in the Northern division (Meta Insights, 2024). Five out of the ten most publicly engaged Facebook pages in Fiji, including mainstream media pages, indicated the high online traffic for news and media generated insights (Meta Insights, 2024; Tarai, 2022b, 2023).

Fiji's most representative social media landscape's stakeholders at present,

Figure 2: Fiji Facebook gender and age distribution
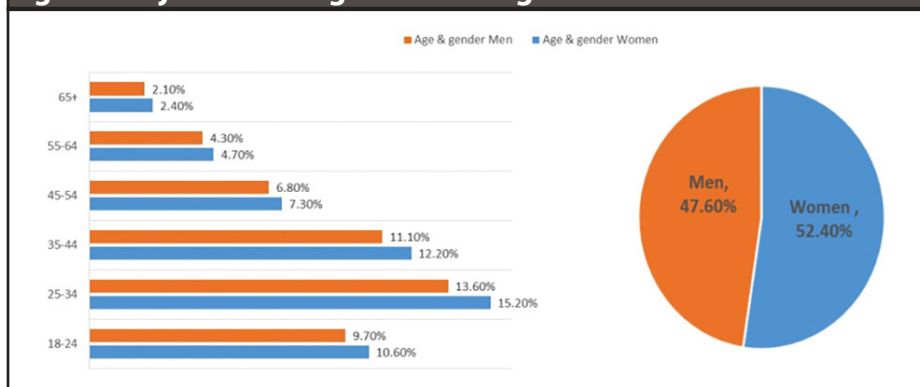
Source: Chat (Fiji) Audience Insights

are women and the youth. The top consistently engaged social media pages have been the news media organisations online, which indicates the emergent intersection between traditional media and the social media landscape.

Chat (fiji)—what makes it an influencer group?

Chat (fiji) as a group and its ability to create viral content was largely premised on its magnitude and its representative ratio within Fiji's wider social media landscape. As such, it will be instructive to review the group's dimensions coupled with an online viral incident, to discuss its social media ecology.

The viral incident

In 2018, a weekend road accident in early August, with graphic images of the dead victims was circulated on social media, specifically through Chat (fiji). Some users publicised the incident as a form of citizen journalism, attempting to break the news first through the social media group. It gained so much traction that a prominent traditional print media organisation had to follow the story through the online conversations. This culminated in a traditional print media capturing and publicising a video of the family of a dead victim, receiving the news of the road accident and loss. The media organisation came under intense criticism from the then Media Industry Development Authority (MIDA), for publicising the grief-stricken victims' emotional and sorrowful videos (Kumar, 2018). The media organisation defended their coverage by claiming that it had received permission from the family to publicise the ordeal. The print media organisation argued that despite the concerns, the decision was made purely as a 'news judgement' (Kumar, 2018). The then Prime Minister, Voreqe Bainimarama, called attention to where the issue surfaced, which was the social media posts that he described as 'sickening' (Bolatiki, 2018).

Within a span of a week, a series of viral social media posts led a media organisation into publicising grief and questioning its ethical codes of practice. The initial social media posts appeared to be a form of citizen journalism, as online users drew attention to the risks of reckless driving. However, the social media content became quite morbid with the publication of lifeless bodies and carnage. The social media posts would not have gone viral without Chat (fiji) as an influencer group. Chat (fiji) effectively amplified the posts and related issues around reckless driving, grief, sorrow and loss. It is instructive to note that citizen journalism in the Pacific has been documented by Singh (2017), as an emerging social media trend. However, the distinction remains that mainstream media journalists are held to higher codes of media practice, protocols and editorial checks and balances. While citizen journalism provides journalistic potential in the form of news leads or tips for the media, it also can be problematic and disruptive for democracy. Mainstream media and journalism become caught in the legislative cross hairs that at times target social media related citizen journalism (Singh, 2017).

Group dimensions—Chat (fiji) 2018

Chat (fiji) as a Facebook group was created in 2010 by a Fijian social media administrator. The original intention behind the social media group was to create an online space where Fijian users could discuss, debate and mostly laugh about a variety of issues. It was established at a time when Fiji's traditional media landscape was surveilled and restricted but social media was not seen as having an impact on public discourse and engagement. However, by 2018, the social media group's online activity and Fiji's wider social media use was referenced for generating what then Prime Minister Bainimarama had criticised (Bolatiki, 2018; Tarai & Eliki, 2018).

During this period, Chat (fiji) had more than 238,000 listed Facebook accounts as a group. The daily active Facebooks accounts ranged from 50,000 to over 64,000 accounts (Meta Insights, 2018). This meant that on a daily basis, around 50,000-60,000 users pre-dominantly in Fiji were actively consuming information from Chat (fiji) and engaging in various discussions.

Gender distribution—Chat (fiji) 2018

There was an estimated 238,584 Facebook users in Chat (fiji) during the previously mentioned analytics data period (Meta Insights, 2018). Male identified accounts were the majority at around 53 percent, with female identified accounts at around 46 percent (Meta Insights, 2018). Considering the diversity of gender identity, around 135 Chat (fiji) users identified themselves within the broad spectrum of gender (Table 1). This marks a very insightful representation of the gender minority community in one of Fiji's largest social media groups.

Table 1: Fiji Facebook gender distribution, 2018		
Gender	Distribution	Percentage
Women	111,263	46.63%
Men	127,186	53.31%
Custom gender	135	0.06%
Total	238,584	

Source: Chat (Fiji) Audience Insight, 2018 Gender Distribution

Country distribution—Chat (fiji) 2018

As detailed in Table 2, Fiji based user accounts comprise over 78 percent of Chat (fiji) membership, followed by Papua New Guinea and Australia (Meta Insights, 2018. These are the top ten out of 99 listed countries which constitute the Chat (fiji) membership. The wide expanse of membership distribution underlies the expanding number of Fijians residing in overseas, who actively engage in the group from time to time. The group administrators screen membership requests and often ensure that the group is strictly limited to Fijian citizens to avoid fake accounts.
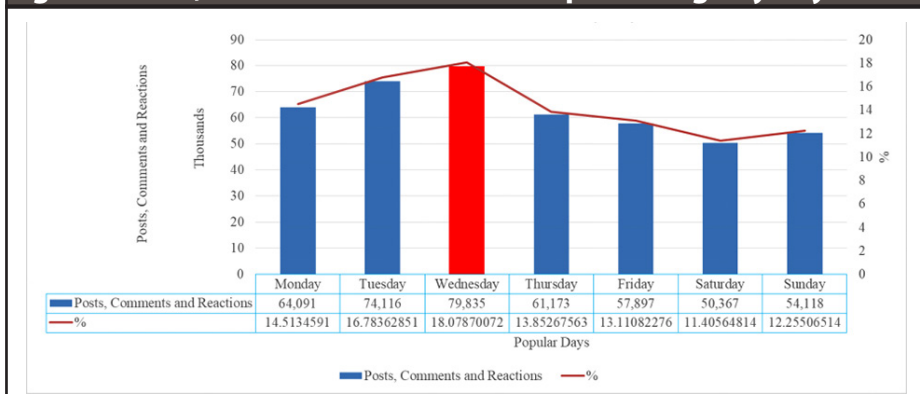
Table 2: Country distribution, Chat (Fiji) 2018		
Top 10 countries	Distribution %	Sum of members
Fiji	78.49%	186,874
Papua New Guinea	3.76%	8,949
Australia	2.74%	6,524
New Zealand	2.00%	4,753
India	1.82%	4,343
United States	1.24%	2,959
Nigeria	0.90%	2,142
Vanuatu	0.84%	2,000
Philippines	0.76%	1,818
United Kingdom	0.76%	1,814
Top 10 countries out of 99listed countries of chat (fiji) membership		

Source: Chat (Fiji) Audience Insight

Daily 'Posts, comments and reactions' distribution—Chat (fiji) 2018

The cumulative total posts, comments and reactions for a week was around 441,597 (Figure 3), with the most active or popular day being Wednesday (Meta Insights, 2018). It was estimated that Wednesday accumulated over 79,000 posts, comments and reactions. The most ideal time frames for online activity included 8-10pm Fiji Time, with the lowest being 1-6 am Fiji Time (Meta Insights, 2018). It is instructive to note that due to the global membership of the group, online activity is active throughout a 24 hour period. Therefore, Chat (fiji) discussions tend to be more hyper active than most other online groups in Fiji's digital landscape.

Figure 3: Post, comments and reactions percentage by day

	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday	Saturday	Sunday
Posts, Comments and Reactions	64,091	74,116	79,835	61,173	57,897	50,367	54,118
%	14.5134591	16.78362851	18.07870072	13.85267563	13.11082276	11.40564814	12.25506514

Source: Chat (Fiji) Audience Insights, 2018

Social media ecology of Chat (fiji)

In 2018 the estimated total Facebook population in Fiji stood at around 534,000 (Tarai, 2019). At present in 2024, there are now estimated be around 544,000 active Facebook users in Fiji (Kemp, 2024). Chat (fiji)'s estimated total of 238,584 users, accounts for around 45 percent of Fiji's total estimated online population. At any given point in the day, there were around 50,000-60,000 active accounts engaging online because of the widely dispersed membership of the group across the world. As seen in Table 2, there were active accounts as far as the United Kingdom, Nigeria, India and the Philippines. Other distant countries not in the top ten, included: Netherlands, Spain, South Korea, Cyprus and Bahrain. This highlights the widely dispersed populations of Fijians living around the globe in various lines of work, who actively follow and engage in the Chat (fiji) discussions. The gendered distribution of the group was typically male dominated at the time, with a minority of gender diverse groups. It is instructive to note that the gendered minority groups constitute some of the popular and outspoken personalities in Fiji's social media landscape. These personalities have been from within the Transgender community, specifically the openly identified Transwomen online accounts.

The **r**oad accident mentioned earlier generated significant online traffic because it was actively shared and repeated in early August 2018. Chat (fiji) promoted more than 80 posts, one of which generated more than 5000 reactions, with more than 300 comments in a day. These did not include other posts or tribute videos that even complete strangers to the deceased, began making and posting repeatedly in the group. Other related posts included news clippings, video footage and images which all focused emotive attention on the discussions.

The social media group's sheer size relative to the wider digital and Fijian population has created an amplifying capability and power. With the round the clock online activity of at least 50,000 users, Chat (fiji) has shown its ability to harness collective focus, attention and reaction as a form of influence. This influence is subsequently a form of power in creating the ability to amplify an issue of focus, to the extent that it was able to dominate the traditional media and draw the attention of the then Prime Minister. In this regard, Chat (fiji) and broadly social media activity, influenced and shaped public discourse and views.

The human experiences of horror, sorrow, anger and sympathy (however so superficial at times) formed an emotional cognitive capture, which coalesced with the magnitude of the active online environment. Thus the nexus between human experiences in online user engagement, coupled with the sheer magnitude of Chat (fiji), demonstrates a powerful social media ecology within Fiji.

Conclusion

Fiji's social media landscape since 2018 has increased in size and shifted in terms of the typical male gender dominance. In early 2024, there were more female identified accounts, but the dominating and influential social media ecology of Chat (fiji) remains consistent. Chat (fiji) has the ability to concentrate and amplify varying human experiences, which often becomes a form of emotional cognitive capture. This ability is underpinned by the magnitude and online hyperactivity of the group. The combination of an emotionally charged issue, being repeated in varying perspectives through the hyperactive online audience, generates viral content and expressive online behavior. Inevitably, this repetition of perspectives and emotions begins shaping discourses and wider views. As such, the influential capability of a social media group and its ecology, depends on the nature of the issue, the magnitude and activity of the audience and the context within which these discussions are unfolding.

In the 2018 Chat (fiji) viral incident, citizen journalism materialised in publicising the story and subsequently taking a lead, ahead of traditional media. However, the vulnerability of citizen journalism in lacking safe and ethical boundaries became apparent, with the publication of traumatic content. The media was caught in the escalation of the story when it attempted to capitalise on the wave of emotions, which was led through the influential social media ecology of Chat (fiji).

Citizen journalism proved to embody the uneasy intersection between traditional media and social media. As stated by Singh (2017), citizen journalism has emerged as a social media trend which has impacted the media landscape as a double edged sword. Legislative pressures are impacting on traditional media, while responding to unmoderated online forms of citizen journalism (Singh, 2017).

The practice of safer and more responsible citizen journalism, is an area that will warrant closer advocacy from authorities, such as the Fiji Online Safety Commission (OSC**).** Despite, it's politically controversial inception (Tarai, 2018b), the (OSC) can collaborate with Fiji's media industry in promoting, safer and responsible citizen journalism.

Viral content creation in Fiji's digital landscape requires an emotionally charged issue to be repeatedly circulated within a representatively large and hyperactive social media group or ecosystem. The social media ecology of Chat (fiji) as an influencer group demonstrates its ability to motivate online and offline behaviour. This may have significant implications and potential for the future of social media political campaigning in Fiji. However, it will require further deepened and embedded digital ethnographic research.

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