

## **When AI Shops Before I Do: Convenience, Choice and Control**

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Once, I looked for a pair of running shoes on the internet. In a matter of hours, ads started showing up on my laptop and phone. My social media accounts were flooded with brand recommendations. From site to site, "Customers also bought..." followed me. What began as a straightforward search turned into a continuous digital echo that followed me around all day. I initially embraced the efficiency. Whatever products I was looking for, the selection seemed well-chosen. It appeared to be a quicker process. But later, a more disturbing concern surfaced: were items being deliberately positioned in front of me or was I actually discovering them? I then came to the realization that I was no longer solely responsible for my shopping habits. I was quietly being shifted from my preferred shopping to algorithmic shopping.

### **From Browsing to Being Guided**

In the past, shopping was an exploring activity for me and the people around me. We browsed shops, weighed options, asked friends and family for recommendations. A large portion of that experience is now mediated by Artificial Intelligence (AI). Preferences are projected by algorithms and recommendation engines. Product listings are reorganized by systems according to our desires.

AI actively enforces customer behaviour rather than just responding to it. Clicks, scrolling habits, search history and frequency of consumption patterns are all examples of how online platforms learn. They build comprehensive behavioural profiles over time. Personalized recommendations aimed at increasing attention, loyalty and conversion are powered by these profiles.

The obvious benefits of AI are ease, faster decisions and personalized choices. However, the way that choice itself is constructed, is questionable. What shows up first is decided by the algorithm. Alternatives are filtered and relevance is ranked. Even though I still have the choice of the final click but the path that leads to that click is controlled by a system that is used commercially for business.

### **The Comfort of Personalisation**

Unquestionably, personalised shopping is more comfortable. Apps related to groceries and clothing keep track of favourite brands. Timely discounts are provided by retail sites and we are reminded to restock necessities by smart assistants. Fashion apps make outfit recommendations based on previous purchases. A lot of this feels really beneficial. When AI is working accurately, it runs daily tasks like an assistant. It eliminates recurring activities and lessens psychological strain. Efficiency is important, especially in hectic and demanding lives that we have today.

Comfort, however, can subtly turn into dependence. Suggestions become a norm when they appear all the time. We no longer wonder why some items appear. We trust product rankings and recommendations ignoring the fact that recommendations are produced by optimization models intended to boost spending and engagement.

### **The Subtle Psychology of Algorithmic Influence**

The delicacy of AI-driven shopping is what makes it so powerful. AI algorithms do not command but they recommend and frame. They use time-bounded deals to emphasise scarcity. They use labels such as "popular choice" to provide social proof. These traits are not random but are strategies for behavioural design. Repeated exposure changes preferences over time. Often, the products displayed seem familiar. Familiarity leads to trust and purchases are accelerated by trust. Every click reinforces the system's algorithmic confidence in its predictions. It feels like a voluntary process. However, coercion is not necessary when it comes to influence being effective.

I became aware of this trend in myself. Items that I had never actively searched for kept coming up until they seemed relevant. Notifications of discounts led to impulsive buying. Unconsciously, suggested packages led to higher spending. Browsing started to give way to recommendations. It did not feel dramatic and that exactly what makes it powerful.

### **Privacy as Currency**

Data lies behind personalised shopping. Every click is turned into input, including location data, device usage, payment methods, browser history and interactive patterns. Users give constant stream of personal data in return for convenience. Only few people read default settings due to which a large portion of this exchange takes place passively. What worries me is aggregation, not just collection. Comprehensive profiles are created from data, helping the platforms to predict not just what we buy but also when we are most likely to buy. The line between surveillance and service is becoming more and more blurry. The majority of customers provide their consent without fully understanding what profiling is. Theoretically, transparency exists, but in reality, it is opaque. Privacy policies are lengthy. Interfaces are difficult to understand and options to opt-out are hidden. Participation is encouraged by the consent architecture. Convenience often comes at the expense of privacy.

### **Who Is in Control?**

A typical response to this is that customers still have a choice because no one can force a person to buy. This is true to some extent. Autonomy, however, is not a binary concept. There is a spectrum for it. Agency is controlled when options are framed, graded and filtered by unseen systems. We select from the options provided. We compare within well-chosen parameters. Rarely do we see what has been left out. Who creates those boundaries is the crucial question here. Retail algorithms are optimized for retention, revenue and engagement. They are designed to meet the commercial goals. Although they do influence results, it does not make them fundamentally wrong. If left unchecked, optimisation puts speed ahead of thought and impulse ahead of reflection. Choice gets thinner but more efficient.

## **Remaining Human in an Algorithmic Marketplace**

It takes intentional awareness on the part of shoppers to do AI-driven purchases. I now reflect before making a purchase and, also, consider whether a product fulfils my actual need or if it is just an algorithm recommendation. I purposefully look beyond the recommended lists. I check the privacy settings and disable notifications. I do not respond to urgency cues that are meant to speed up my decisions. These little actions help to restore agency.

Proper and deep reflection is essential to being human in an AI-mediated marketplace. It means realising that knowledge and efficiency are not synonymous. It means keeping in mind that desires can be reshaped. We need to keep in mind that if something is being suggested does not always mean that it is required.

## **Teaching Digital Consumption**

Being from an educational background, I see obvious similarities between algorithmic shopping and the application of AI in teaching. Convenience and quicker processes are promised by both, however, both run the risk of reducing critical engagement if they are implemented without reflection.

Recommendation systems are a part of students' lives. They use algorithms to select their news, media and purchases. Therefore, teaching students about AI involves more than just using classroom resources; it also involves teaching them about digital literacy and consumer awareness. Understanding how algorithms impact behaviour has become a vital life skill.

We need to assist students in identifying nudges, challenge rankings, considering data sharing and understanding how experience is shaped by optimization. These skills are just as important as technical knowledge that students obtain in their educational programs.

## **A Co-Consumer Relationship**

I no longer just see AI as a tool when it comes to shopping. I consider it a quiet consumer which is impacting the environment where choices are made. It anticipates, predicts and influences. This relationship can be useful when there is transparency and user control. If optimization dominates, issues start to occur and it starts taking the place of intention.

A shared responsibility model should be adopted where AI platforms are designed ethically, and accountability is ensured by regulators. Customers also need to pay attention; however, important point to note is that awareness begins with each individual user of AI.

AI did not drastically change shopping overnight. AI made its way quietly through product recommendations, notifications, suggestions and personalised lists. The main issue is not that machines will guide and force into consumption. It is that they will do this gradually until the guidance becomes normal.

We must slow down, question AI outputs and reflect, not blindly trust. This slowing down is necessary in order to normalise things the way they used to be. To do so, convenience must

be questioned. It is important to keep in mind that autonomy is exercised, not assumed. AI could help in 'add to cart' but we still need to have purpose, self-control and accountability.

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