The Algorithmic Self: *Learning to Want What We Choose*

When a feed keeps offering us the next thing to want, how do we tell what we have chosen from what we have simply been shown?



BY **MARIA GLADYS A**
Independent, India

ABSTRACT

Recommendation systems now shape much of what Gen Z watches, hears and buys. This essay asks how easily repeated suggestions are mistaken for personal desire, and how algorithms influence identity, intimacy and creativity. Rather than rejecting technology, it argues for using it with intention: pausing to ask whether we would still want something if we had never been shown it.

KEYWORDS Algorithms · Identity · Gen Z · Creativity · Digital wellbeing



THE QUIET INFLUENCE OF RECOMMENDATIONS

Most of us know the experience: we pick up our phones to check one message, then find ourselves watching videos, listening to unfamiliar music, or looking at products we never intended to buy. One recommendation leads to another, and minutes—or even an hour—pass. The next thing is already waiting, so the experience feels effortless.

This is everyday life, especially for Gen Z, which has grown up with recommendation systems woven into music, entertainment, shopping, news, and social media. These systems learn from what we watch, search for, replay, and skip, then predict what might hold our attention. They can introduce us to new artists, useful ideas, and communities we might never have found otherwise.

But a deeper question sits beneath this convenience: when something is repeatedly recommended, **how easily do we mistake familiarity for personal desire?** Algorithms may not decide who we are, but they influence what we notice, value, and want. The challenge is not to escape technology. It is to keep an active role in shaping ourselves while living with it.

WHEN PREDICTION STARTS TO FEEL LIKE IDENTITY

An algorithm does not know us as a close friend does. It recognises patterns in our behaviour. If we replay a certain kind of music, it offers more. If we pause on videos

about a particular lifestyle, our feed may fill with similar images. Repetition can make a preference feel more fixed than it really is.

Identity is built through experiences, relationships, mistakes, curiosity, and the things we choose to explore. Online, we express ourselves through photographs, playlists, memes, captions, fandoms, and selected moments from daily life. That expression can be genuine, even when curated. The difficulty begins when the trends repeatedly shown to us become the limits of what we imagine ourselves to be.

> *Being seen is not always the same as being known.*

Personalised spaces can also be valuable. Someone who feels isolated may find people online who share their interests or understand their experiences. A young person can discover language for feelings they struggled to explain. Online communities can offer support, friendship, and belonging.

Yet being seen is not always the same as being known. We may follow someone's updates and know where they went or what made them laugh, while rarely having a real conversation. Digital contact can strengthen relationships, but visibility alone cannot replace the attention and care that intimacy requires.

CREATIVITY UNDER THE PRESSURE TO PERFORM

Algorithms also shape creativity. A phone can now be a camera, editing studio, publishing platform, and route to a worldwide audience. Young people can share music, writing, art, and ideas without traditional gatekeepers. That access is worth celebrating.

At the same time, creators can feel pressure to make work that performs well. The question shifts from "What do I want to make?" to "What will people watch?" Writers try to capture attention immediately; musicians consider whether listeners will skip the opening seconds. Studying trends and engagement can be practical, but it can narrow creative freedom when visibility becomes the main measure of success.

Memes and hashtags show the same tension. They can turn private frustration into shared humour, spread information, help people organise, and draw attention to events that might otherwise be ignored. But serious messages can become fleeting trends, and personal stories can be consumed like any other content. Platforms are designed to distribute material and hold attention; they do not necessarily understand the difference between something deeply meaningful and something merely clickable.

> *"Would I still want this if I had never been shown it?"*

INFLUENCE IS NOT THE SAME AS CONTROL

It would be too simple to say algorithms control us. Our desires have always been influenced by family, friends, advertising, films, celebrities, and the culture around us. Digital systems did not invent influence; they made it faster, more personalised, and harder to notice. Because recommendations feel tailored to us, we may not recognise how strongly they guide our attention.

We want privacy but share parts of our lives online. We want to be authentic but edit what we post. We want to disconnect but fear missing something. These tensions do not make us hypocrites. They make us human beings trying to find our place in systems designed to learn from our behaviour.

The answer is not to treat every recommendation as manipulation or every screen as a threat. Personalised tools can be useful and entertaining. The important thing is to notice when convenience becomes automatic—when we scroll without knowing why, compare our lives with polished images, or assume repeated suggestions must matter to us.

MAKING ROOM FOR OUR OWN CHOICES

A small question can restore perspective: "Would I still want this if I had never been shown it?" It applies to a song, product, lifestyle, opinion, or image of success. There may be no simple answer; our desires have always been shaped by other people. But asking gives us a moment to reflect instead of automatically following the next prompt.

We can make that space in ordinary ways: explore music beyond our feed, read viewpoints that challenge us, and create something without measuring its likely popularity. We can keep some experiences private, put our phones away during conversations, and contact a friend rather than silently watching their updates. A trending opinion is not automatically thoughtful, and popularity does not determine personal value.

This does not require abandoning the internet. It requires using it with intention. Algorithms can suggest

what we might enjoy, but **a suggestion need not become a decision.** A feed can introduce an idea, but we can still question it. A platform can help us find a community, but relationships still need attention and care.

The most important digital skill may be more than knowing how to use technology. It is recognising how technology influences us—and deciding where that influence should end. We need room for accidental discoveries, unpopular ideas, unfinished experiments, and moments that do not need to be posted. We need room to change our minds and to like something without an audience.

An algorithm can learn what we clicked yesterday and estimate what we may click tomorrow. It cannot fully define what we become unless we let its predictions stand in for our own choices. In a world that constantly offers us the next thing to want, pausing, reflecting, and choosing may be among the clearest ways to remain ourselves. ■

MAKING ROOM FOR OUR OWN CHOICES

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- Read viewpoints that challenge you.
- Create something without measuring its likely popularity.
- Keep some experiences private.
- Put the phone away during conversations.
- Contact a friend instead of silently watching their updates.

> *Would I still want this if I had never been shown it?*
>
> A QUESTION FOR EVERY SCROLL

