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**Feature Article**

### **The Algorithm Is Influencing Your Purchases, Are You Aware?**

As Fiji moves into the festive and holiday season, homes across the country are preparing for a period traditionally marked by togetherness, generosity and celebration. With all of this activity comes a surge in shopping, from festive groceries and decorations to gifts, clothing, household items and technology purchases. It is a season where spending feels almost natural, expected and justified.

This feature article aims to bring awareness to how digital algorithms guide consumer behaviour, why festive seasons make us more vulnerable, and how Fijian consumers can protect themselves from overspending and regret buying.

### **Understanding Digital Algorithms, How They Shape Your Online Experience**

A digital algorithm is simply a system used by social media and advertising platforms to determine which content appears on your screen. While this seems harmless, the true purpose behind these algorithms is to keep you online longer and encourage you to buy more. Every action you take, viewing a post, clicking on a product, searching a shop name, liking a video, or even pausing on an advertisement, becomes data. Algorithms read this data and learn:

- what products interest you;
- what styles attract you;
- what price ranges you browse;
- what festive content you interact with;
- which sellers or pages you frequently view; and
- how long you spend looking at certain items.

This data shapes your feed so that you are constantly shown products in your “interest zone.” Over time, you might begin to believe that you need something simply because you see it often.

### **The Psychological Impact: Shaping Who You Are**

The most profound influence is on your subconscious.

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- *Altering Your Preferences:* Over time, being fed a certain type of content can change what you like and value. You might develop a new interest in a hobby, a shift in musical taste, or even a change in political leanings, believing these evolutions happened organically.
- *Impact on Mood and Self-Perception:* Beauty filters alter your perception of your own face. Fitness influencers can reshape your body image. A feed full of highlight reels from others' lives can fuel anxiety and dissatisfaction with your own. The algorithm doesn't just show you a mirror; it holds up a distorted funhouse mirror.

### **Why Algorithms Become Stronger During the Festive Season**

The holiday period is one of the biggest shopping seasons in Fiji. Algorithms fully understand this and act accordingly.

#### **1. Increased Online Activity Means Increased Data**

During December and January, consumers:

- browse gift ideas;
- search for festive recipes;
- look up outfits;
- compare prices;
- shop for decorations; and
- scroll through holiday content.

Every search strengthens the algorithm's ability to predict your next purchase.

#### **2. Platforms Know You're Emotionally Charged**

Platforms detect emotional browsing behaviour and push ads that match the mood. If you watch a heartwarming festive video, you may soon see ads for gifts, hampers or decorative items. Algorithms thrive in emotional environments.

#### **3. Year-End Sales Create Fear of Missing Out (FOMO)**

Year-end sales often create a strong sense of FOMO, as algorithms aggressively push seasonal offers using countdown timers, "limited stock" labels, flashing festive banners, Christmas-

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themed discounts, and holiday bundles or mega deals. Together, these tactics pressure shoppers to make quick purchases without taking the time to fully consider their decisions.

#### **4. Holiday Pressure Increases Impulsive Buying**

In Fiji's communal culture, people often feel pressure to give gifts, host gatherings, contribute to events, prepare special meals, and present themselves well, and algorithms feed into this by constantly displaying "must-have" items for the season.

#### **How Algorithms Influence Your Thoughts and Decisions**

- i. Repetition Creates Desire: When a product keeps appearing on your feed, it begins to feel familiar and necessary, hence it intentionally repeat items you almost clicked or hovered over.
- ii. "Personalised" Ads Feel Like Recommendations: Consumers often mistake algorithmic suggestions for "good deals and they are designed to increase your likelihood of purchasing, not save you money.
- iii. Timing Is Never Random: If you browse at night, expect more ads at night. If you use your phone more on weekends, your feed becomes busier then. The algorithm knows when you are most likely to make an emotional purchase.
- iv. Algorithms Link Your Searches Across Platforms: A single search on Google can trigger ads on Facebook. A single like on TikTok can influence your Instagram recommendations. Platforms exchange signals that allow advertisers to find you everywhere.

#### **Why Consumers Are Becoming More Vulnerable**

**1. Rising Online Shopping Culture**: More consumers are shopping through Facebook Marketplace, Instagram shops, TikTok sellers, Google-promoted stores, and international websites, and algorithms adapt to these behaviours, sometimes pushing products from sellers with low quality standards or unclear refund policies.

**2. Limited Local Information**: Fiji is a small market; consumers rely heavily on online advertisements rather than comparison websites or independent reviews. This makes it easier for algorithms to dominate decision-making.

**3. Financial Pressure During Festive Season**: Families often have multiple events, community commitments and gifting responsibilities. When budgets are stretched, impulsive purchases driven by algorithmic persuasion can cause long-term financial strain.

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**4. Younger Audiences Are Highly Engaged:** Young people spend significant time online and are highly responsive to trends. Without realising it, they replicate global consumer habits, which include frequent upgrading, trend-based purchases and impulse shopping.

### **The Hidden Risks of Algorithm-Driven Purchasing**

The biggest risk of algorithm-driven purchasing is overspending, as repeated exposure makes products seem more important than they really are. Many consumers later regret buying, realising after the festive season that they purchased unnecessary items, stretched their budgets, used money needed for essentials, or followed trends they didn't actually care about. Another concern is poor-quality purchases, as fast-moving ads often promote counterfeit items, unreliable sellers, low-quality products, and stores with no-refund or no-exchange policies. Algorithms also encourage emotional shopping by prompting people to buy based on feeling rather than logic, especially during festive periods. Finally, there are privacy concerns, as algorithms collect large amounts of personal data, and the more information you provide, the more accurately they can persuade you.

### **How Fijian Consumers Can Take Back Control**

#### **1. Recognise When the Algorithm Is Speaking, Not You**

Ask yourself: *"Did I want this before I saw it online?"*

#### **2. Pause Before Purchasing**

A 24-hour pause rule reduces impulse buying.

#### **3. Avoid Shopping When Feeling Emotional**

Excitement, stress, generosity, fatigue, these are moments where algorithms influence heavily.

#### **4. Set a Festive Budget and Stick to It**

Holiday spending becomes manageable when limits are respected.

#### **5. Compare Prices Offline**

Check a physical store before trusting an online deal.

#### **6. Limit Your Exposure**

- Reduce scrolling during peak shopping hours.

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- Mute notifications from shopping apps.
- Avoid browsing when bored.

### 7. Be Careful With “Festive Bundles” and “Holiday Combos”

These often contain unnecessary items disguised as savings.

### 8. Buy From Trusted Sources

Check:

- seller history;
- refund policy;
- product reviews; and
- delivery terms.

### 9. Pay With Caution

Avoid saving your card details on apps.

Use safer payment methods when possible.

### 10. Be Aware of Your Digital Footprint

Clear your search history and limit what platforms can track.

As we celebrate this festive season, it is important to remember that not every “perfect gift,” “holiday deal,” or “special offer” appearing on your screen is meant to serve you. Many are designed to push you into spending, using information the algorithm has collected about you. Being aware of algorithm influence is the first step toward wise, intentional and financially responsible holiday shopping.

This year, let you decide what to buy, not your feed, not your screen, and not the algorithm.

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