

# Free will: Why people believe in it even when they think they're being manipulated

January 3 2023, by Magda Osman

---



Credit: Jill Wellington from Pexels

We all like to believe that we are free to make our own choices. At the same time, many people think that psychological techniques are constantly being used to sway us—from social media trends to

advertising. So how do we square this?

Surprisingly, it's a question most researchers have ignored until now. But in a series of recent studies, we asked people "where in your day to day life do you think psychological tactics are being used to manipulate you unconsciously?"—and investigated what that meant for their belief in [free will](#).

In a 2018 study across four countries (Australia, Canada, U.K. and the U.S.), responses to the question above [were remarkably similar](#). In fact, they cut across age, gender, religiosity and [political affiliation](#).

Approximately 45% of the examples people gave of psychological manipulation referred to marketing and [advertising](#)—especially "subliminal advertising" (using images or sounds to entice or persuade people that they aren't consciously aware of). The next most common (19%) was research (such as using placebos), then political campaigning (7%), social media (4%) and hypnotherapy (4%).

People typically described methods that subtly change mood, emotions and thoughts in such a way they that they persuade us into choosing or doing things that we have not consciously consented to. For instance, shops can pipe the smell of fresh baked bread outside it to entice people in. In a speech, a politician may emphasize specific words to persuade people to support them. Despite knowing such a thing could happen, we typically can't be sure when we were being manipulating in this way.

But do methods such as subliminal messaging actually work? Psychological research [has not settled on an answer](#) to this. But it is interesting to ponder how all this affects our belief in free will.

## Rating scenarios

We set out to investigate this topic over the past two years. Across eight studies [we presented 1,230 people with scenarios](#) based on the earlier examples people had volunteered in the study conducted in 2018. The scenarios were from a range of contexts (marketing/advertising, research, political campaigning, social media, therapy).

For each scenario people had to rate the extent to which they believed there was unconscious manipulation (from none at all to complete manipulation), and the extent to which free [choice](#) would be maintained (from none at all to complete free choice).

Each person had to give ratings of free choice and ratings of unconscious manipulation several times over because they had to do this for each of the scenarios they were presented with. Totaling up all the ratings given across all eight studies across all 1,230 participants generated over 14,000 of each of the two ratings. A total of 3.7% of the 14,000 ratings of free choice were "0" (no free choice at all) and 8.4% were "10" (complete free choice)—with the remainder being somewhere in the between.

These are crude indicators, but they give a reasonable impression that even where manipulation was described to be occurring, there was proportionally more attributions of complete free choice than of absolutely none. For ratings of unconscious manipulation, 3.4% were "0" (no unconscious manipulation) and 9% were "10" (complete unconscious manipulation). So overall, people were more likely to think they had complete free choice than not at all, but they are also more likely to believe they were sometimes being manipulated than not at all.

We had expected to find what researchers call a negative correlation. That is, the more people think they are being manipulated, the less they believe they have free will. But this isn't what we found. In the majority of the studies, there was no reliable correlation between the two. How

can this be?

## Justifying beliefs

One reason for this is how we think of the manipulation methods. Chances are we don't think they'll work very well on us, personally—leaving people to believe they remain in charge of their choices.

We did, however, find a difference when people were giving ratings from an impersonal point of view and when they are asked to imagine themselves in the scenarios. The more vividly people imagined the possibility of being manipulated, the more they saw this to impinge on their free choice. But chances are we are biased to think of others as more manipulated than ourselves.

The scenarios weren't equal either. Some people don't especially care that there might be manipulation going on. If marketing tactics and advertising steer us into selecting one cheap brand of toothpaste compared to another, then as long as we are saving money, it doesn't matter. So people justify their belief in free will by assuming manipulation only happens for situations they don't care about or that they are actively choosing to be manipulated—they are letting it happen.

That might be a reasonable approach to advertising. But if we are going into a voting booth, we will want to claim that it is our free choice who we vote for, and not a combination of psychological tactics that meddled with our unconscious. In such a situation, we are more likely to believe there's no manipulation going on, or that we are somehow immune to it.

What the findings from our work tells us is that on a fundamental level we want to preserve a belief that we are free to choose. But how much we maintain the belief seems to depend on what is at stake.

While this may seem irrational, it is actually rather helpful and healthy. Ultimately, the world as we know it would totally collapse if we refused to believe we are responsible for our own actions.

This article is republished from [The Conversation](#) under a Creative Commons license. Read the [original article](#).

Provided by The Conversation

Citation: Free will: Why people believe in it even when they think they're being manipulated (2023, January 3) retrieved 12 May 2024 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2023-01-free-people-theyre.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.