

# The Moral Devaluation of Art

Vladimir Chituc, Paul Bloom, Molly J. Crockett  
Department of Psychology, Yale University

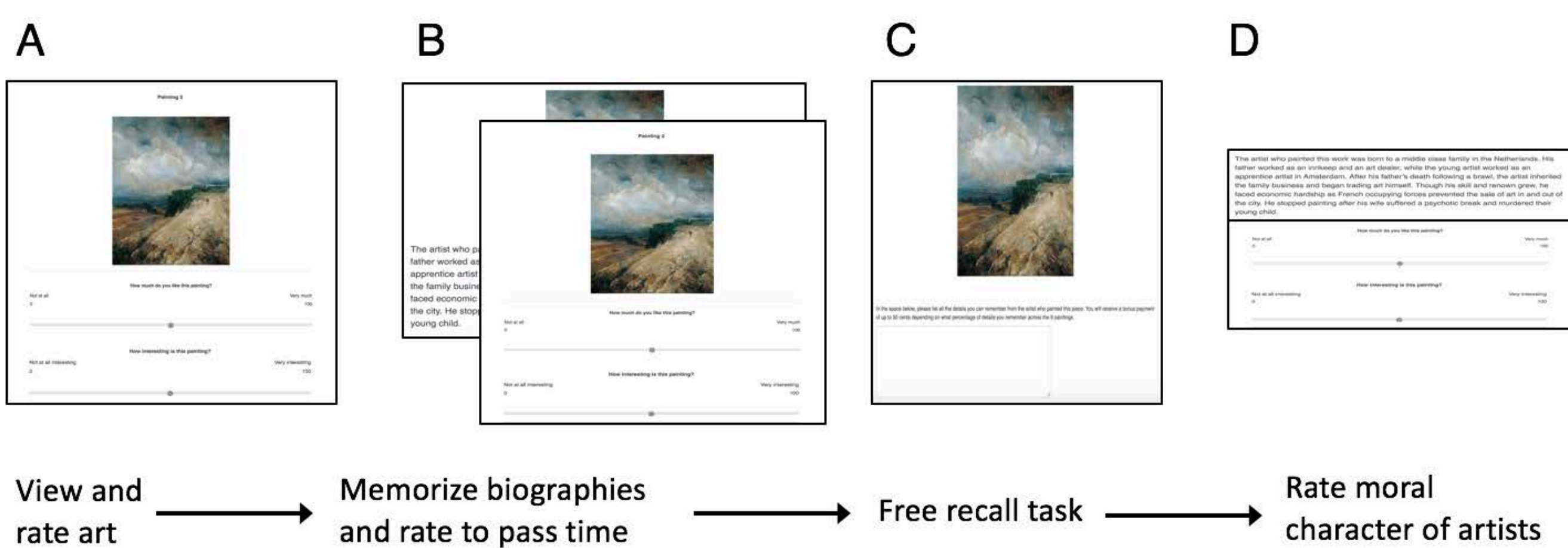


## Background

To take one of many possible examples: Salvador Dalí abused women and admired fascists. Do facts like this influence aesthetic judgments? Existing work has explored similar questions within the domain of consumer psychology. [e.g. 1] For example, a process of moral contagion explains why we are averse to wearing a killer's sweater.<sup>2</sup> In contrast, work on *moral decoupling*<sup>3</sup> suggests that judgments of performance (e.g. evaluating a baseball player) are separate from judgments of morality, insofar as moral transgressions are not relevant to performance (c.f. tax fraud vs. steroid use). Thus, we might expect devaluation when a work of art is relevant to an artist's moral transgression. Furthermore, past work suggests that information about an artist affects some kinds of aesthetic evaluations more than others. [e.g. 4]

## Methods

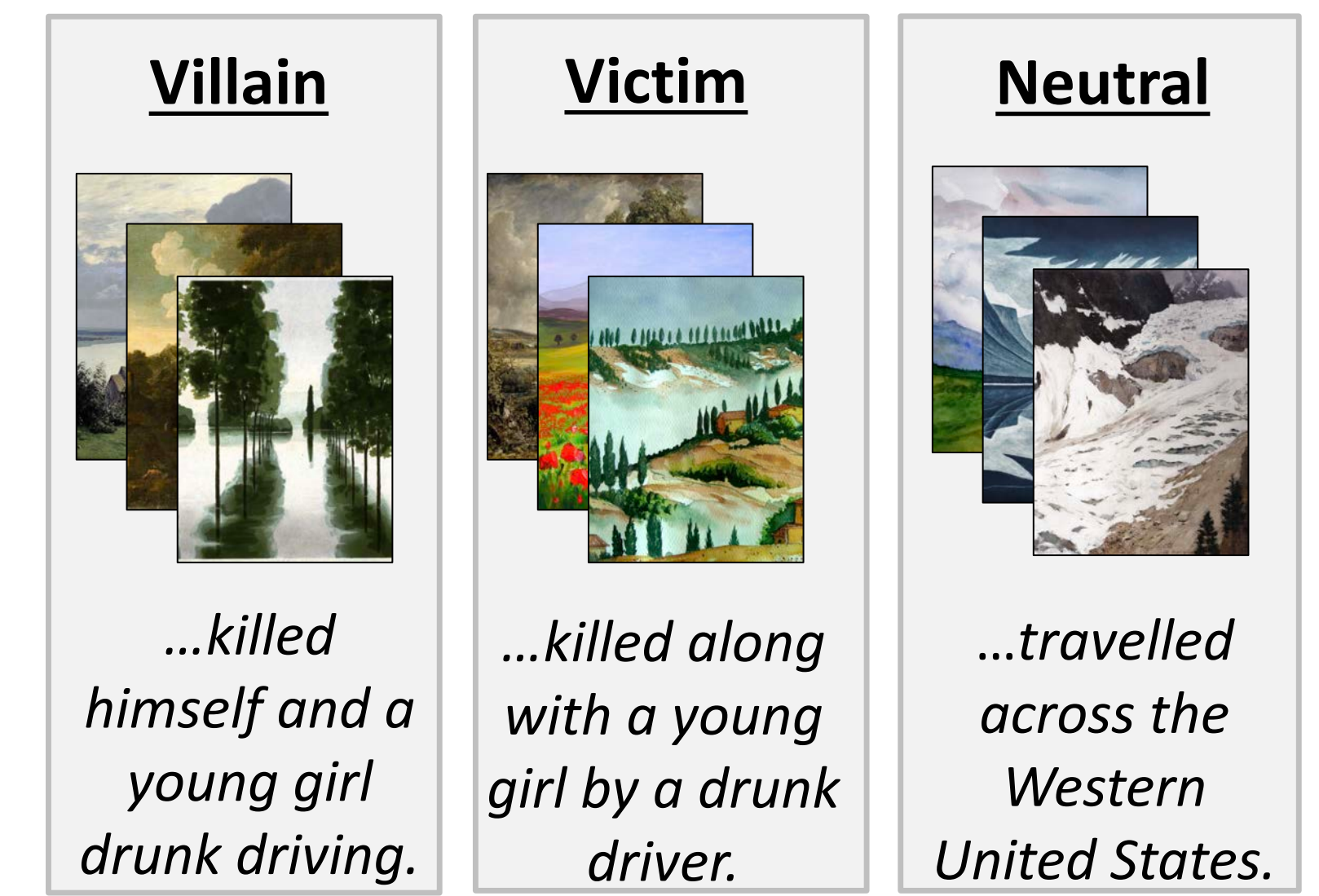
### Task: a novel paradigm to study moral devaluation of art



Participants rated each painting before reading and memorizing the biography of the artist who painted it (A-B). They rated the painting again, ostensibly to pass time before the recall task (C). Participants provided moral ratings at the end (D).

**Measures:** We analyzed a difference score of the following aesthetic evaluations: *Liking*, *Quality*, *Interestingness*, and *Familiarity*.

**Stimuli and Design:** Participants read 9 biographies across 3 conditions: **Villain** (artist committed moral violation), **Victim** (artist was victim of a moral violation), and **Neutral** (morally neutral fact about artist).



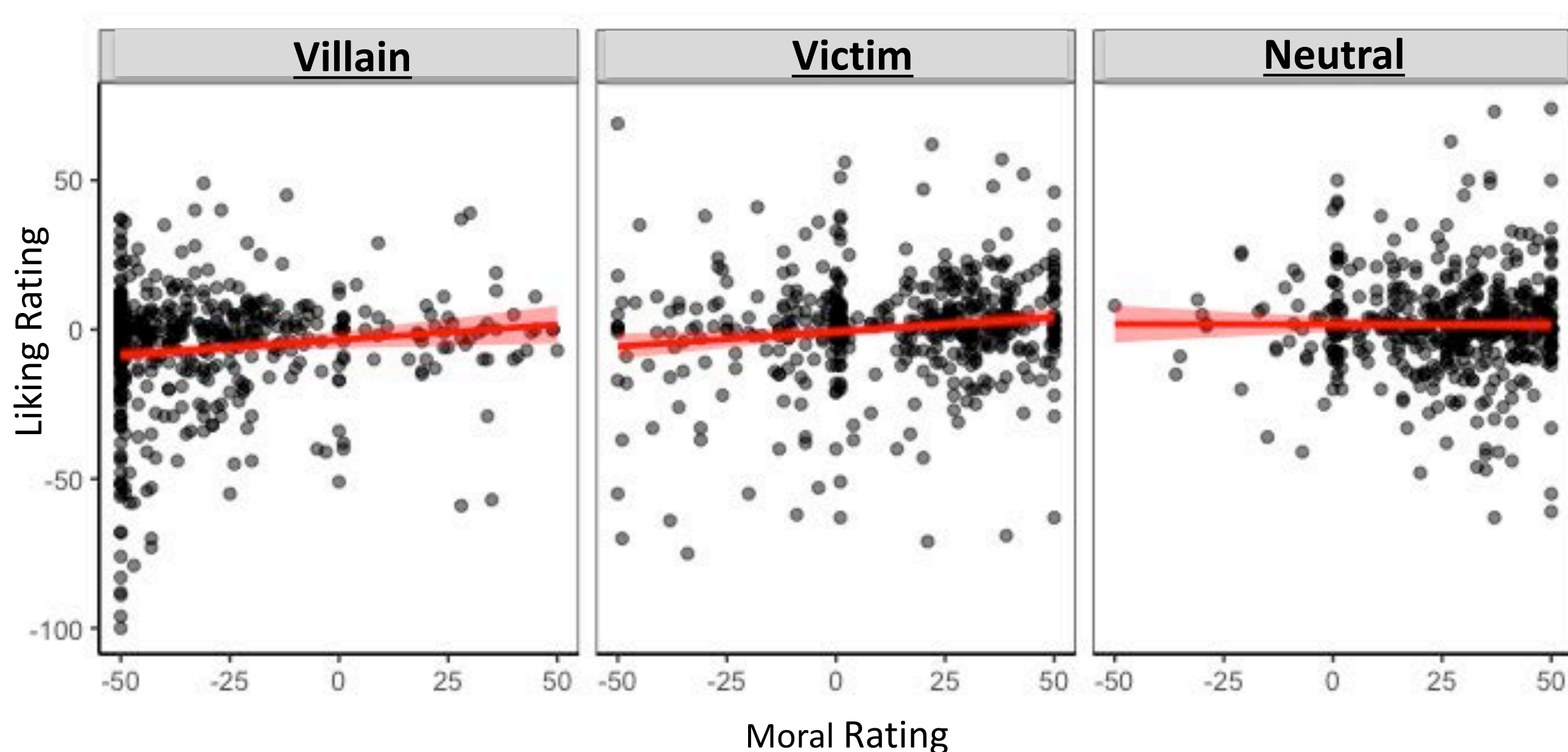
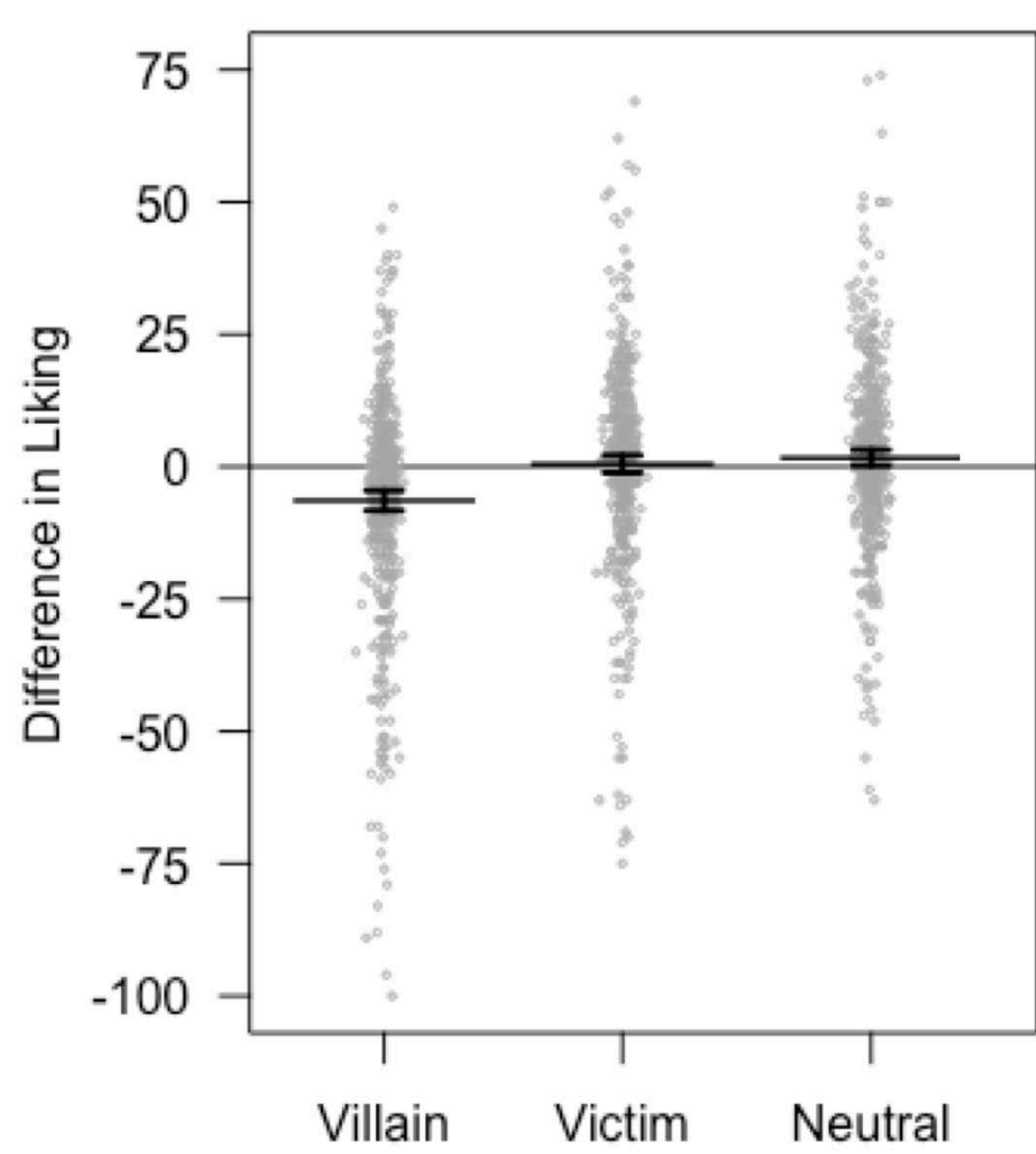
## Study 1

**Question:** Do we devalue art by immoral artists? And does the kind of aesthetic evaluation matter?

**Design:** Sample size and exclusions preregistered on OSF. We recruited 235 participants from mTurk (final  $n = 159$ ).

**Results:** Each dot is a raw data point, and error bars are 95% CI.

- Significant effect of *Biography* on *Liking* (left) *Quality*, and *Interestingness* ( $p$ 's < .001).
- Pairwise comparisons revealed only a difference between *Villain* and the two controls ( $p$ 's < .005).
- In a mixed-effect model, moral ratings significantly predicted devaluation in *Liking*, *Quality*, *Interestingness* ( $p$ 's < .001). We plot morality vs. difference in *Liking* across condition, below.



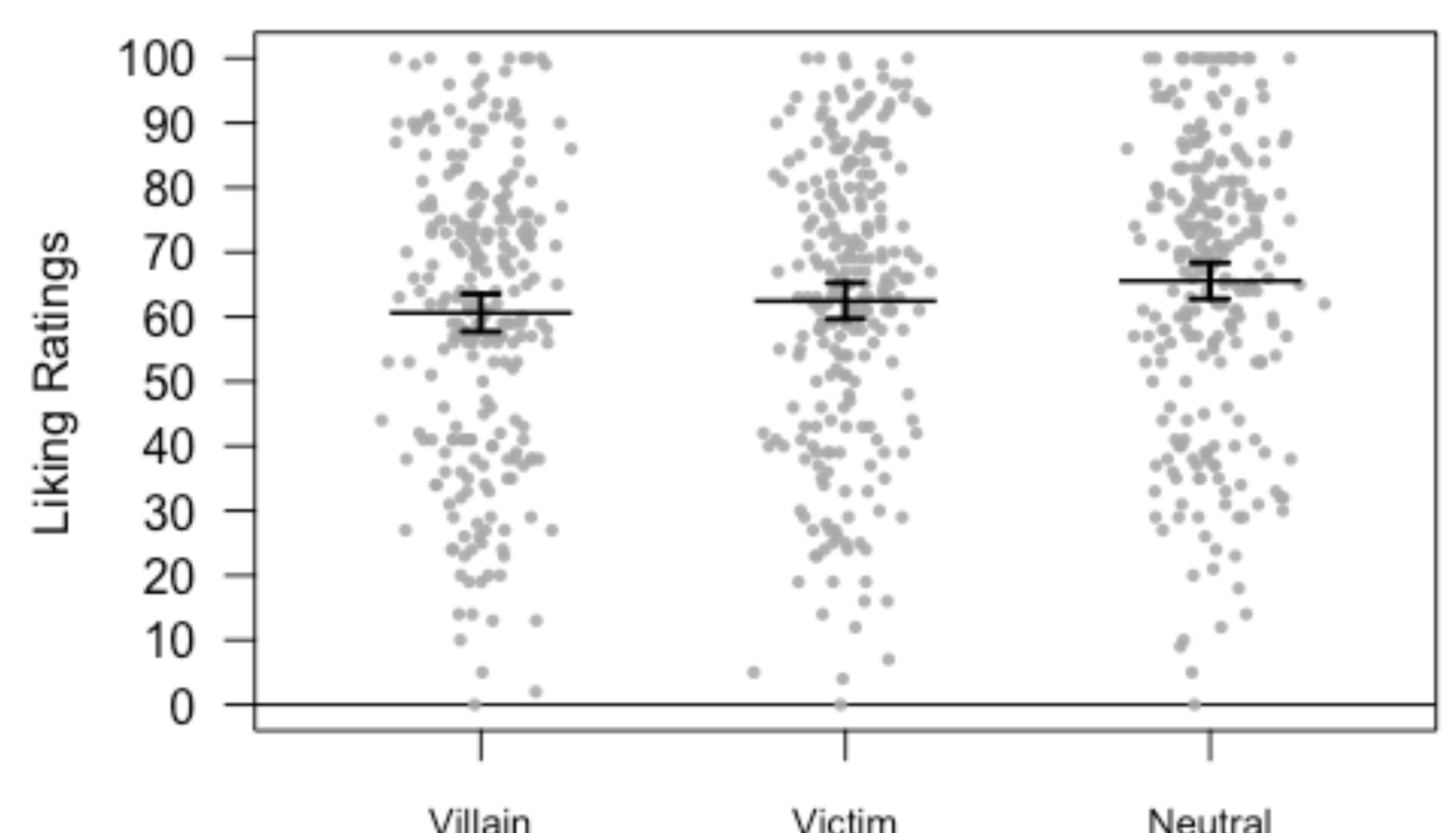
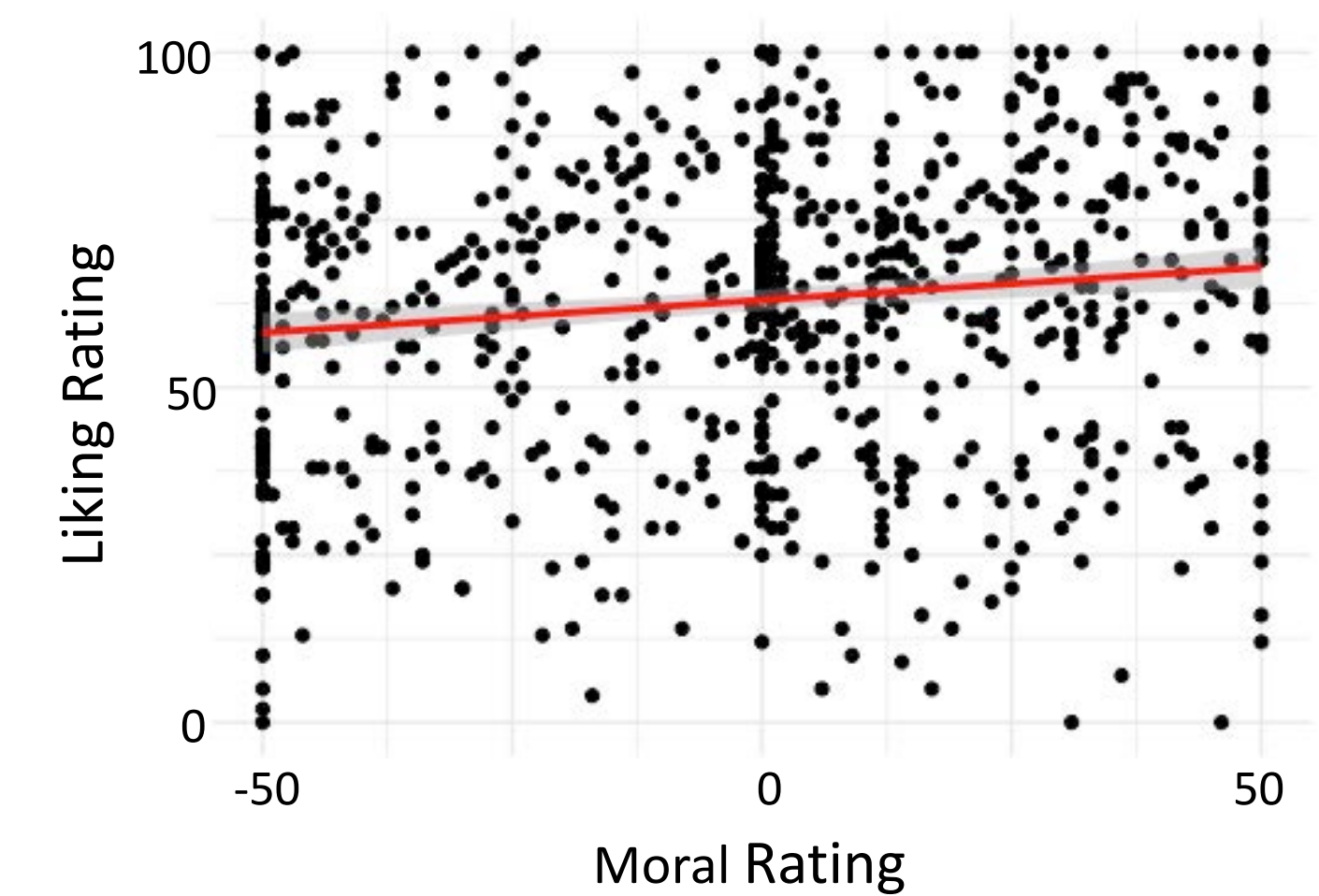
## Study 2

**Question:** When viewing an artist's work, are immoral details more likely to come to mind? If so, does this break in immersion lead to devaluation?

**Design:** We recruited 84 undergraduates and used the same materials as Study 1. Participants read a biography then viewed a painting for 15 seconds, and their task was to press the spacebar each time they thought about the artist's biography.

**Results:** Each dot is a raw data point, and error bars are 95% CI.

- Main effect of biography on *Liking* (below),  $p < .05$ .
- Moral ratings predicted *Liking* (right), *Quality*, and *Interestingness* ( $p$ 's < .03), but not *Familiarity* or spacebar presses.
- Spacebar presses did not differ across condition.

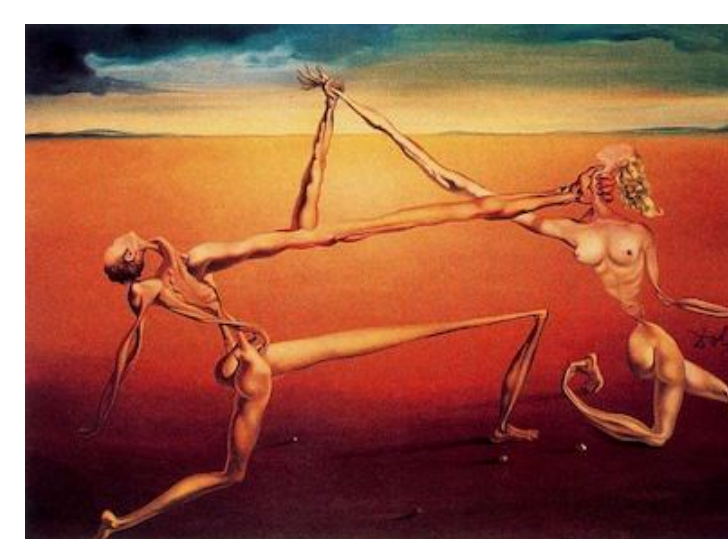


## Studies 3a and 3b

**Question:** Is moral devaluation of art amplified when the art depicts content relevant to the transgression?

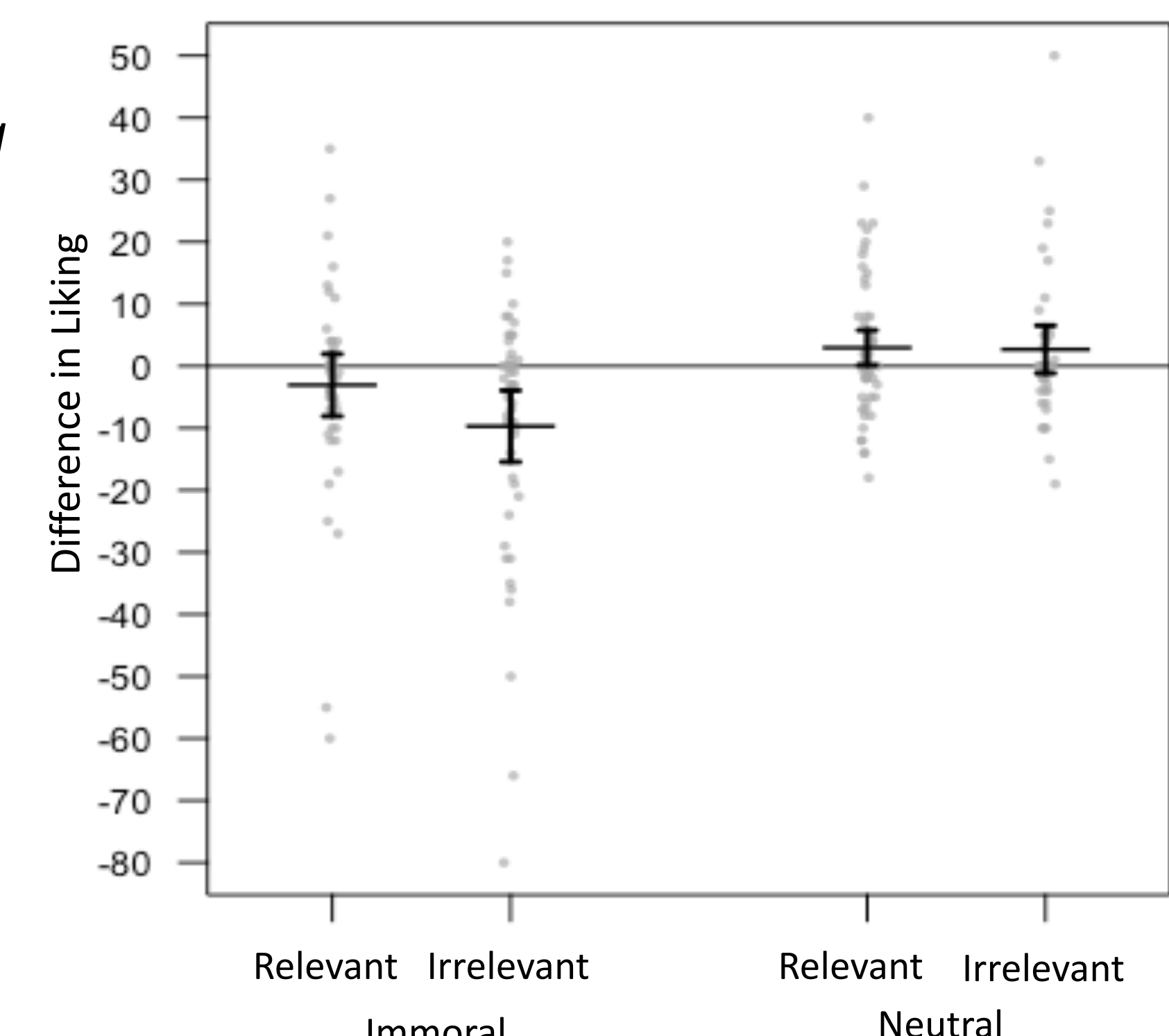
### Design:

- Participants (**3a**:  $n = 99$ ; **3b**:  $n = 84$ ) saw and rated paintings by 2 artists (**3a**) or 6 artists (**3b**). We preregistered 3b on OSF.
- Similar to Study 1 with two key differences: only neutral and immoral conditions, and the content of the paintings are either relevant or irrelevant to the transgression in a 2 x 2 within subjects design.
- For example, participants either read that Dalí once beat his wife, breaking her ribs (*Immoral*) or that he took inspiration from Freud (*Neutral*). This biography was either paired with a painting of a man choking a woman (*Relevant*, top) or a still life (*Irrelevant*, bottom).



**Results:** Each dot is a raw data point, and error bars are 95% CI. The figure below depicts *Liking* ratings for 3a.

- For **3a**, there was a main effect of biography on *Liking* ( $p < .001$ ) and *Quality* ( $p = .01$ ). For **3b**, these were marginal ( $p$ 's < .1).
- Moral ratings predicted devaluation for *Liking* (**3a & 3b**) and *Quality* (**3a**),  $p$ 's < .01.
- No interaction between content and biography (**3a**:  $p = .13$ ; **3b**:  $p = .27$ ).



## Conclusion

Across four studies ( $n = 426$ ), we find that the moral judgments of an artist affects aesthetic judgments of their work. Across a number of aesthetic evaluations, art by immoral artists is devalued. Though we consistently replicate the basic effect, such that moral ratings of an artist predict aesthetic ratings of their work, the mechanism remains unclear. Participants were no more likely to think about the biographical details of immoral artists while viewing their art (Study 2), and we find no evidence that participants more strongly devalue art when it is relevant to the artist's moral transgression (Studies 3a and 3b). We hope these studies are a first step in explaining moral devaluation of art.

### Session:

Thursday, 8AM EST

### Zoom:

<https://yale.zoom.us/j/99021211754>

### Contact:

vladimir.chituc@yale.edu

