

Research Article

Rags to Riches: How Narratives of an Artist's Lifelong Effort Shape Artwork Evaluation

Yeryung Kim

Fayston Preparatory School, Korea
Email: 27kim.yeryung@faystonsuji.org

Article History	Abstract
Received: August 19, 2026 Accepted: September 09, 2026 Published: September 15, 2026	This study examines the influence of an artist's personal narrative on individuals' evaluations of the artist and their artwork, addressing the relatively limited research on the relationship between artist narratives and individual evaluation. Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions and were asked to evaluate an artwork paired with a narrative that either emphasized the lifelong efforts of the artist or did not emphasize it. The results showed that participants reported more favorable responses (e.g., favorability and purchase intention) to the artwork when it was paired with a narrative emphasizing the artist's lifelong effort, while objective evaluations of the artworks' visual characteristics (e.g., quality) did not differ depending on the provided narrative. These findings suggest that an artist's personal narrative may exert a significant influence on individuals' responses and favorability toward the artwork, regardless of their objective visual evaluations of the artwork. Furthermore, the findings suggest that specific characteristics of artist narratives can be highlighted to shape visitors' perceptions and the perceived value of artworks, providing important social implications for artists, museums, and cultural institutions in developing effective communication strategies. Keywords: Artist Narrative, Artwork Perception, Artwork Evaluation, Artwork Preference, Effort.

Introduction

Van Gogh's posthumous fame is a prime example showing that not only an artist's work but also that artist's life and narrative can influence the public perception of an artwork. Van Gogh had already begun to attract some attention from the art world during his lifetime, but it was only after his death that he achieved the broad reputation he enjoys today. In particular, Johanna van Gogh-Bonger, the wife of his brother Theo, played an important role in spreading public interest in his work and life by introducing Van Gogh's paintings to various exhibitions, actively lending his works, and compiling and publishing the letters between Van Gogh and Theo (van Bronkhorst, 1995). In this narrative, Van Gogh's dedication to art and persistent efforts throughout his life became an important part of how the public came to understand and appreciate his work. Similar patterns can be observed in the posthumous recognition of artists such as Amedeo Modigliani, Frida Kahlo, and Jean-Michel Basquiat, whose personal lives and biographical narratives have become important parts of how their artistic legacies are represented and understood (Dosamantes-Beaudry, 2002; da Silva, 2010). These cases suggest that artworks can be conveyed to the public not merely as visual objects, but also through narratives of the artist's life, effort, and artistic journey.

Despite the implications of these historical examples, existing studies largely overlooked the influence of artists' narratives of struggle on artwork evaluations. Instead, most prior research has focused on the effects of perceived time and effort invested in creating a *particular* work, or on the influence of positive or negative information about the artist. For example, in Kruger et al.'s (2004) study of the effort heuristic, participants rated an artwork as having higher quality, greater value, and as more likeable when the artwork was perceived to require more time and effort to produce. Similarly, Bellaiche *et al.*, (2023) reported that people generally value, prefer, and trust artworks created by humans more than those generated by AI.

However, the influence of narratives that portray artists' *lifelong* effort and development on the viewer's evaluations of their artworks has yet to be examined. Therefore, this study investigates whether, beyond the effects of the effort directly invested in a work or the positive and negative information about the artist on work evaluation, the evaluation of the same work changes depending on the artist's narratives of long-term artistic effort and development. Research has shown that displays of effort can signal positive characteristics of an individual, such as greater commitment and moral character (Celniker *et al.*, 2023). Furthermore, people tend to place greater value on effort, evaluating individuals who exert more effort as more deserving, conscientious, and moral, even when their outcomes are identical (Tissot and Roth, 2025). People also tend to use effort as a heuristic when evaluating moral character, viewing hardworking individuals as more honest, trustworthy, and morally good (Amos *et al.*, 2017). This effort heuristic has been demonstrated in evaluations of creative works, including paintings, suggesting that perceived effort can serve as a cue for quality, value, and liking. However, effort information may not only shape judgments of the product itself but also influence perceptions of the person who created it.

Indeed, narratives influence perceptions of the artwork. Dunham *et al.*, (2026) found that artworks were evaluated less favorably when their artist was portrayed as having extrinsic motives, such as seeking economic gain, recognition, and social success, compared to when the artist was described as having intrinsic motives, such as expressing their emotions and thoughts or conveying personal meaning. In addition, recent research has revealed that negative information about the artist can affect the aesthetic evaluation of the work. When participants were given negative information indicating that the artist had engaged in morally reprehensible behavior, such as animal cruelty, murder, and criminal assault, they evaluated the artist's artworks more negatively (Kaube and Abdel Rahman, 2024). Therefore, information about an artist's sustained effort over their lifetime may lead viewers to form more favorable impressions of the artist, and these impressions may subsequently influence how they respond to a particular artwork created by that artist. Based on this reasoning, the present study hypothesized that narratives emphasizing an artist's lifelong effort would increase viewers' favorability toward the artist's artwork. To this end, this study utilized the "rags-to-riches" narrative structure to convey differences in the artist's effort. Rags-to-riches narratives typically depict individuals overcoming hardship through hard work and achieving a more favorable outcome from a disadvantaged starting point (Brattström and Wennberg, 2021).

This study hypothesized that narratives highlighting the artist's lifelong effort in creating art will lead viewers to evaluate their artwork more positively. Specifically, participants who read about the artist who grew up in poverty and invested substantial effort in their artistic development will evaluate the artwork more favorably than participants who read about an artist who grew up without material hardship and invested comparatively less effort. Additionally, the narratives were paired with artwork painted in different styles to explore their potential influence on participants' evaluations.

Methods

Participants

A total of 126 participants (48.4% female; 65.1% White, 13.5% Black, and 9.5% Asian) were recruited from CloudResearch, and the survey was sent out to individuals who reside in the United States. Participants were compensated with \$1.75 for their participation. The average age of the participants was 38.5, with a standard deviation of 12.

Procedures

Participants were randomly assigned to one of four experimental conditions in a 2 (artist's narrative: high-effort vs low-effort) X 2 (painting styles: oil painting vs digital line drawing) between-subject design.

In the high-effort narrative, the narrative depicted an artist who continuously pursued and developed artistic skills despite economic and environmental difficulties, while in the low-effort narrative, the artist was described as a person who began making art with the support of their parents and with relatively fewer struggles. The two artworks depicted the same subject and shared a similar composition but differed in artistic style. One artwork was a digital line drawing characterized by simple lines and minimal visual detail (Figure 1, left panel), whereas the other was an oil painting with a traditional, textured appearance, generated by AI using the former artwork (Figure 1, right panel). After reading the assigned narrative and viewing the painting, participants answered questions about the artist and the artwork. Questions about the artist assessed their perceived lifelong effort as a manipulation check, and questions about the artwork assessed participants' preference and visual evaluations of the artwork presented. Afterwards, participants reported their level of interest in art and provided demographic information, including gender and socioeconomic status.



Figure 1. Artworks presented to participants.

Measures

Perceived Lifetime Effort

Participants' perception of the artist's lifetime effort was measured using a scale adapted from Celniker *et al.*, (2023). The scale consisted of 4 items (e.g., "How committed was this artist to painting?") that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 7 (*strongly agree*). The reliability of the composite scale was .84.

Artwork Evaluations

Participants' evaluations of the artwork were measured using items adapted from prior research (Bellaiche *et al.*, 2023; Moulard *et al.*, 2014). Specifically, participants rated their liking, favorability, perceived quality, and personal meaning on bipolar scales, with each scale anchored by two opposing end points on a 7-point scale. For example, for an item measuring participants' liking of the artwork, the scale ranged from "dislike" to "like." Participants also rated their perceived effort ("How much effort do you believe was involved in making this artwork?"), perceived time ("How much time do you believe it took to create this piece?"), and purchase intention ("Assuming the price of this artist's paintings is within my budget, I would consider purchasing a painting from this artist.") of the artwork on a 7-point Likert scale that ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree/not at all*) to 7 (*strongly agree/extremely*).

Art Interest

A 3-item scale measuring art interest (e.g., "I like to talk about art with others."; Specker *et al.*, 2020) was also included in the survey to control for participants' art interest influencing their evaluations of the artworks. The scale ranged from 1 (*not at all*) to 7 (*extremely*) and demonstrated a high reliability ($\alpha = 0.92$).

Results

First, a series of 2 x 2 between-subject ANOVAs were conducted to probe the moderating effect of the painting styles across conditions. However, the results revealed no significant interaction effect of the painting styles on any of the outcome variables across conditions. Therefore, in the subsequent analyses, the responses from participants who viewed different paintings were aggregated across the narrative conditions.

Manipulation Check

Before conducting the main analyses, two independent *t*-tests were conducted to verify that the narratives manipulated the level of effort the artist invested in creating art throughout his lifetime. As expected, participants reported that the artist invested more effort ($M_{\text{high-effort}} = 5.45$; $M_{\text{low-effort}} = 4.68$) and was more passionate about creating art ($M_{\text{high-effort}} = 5.94$; $M_{\text{low-effort}} = 5.46$) in the high-effort condition than in the low-effort condition, $ts(124) > 2.02$, $ps < .046$, $ds > 0.36$.

Main Analysis

To test the main hypotheses, a series of independent *t*-tests comparing the evaluations between the low-effort ($N = 66$) and high-effort ($N = 60$) conditions were conducted (Table 1). Overall, the results indicated that

participants' positivity toward paintings significantly differed across conditions. That is, they favored ($M_{high-effort} = 3.52$; $M_{low-effort} = 3.02$), attributed more personal meaning to ($M_{high-effort} = 3.50$; $M_{low-effort} = 2.98$), and reported higher intention to purchase ($M_{high-effort} = 2.82$; $M_{low-effort} = 2.32$) the paintings in the high-effort condition than the low-effort condition. However, participants' liking of the paintings did not significantly differ ($M_{high-effort} = 4.55$; $M_{low-effort} = 4.03$).

While participants responded more positively to the paintings in the high-effort condition than to those in the low-effort condition, their evaluations of the quality of the paintings did not significantly differ across conditions. Specifically, participants rated the paintings in both conditions as being of similar quality ($M_{high-effort} = 3.47$; $M_{low-effort} = 3.19$) and believed that similar amounts of effort ($M_{high-effort} = 5.24$; $M_{low-effort} = 4.77$) and time ($M_{high-effort} = 4.98$; $M_{low-effort} = 4.47$) were invested in creating the paintings. Additionally, ANCOVA analysis comparing the two conditions controlling for the participants' own art interest revealed patterns identical to the findings of *t*-tests (Appendix A).

In summary, the results provided partial support for the hypothesis. Participants viewed the paintings created by artists who struggled and invested substantial effort more positively, despite evaluating the qualities of the paintings to be at a similar level.

Table 1. The results of independent *t*-tests.

Outcome variables	<i>t</i>	df	<i>p</i>	<i>d</i>
Liking	1.65	123	.101	0.30
Favorable	2.21*	122	.029	0.40
Meaning	2.10*	124	.038	0.38
Purchase intention	2.01*	124	.047	0.36
Perceived quality	1.46	124	.146	0.26
Perceived effort	1.76	124	.081	0.31
Perceived time	1.83	124	.070	0.33
Note. * = $p < .05$				

Discussion

This study examined how information about an artist's narrative affects people's evaluations of their artwork. The hypothesis of this study was that participants who read the life story of an artist who put in relatively more effort would evaluate the artist's work more positively than those who read the life story of an artist who put in relatively less effort. Overall, the findings suggest that an artist's narrative can influence the viewer's preference for the artwork, but this effect may not extend to their evaluations of the artworks' visual qualities. The responses measuring preference toward the artwork (favorable, meaning, and purchase intention) supported the hypothesis. However, evaluations of the artwork (quality, effort, and time invested) itself did not differ depending on the artist's narrative.

The findings in the present study highlight the importance of perceived human effort in evaluations of artworks and provide a basis for examining how an artist's effort influences the perceived value of art. Whereas previous research has focused on evaluations of the effort invested in creating an artwork (e.g., Bellaiche *et al.*, 2023; Kruger *et al.*, 2004), this study takes a novel approach by examining how knowledge of an artist's lifelong efforts influences people's evaluations of their artwork. By shifting the focus from effort invested in a particular artwork to the broader efforts accumulated over an artist's lifetime, this study contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of artwork evaluations. Therefore, this approach can contribute not only to understanding the visual characteristics of a work but also to grasping how the artist's context and narrative are integrated into artwork evaluation (Celniker *et al.*, 2023).

Furthermore, if an artist's narrative influences the evaluations of a work, it may suggest that the way lesser-known artists convey narratives about their artistic process and efforts could also affect the reception of their works. In practice, museums and cultural institutions could highlight specific aspects of an artist's narrative, such as their persistence, challenges overcome, and long-term artistic development, through exhibition labels, artist biographies, or display materials. Emphasizing these aspects may help visitors better understand the artist's journey and potentially increase their engagement with and favorability toward the artwork. Previous research suggests that people's evaluations of artworks can vary depending on the visual style and characteristics of the artwork (Wang *et al.*, 2016; Li, 2024). To account for these potential biases arising from differences in artistic style, we randomly presented participants with one of two artworks that shared the same subject matter and composition but differed in artistic style. The design allowed for control of the

influence of stylistic differences between artworks on artwork perception, which ultimately revealed that the effects of the artist's narratives did not differ by artwork style. Thus, the findings imply that artist narratives may play a critical role in artwork perception, above and beyond the influence of artwork styles, highlighting the importance of contextual information about the artist.

However, this study is not without any limitations. This study used rags-to-riches stories to contrast the artists' levels of lifetime effort in creating artworks. Although the rags-to-riches narratives were intended to highlight differences in effort, they may have inadvertently created differences not only in perceived effort but also in the artist's economic background and social status. Therefore, different aspects of the artist's background, such as economic status and social position, may have also contributed to participants' evaluations (Durante *et al.*, 2017). To address this limitation, future research could generate narratives that differ in perceived effort but are identical in terms of the artist's economic background, social status, career outcome, and other biographical information. Another limitation of this study is that participants were recruited only from the U.S., which restricts the cross-cultural generalizability of the findings (Henrich *et al.*, 2010). Cultural backgrounds can influence evaluations of artistic creativity and the ways in which visual art is appreciated and interpreted (Niu and Sternberg, 2001; Darda and Cross, 2022), and therefore, further research needs to examine whether the influence of the artist's narrative on evaluations of the artwork is consistent across different cultural contexts.

Previous research suggests that individual differences, such as personality traits, can influence aesthetic responses to artworks (Pietras and Ganczarek, 2022). Therefore, participants' liking of the artist, liking of the artwork, and evaluation of the artwork's visual qualities may also vary depending on their personality. Future studies could include a personality assessment, such as the Big Five, and examine how participants' personality traits interact with the artist's narrative and painting style. This could help determine whether the effects observed in the present study are consistent across different personality types or are stronger among participants with certain personality traits.

Declarations

Acknowledgments: The author acknowledges that this research was conducted independently without institutional or external support.

Artificial Intelligence (AI) Use Statement: The author declares that no artificial intelligence (AI) tools were used in the conception, experimental design, data analysis, interpretation of the results, or preparation of this manuscript.

Author Contribution: Yeryung Kim was solely responsible for the conceptualization, methodology, investigation, formal analysis, interpretation of the results, and writing and revision of the manuscript.

Conflict of Interest: The author declares no competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have influenced the work reported in this manuscript.

Consent to Publish: The author consents to the publication of this manuscript in International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research.

Data Availability Statement: The data generated and analyzed during the current study are presented within the manuscript. Additional data may be made available by the author upon reasonable request.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: As this research was conducted independently without institutional affiliation or external institutional support, institutional review board approval was not required. The study was conducted in accordance with internationally accepted ethical principles for research involving human participants.

Informed Consent Statement: Informed consent was obtained from all participants before their participation in the study.

Research Content: The research content of this manuscript is original and has not been published elsewhere.

References

1. Amos, C., Zhang, L. and Read, D. 2017. Hardworking as a heuristic for moral character: Why we attribute moral values to those who work hard and its implications. *Journal of Business Ethics*, 158(4): 1047–1062.
2. Bellaiche, L., Shahi, R., Turpin, M.H., Ragnhildstveit, A., Sprockett, S., Barr, N., Christensen, A. and Seli, P. 2023. Humans versus AI: Whether and why we prefer human-created compared to AI-created artwork. *Cognitive Research: Principles and Implications*, 8: 42.
3. Brattström, A. and Wennberg, K. 2021. The entrepreneurial story and its implications for research. *Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice*, 46(6): 1443–1468.

4. Celniker, J.B., Gregory, A., Koo, H.J., Piff, P.K., Ditto, P.H. and Shariff, A.F. 2023. The moralization of effort. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General*, 152(1): 60–79.
5. da Silva, R.R. 2010. Rediscovering interdisciplinarity in contemporary Brazilian art: The work of Willys de Castro. *Third Text*, 24(6): 681–695.
6. Darda, K.M. and Cross, E.S. 2022. The role of expertise and culture in visual art appreciation. *Scientific Reports*, 12: 10666.
7. Dosamantes-Beaudry, I. 2002. Frida Kahlo: The creation of a cultural icon. *The Arts in Psychotherapy*, 29(1): 3–12.
8. Dunham, R.L., van Kleef, G.A. and Stamkou, E. 2026. The heart behind the art: Motives for making art and how they influence audience appreciation. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*. <https://doi.org/10.1037/aca0000819>
9. Durante, F., Tablante, C.B. and Fiske, S.T. 2017. Poor but warm, rich but cold (and competent): Social classes in the stereotype content model. *Journal of Social Issues*, 73(1): 138–157.
10. Henrich, J., Heine, S.J. and Norenzayan, A. 2010. Beyond WEIRD: Towards a broad-based behavioral science. *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*, 33(2–3), 111–135.
11. Kaube, H. and Abdel Rahman, R. 2024. Art perception is affected by negative knowledge about famous and unknown artists. *Scientific Reports*, 14: 8143.
12. Kruger, J., Wirtz, D., Van Boven, L. and Altermatt, T.W. 2004. The effort heuristic. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 40(1): 91–98.
13. Li, Q. 2024. How context and painting attributes affect aesthetic judgment across expertise. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 43(1): 402–423.
14. Moulard, J.G., Rice, D.H., Garrity, C.P. and Mangus, S.M. 2014. Artist authenticity: How artists' passion and commitment shape consumers' perceptions and behavioral intentions across genders. *Psychology and Marketing*, 31(8): 576–590.
15. Niu, W. and Sternberg, R.J. 2001. Cultural influences on artistic creativity and its evaluation. *International Journal of Psychology*, 36(4): 225–241.
16. Pietras, K. and Ganczarek, J. 2022. Aesthetic reactions to violations in contemporary art: The role of expertise and individual differences. *Creativity Research Journal*, 34(3): 324–338.
17. Specker, E., Forster, M., Brinkmann, H., Boddy, J., Pelowski, M., Rosenberg, R. and Leder, H. 2020. The Vienna Art Interest and Art Knowledge Questionnaire (VAIAK): A unified and validated measure of art interest and art knowledge. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts*, 14(2): 172–185.
18. Tissot, T.T. and Roth, L.H. 2025. Is it worth the hustle? A multi-country replication of the effort moralization effect and an extension to generational differences in the appreciation of effort. *Collabra: Psychology*, 11(1): 132411.
19. van Bronkhorst, G. 1995. Vincent Willem van Gogh and the Van Gogh Museum's pre-history. *Van Gogh Museum Journal*, 24–33.
20. Wang, T., Cant, J.S. and Cupchik, G. 2016. The impact of depth of aesthetic processing and visual-feature transformations on recognition memory for artworks and constructed design patterns. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 34(2): 193–220.

Citation: Yeryung Kim. 2026. Rags to Riches: How Narratives of an Artist's Lifelong Effort Shape Artwork Evaluation. *International Journal of Recent Innovations in Academic Research*, 10(3): 176-182.

Copyright: ©2026 Yeryung Kim. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.

Appendix A

Table 2. Results of ANCOVA controlling for participants' art interest.

Variables	SS	df	MS	F	p	η^2
Liking						
Narrative	7.07	1	7.07	2.73*	.101	0.02
Art interest	52.34	1	52.34	20.21***	<.001	0.14
Residual	315.95	122	2.59			
Favorable						
Narrative	6.89	1	6.89	4.86*	.029	0.04
Art interest	19.88	1	19.88	14.02***	<.001	0.10
Residual	171.58	121	1.42			
Meaning						
Narrative	7.49	1	7.49	4.55*	.035	0.03
Art interest	33.09	1	33.09	20.11***	<.001	0.14
Residual	202.4	123	1.65			
Purchase intention						
Narrative	7.1	1	7.1	4.06*	.046	0.03
Art interest	27.9	1	27.9	15.97***	<.001	0.11
Residual	214.9	123	1.75			
Perceived quality						
Narrative	2.13	1	2.13	2.01	.159	0.02
Art interest	13.82	1	13.82	13.01***	<.001	0.10
Residual	129.57	122	1.06			
Perceived effort						
Narrative	6.37	1	6.37	3.03	.084	0.02
Art interest	26.36	1	26.36	12.54***	<.001	0.09
Residual	258.49	123	2.1			
Perceived time						
Narrative	7.48	1	7.48	3.33	.071	0.02
Art interest	37.48	1	37.48	16.68***	<.001	0.12
Residual	276.43	123	2.25			
Note. * = $p < .05$; *** = $p < .001$						