# Testing the Relationship between Phenomenological Control related to Illusion Sensitivity

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# Abstract

Visual illusions highlight how easily our conscious experience can be altered with respect to perceptual reality. Despite sharing in-principle mechanisms with phenomenological control, i.e., the ability to alter our perceptual experience to match task demands or expectations, research tying the two remains scarce. This study aims to replicate and expand Lush et al. (2022) reporting an absence of correlation between phenomenological control (measured using the Phenomenological Control Scale) and illusion sensitivity to different illusion types. *[N participants were recruited in an online study. Results will be added in the final version of the manuscript]*.

*Keywords*: illusion sensitivity, visual illusions, phenomenological control, suggestibility, hypnotizability

# Testing the Relationship between Phenomenological Control related to Illusion Sensitivity

Visual Illusions are an interesting type of stimuli highlighting the ease with which our phenomenological conscious experience can become dissociated from physical reality. Their robust and reliable effect makes them useful stimuli to explore how perception is constructed and shaped, and several theoretical models have been put forth to explain how they work. **In particular, illusions have been reframed using a predictive coding account of perception (Notredame et al., 2014) in which the brain optimally combines, using some flavour of Bayesian inference, perceptual inputs with prior knowledge to make sense of ambiguous environments (Friston, 2010).**

Such computational model(s) propose to conceptualize illusions as stimuli providing weak or conflicting sensory evidence (Gershman et al., 2012; Sundareswara & Schrater, 2008) that bias perception toward prior knowledge. In other words, the weight of priors, in the form of perceptual knowledge about the world (e.g., internalized rules of perspective) is amplified when the sensory input is confusing. For instance, in the Müller-Lyer illusion, we “compute” the two (actually identical) lines as being of different lengths because the line flanked with converging fins is misinterpreted as being further away (Notredame et al., 2014). In this context, measuring sensitivity to illusion can be operationalized as indexing the parameters of the Bayesian inference process (e.g., prior precision).

These accounts also provide a compelling framework to explain existing findings reporting interindividual variability in the sensitivity to illusions. Indeed, several studies suggest a potential link with psychopathology, in particular schizophrenia (Costa et al., 2023) and autism (Gori et al., 2016), in which the reported lower sensitivity to illusions has been attributed to a diminished influence of top-down processes such as prior knowledge (Mitchell et al., 2010) and a greater emphasis on (i.e., precision of) sensory information (Palmer et al., 2017). Evidence beyond psychopathology also suggests variability in the general population, potentially correlated with personality traits such as agreeableness and honest-humility (Makowski et al., 2023), as well as cognitive abilities (Shoshina & Shelepin, 2014).

However, the exact nature of this interindividual variability and its potential origin remains unclear. The somewhat mixed evidence in the literature regarding its generalizability and strength could be related to the variety of the paradigms used and the type of processes being mobilised (Makowski et al., 2021). Indeed, traditional methods frequently focus on participant’s experience by prompting them to assess the difference between two identical targets, estimate the target’s physical properties, or adjust the targets to match a reference stimulus (Todorović, 2020). Relying on metacognitive judgments about one’s subjective experiences adds an additional layer to the measure that might not be desired when attempting to measure illusion **sensitivity**. Moreover, paradigms often face challenges in diversifying the illusory effects (i.e., using multiple stimuli to experimentally manipulate the strength of the illusion) and the illusion types (i.e., using various illusions, such as Müller-Lyer, Ebbinghaus, Delboeuf which might rely on a different admixture of mechanisms), hindering the potential of obtaining a comprehensive, valid, and reliable measure of illusion sensitivity.

The “Illusion Game” paradigm (Makowski et al., 2023) has been recently developed to measure illusion sensitivity to various illusion types through its behavioural impact (on response time and error rate) in a perceptual decision task (where participants have to respond as fast as possible; e.g., “which of the left or right circles is bigger”). The stimuli for different classical illusions are created using the *Pyllusion* software (Makowski et al., 2021), which allows researchers to modulate the strength of the illusion as a continuous dimension, independently from the difficulty of the perceptual task. This paradigm, inspired by psychophysics, lends itself to the computational modelling of illusion sensitivity through its interference effect, hopefully bypassing some of the metacognitive processes at stake in other paradigms.

Interestingly, the fact that inter-individual variability in illusion sensitivity seems to persist in this task suggests that it is not solely explained by metacognitive abilities difference, and gives rise to the following question: is the variability in illusion sensitivity related to low-level perceptual processes (e.g., baseline precision of perceptual priors), or rather to the ability to actively control and “resist” the illusion in a top-town fashion in order to achieve the task at hand (higher-level modulation of the perceptual inference parameters). If the latter is true, then illusion sensitivity measured in contexts with strong task-demand characteristics, e.g., in paradigms where participants’ performance is explicitly or implicitly assessed (i.e., where there is an incentive to downplay the illusion effect) might correlate with one’s ability to alter one’s subjective experience following suggestions - a mechanism referred to as “phenomenological control”.

The idea that we are endowed with the potential to unconsciously alter our subjective experience and distort reality - even momentarily - to meet the goals at hand is not novel. While this phenomenon has been historically often studied under the label of “hypnotisability” - the tendency to alter our conscious experience to match external demands (Lush et al., 2021), the term “phenomenological control” (PC) has been recently introduced to disconnect this concept from the potentially negative associations with hypnosis and the misconception that a hypnotic context is necessary for responding to imaginative suggestions (Dienes et al., 2022).

To encourage the empirical exploration of our ability and tendency to alter our phenomenological experience and further accelerate investigations away from the hypnotic context, Lush et al. (2021) adapted the Sussex-Waterloo Scale of Hypnotisability (SWASH, Lush et al., 2018) by removing all its references to hypnosis, to measure trait phenomenological control. **This newly developed phenomenological control scale (PCS) consists of 10 imaginative suggestions followed by subjective ratings for each suggestion on a 6-point Likert scale (from 0-5) and has demonstrated validity in online experiments (Lush et al., 2022).**

Interestingly, Lush et al. (2022) did test for a relationship between PC and illusion sensitivity using the Müller-Lyer illusion (in which the arrangement of the arrowheads flanking two lines makes them appear as having different lengths), and reported evidence in favour of an absence of correlation between the two measures. This finding was interpreted as indicative of the cognitive impenetrability of illusions, implying that the effect is driven by low-level processes and therefore not influenced by top-down mechanisms such as PC. The goal of this study is thus to replicate the results from Lush et al. (2022) pointing to an absence of a relationship between phenomenological control and illusion sensitivity, by generalising them to a different illusion paradigm that encompasses other illusion types (see [Table 1](#tbl-table1)).

Table 1

Study Design Table

|  |  |
| --- | --- |
| **Question** | Is there a correlation between trait phenomenological control (PC) and visual illusion (VI) sensitivity? |
| **Hypothesis** | Replicating findings from Lush et al., 2022 paper, we expect evidence of favour of an absence of relationship between VI and PCS |
| **Sampling Plan** | The goal is to recruit around 500 adult English speakers using Prolific. This sample size is based on the ones used in Lush et al., 2021 and Lush et al., 2022 that we aim at replicate. |
| **Analysis Plan** | Bayesian correlations between the PC score and the VI performance for the 3 illusion types (corresponding to the error rate) will be computed using the \*BayesFactor::BFCorrelation()\* function (with the r-scale prior parameter set to ‘medium’) |
| **Rationale for Deciding the Sensitivity of the Test** | Evidence against a relationship between PC and VI will be found if BF10 <= 1/3, following the Lush et al., 2022 findings. BF10 > 3 will be interpreted as evidence for a relationship between these two measures. |
| **Interpretation Given Different Outcomes** | The hypothesis that VI sensitivity is independent from PC. |
| **Theory That Could Be Shown Wrong by the Outcomes** | The cognitive impenetrability of illusions, implying that the effect is driven by low-level processes and therefore not influenced by top-down mechanisms such as PC. |

# Methods

## Participants

We aim to recruit around 500 (in line with the sample sizes used in Lush et al., 2021; Lush et al., 2022) adult English native speakers with a desktop device using Prolific (www.prolific.co). Participants will be first presented with an explanatory statement and the consent form, and can proceed by pressing a button to confirm they have read and understood the information. This study has been approved by the ethics board of the School of Psychology of the University of Sussex (ER/ASF25/5).

## Procedure

The experiment’s setup follows of the born-open principle (De Leeuw, 2023). The online experiment, implemented entirely using JsPsych (De Leeuw, 2015), has its code stored on GitHub and will leverage the power of the platform to host the experiment for free. Participant’s raw data files (containing identifiers) **are** automatically stored in a private OSF repository. The preprocessing and analysis scripts, as well as the anonymized data, will be available directly on GitHub, ensuring the transparency and reproducibility of all the analysis steps.

Participants will be presented with a consent form followed by demographic questions (gender, education level, age, and ethnicity). **Although these variables are not directly analyzed in the current study, they will be used to provide to provide a detailed and thorough description of the sample and maximizing data reusability.** Participants will then be administered the PCS and the Illusion Game task (IG) in a counterbalanced order.

### Phenomenological Control Scale (PCS)

Participants will be asked to put on their headphones and await further auditory instructions. The PCS procedure starts with a recorded introduction explaining that a series of tests will be applied to evaluate how experiences can be created through imagination. This will be followed by 10 suggestions in a fixed order (see Lush et al., 2021), such as “now extend your arms ahead of you, with palms facing each other, hands about a foot apart” and “as you sit comfortably in your chair with your eyes closed, a picture of two balls will be displayed on the computer screen”. **Once the 10 suggestions are completed, participants will be asked to rate their subjective experiences and response to each suggestion on a 6-points Likert scale (from 0-5).** Phenomenological control will be indexed by averaging the scores from the 10 scales.

| suggestion | example | question |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Hand Lowering | Now the hand and arm feel heavy, as if the weight were pressing down...and as it feels heavier and heavier the hand and arm begin to move down... | How strongly did you feel your hand become heavy, where 0 means you felt your arm was no more heavy than normal and 5 means you felt your arm becoming as heavy as if you had a heavy object in your hand, pulling it down? |
| Moving Hands Together | You are thinking of your hands being pulled together, and they begin to move together... | How strongly did you feel a force between your hands, where 0 means you felt no force at all and 5 means you felt a force so strong it was as if your hands were real magnets? |
| Mosquito Hallucination | You may not have noticed a mosquito that has been buzzing, singing as mosquitoes do... | How strongly did you feel the sensation of a mosquito being there, in either sound or touch, where 0 means you felt no sensation and 5 means you felt by any means as if there actually was a mosquito there? |
| Taste Hallucination | Imagine that you have something sweet-tasting in your mouth, like a little sugar... | How strongly did you taste a SWEET taste in your mouth, where 0 means you felt no taste at all and 5 means you felt a strong taste?   How strongly did you taste a SOUR taste in your mouth, where 0 means you felt no taste at all and 5 means you felt a strong taste? |
| Arm Rigidity | Your arm feels stiff as if tightly splinted... Test how stiff and rigid it is ... | How stiff did your arm feel, where 0 means no more stiffness than normal and 5 means you could feel a stiffness so compelling no amount of effort would overcome it? |
| Arm Immobilization | Your hand is getting heavier, very heavy, as though it were being pressed against your lap. | How strongly did you feel a heaviness in your hand, where 0 means you felt no heaviness at all and 5 means your hand felt so heavy it was as if a very heavy object was actually pressing it down? |
| Music Hallucination | In a few moments, a recording of ‘Happy Birthday to You’ will be played for you. When the recording starts the volume will be turned way down and you will probably not be able to hear it, or you will hear it very faintly. | Report how clearly you heard the music, where 0 means you did not hear any music at all and 5 means you heard it so clearly it was as though it was coming from the best sound system. |
| Negative Visual Illusion | You will see just two balls on the screen... just two balls... | What color balls did you see in the screen? |
| Amnesia | You will remember nothing of what you did or felt from the time that you closed your eyes until I say to you: 'Now you can remember everything!' | How hard was it to remember events before you were told 'now you can remember everything', where 0 means you could remember events as easily as normal and 5 means you found it so difficult to remember it was as if there was an actual blank in your memory? |
| Button Press | You will press the space bar six times but forget that I told you to do so, just as you will forget the other things, until I tell you, 'Now you can remember everything'. | Report how strong an urge you felt to press the space bar, where 0 means you had no urge whatsoever and 5 means you had a clear urge to press the space bar repeatedly.   Report how clearly you remembered being given the instruction to press the space bar six times, where 0 means you were able at that time to remember the instruction normally and 5 means you had no memory of the instruction at that time to press the space bar. |

### Illusion Game

The task is an adaptation of the one used in Makowski et al. (2023) to make it shorter and more reliable, in which participants must make perceptual judgments (e.g., “which red line is the longer”) as quickly and accurately as possible. It includes 3 illusion types, namely Ebbinghaus, Müller-Lyer, and Vertical-Horizontal. The procedure encompasses 2 sets of 80 trials for each illusion type. Each set will include, in a random order, the 3 blocks of illusion types, in which trials are separated by a fixation cross, temporally (uniformly sampled duration of 500 - 1000s) and spatially jittered (around the centre of the screen in a radius of a 1 cm) to attenuate its potential usefulness as a reference point. After each illusion type block, a score is presented (computed as a scaled Inverse Efficiency Score) as a gamification mechanism to increase motivation to perform to the best of one’s abilities. To mitigate for the potential variability in the speed/accuracy trade-off, the instructions emphasize with equal weight to be fast and to avoid errors.

For each illusion type, two continuous dimensions are orthogonally manipulated (see Makowski et al., 2021 for details on the rationale and execution), namely task difficulty and illusion strength, so that each trial corresponds to a unique combination. Task difficulty corresponds to the difficulty of the perceptual decision (e.g., if the task is to select the longest red line, task difficulty corresponds to how the lines are objectively different). Illusion strength corresponds to the degree to which the illusion elements (e.g., the black arrow lines in Müller-Lyer) are interfering with the aforementioned task. Note that the illusion effect can be “incongruent” (biasing perception in the direction of the incorrect response) or “congruent” (facilitating, i.e., biasing perception in the direction of the correct response). Participants respond with a key arrow (left vs. right; or up vs. down), and their reaction time (RT) and accuracy are recorded.

Visual illusion sensitivity will be measured as the average error rate in the incongruent condition, separately for the 3 illusion types. Although the error rate is arguably a crude score, which does not take into account the effect of varying illusion strength, the interaction with task difficulty and the possible adjustments in response strategy (speed-accuracy trade off), it is also the most simple and easy to reproduce, hence its usage as our primary outcome for the current **registered report**.

The two sets of 3 illusion blocks will be separated by 2 short questionnaires acting as a break, namely the IPIP-6 (Sibley et al., 2011), measuring 6 personality traits with 24 analogue scales items, and the PID-5 (Krueger et al., 2011), measuring 5 maladaptive personality traits with 25 Likert scales items. These questionnaires are included as a way of providing a break between the two cognitively taxing blocks and maintain paradigmatic consistency with previous studies (Makowski et al., 2023).

Figure 1

The parametric framework for visual illusions (Makowski et al., 2021) applied to the Müller-Lyer illusion (above). Below are examples of stimuli showcasing the manipulation of two parameters, task difficulty and illusion strength.

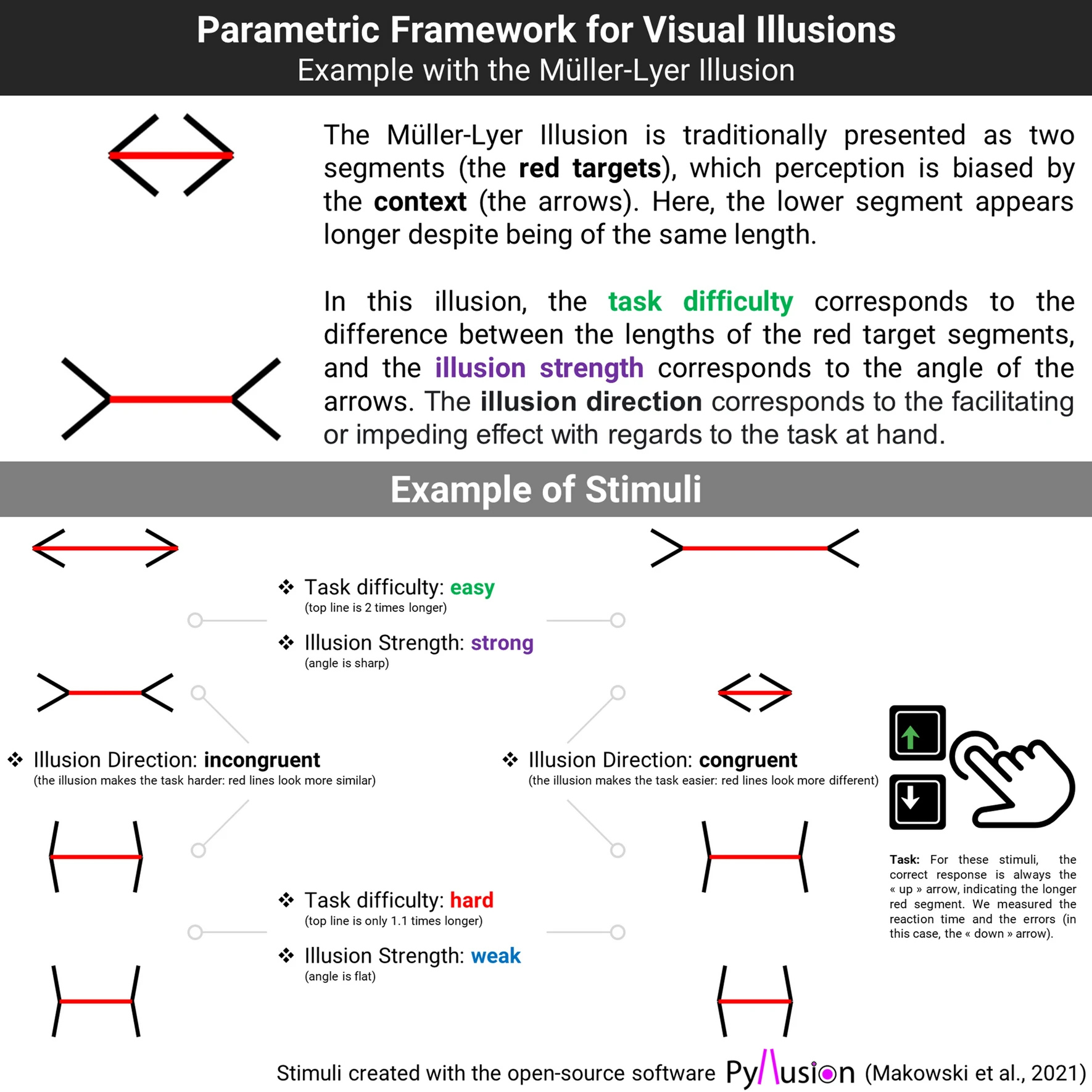
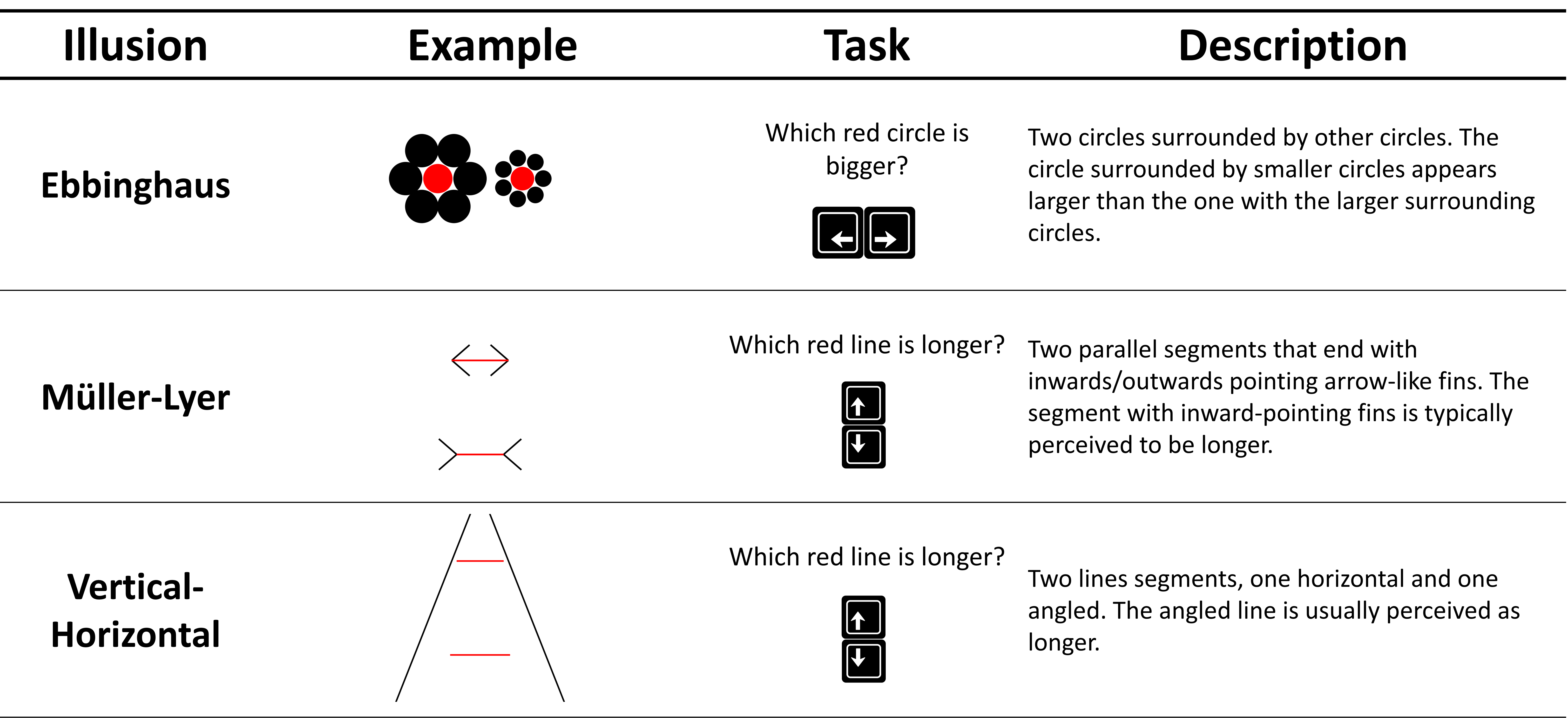


Table 2

Illusions Task Example Stimuli.



## Data Analysis

The PCS will contain several manipulation check indices to identify problematic participants. **The phenomenological control task consists of various auditory and visual exercises. In one such exercise, participants receive the following instruction: “Open your eyes. You will see only two balls on the screen…just two balls”. However, three differently coloured balls are actually displayed. If participants select the option “no balls were shown”, it indicates they failed to pay attention to both the auditory instructions and the visual stimuli. In another exercise, participants are asked to press the spacebar six times. If they press it fewer than five times within the allotted time, it suggests a lack of attentiveness to the auditory instructions. Participants will be excluded if they fail at least one of the attention checks.**

Illusion Game outliers will be flagged based on their RT distributions, following the same procedure as in (Makowski et al., 2023). **If the RT is collapsed to the left (i.e., has > 1/3 of ultra-fast responses - typically < 200 ms) in the first set, the entire participant will be discarded (suggesting that they did not properly do the task), but if only the second set is bad, then only the second set will be discarded (as the illusion sensitivity can still be estimated, albeit with less precision).** In addition, the removal of individual trials will also be performed [RT < 200 ms or > 3 SD; following Thériault et al. (2024)].

After removing problematic participants and trials, the outcome measures (PC and VI sensitivity scores) will be computed and the Bayesian correlation (with medium prior on the coefficient, i.e., r-scale parameter set to 1/3) will be computed [using the *BayesFactor* package; Morey and Rouder (2024)]. Following Lush et al. (2022), we expect to collect evidence against (BF10 <= 1/3) a relationship between PCS and VI sensitivity. Data analysis will be carried out using R, using *tidyverse* (Wickham et al., 2019) and *easystats* (Lüdecke et al., 2020, 2022; Makowski et al., 2019, 2022; Patil et al., 2022). The analysis script and additional information are available at *https://github.com/RealityBending/IllusionGamePhenomenologicalControl*.

# Results

*This section will be completed after data is collected.*

# Discussion

*This section will be completed after data is collected.*

# Data Availability

All the study materials, experiment, data, and analysis is available on GitHub at https://github.com/RealityBending/IllusionGamePhenomenologicalControl

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