Research Article

Bullshit (Sometimes) Makes the Art (Slightly) More Attractive: A Field Study in Gallery-Goers

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Abstract

Vague, impressive language used in descriptions (bullshit) is thought to make art seem more profound and valuable to the viewer. We studied the effect during art exhibitions in real-life gallery-goers who saw paintings of four artists, each with either simplified, neutral, or bullshitty description. We crafted a typical description of each painting, which we later manipulated in terms of language. A simplified description was modified to be concrete and simplistic, while a bullshitty one was very abstract and vague. After analyzing over 1500 ratings, we found the expressive language of descriptions had a negligible effect on the perceived quality and monetary value of art (R^2 marginal $\leq$ 1%). We conclude that, at least for experienced gallery-goers, the description accompanying a painting has little influence, and the art speaks for itself.

Keywords

bullshit, language, art perception, field study, art pricing

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Finding patterns is evolutionarily advantageous (Beck & Forstmeier, 2007; Mattson, 2014; Shermer, 2011). For instance, it is better to mistake rustling leaves for a predator (see a pattern, which is not there) than to mistake a predator for leaves (fail to notice an existing pattern). Along these lines, people are averse, for example, to uncertainty, ambiguity, and risk (Pratt, 1978; Tversky & Kahneman, 1992). It is said that cognition evolved to help us deal with uncertainty and plan our actions (FeldmanHall & Shenhav, 2019). It is not surprising then that people prefer when things around them have a meaning. People also tend to prefer stimuli hitting the "sweet spot" in terms of how surprising they are (Andersen et al., 2022). For instance, enjoyment experienced by adults in a haunted house attraction has been reported to have a U-shaped relationship with experienced fear (Andersen et al., 2020). In line with that, curiosity piques when facing moderately novel and surprising information (Loewenstein, 1994). The above are some of the reasons why abstract art is quite controversial. While individuals open to experience and those who prefer non-conformity can enjoy it (Feist & Brady, 2004), generally people who fail to find meaning in a painting will dislike it (Dissanayake, 1995; Donald, 1991; Humphrey, 1999; Lewis-Williams, 2011; Ramachandran & Hirstein, 1999). To avoid the discomfort caused by this, individuals may even search for illusory patterns and assign a work of art a meaning, which was not even intended by the author (Van Harreveld et al., 2014; Whitson & Galinsky, 2008).

Let us consider then, how the way art is presented might improve the viewers' attitude and liking. In short—people seem to like more what they understand. For example, adding titles or descriptions alongside a painting positively impacts aesthetic experience of the viewer (Landau et al., 2006; Millis, 2001), especially if the title is elaborative (Mullennix & Robinet, 2018). Interestingly, random or otherwise non-matching titles can decrease understanding, but not aesthetic experience of the viewer (Gerger & Leder, 2015; Millis, 2001). However, these findings are not always observed—sometimes adding titles only increases meaningness and decreases abstractness, but does not affect pleasantness or interestingness of a painting (Russell & Milne, 1997). Supplementing the titles with an elaborative description of the artwork increases the understanding and preference ratings, whereas mere addition of titles produces no effect (Szubielska et al., 2021). Contextual information (regarding the authors' biographical information, technique, historical, or content information) increases the liking and interest of the participants as well (Darda & Chatterjee, 2023; Mari et al., 2021).

One reason to understand the inconsistency is the presentation format—online studies of artwork, or classroom experiments with students, may not produce an effect because incorporating additional information requires longer presentation times (Leder et al., 2006) and because aesthetic emotions caused by viewing the installation in the gallery are more automatic and subjectively significant than emotions experienced in the classroom context (Szubielska et al., 2021). Thus, people's perception and experience of art are tied to their understanding of it or lack thereof. It follows that including a detailed description alongside

a painting should aid one's understanding of the artwork and thereby increase its perceived quality or liking.

Recent studies seem to suggest that there is another strategy for improving the perceived quality and attractiveness of artworks. Turpin et al. (2019) found that paintings paired with meaningless computer-generated pseudo-profound sentences (referred to as *bullshit*) were judged as more profound. The titles were a set of profound-sounding words that retained the syntactic structure of general English (Pennycook et al., 2015). The general line of research that studies peoples' susceptibility to pseudo-profoundness follows Frankfurt's (2005) definition of bullshit, as an absence of substance. Bullshit can be both true or false, and it has no inherent meaning. According to Turpin et al. (2019), bullshitting can be used as an effective and low-cost strategy for gaining an advantage in prestige-awarding domains. The idea is that within areas where performance and quality are not objectively measured, perception can be shaped by the addition of pseudo-profound bullshit. Thus, presenting a viewer with an artwork accompanied by an impressive (albeit meaningless) description could perhaps be more effective than simply describing what can be seen.

We decided to compare the two aforementioned approaches and investigate how providing simple versus bullshit descriptions could influence the perceived quality and value of art. On the one hand, a straightforward description should increase liking through an enhanced understanding, on the other hand, a vague and impressive description should increase liking through an enhanced perception of profoundness. We decided to test this empirically by contrasting bullshitty and simplified descriptions as perceived by gallery-goers. It is important to note that Turpin's (2019) study on bullshit implementation concerned only abstract art, an intrinsically subjective domain, so generalizing the results for more objective domains should be done with caution. While the paintings employed in our experiment were modern, they were not abstract (e.g., see section "Materials"). Still, there are reasons to think similar results could be found, given that pseudo-profound bullshit can improve even the perceived quality of scientific papers, where one would expect objective expertise to be an important factor. Examples include a famous hoax—Sokal's (1996) paper that used nonsensical buzzwords. The premise was that an academic journal would easily publish something that only seems profound, even though it makes no sense upon investigation. The obvious pseudo-profound nature of the language used can be observed already in the title of the article: *Transgressing the Boundaries: Towards a Transformative Hermeneutics of Quantum Gravity*. Another example is Eriksson's (2012) study. The author showed that papers containing irrelevant (and nonsensical) math formulae were rated as higher in quality than those without them.

Let us address some further differences between the study presented here and the previous research. Firstly, Turpin et al. (2019) used only titles whereas we used entire descriptions of the paintings. Moreover, to ensure the best possible quality of data, we collected it in a real-life scenario with gallery-goers, that is, individuals who

deal with art on at least a somewhat regular basis. Such a method of data collection might yield different results to that obtained from online participants, which took part in Turpin et al. (2019) and Darda and Chatterjee (2023). Gallery goers participating in studies in person seem to not be very strongly influenced by descriptions but by artworks themselves (Krauss et al., 2021). It is possible, that experts use different cues when judging a piece of art: they show attenuated reactions to emotions evoked by provocative art (Leder et al., 2014) and are less confused by abstract art (Silvia, 2013). Finally, experts show similar aesthetical and emotional reactions regardless of the abstraction level of a painting (Pihko et al., 2011), while laypersons are least charitable to abstract art. Thus, experts may show to be relatively resilient to bullshit.

Overview of the Studies

In Experiment 1, we set out to investigate the effect of description type on the perception of non-abstract modern paintings. Artworks provided by four different artists were rated by the participants during the showings at art galleries. We created descriptions for each painting on three levels of abstraction: simplified, neutral, and bullshit (e.g., see the Materials section). We found very small effects of description type. To test for the robustness of the effect, we conducted Experiment 2, in which university students rated each description on three dimensions: abstraction, floweriness, and bullshit. This allowed us to replace categorical predictors (simplified, neutral, bullshit) with a continuous rating of the description. Data and materials for the experiments are available at https://osf.io/ha9fu/?view_only=81df6d79da9842a09f6203228e3b33b0. Experiment 2 was preregistered at https://aspredicted.org/76Y_5R8. The experiments received the approval of the ethics committee at the University of Wrocław at the Faculty of Historical and Pedagogical Sciences.

Experiment 1

Participants

We collected data from $N = 107$ (f = 73, m = 31, o = 3), mean age = 42.4 [18–89], gallery-goers, presumed to be at least relatively well-informed on art quality and value. We did not actively preselect participants; anyone who came to the exhibitions could take part in the experiment, thereby ensuring a natural selection of subjects. We excluded data from two participants who provided unreasonable prices for the paintings (e.g., 1.000.000 PLN whereas the overall mean price was under 1.000 PLN). Education ranged from 1 (higher education related to arts) to 4 (primary school). Self-assessed level of expertise ranged from 1 (no expertise at all) to 4 (expert knowledge on arts) with a mean score of 2.11. We expected the art education and art expertise to correlate but were still interested in the expertise effects in participants with no formal art education.

Materials

The participants gave their assessments recording the profoundness, attractiveness, and value of paintings during art exhibitions of four artists (i.e., Gosia Herba—16 paintings, Piotr Rychel—12 paintings, Marianna Sztyma—15 paintings, and Adam Wójcicki—15 paintings). Gallery visitors were provided with booklets containing descriptions of the selected paintings that were displayed. The descriptions appeared in three within-subject versions—simplified, natural, and bullshit (see Table 1).

Table 1. Example Materials Used in Experiment 1.

Painting (Titled—*Zwierzęta Pana i diabła* / [The animals of the Lord and the Devil])—Adam Wójcicki	
Simplified description [PL/ENG]	*Na środku obrazu jest piramida z okiem między drzewami. Nawiązuje ona do tytułu. Dookoła niej znajduje się wiele zwierząt przypominających kształtem psy*. [In the center of the picture, there is a pyramid with an eye between the trees. The pyramid is a reference to the title. Around it, there are many dog-shaped animals.]
Neutral description [PL/ENG]	*Centrum obrazu stanowi znajdująca się pomiędzy dwoma drzewami piramidalna struktura z okiem, prawdopodobnie stanowiąca alegorię tytułu. Scenę dopełniają otaczające ją zwierzęta.* [The center of the painting is focused on the pyramidal structure with an eye between the two trees, which is likely to be an allegory of the title. The scene is complemented with animals surrounding the structure.]
Bullshit description [PL/ENG]	*Uwagę przyciąga metaforyczna postać łypiąca na odbiorcę okiem z centralnej pozycji dzieła. Piramidalna struktura prawdopodobnie stanowi alegorię tytułowego Pana, natomiast otaczające ją szakale mogą symbolizować bałwochwalczego bożka - egipskiego Anubisa.* [Attention is drawn to a metaphorical figure leering at the viewer from the central part of the work. The pyramidal structure is probably an allegory of the titular Lord, while the jackals surrounding it may symbolize the idolatrous god—the Egyptian Anubis.]

They were pseudorandomized using a Latin square. An additional factor, uncontrolled by the experimenters was that two out of four artists presented their work with titles, and two others presented their work untitled.

Description Types

We arrived at the three types of descriptions in the following way. Firstly, we briefly described paintings the way one would normally expect them to be described in a gallery during a showing. Then, we modified those descriptions. The simplified version would be simplified and usually slightly shorter. Any difficult words were replaced by simpler synonyms. Long sentences were split into shorter ones. We avoided using unnecessary adjectives or metaphors. The bullshit version, in turn, would be made more complex, usually slightly longer. We included as much sophisticated vocabulary as possible, replacing simple words with more difficult ones. We used complex compound sentences, multiple unnecessary adjectives, long noun phrases, and metaphors (see examples in Table 1).

Method

The experiment was conducted in Satyrykon Art gallery (Legnica, Poland) during art exhibitions (in 2020–2021), which allowed us to capture judgments in a natural setting, provided by participants who regularly attend such events. For each exhibition start, where we collected significant amount of our data, the artists were present at the galleries, and they engaged with the exhibitions as they normally would regardless of the experiment. However, we also collected data over the next two weeks, when the exhibition was open for viewers, but no artist was present anymore.[1] Some participants visited two or more exhibitions, providing multiple data points.

Before each exhibition, we selected a subset of paintings that will be tested: we tried to use those that were the most vague and abstract. Yet, we did not know the exact place the paintings would be placed in the gallery, nor their numbers. Thus, participants were forced to walk around the exhibition hall and search for those paintings using their descriptions as a cue. This, accidentally, increased the engagement of our participants and assured they carefully read each of the descriptions.

The participants were asked to assess the profoundness, attractiveness and monetary value of each painting described in the booklet provided at the exhibition. Both profoundness and attractiveness were marked on a scale from 1 to 10. There was no scale for the value, the participants could provide the price they thought each painting could be sold for as they saw fit.

Results

Data Preparation. Dependent variable—Art evaluation. Participants rated the profoundness and attractiveness of each painting. We combined the two ratings

into one "quality of art" score, because the two correlated strongly enough to justify it ($r = .69$, $\alpha = .81$).[2]

Dependent variable—Art pricing. To reduce the skewness of the variable, we log-transformed the monetary values assigned to each painting.

Data analysis. Figure 1 presents the results of the experiment. For each dependent variable (quality of art and pricing), we submitted our data to a linear mixed model using GAMLj (Gallucci, 2019) for JAMOVI 2.3.18 (The jamovi project, 2022). For the basic model (M1), the predictor was description type (simplified, neutral, bullshit; simple coding), and the clustering variables were: painting number, artist, Participants' ID, and title (yes/no). We centered and standardized the dependent variable. Each model had a fixed intercept and random slopes. We then conducted a robustness check, testing only participants at their first visit (M2), or additionally controlling for self-reported expertise in art (M3) or for artistic education (M4). Results displayed in Table 2 suggest that the description of art indeed affected the perceived quality of art, with bullshit descriptions resulting in non-significantly higher ratings than neutral and significantly higher than simplified descriptions. Despite significance, the effects have little to no practical value; the descriptions explained less than 1% of the variance of quality of art or pricing. Perhaps even this small increase could be meaningful for really expensive artworks (1% of $1.000.000 is still a lot). However, the fixed effects of painting, whether it was titled or not, participant, and artist explained about 50% of the variance in liking and over 80% of the variance in pricing. So, the judgments of paintings were highly consistent and predictable but robust to their descriptions.

Discussion

We found that the way a painting is described to gallery-goers influences the way they perceive the art in a negligible way: the vaguer and more abstract the description, the slightly higher the perceived quality of the art. As the participants were people who regularly attend such events, we assume their judgments to reflect the attitudes of individuals relatively better informed on the issue of art quality and value than participants coming from different backgrounds unrelated to art.

However, there is some level of uncertainty regarding our results: specifically, we cannot be sure whether the descriptions we designed to represent simplified, neutral, and bullshit descriptions were indeed perceived as such by our participants. For example, we could have failed to provide all descriptions as intended: some neutral descriptions could be perceived as fairly bullshitty or quite simplified. If participants perceived our descriptions differently from how it was intended, we could have artificially amplified or muddied the effect of the description on the perceived quality of art. If we had scoring indices for individual descriptions, we could further improve the robustness of our analysis. To illustrate, assume each description is evaluated on a dimension of abstractness on a scale ranging from 1 to 10. Some bullshit descriptions could be judged as 7, and some others 9 on that scale, whereas some neutral descriptions could be evaluated as 4 and some other 6. We then expect the perceived quality of

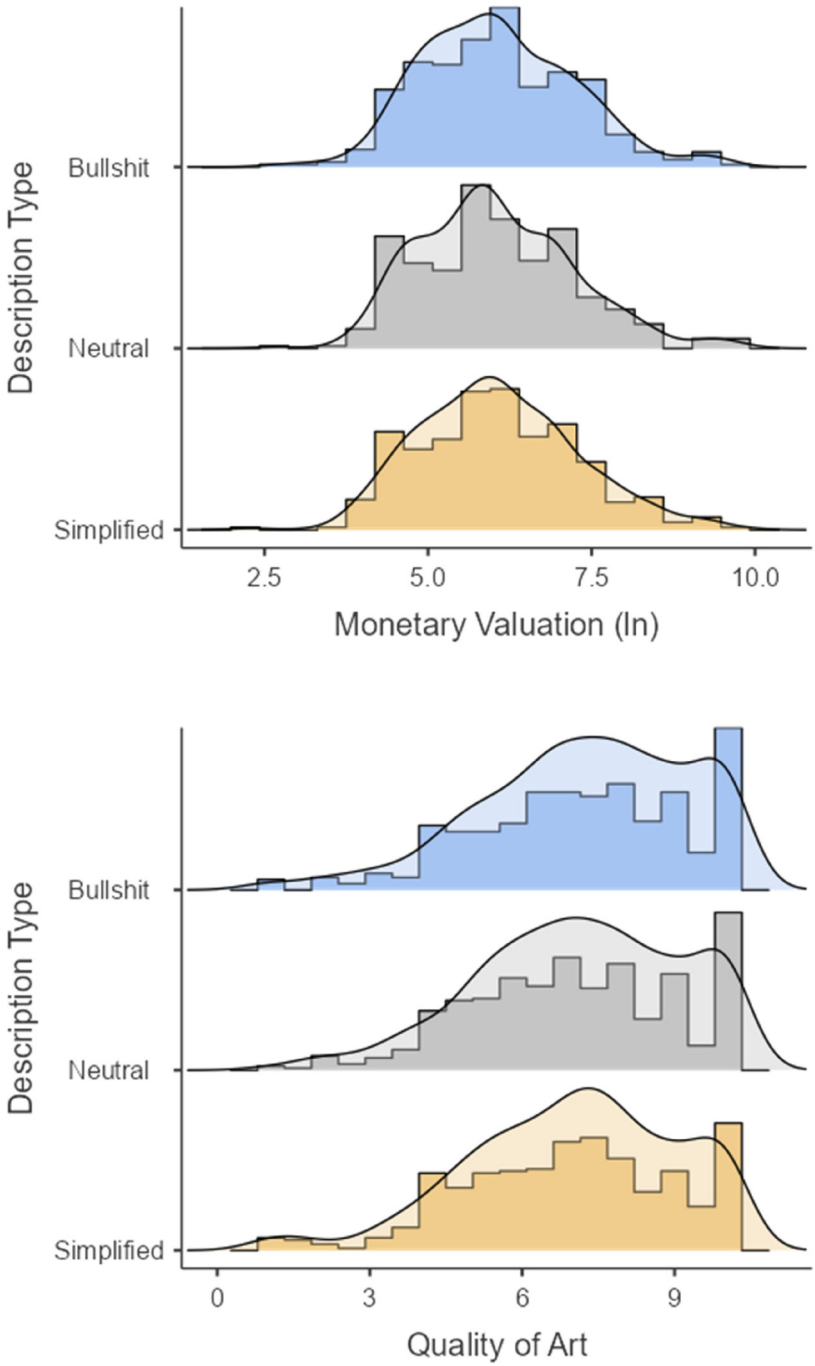

Figure 1. Pricing and perceived quality of art in Experiment 1.

Table 2. Results—Different Models.

	Quality of art				Pricing (log)			
	M1	M2 (only first visit)	M3	M4	M1	M2 (only first visit)	M3	M4
Random effects (B)								
N	1545	1238	1545	1530	1128	865	1128	1128
Description								
S-B	**−0.13 [−0.22, −0.04]**	**−0.12 [−0.23, −0.01]**	**−0.13 [−0.22, −0.04]**	−0.07 [−0.20, 0.06]	−0.02 [−0.08, 0.04]	−0.01 [−0.08, 0.06]	−0.02 [−0.08, 0.04]	0.01 [−0.08, 0.09]
N-B	−0.05 [−0.14, 0.04]	−0.07 [−0.18, 0.03]	−0.05 [−0.14, 0.04]	−0.04 [−0.17, 0.09]	−0.01 [−0.07, 0.05]	−0.02 [−0.09, 0.05]	−0.01 [−0.07, 0.05]	0.00 [−0.08, 0.08]
Expertise			−0.07 [−0.20, 0.06]				0.11 [−0.10, 0.31]	
Artistic education (yes—no)				0.07 [−0.30, 0.45]				0.03 [−0.54, 0.60]
Fixed effects (ICC)								
Participant ID	0.43	0.36	0.43	0.43	0.83	0.83	0.83	0.83
Painting No.	0.13	0.11	0.13	0.13	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14
Title	<.01	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.29	0.04	0.06
Artist	0.07	0.06	0.08	0.06	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00
Model fit								
R^2 Conditional	0.50	0.43	0.50	0.49	0.84	0.84	0.84	0.84
R^2 Marginal	<.01	<.01	.01	<.01	<.01	<.01	.01	<.01

Note: descriptions are labeled as S—simplified, N—neutral, B—bullshit.

art to vary predictably between categories (in our example means of 8 and 5 respectively), but also within each description category. Hence, independently rating each description rather than clustering all into one of three categories can better test our hypothesis. Considering the above, we decided to post-hoc validate our description by asking an independent sample of participants to evaluate them. Having all descriptions judged by independent raters, we can replace categorical predictors (simplified, neutral, bullshit) with a continuous rating of the description, and re-run the analyses. This way, we test for the robustness of our observed effects of the painting's description on its perceived quality.

Experiment 2

Participants

$N = 60$ individuals participated in this experiment. They were all first-year psychology students at The Karkonosze University of Applied Sciences and native speakers of Polish.

Method

We provided the participants with questionnaires aimed at assessing the language used in painting descriptions in Experiment 1. Each questionnaire contained 14 or 15 descriptions of paintings, pseudo-randomly assigned to them from a set of 173 previously used descriptions.

To ensure the nature of the task was clear, the individuals were provided with the definition of *bullshit*, which was as follows: '*bullshit* is when there are impressive statements, which at first sight seem to make sense; however, they are meaningless (there is no underlying meaning). An example of such language might be *apathetic public communication*.' The participants assessed the descriptions on three dimensions: abstraction (0–10), floweriness (0–10), and bullshit (0–10). We added those three ratings to create a language-impressiveness score.

Results

Descriptions Validation. First, we tested whether the three ratings were interrelated enough to warrant their combination into one factor ($r > .42$, $p < .001$, $\alpha = .79$). Having confirmed this, we ran an ANOVA, comparing the ratings across their classification categories (JAMOVI 2.3.18). As expected, we found a difference between the categories $F(2, 1048) = 220$, $p < .001$, with simplified description scoring the lowest (Mean 11.6, SD = 4.56), neutral, higher (Mean 13.1, SD = 4.61), and bullshit, the highest (Mean 17.0, SD = 4.10). Each pairwise comparison was statistically significant at $p < .001$.

Table 3. Description Effects on Quality and Pricing.

	Quality of art				Pricing (log)			
	M1	M2 (only first visit)	M3	M4	M1	M2 (only first visit)	M3	M4
Random effects (B)								
N	1545	1238	1545	1530	1128	865	1128	1128
Description expressiveness	0.04 [−0.01, 0.09]	0.05* [>−0.01, 0.11]	0.04 [−0.01, 0.09]	0.01* [>−0.01, 0.02]	0.00 [−0.01, 0.01]	<0.01 [−0.01, 0.01]	<0.01 [−0.01, 0.01]	<0.01 [−0.01, 0.01]
Expertise			−0.07 [−0.20, 0.06]				0.11 [−0.10, 0.31]	
Artistic education (yes—no)				0.08 [−0.30, 0.45]				0.03 [−0.54, 0.60]
Fixed effects (ICC)								
Participant ID	0.43	0.36	0.43	0.43	0.83	0.83	0.83	0.83
Painting No.	0.13	0.11	0.13	0.13	0.14	0.14	0.14	0.14
Title	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.00	0.06	0.29	0.04	0.06
Artist	0.06	0.05	0.08	0.05	<0.01	0.00	0.00	0.00
Model fit								
R^2 Conditional	0.49	0.43	0.50	0.49	0.83	0.84	0.84	0.84
R^2 Marginal	<.01	<.01	.01	<.01	<.01	<.01	.01	<.01

Note: * $p < .01$.

Experiment 1 Robustness Check. After obtaining the ratings of the descriptions, we used them to predict the perceived quality of art. We used the same set of models as in Experiment 1, substituting categorical variable description (simplified, neutral, bullshit) with a continuous variable *language-impressiveness score* (Table 3). The results do not differ in terms of the substitution. Turns out, that the *language impressiveness score* did not predict the quality of the art, nor the pricing of it.

Discussion

We found that there were significant differences between the three types of descriptions: simplified, neutral, and bullshit conditions. The scores were as expected with the bullshit descriptions scoring the highest on the developed scales, and the simplified descriptions scoring the lowest. As we argued above, this scoring should be a better predictor of the perceived quality and pricing. In contrast to Experiment 1, this time we do not observe a significant effect of description type on any of the dependent variables. However, Experiment 2 does not necessarily undermine the results of Experiment 1, as the individuals rating the descriptions were not the same as those rating the paintings. Even if a given description was on average judged as bullshit, it does not mean that it was perceived as such by a single participant from Experiment 1. In an ideal scenario, we could have asked the participants from Experiment 1 to rate both the quality/pricing of the art as well as the language impressiveness; however, it would have revealed the goal of the study and thus influenced the results negatively (they could try to impress the experimenters by, i.e., proving their *resistance* to bullshit).

General Discussion

We wanted to compare the effects of language used to describe an artwork on its perceived quality and pricing. To this end, we created three types of descriptions, manipulating expressiveness of the language used in them: simplified, neutral, and bullshitty. Depending on the operationalization of the predictors we observed either a very small positive effect of the language or a complete lack of it. Regardless of the statistical significance of the effect, the effect size is negligible and has no practical meaning. It accounts for up to 1% of variance in the dependent variables. However, the ratings given by participants are not random, as R^2 Conditional tells us that the fixed effects of painting, whether it was titled or not, participant, and artist explained about 50% of the variation in the perceived quality of the artworks and above 80% of the variation in pricing.

From our data, we can conclude that the type of description accompanying the painting has negligible real-life consequences in terms of the artwork's quality or value perception. This is true at least for the particular scenario we researched and concerns in-person gallery-goers, who view the paintings during art exhibitions. Similar observations have been made before, with other in-person studies also finding that the artworks themselves had a stronger influence on the viewer than

their descriptions (Krauss et al., 2021; Szubielska et al., 2021). We could wonder what causes the disparity between the studies conducted in galleries and those carried out online.

Firstly, the paintings used in both our study and Krauss's are not abstract unlike it was the case for most of the artwork employed in the online experiments. Description type could be more influential for art which is by default more difficult to understand. Secondly, individuals participating online might be less knowledgeable about art than typical attendees of art exhibitions. Perhaps, a layperson might change their opinion based on the description, but a more art-experienced person might not. Thirdly, as we discussed earlier, the effect was weak. It is possible that it can only be observed in very well-controlled circumstances, which are much easier to achieve online. The present experiment was conducted in a setting most accurately resembling real-life scenarios at the cost of some aspects of the situation not being controlled. Each art exhibition proceeded as intended by the artists, who were present during the experiment, and the participants provided their ratings at their own pace as they freely engaged in the event. Finally, an individual at a gallery gets to spend as much time contemplating the painting as they wish, while an individual sitting at a computer might want to deal with the task as quickly as possible. It could be that the description type aids fast-paced impression-based judgments, while the artwork itself is more important for deliberation-based judgments (Leder et al., 2006).

Because of its nature, the study had some limitations. As mentioned above, the setting was quite informal and difficult to control in exchange for its realistic character. Thus, we rather answer a question whether it is feasible to amend perception of the art in real-life setting, rather than whether such change is possible in general. For example, because of the self-selection of the participants, we could not control their attitudes towards the paintings or artists. They might have already been familiar with the work of the artists whose exhibitions they attended. Previous opinions may have influenced the ratings they gave in Experiment 1, and thus make those knowledgeable more resilient to the description manipulation. Additionally, the presence of the artists could have its own effect. This is not entirely explaining the lack of the effect of description (i.e., part of our participants viewed the artwork in the two weeks period after the exhibition opening), but we could obtain clearer results in a study where the authors of the paintings are not in the room.

There was no condition in which a painting would not be accompanied by a description at all. It might be that including a description changes the perceived liking or value of the painting regardless of the content or language used. However, the alternative design commonly employed in similar studies, with participants rating each artwork twice (e.g., before and after reading its description), is also not without limitations. Specifically, any effect may be harder to detect because people may be willing to present themselves as consistent or as immune to external sources of information. Future research could focus on incorporating paintings without descriptions to help divorce the effects deriving from the mere presence of a description from those triggered by its style.

Finding a wider participant pool could also be beneficial for statistical power. However, with the data we collected the effect was already observed to be statistically significant. The interpretation that description has no impact comes from its negligible size, not significance.

Finally, one can argue that our descriptions were not very informative, and the readers could simply have put them aside. This criticism consists of two smaller ones: (1) participants have not read the description, and (2) participants read but ignored the description as irrelevant or unhelpful. Regarding the first point, our observations suggest otherwise. Gallery visitors received booklets and had to locate corresponding artwork based on their descriptions, assuring one had to read them carefully. We saw them doing this. Regarding the second potential criticism: even if participants read the descriptions but ignored them as unhelpful, this is still a valid empirical finding. That is—people want to evaluate art based on the art itself.

One could also classify our descriptions as local (commenting on the parts of the artwork), as contrasted to more informative global descriptions (commenting on the whole of the painting) and historical descriptions (giving historical background to the painting) (Mari et al., 2021). Yet still, in the mentioned study local descriptions improved the aesthetic appreciation of ambiguous (but not Renaissance) portraits.

To summarize, our study showed that the effects of description of art when presented in a naturalistic setting of art exhibition is weak. Gallery-goers, despite varying severely in their judgments of each painting they saw, were only modestly influenced by the language of its description. So, the value of a painting comes from elsewhere—most likely its core features. Thus, art seems to be able to defend itself.

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Notes

1. We did not code which data comes from which part of the data collection, and thus cannot test for the effect of the artist presence.
2. Testing the effects on each DV separately yields similar conclusions.

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