

# Bullshit (sometimes) makes the art (slightly) more attractive: A field study in gallery-goers

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## Objective

We decided to investigate how providing simple vs. 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 (Turpin et al., 2019).

## Methodology

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.

We collected data from N=107 (f=73, m=31, o=3), mean age=42.4 [18-89] gallery goers.

## Robustness check

We decided to post-hoc validate our painting descriptions by asking an independent sample of participants to evaluate them. N=60 individuals assessed the language used on 3 dimensions: abstraction (0-10), floweriness (0-10), and bullshit (0-10). To ensure the nature of the task was clear, they were provided with the definition of bullshit.

## Materials

The participants assessed 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, displayed paintings.

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.]*

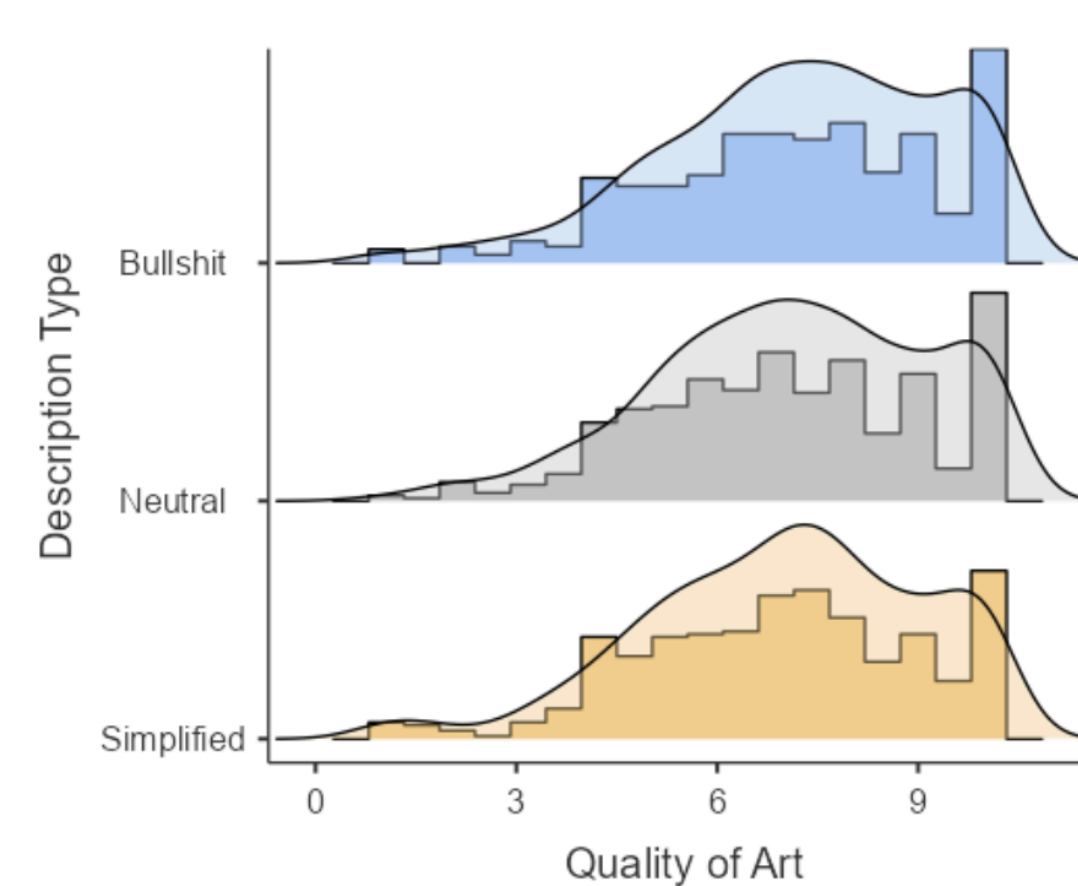
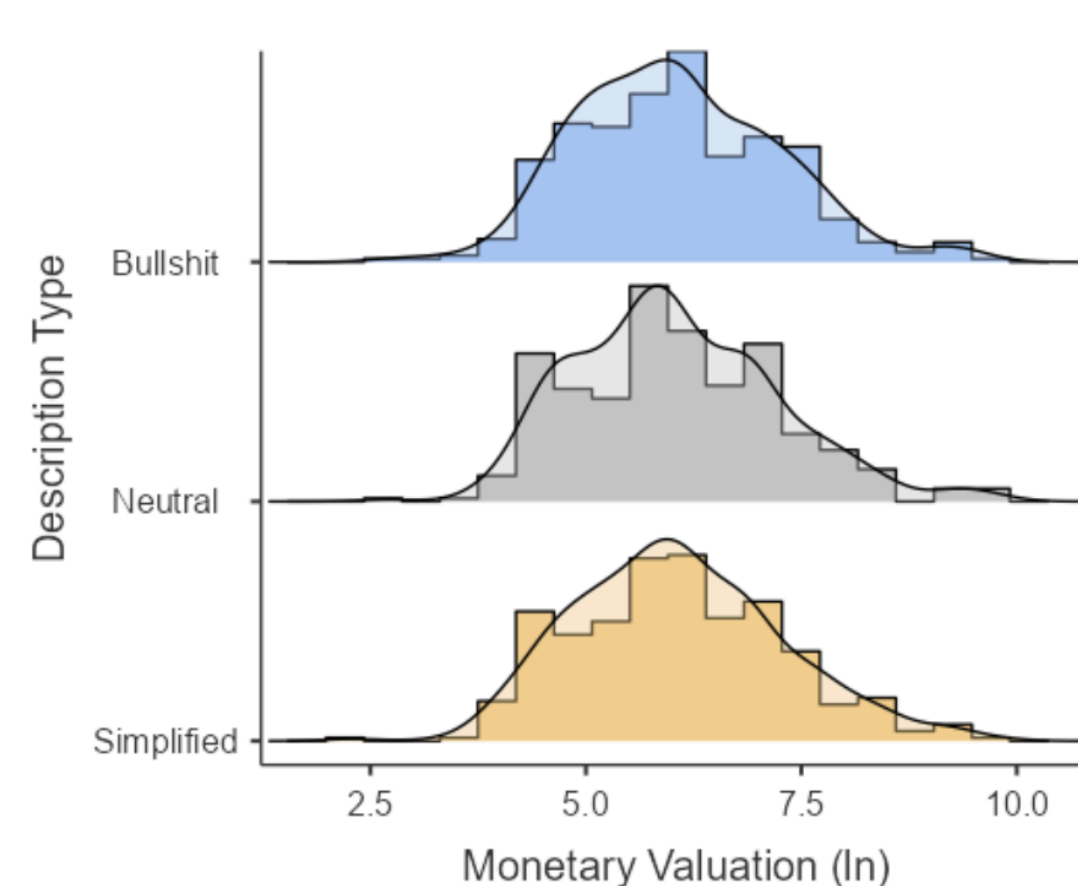
Neutral description [PL/ENG]

*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 balwochwalczego 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.]*

Painting (Titled—*Zwierzęta Pana i diabła / [The animals of the Lord and the Devil]*)—Adam Wójcicki



## Analysis

presents the results of the experiment. For each dependent variable (quality of art and pricing), we submitted our data to a linear mixed model. For the basic model (M1), the predictor was a continuous variable: language-impressiveness score. 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). Despite significance for some models, the effects have little to no practical value; the descriptions explained less than 1% of the variance of quality of art or pricing. In comparison, 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.

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 <sup>2</sup> Conditional	0.49	0.43	0.50	0.49	0.83	0.84	0.84	0.84
R <sup>2</sup> Marginal	<.01	<.01	.01	<.01	<.01	<.01	.01	<.01

Note: \*  $p < .01$ .

**We conclude that, at least for experienced gallery-goers, the description accompanying a painting has little influence, and the art speaks for itself.**

## Key references:

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- Turpin, M. H., Walker, A. C., Kara-Yakoubian, M., Gabert, N. N., Fugelsang, J. A., & Stolz, J. A. (2019). Bullshit makes the art grow profounder. *Judgment and Decision Making*, 14(6), 658–670. <https://doi.org/10.2139/ssrn.3410674>

## The article:

Urbanek, A., Borkowska, A., Milczarski, W., Zagobelny, J., Luty, J., & Białek, M. (2024). Bullshit (Sometimes) Makes the Art (Slightly) More Attractive: A Field Study in Gallery-Goers. *Empirical Studies of the Arts*, 02762374241237981. <https://doi.org/10.1177/02762374241237981>

