

# Sticks and Stones: How Aggressive Humor Can Help and Harm Negotiation Outcomes

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Across three experiments, we identify an aggressive behavior that both improves negotiation outcomes and promotes relationships – the use of aggressive humor. Aggressive humor can help a joke teller capture value in negotiation and bargaining settings. However, aggressive humor attempts that are too offensive can harm negotiation outcomes. The relationship between the use of aggressive humor and negotiation outcomes is mediated by perceptions of closeness. Instead of viewing humor as a superfluous behavior, we argue that humor plays a fundamental role in shaping interpersonal perception and behavior in groups.

## Motivation

- Aggressive behavior harms relationships.
- Being collaborative in a distributive negotiation may help the relationship, but harm the outcome.
- In contrast, competitive behavior, such as expressing anger, harms relationships but helps negotiation outcomes.
- This work explores a method of signaling aggression without harming the relationship – aggressive humor.

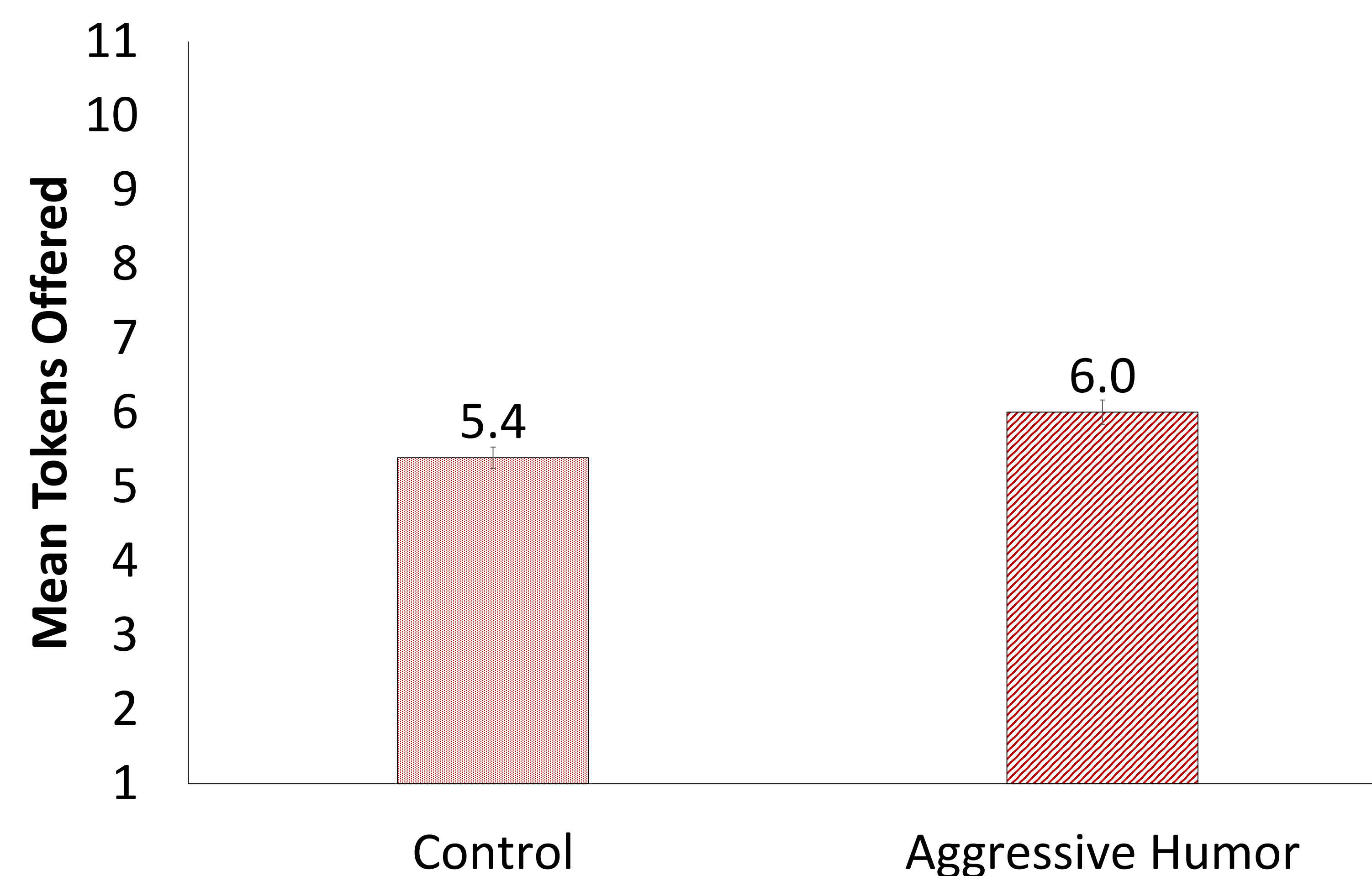
## Theoretical Background

- Aggression can be an effective method of signaling to a counterpart that a negotiator is less willing to compromise and is even willing to walk away from the negotiation.
- However, aggression can be a risky method for capturing value in a negotiation and can have harmful interpersonal effects.
- Aggressive humor allows an individual to signal aggression to their partner, while also increasing feelings of closeness with that counterpart.

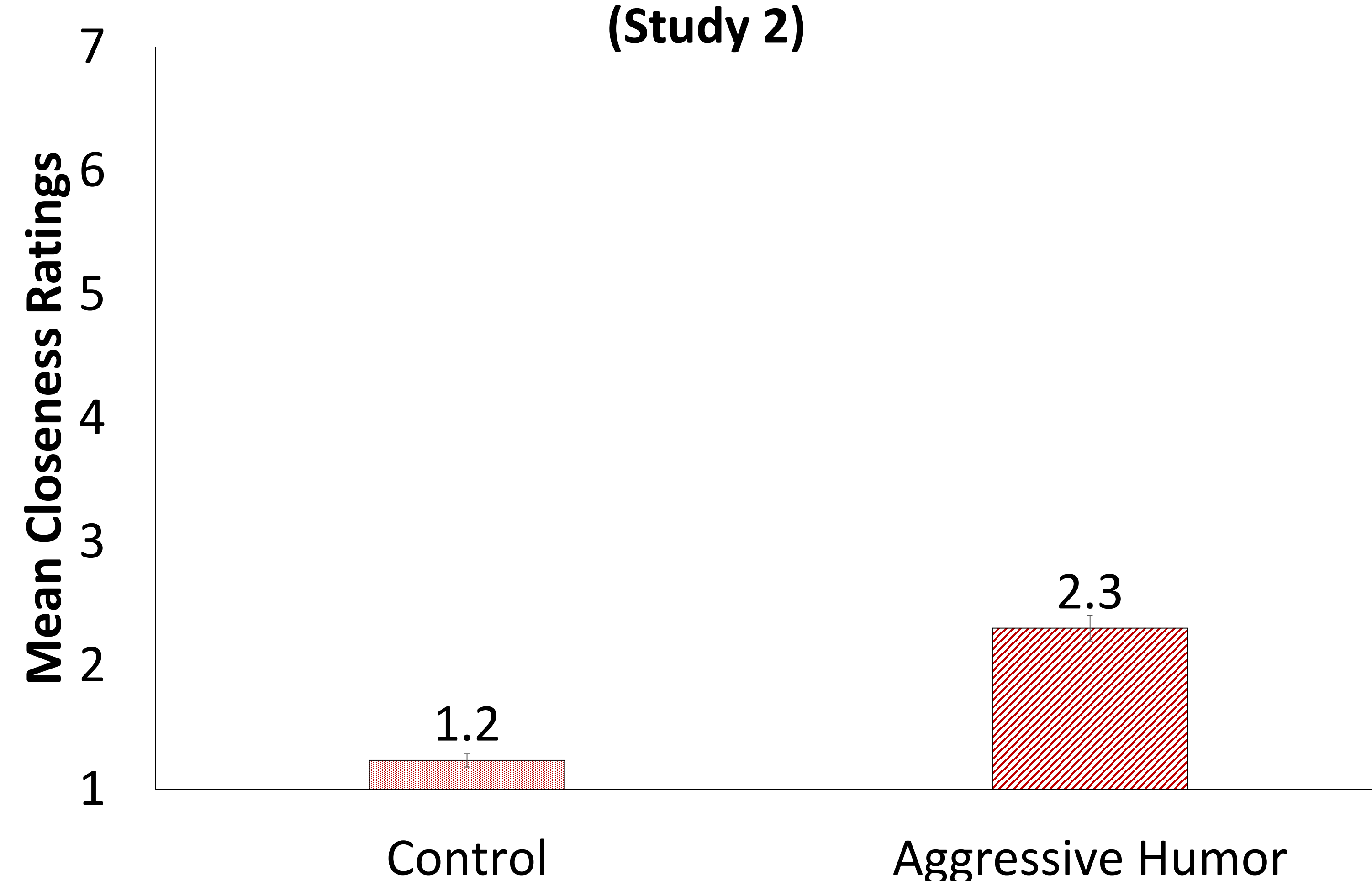
## Overview of Current Work

- **Study 1** – Aggressive humor improves offers in a distributive negotiation.
- **Study 2** – Aggressive humor improves offers in an ultimatum game. Effect is mediated by feelings of closeness.
- **Studies 3** – Aggressive humor that offends the counterpart harms negotiation outcomes.

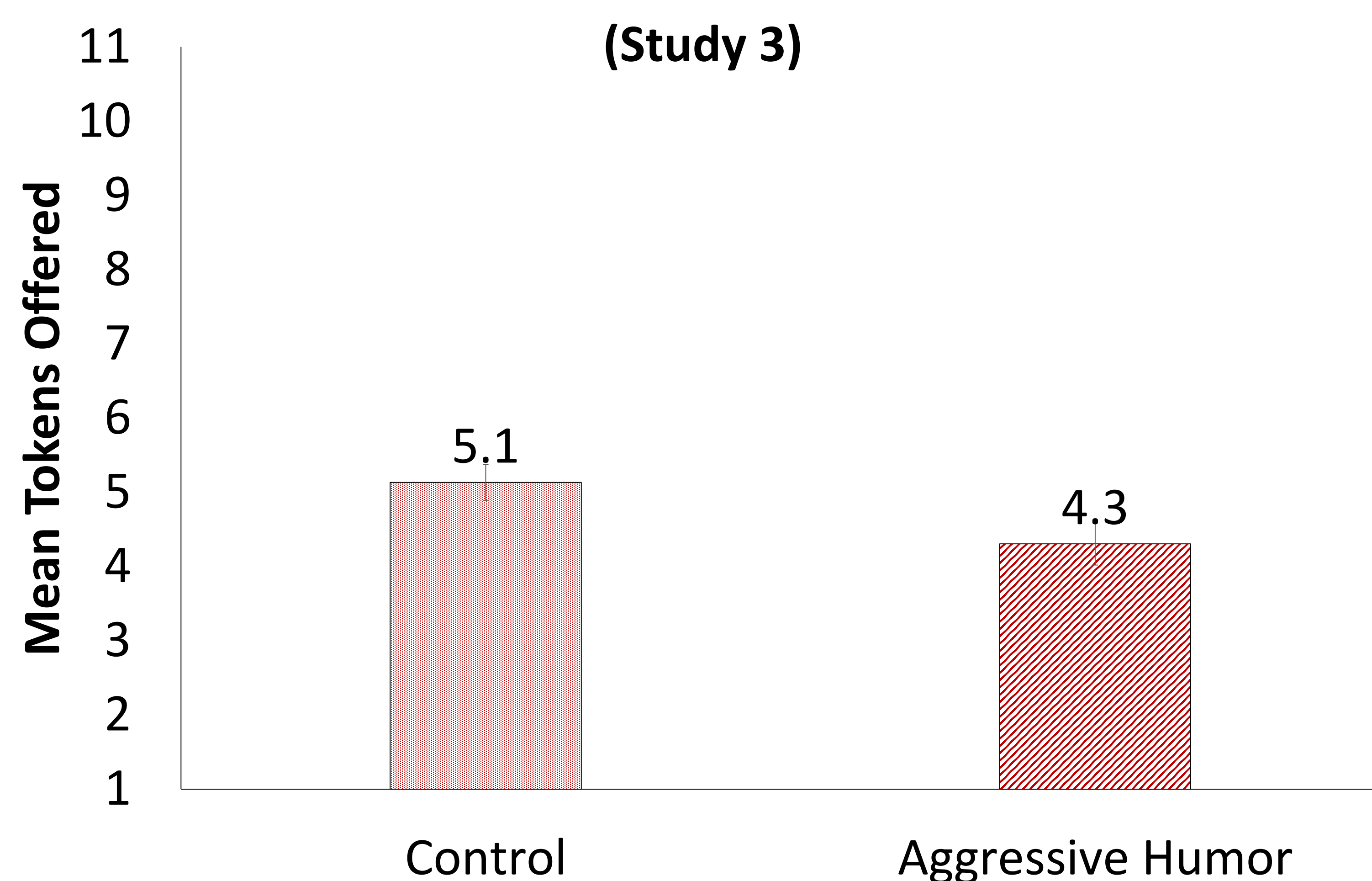
### Aggressive Humor Improves Ultimatum Game Offers (Study 2)



### Aggressive Humor Increases Feelings of Closeness (Study 2)



### Offensive Jokes Harm Ultimatum Game Offers (Study 3)



## Methods

- Participants recruited using the Wharton Behavioral Lab and MTurk.
- DVs:
  - Initial offers in a distributive negotiation (Study 1).
  - Ultimatum game offers (Study 2 and Study 3).
  - Feelings of closeness (Study 2 and Study 3).
- Manipulation:
  - Before making offers, P's received a message from their partner (a confederate).
  - Study 1: In the Aggressive Humor condition, the confederate made fun of the experimenter: "did you see the experimenter rocking a fanny pack? I wonder if it's big enough to hide their dignity in there". In the Control condition, the confederate did not mention the experimenter.
  - Study 2: We included a typo at the top of the study. We wrote "Blue Player Massage" rather than "Blue Player Message". In the aggressive humor condition, the confederate sent the participant the following message: "A message? Has the experimenter heard of spell check? Anyways, what is your offer?" In the Control condition, the confederate sent the participant the following message: "What is your offer?"
  - Study 3: Participants were sent either an offensive joke or a control message. The materials are available upon request from the authors.

## Discussion

- By making a joke targeted at a third party, negotiators can appear aggressive, but also make their partner feel closer and improve the offers they receive.
- If a negotiator makes an aggressive joke that is too offensive, they will appear aggressive, but their partner will not feel closer and they can harm the offers they receive.

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