

# "I'm just joking!" Does authenticity matter in comedy?

Drew Gorenz, Norbert Schwarz  
University of Southern California

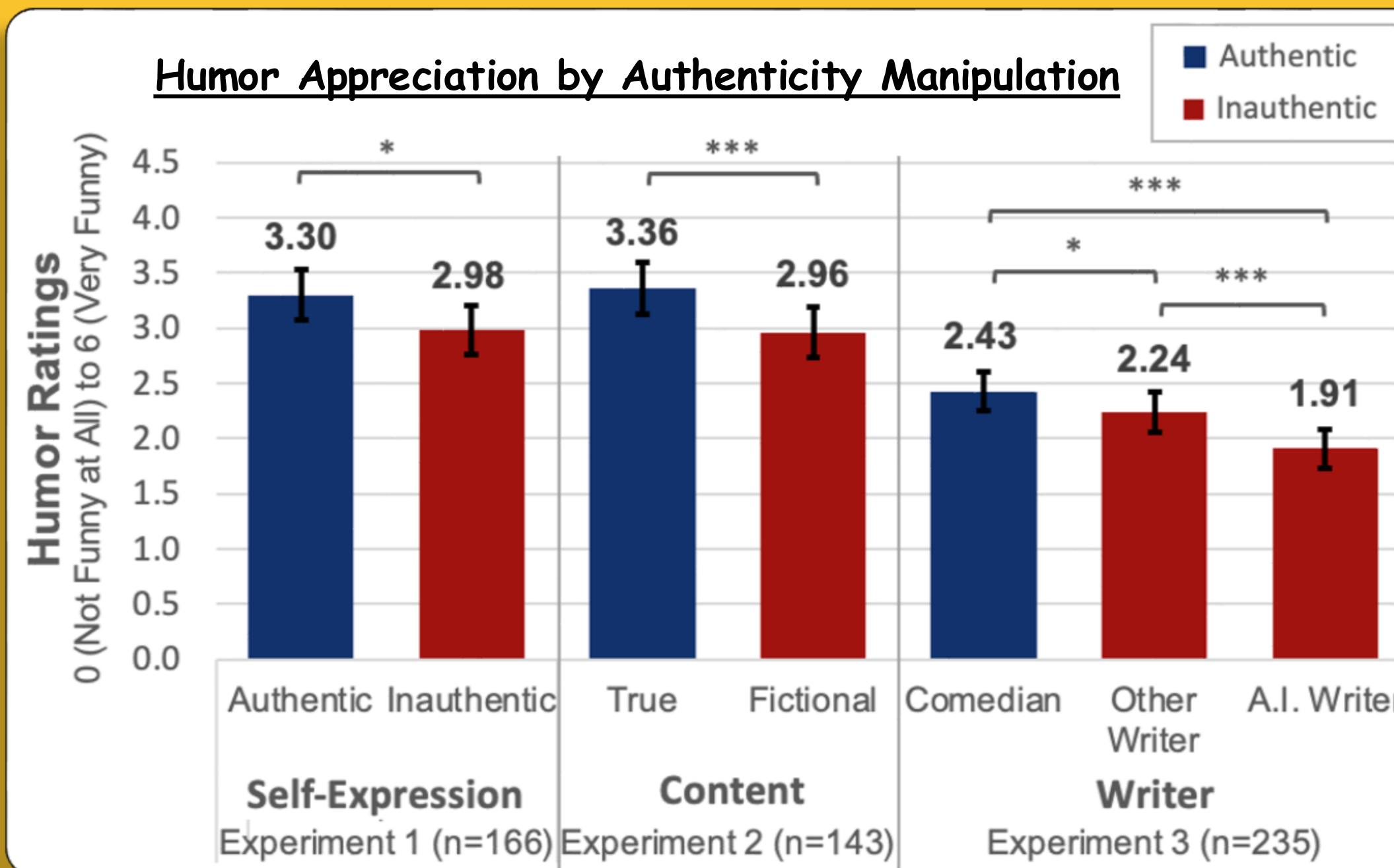


## Background

- Authenticity can enhance enjoyment of products and experiences (Grayson & Martinec, 2004; Kovács, Carroll, & Lehman, 2014, 2016).
- Does this hold for comedy, where exaggeration and fictional premises are common?
- We test experimentally whether different types of authenticity influence people's evaluations of story-based jokes and the comedians telling them.

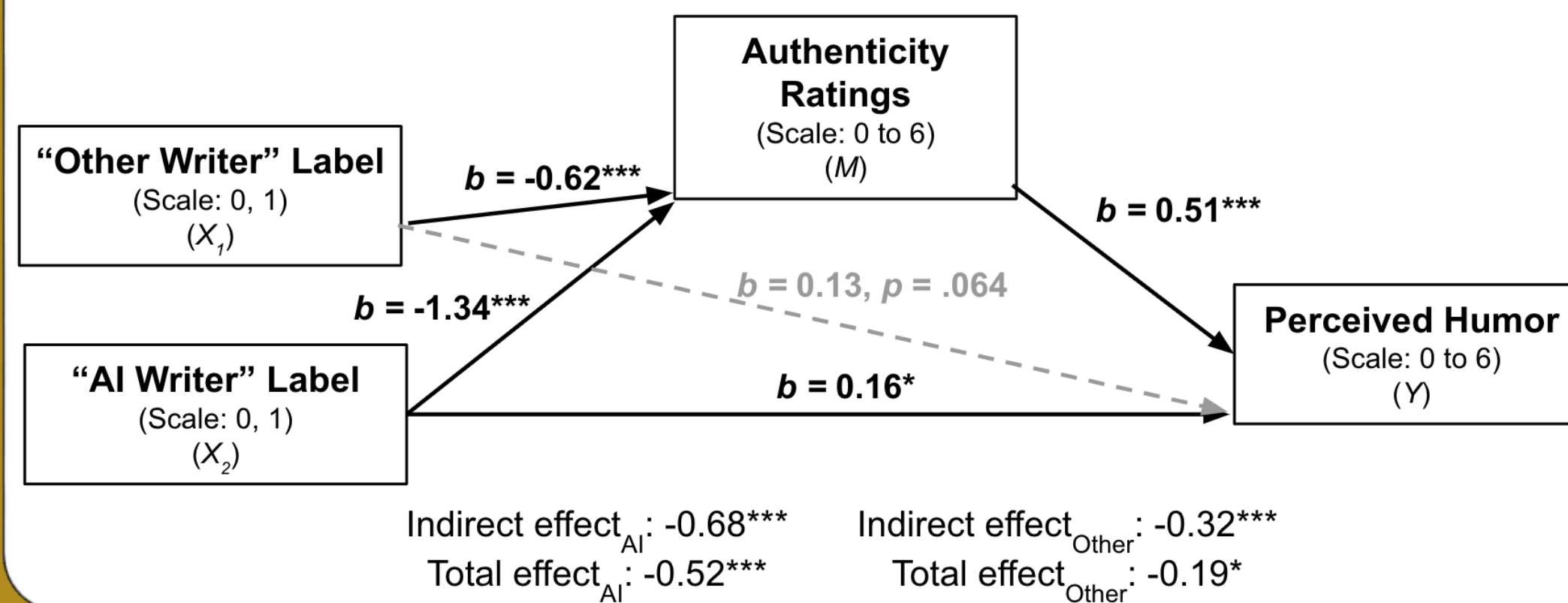
## Methods & Materials

- Participants listened to or read story-based jokes from different standup comedians and rated how funny they are.
- We manipulated the perceived authenticity of the comedians and jokes. We counterbalanced the manipulation across all jokes.
- Experiment 1 (n=166):** the comedian allegedly picked the jokes because *he* likes them (vs. because he thinks *the audience* will) (within-ss).
- Experiment 2 (n=143):** the jokes were allegedly based on the comedian's *true, personal* (vs. fictional, imagined) experiences (within-ss).
- Experiment 3 (n=235):** the jokes were allegedly written by *the comedian* sharing them (vs. written by other writers or by A.I.) (within-ss).
- Jokes were presented in audio clips (Exp. 1 & 2) or writing (Exp. 3).
- In Experiment 3, participants also reported their perceived authenticity of each joke.



Error bars represent 95% confidence intervals

## Experiment 3 Mediation Analyses:



## Experiment 3 Stimuli (Comedic Tweets):

when i was 19, i went to a bar with my cool, hot roommate. she told me to just act like i was old enough and they wouldn't question it. she got a jack and ginger. i proceeded to order a 'virgin piña colada' and then said 'but with the alcohol'  
i think about that every day

our soccer ref didn't show up so one of the moms on our team had her 9 year old son ref for us (he had a whistle) and a completely adult woman on the other team argued with one of his calls and he yellow carded her in front of everyone and she had to sit in her car to calm down

## Results

- Across three manipulations of authenticity, people evaluated jokes as funnier when they were presented as more authentic:
  - Values consistent (vs. inconsistent) with behavior ✓  
 $t_{paired}(166) = 2.38, p = .018$
  - Jokes are based on true (vs. fictional) experiences ✓  
 $t_{paired}(143) = 3.23, p = .002$
  - Jokes are written by the comedian (vs. other writer or A.I.) ✓  
 $t_{paired}(235) = 2.11, p = .036$   
 $t_{paired}(235) = 5.33, p < .001$
- Perceptions of authenticity mediated the effect of the writer source in Exp 3.

## Discussion

**These experiments provide the first evidence of a causal relationship between perceptions of authenticity and humor appreciation.**

- Many standup comedians perform the same jokes hundreds of times in front of new audiences that they no longer find funny themselves.
  - Many comedians exaggerate or fabricate stories to make others laugh.
  - Many comedians (particularly actors and talk show hosts) utilize writers.
- Our research shows that knowing this can make the same jokes less funny. It suggests that comedians should not overshare details that question the authenticity of their jokes.
- Past research has also shown that people rate jokes written by A.I. models (i.e., ChatGPT 3.5) as funnier than those produced by lay people and equally good as those produced by some professional writers when blind to the source (Gorenz & Schwarz, 2024).

Our research suggests these results may differ when the audience knows the jokes were written by A.I.