

The Comic, not the Comedy: Effect of Joke-Origin-Induced Expectancy on Cognitive Humour

Johnson, A.J., and Mistry, K.
Department of Psychology, Coventry University, UK

Introduction

Cognitive evaluations of humour are not uniquely determined via objective judgments of joke quality but influenced by contextual factors such as order (e.g. Forabosco, 1994). Indeed, Wimer and Beins (2008) demonstrated that extraneous additional information (prior ratings of the jokes) could affect subsequent humour appraisals. Wimer and Beins (2008) argued that prior ratings of the jokes primed expectancy of humour altering subsequent evaluations. The following series of experiments examined whether expectancy for humour could be manipulated via a more subtle prime of joke origin. That is, if one expects the joke teller to be humorous, does this bias subsequent appraisal of joke quality.

Humour Evaluation Paradigm

Across the four experiments, participants are presented with a series of jokes and are instructed to rate the humour quality on a scale of 0-100. Each joke is purportedly said by a comedian or a non-comedian along with a situation in which the joke was said.

For example: *In a recent television panel show, comedian and television presenter Jimmy Carr said: "How do you make a door laugh? Tickle it's knob."*

Experiment 1

Five incongruity-based jokes were presented to 169 (45 males, 124 females: mean age = 19.71 years) Coventry University volunteer Psychology undergraduates. Participants were randomly assigned to a condition where the five jokes were purportedly said by five different celebrity comedians (n=85) or celebrity non-comedians (n=84). Average humour ratings for the two conditions are displayed in Figure 1. Humour ratings were significantly higher for the comedian condition (mean humour rating = 40.40) compared to the non-comedian condition (mean humour ratings = 27.33), $t(167)=5.30$, $p<0.001$.

Experiment 2

Experiment 1 suggests that expectancy of forthcoming humour induced via joke origin can affect humour evaluations. However, such effects may have been induced by (1) participants possessing more favourable attitudes to the comedians and (2) group differences. These limitations were addressed by using celebrities that had been matched on like-ability (pilot study: $n = 36$) and through employing a within-participants design.

Ten incongruity jokes were presented to 61 (14 males, 47 females: mean age = 22.22 years) Coventry University volunteer Psychology undergraduates. Five of the jokes were said by celebrity comedians and five were said by celebrity non-comedians (the assignment of jokes to these conditions was counterbalanced). Average humour ratings for the two conditions are displayed in Figure 2. Humour ratings were significantly higher for the comedian condition (mean humour rating = 34.30) compared to the non-comedian condition (mean humour ratings = 30.94), $t(61)=2.15$, $p=0.035$.

Experiment 3

Experiment 2 suggests that expectancy for humour is still found to affect joke evaluation when group differences and like-ability of joke-teller is controlled. Experiment 3 examines whether the expectancy effect remains when the name of the joke teller (but not the profession) is obscured. Five incongruity jokes were presented to 96 (12 males, 84 females: mean age = 23.10 years) Coventry University volunteer Psychology undergraduates. Participants were randomly assigned to either a condition where the five jokes were purportedly said by different 'celebrity comedians' (n=49) or different 'celebrity actors' (n=47). Average humour ratings are displayed in Figure 3. There was no effect of the comedian condition, $F(1,94) = 0.027$, $MSe=1581.46$, $p=0.87$, partial eta squared <0.001 , nor did comedian condition interact with any of the jokes used, $F(4,376) = 1.38$, $MSe=552.05$, $p=0.24$, partial eta squared = 0.01. These findings suggest that the name of the celebrity is required in order to generate the expectancy of humour. One might argue, therefore, that individuals recall prior exposure to that individual (rather than making a generalisation about comedians) and this induces expectancy of humour.

Experiment 4

Experiment 4 examined if the expectancy effects observed in Experiments 1 and 2 are mediated by the type of joke used and whether that joke is previously rated as funny or not. A pilot study ($n=67$) identified two incongruity and two nonsensical jokes that were high and low in humour. These four jokes were presented to 132 (37 males, 95 females: mean age = 19.62 years) Coventry University volunteer Psychology undergraduates who were randomly assigned to either a condition where the jokes were purportedly said by different celebrity comedians (n=60) or different celebrity non-comedians (n=72). Average humour ratings are displayed in Figure 4. Ratings were significantly higher for the comedian condition (mean humour rating = 32.48) compared to non-comedian condition (mean humour rating = 25.08), $F(1,130) = 6.76$, $MSe=1056.47$, $p=0.01$, partial eta squared = 0.05 (32.48 and 25.08). Although the interaction between joke type and comedian condition did not reach significance ($F(1,130) = 2.84$, $MSe=670.13$, $p=0.09$, partial eta squared = 0.02), planned comparison t-tests revealed that ratings were higher for the comedian condition following high ($t(130)=2.25$, $p=0.026$) and low ($t(130)=2.97$, $p=0.004$) nonsensical jokes but not significantly higher for high ($t(130)=1.56$, $p=0.13$) and low ($t(130)=0.01$, $p=0.99$) incongruity jokes. This suggests that the expectancy effect may be stronger for specific jokes (i.e. nonsensical).

General Discussion

Four experiments have shown that humour evaluations can be changed by the belief that the joke was delivered by a humorous individual. This belief generates an expectancy of humour which in turn influences the joke appraisal (see also Wimer and Beins, 2008). This effect is not underpinned by individuals simply possessing a more favourable attitude to the humorous individual (Experiment 2). However, this effect is eradicated if the name of the celebrity (but not the profession) is obscured (Experiment 3). This suggests that prior exposure of the individual (rather than semantic knowledge about the profession) determines the effect. Finally there is some evidence that the effect is greater for nonsensical jokes compared to incongruity jokes (Experiment 4). One might argue that nonsensical jokes are uncommon in non-comedians; with surrealist humour performed almost exclusively by comedians. As a consequence, one might expect nonsensical jokes to be humorous if delivered by comedians but not by non-comedians. This effect might be diluted for incongruity jokes due to their ubiquity.

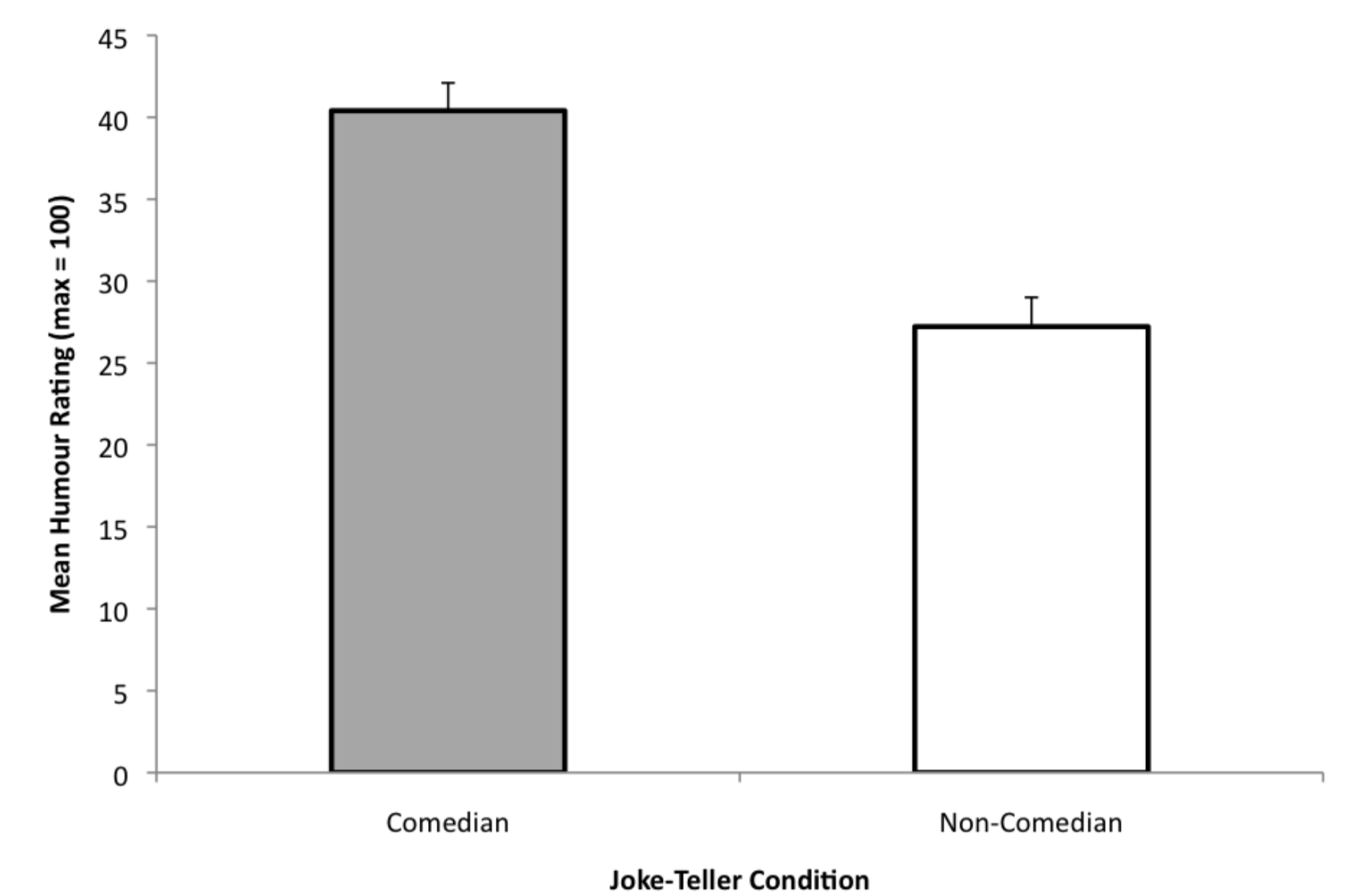


Figure 1: Mean humour ratings for comedian and non-comedian conditions. Error bars denote +/- SEM.

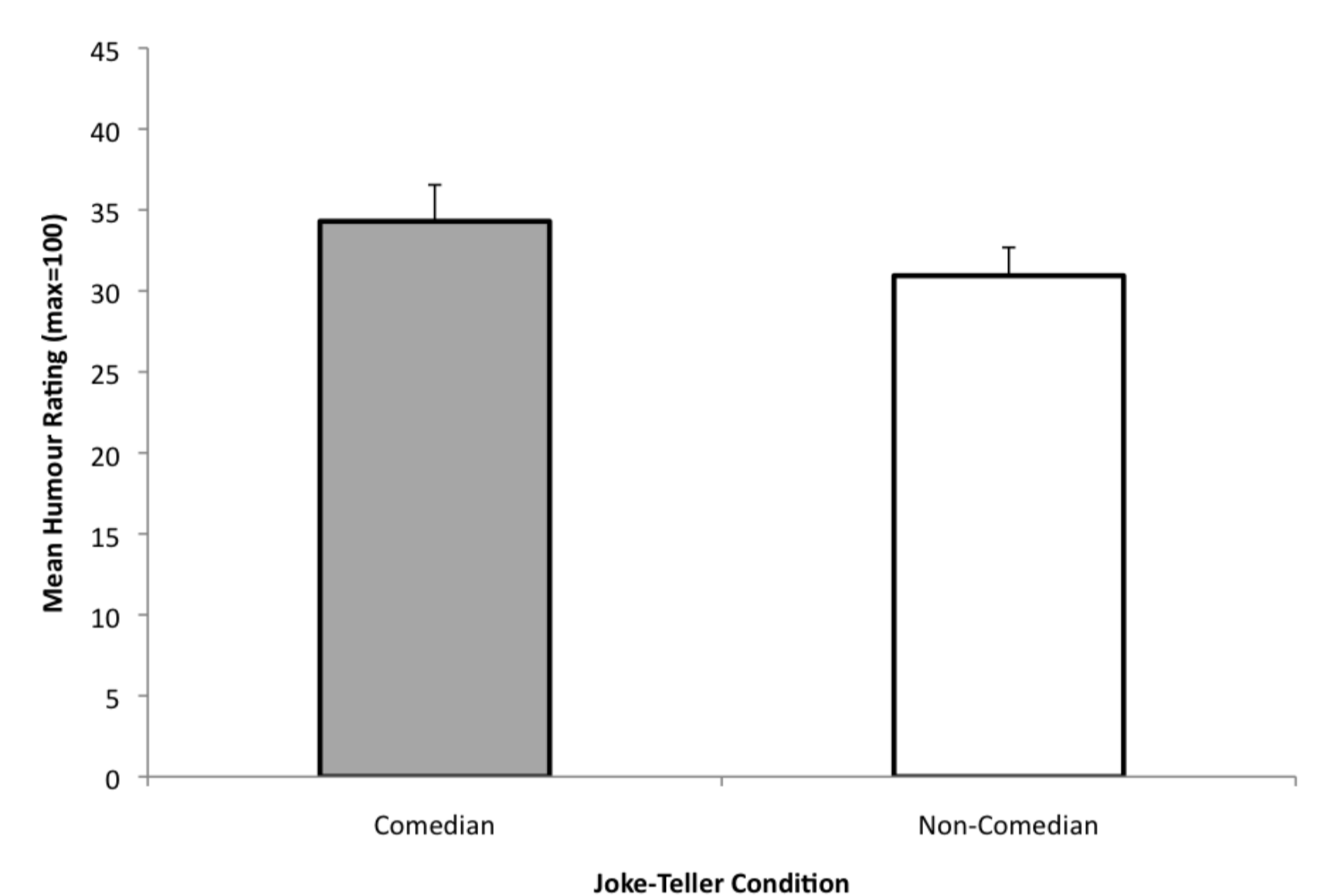


Figure 2: Mean humour rating for the comedian and non-comedian conditions. Error bars denote +/- SEM.

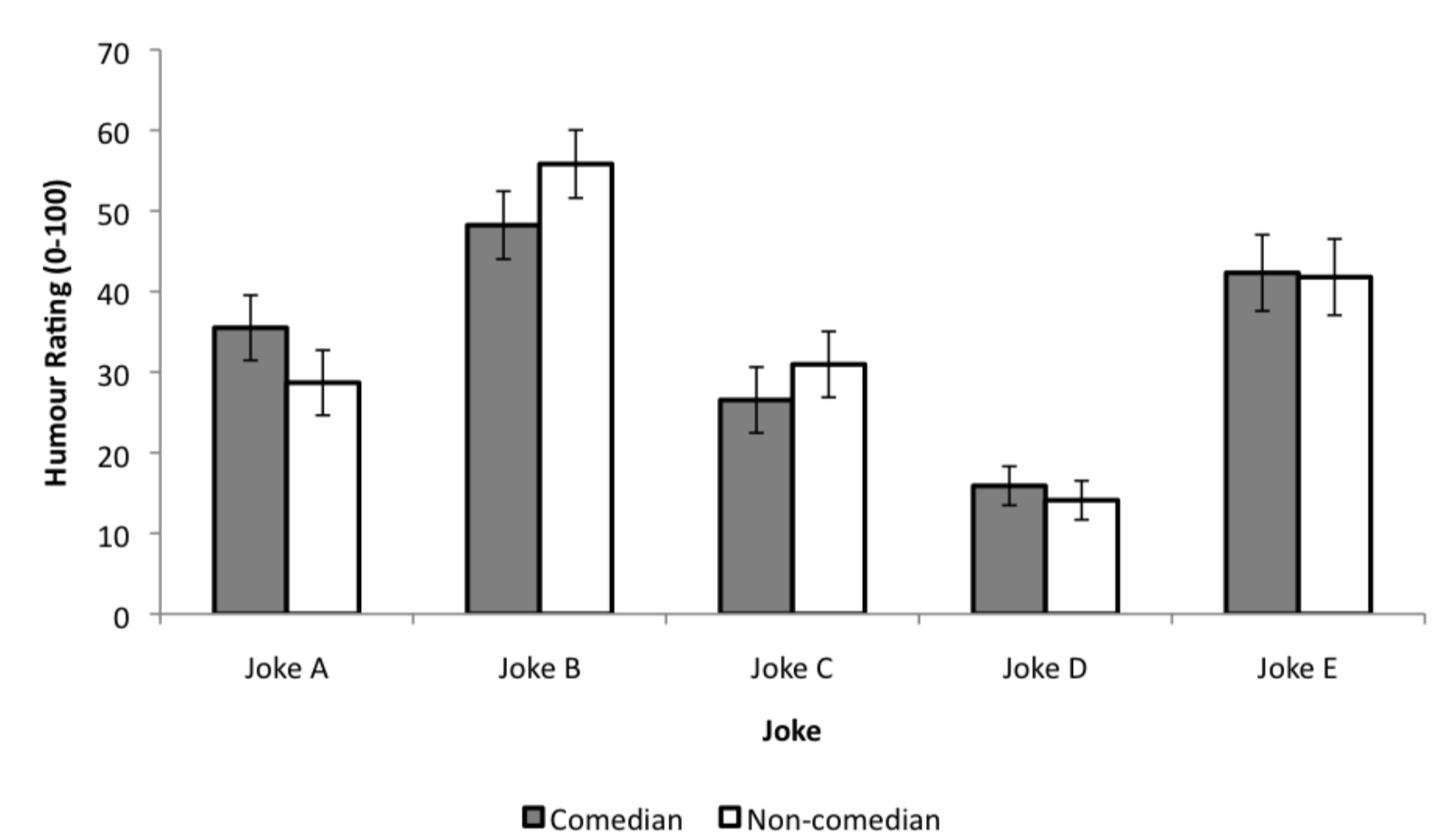


Figure 3: Mean humour rating for the comedian and non-comedian conditions across the five jokes. Error bars denote +/- SEM.

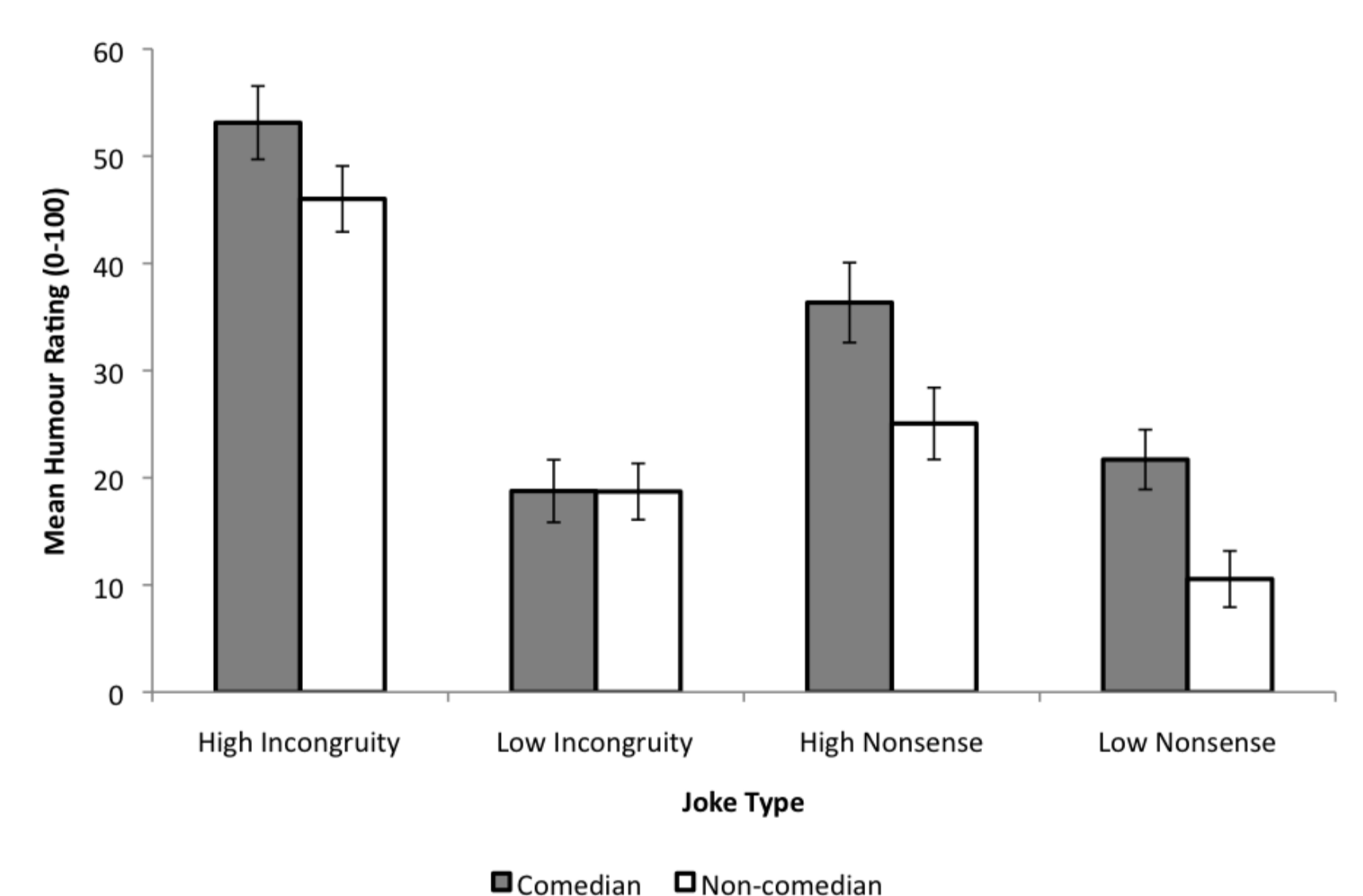


Figure 4: Mean humour ratings for the comedian and non-comedian conditions across the four joke type. Error bars denote +/- SEM

Key References

Forabosco, G. (1994). "Seriality" and appreciation of jokes. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 7, 351-375.

Wimer, D. J., and Beins, B. C. (2008). Expectations and Perceived Humour. *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 21, 347-363.