frontiers | Frontiers in Communication

TYPE Brief Research Report
PUBLISHED 05 January 2026
DOI 10.3389/fcomm.2025.1576408

OPEN ACCESS

EDITED BY
Nevena Kulic,
University of Pavia, Italy

REVIEWED BY
Flavio Antonio Ceravolo,
University of Pavia, Italy
Diana Roxana Galos,
University of Copenhagen, Denmark

*CORRESPONDENCE
Charisse L'Pree Corsbie-Massay
✉ clcorsbi@syr.edu

RECEIVED 13 February 2025
REVISED 21 November 2025
ACCEPTED 28 November 2025
PUBLISHED 05 January 2026

CITATION
Corsbie-Massay CL, Santia M and Anderson L (2026) Peeling *The Onion*: a study of audience reactions to anti-classism satire. *Front. Commun.* 10:1576408. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2025.1576408

Peeling *The Onion*: a study of audience reactions to anti-classism satire

Charisse L'Pree Corsbie-Massay[1]*, Martina Santia[2] and Luvell Anderson[3]

[1]S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communications, Syracuse University, Syracuse, NY, United States, [2]Department of Political Science and Law, Montclair State University, Montclair, NJ, United States, [3]Department of Philosophy, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Champaign, IL, United States

The topics of socioeconomic status, class, and income inequality are integral to human rights. However, media misrepresentation of socioeconomic class and the pervasive national narrative of social mobility inhibit audiences' ability to understand and mobilize around these issues. Satire can disrupt this cycle by effectively exposing the inconsistencies of class inequality and the flaws of the "American Dream." Thus, we examine the potential of satire to challenge prevailing attitudes toward class inequality and bolster anti-classism confidence through an online study featuring written satirical articles from *The Onion* categorized based on style (aggressive vs. benign) and target (individual vs. institutional). Overall, participants enjoyed the anti-classism satirical articles and exhibited more appreciation after repeated exposure. Satirical ratings were negatively correlated with legitimizing income inequality and positively correlated with confidence in disrupting hegemonic patterns regarding class inequalities. However, participants classification of the satirical targets did not align with the *a priori* categories established by the researchers. This work is some of the first to deploy content from *The Onion*, an American satirical staple, and explore the role of marginalization satire that tackles socioeconomic injustice.

KEYWORDS

satire, socioeconomic status, classism, survey, audience reception, media effects

1 Introduction

In the United States, disparities between the top 10% and the bottom 50% of the socioeconomic spectrum have increased steadily over the past few decades after a historic low in the mid-20th century (Kent and Ricketts, 2024; Kochhar and Sechopoulos, 2022), resulting in substandard access to food (Wood et al., 2023), healthcare (McMaughan et al., 2020), and education (American Psychological Association, 2017; Garcia and Weiss, 2017) for a growing segment of the American population. This ongoing atrocity is particularly absurd when considering that the United States is one of the wealthiest countries in the world with an ethos of social advancement (Ewing, 2020). Whereas prior research investigating the effects of satire has overwhelmingly focused on political outcomes (e.g., Boukes, 2019; LaMarre et al., 2014; Landreville and LaMarre, 2013), we seek to understand how satirical communications can enable audiences to address and engage with issues of socioeconomic injustice.

The topics of socioeconomic status, class, and income inequality are integral to human rights, but Americans' ability to talk about socioeconomic inequality may be limited due, in part, to media misrepresentation of socioeconomic class. A content analysis by Behm-Morawitz et al. (2018) revealed a disproportionate percentage of television characters portrayed as middle class (65% of characters vs. 50% of the American population) while lower/

working classes were underrepresented (11% of characters vs. 30% of the population). Wealthy characters tend to receive more flattering portrayals, whereas working-class television characters are often portrayed as unintelligent, lazy, irresponsible, undeserving, and unethical (Corsbie-Massay, 2024; Matheson, 2007). When it comes to portrayals in the news, media tend to focus on stories of poverty and downward economic mobility for the American working and middle classes (Eshbaugh-Soha and McGauvran, 2018; Gilens, 1996; Kim, 2023). These mediated stereotypes remain unquestioned given the national ideology that "people can work their way out of their life circumstances because the United States provides them unique opportunities for ascending the class hierarchy" (Corsbie-Massay, 2023, p. 34); this belief in the American Dream—the United States is a "classless society" where anyone can advance (Kingston, 2000)—persists even as the opportunity for class advancement has decreased over the past 75 years (Chetty et al., 2017; Davidai and Gilovich, 2018; Kim, 2023).

Satire can disrupt this cycle of socioeconomic inequality by effectively exposing inconsistencies between media rhetoric and reality. Satire is a complicated genre, defined by what it does rather than what it looks like. According to Frye (1957), satirical content is "militant irony" with "moral standards;" it demands the audience – and the target – recognize the "grotesque and absurd" parts of society (p. 223). Satire presents complex issues by means of narrative and emotional appeal (Baym, 2010; Graber, 2004), which may help audiences unpack complex phenomena.

There are prominent examples of satirists and satire that have impacted the broader social imagination. Dick Gregory, for instance, performed in front of White audiences during the 1960s with material that satirized Black-White race relations in the United States (Rossing, 2013). His brand of comedy and ability to win over White audiences opened the door for other Black comedians (Rossing, 2013). More recently, satirical news shows, such as *The Daily Show*, *Last Week Tonight with John Oliver*, and the *Weekend Update* segment on *Saturday Night Live (SNL)*, continue to attract and activate audiences through the use of humor to criticize institutions, including challenging socioeconomic inequality and class-based discrimination. From the founders' use of satire as a political weapon to determine the future of the new Republic (McClennen and Maisel, 2014) to John Oliver's (LastWeekTonight, 2014) segment "Net Neutrality" resulted in hundreds of thousands of comments regarding the FCC's proposed policy change and ultimately crashed the FCC website (Hu, 2014; Terhune and Corsbie-Massay, 2020), there is evidence of this social impact. We build on this work by investigating the effects of satirical content on individuals' attitudes about socioeconomic inequality.

1.1 Current study

We employ an online study to understand the effects of anti-classism satire, which critiques social hierarchies and the processes that maintain and perpetuate class stratification (Corsbie-Massay, 2023). Given that anti-classism satire can be uniquely difficult for audiences to parse (Baumgartner and Morris, 2008), we seek to examine the potential of satire to inspire audiences to question power structures and assess whether ratings of satirical content predict attitudes toward class inequality. To this end, we exposed a sample of U.S. individuals to two brief articles from *The Onion* to address key questions regarding whether and how satire is effective in shaping attitudes about (and perceived confidence in disrupting) socioeconomic injustice.

We assess the effects of satire based on intentional stylistic choices according to Anderson and Corsbie-Massay's (in press) taxonomy of effective satire along two dimensions: style and target. Stylistically, satire can be either benign or aggressive. Benign satire is "ironic, sarcastic, or ridiculous enough to arouse attention but not so much that it overstates its case" (Anderson and Corsbie-Massay, in press); it is humorous in a way that is perceived to be safe and non-serious, eliciting classic comedic responses such as smiling, chuckling, and laughter. Alternatively, aggressive satire is provocative and criticizes phenomena in a manner that causes audiences to cringe, or experience visceral responses in the wake of distressing or humiliating events (Corsbie-Massay, 2023); it may elicit fear or pain (Janes and Olson, 2000), evident in audience sighs or groans in response. Orthogonally, satire can target either individuals or institutions. Satire that targets the actions and attitudes of specific people may be more accessible to the general audience because individuals (e.g., Archie Bunker and Homer Simpson) are tangible and easier to understand (Corsbie-Massay, 2023). Alternatively, satire that targets institutions by ridiculing the underlying processes and structural forces that perpetuate systems of oppression and legitimize socioeconomic disparity may be more cutting, but may not be easily understood by audiences (Gray et al., 2009).

The results of this work provide essential insights into the effects of satire on social justice attitudes and perceived confidence in disrupting class inequality by exploring a popular but understudied satirical outlet. Specifically, the contributions of this study are threefold. (1) Whereas past work has overwhelmingly focused on political satire and its effects on several political outcomes (e.g., voting preferences, understanding of policies, and holding politicians accountable; see, e.g., Boukes, 2019; LaMarre et al., 2014; Landreville and LaMarre, 2013; Richmond and Porpora, 2019), we focus on how satirical content can help people make sense of class-based discrimination that is perpetuated in institutional structures in the United States. (2) Whereas previous studies have looked at the potential of satire to correct misperceptions by highlighting inconsistencies and false arguments, we explore audiences' desire to and perceived confidence in taking action against socioeconomic inequality and class stratification. (3) Whereas past studies have mainly relied on televised satirical content (e.g., Boukes, 2019; Young, 2008, 2013; Young et al., 2018) and other forms of video-based satire, we deploy brief, written articles from *The Onion* allowing for the exploration of different topics and styles without confounding elements endemic to audiovisual content, including attitudes about the satirist or host and extraneous non-verbal cues (e.g., facial expressions, audience laughter).

1.2 Research questions

We are interested in understanding whether and how satire is effective in shaping attitudes about (and perceived confidence in discussing) socioeconomic injustice. Content that effectively satirizes class inequality can be considered a civic strategy for grassroots-level change by engaging the audience directly. Satire—especially sneering satire aimed at readjusting hierarchies (Anderson, 2022)—can raise

awareness of socioeconomic injustice by inviting the broader public to engage with this complicated social phenomenon in varied ways (Saucier et al., 2016). However, this impact is notoriously difficult to assess. Prior research has explored the ability of satire to shift attitudes (for a systematic review, see Kafle et al., 2023), but satire's "wider potential for social change derives from [satirists'] desire to use their voices and stories and perspectives to intervene in the culture and provide audiences with new frames of reference, new understandings, and new conversations" (Chattoo and Feldman, 2020). This inherent complexity of interpreting anti-classism satire (Baumgartner and Morris, 2008), along with the limitations of previous literature, motivates the following overarching question:

> *RQ1: How do audiences respond to content that satirizes class inequality?*

This study also assesses how different stylistic choices incorporated in the satire can effectively expose the absurdities of socioeconomic inequality. Satire may critique the actions and attitudes of specific individuals (e.g., the emperor has no clothes) or target institutionalized phenomena that are often taken for granted by the larger population (Gray et al., 2009). Moreover, satire can vary in tone as benign or aggressive in its critique of social phenomena. Different stylistic choices may elicit different audience responses, which we aim to capture through the following question:

> *RQ2: Will different types of satire elicit different emotional responses?*

The effectiveness of satire may lie in its ability to instill counter-hegemonic confidence, that is, the belief in one's own ability to disrupt socioeconomic inequality. Few scholars to date have explored the role of satire in increasing internal motivation to disrupt socioeconomic hegemony, but understanding the effectiveness of satire is critical to disrupt the absurdities of the social reality. We examine the relationship between satirical ratings and attitudes toward class inequality, recognizing that understanding satire's effectiveness is essential for challenging the absurdities of society, resulting in the following research question:

> *RQ3: Will participant ratings of content satirizing class inequality predict anti-classism confidence after controlling for socioeconomic status and legitimizing income inequality?*

2 Methods

2.1 Participants and procedure

We recruited a convenience sample of paid U.S. adults ($N = 399$) from Prolific Academic, an online survey platform that allows individuals to participate in research studies in exchange for monetary compensation. The study took approximately 15 min to complete. Participants were compensated $3 for completing the study in all its parts.

The average age of the sample was 40.3 years (SD = 13.5). Overall, the sample was mostly white, mostly lower socioeconomic class (65%) according to the MacArthur community ladder (Adler et al., 2000), and evenly distributed by gender. Furthermore, 61% of participants self-identified as liberal and 69% indicated they engaged with satirical content at least multiple times per week. For a detailed breakdown of sample demographics, see Table 1.

Inspired by the taxonomy of effective satire proposed by Anderson and Corsbie-Massay (forthcoming), we employed a 2 (satirical style: aggressive vs. benign) x 2 (satirical target: individual vs. institutional) between-subjects experimental design. Within each condition, study participants were randomly assigned to two authentic brief articles from *The Onion* in a mono-thematic setting following previous research (see, e.g., Geise and Maubach, 2024). The authors carefully searched for articles that would align with the established taxonomy and ultimately selected eight pieces published by *The Onion* between 1999 and 2022. For example, the article titled "Immigrant child still hoping to achieve American Dream of better cage" (*The Onion*, 2018)

TABLE 1 Sample demographics.

Category	Statistic	%
Gender	Women	48.6
	Men	48.4
	Transgender/Nonbinary/Agender	2.0
Race/ethnicity	White (European descent)	77.7
	Black (African descent)	8.9
	Mixed/Multiracial	6.2
	Asian	3.7
	Indigenous, Middle Eastern/North African, none of the above, or undisclosed	< 1.0
Income	Household income < $60,000	52.0
Education	High school diploma	13.8
	Some college or 2-year degree	35.8
	Four-year college degree	37.0
	Advanced degree	14.8
Socioeconomic status (MacArthur Ladder)	Lower rungs (1–3)	20.4
	Middle rung (4–6)	65.8
	Upper rungs (7–10)	13.8
Media engagement	Satirical content (daily)	20.0
	Satirical content (multiple times per week)	49.0
Political views	Liberal	61.0
	Moderate	19.6
	Conservative	19.4

We assessed participants' socioeconomic status through the MacArthur community ladder (Adler et al., 2000), a visual scale allowing participants to select one of 10 rungs of a social ladder to indicate their perceived socioeconomic status related to others in their society. Lower scores indicated lower perceived socioeconomic status whereas higher scores indicated higher perceived socioeconomic status in relation to income, education, and employment. We measured political views using a single-item: "In general, how would you describe your political views?" to which participants could respond on a 7-point scale from "very liberal" to "very conservative." This metric has been used in multiple studies (see, e.g., Martinez and Atouba, 2021).

is considered aggressive because the subject of the headline is a child in a cage and it reminds the audience of the horrendous treatment of immigrant families at the U. S.-Mexico border. Alternatively, the article titled "Scientists: Rich People, Poor People May Have Shared Common Ancestor" (*The Onion*, 2014) is considered benign because this supposed-scientific observation is ridiculous but it does not address painful social memories. The researchers discussed the selected pieces at length and ultimately agreed on which articles to assign to the following four conditions: (1) benign satirical articles targeting an individual, (2) aggressive satirical articles targeting an individual, (3) benign satirical articles targeting an institution, and (4) aggressive satirical articles targeting an institution—see Table 2 for more information on the stimuli.

Upon accessing the Qualtrics survey, participants encountered an information sheet outlining the informed consent and related instructions. Participants had to consent to participate in the study and indicate that they were over 18 years of age. The second page of the survey featured baseline questions about participants' consumption of satirical media content. Participants were then randomly assigned to one of the four conditions outlined above and were asked to read two authentic brief articles from *The Onion*. Importantly, all articles retained *The Onion*'s logo and layout and were presented to ensure exposure to the same exact features across the four conditions. Because the structure of the stimuli (e.g., article length and delivery method) was held constant across conditions, we are confident to assume that potential differences in audience perceptions

TABLE 2 Taxonomy of effective satire with article means.

"Article title" (Year)	Target/Style	*n*	Mean rating (SD)	Mean chuckle (SD)	Mean cringe (SD)	% Reporting institutional target
"Eight Million Americans Rescued from Poverty with a Redefinition of Term" (1999)	Institutional; Aggressive	100	3.77 (1.033)	2.373 (0.889)	1.650 (0.722)	96.0
"Rising Income Inequality Causing Wealthy Americans To Take On Second Sailboat" (2014)	Individual; Benign	99	3.48 (1.082)	2.306 (0.961)	1.599 (0.746)	92.9
"Solemn Jeff Bezos Realizes He Could End Up Like Homeless Man If Just Few Hundred Thousand Things Go Wrong" (2019)	Individual; Aggressive	99	3.45 (1.172)	2.328 (0.938)	1.546 (0.707)	18.2
"Scientists: Rich People, Poor People May Have Shared Common Ancestor" (2014)	Institutional; Benign	101	3.42 (1.08)	2.389 (0.941)	1.416 (0.586)	94.0
"Immigrant Child Still Hoping To Achieve American Dream Of Better Cage" (2018)	Institutional; Aggressive	100	3.19 (1.178)	1.730 (0.806)	2.020 (0.847)	88.0
"Nation's Rich And Powerful Wondering When Rest Of Americans Will Just Give Up" (2018)	Institutional; Benign	101	3.17 (1.265)	2.040 (0.976)	1.855 (0.852)	93.1
"Goldendoodle Not Good With People Who Earn Less Than 6 Figures" (2022)	Individual; Aggressive	99	3.05 (1.265)	2.256 (0.995)	1.534 (0.662)	73.7
"Woman Relieved Soulmate Turned Out To Be In Same Socioeconomic Bracket" (2015)	Individual; Benign	98	2.91 (1.026)	1.980 (0.858)	1.761 (0.814)	49.5

of satirical content can be attributed to how they made sense of it rather than possible extrinsic factors.

Participants reviewed the article without time constraints; they could advance through the survey when they were ready and were notified that they would not be able to return to the article. Participants then answered questions about each article, including article ratings using a 5-star system, who they believed to be the target of the article, their emotional responses to the article, and an open-ended question in which they elaborated a memorable component of the article; these open-ended responses were not analyzed as part of the current manuscript. After engaging with both articles, participants completed a posttest questionnaire assessing various outcomes of interest, including the legitimizing income inequality scale (Coleman et al., 2022) and the anti-classism confidence scale. Participants then responded to a series of demographic questions, were thanked and received a completion code for compensation purposes. The study was approved by the researchers' Institutional Review Board in August 2023.

2.2 Measures

2.2.1 Article rating

Participants rated each article using a 5-star system "where 1 star indicates that you did not like the article and 5 stars indicates that you really liked the article." Participants rated artifacts, on average, 3.307 (SD = 0.972). Participants also indicated whether they felt the article was making fun of "an individual person" (22%) or "an institution or established social system" (78%).

2.2.2 Chuckle-cringe scale

Participants rated their reactions to each article using a 6-item PANAS-type scale. Participants indicated how much each article made them "smile," "chuckle," "laugh," "cringe," "sigh," and "groan." Responses ranged from 1 (not at all) to 4 (a lot) for each of the items listed. Exploratory factor analyses revealed two factors: chuckle (i.e., smile, chuckle, laugh; $\text{Alpha}_{\text{ARTICLE1}} = 0.902$, $\text{Alpha}_{\text{ARTICLE2}} = 0.919$) and cringe (i.e., cringe, sign, and groan $\text{Alpha}_{\text{ARTICLE1}} = 0.752$, $\text{Alpha}_{\text{ARTICLE2}} = 0.798$).

2.2.3 Legitimizing income inequality

We deployed seven items about economic meritocracy beliefs from Coleman et al.' (2022) legitimizing income inequality scale ($M = 2.9$, SD = 1.2, Alpha = 0.91). We gauged participants' attitudes toward socioeconomic inequality through items like "Generally, people receive recognition that is equal to the amount of effort they put into improving their lives" and "Although there is some inequality in our society, most people can overcome these differences if they work hard enough." Participants were instructed to indicate their level of agreement with each statement on a 6-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 6 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated stronger attitudes legitimizing income inequality (i.e., less recognition of income inequality as an injustice).

2.2.4 Anti-classism confidence

We developed a 5-item scale ($M = 3.4$, SD = 0.9, Alpha = 0.70) to measure participants' confidence in disrupting classist structures. The five statements were: "When people disagree with my perspective on socioeconomic issues, I withdraw from the conversation," "If I wanted to, I could figure out the facts behind most socioeconomic issues," "I feel confident in having a conversation about classism and socioeconomic injustice with my friends and family," "I am willing to post information about socioeconomic issues on my social media platforms," and "I feel confident in having a conversation about classism and socioeconomic injustice with strangers or casual acquaintances." Participants indicated their level of agreement with each statement on a 5-point Likert-type scale, ranging from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Higher scores indicated greater confidence in disrupting hegemonic patterns regarding class-inequality.

3 Results

To answer how audiences respond to satirical content (RQ1), we averaged participants' responses to the 5-star article rating scale and found that participants responded positively overall, reporting an average rating of 3.31 stars across both articles. There was no significant difference in the order of presentation on ratings, meaning that respondents did not rate the first article higher than the second article or vice versa. To capture more nuanced reactions, we complemented these analyses by looking at participants' scores on the chuckle-cringe scale for each article. Participants' reported chuckling was normally distributed ($M = 2.18$, SD = 0.779) whereas cringe exhibited substantial positive skew ($M = 1.68$, SD = 0.64) and was therefore subjected to an inverse transformation to meet the assumptions of parametric testing. Interestingly, a series of paired sample t-tests revealed that respondents reported significantly *lower* chuckle scores ($t(398) = 5.117$, $p < 0.001$) for the second article ($M = 2.042$, SD = 0.948) compared to the first article ($M = 2.309$, SD = 0.924) and significantly *higher* cringe scores ($t(398) = 2.847$, $p = 0.005$) for the second article ($M = 1.733$, SD = 0.804) compared to the first article ($M = 1.614$, SD = 0.722); see Figure 1, panel 1.

RQ2 asked whether differences in satirical style or target would elicit different responses. Manipulation checks revealed that our original categorizations of satirical target (i.e., individual vs. institutional) were not as clearly recognized by our participants who overwhelmingly reported that the articles were directed at institutions (see Table 2), aside from instances where people were explicitly mentioned (e.g., Jeff Bezos). To assess potential differences based on style (i.e., benign vs. aggressive), we averaged responses to the chuckle-cringe scale. We expected that benign satire would evoke a smirk or slight bemusement and be easily discounted as being "just a joke" (Peifer, 2018). Benign satire, indeed, elicits hedonic enjoyment (Oliver and Raney, 2011), that is, a pleasing experience avoiding pain (Higgins, 2006), along with classic comedic responses such as smiling, chuckling, and laughter. Aggressive satire, on the other hand, should elicit cringe because it is provocative and induces fear. Despite our initial expectations, we found no significant differences in response to the chuckle-cringe scale across the articles, indicating that the researcher-established categories did not emerge as anticipated. When investigated separately, an effect of style emerged in participants' rating of the second article; participants in the aggressive condition rated the second article higher ($M = 3.402$, SD = 1.218) compared to those in the benign condition ($M = 3.160$, SD = 1.175); $t(397) = 2.019$, $p = 0.044$; see Figure 1, panel 2. Interestingly, there was a significant effect of *a priori* target condition on overall reported cringe; participants

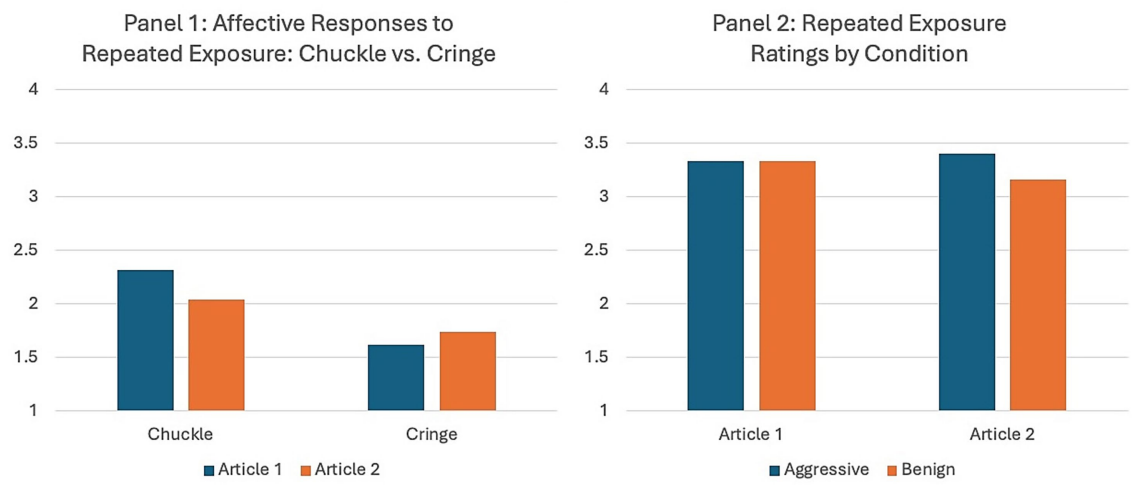

FIGURE 1
Chuckle/cringe response (panel 1) and ratings by condition (panel 2) across article 1 and article 2. Both scales ranged from 1 to 5.

in the individual target condition reported less cringe ($M = 0.343$, SD = 0.223) compared to those in the institutional target condition ($M = 0.297$; SD = 0.229); $t(397) = 2.060$, $p = 0.040$.

RQ3 asked whether ratings of content satirizing classism will be correlated with attitudes toward class inequality, specifically legitimizing income inequality and anti-classism confidence. Bivariate correlations revealed that satirical ratings were negatively correlated with legitimizing income inequality ($r = -0.247$, $p < 0.001$) and positively correlated with perceived anti-classism confidence ($r = 0.238$, $p < 0.001$). Furthermore, lower legitimizing income inequality was correlated with greater anti-classism confidence ($r = -0.259$, $p < 0.001$). When entered together, overall satirical rating and legitimizing income inequality significantly predicted approximately 10% of variance in perceived anti-classism confidence ($F(2,396) = 21.881$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.100$); see Table 3 for regression coefficients. To assess whether these relationships were independent, we conducted a series of stepwise regressions after controlling for socioeconomic status[1] (Adler et al., 2000), but the analyses did not reveal any mediation effects—indicating that each construct had a unique effect.

4 Discussion

Satire is often criticized for preaching to the choir and making jokes that only resonate with those already familiar with the topic (Flanagan, 2017). In this study, we tested the power of satire to affect awareness of socioeconomic inequality by exposing individuals to satirical articles from *The Onion* that criticize class inequality. Through this innovative approach, we explore whether and how satire affects attitudes about (and perceived confidence in disrupting) socioeconomic injustice.

Our results suggest that participants enjoyed the satirical content, but our initial categorization of the articles in terms of target (i.e., institutional vs. individual) and style (i.e., benign vs. aggressive) was not in line with participants' perceptions. Most notably, participants overwhelmingly indicated that the articles targeted institutions or established social systems rather than individuals; the majority of participants (83%) categorized only the article about Jeff Bezos as targeting an individual. The disparity between our *a priori* categorizations and participant responses is in line with past studies, which have found that interpreting satirical content and its intended messages is often a challenging endeavor, especially when participants lack the necessary background to unpack specific satirical artifacts (Saucier et al., 2016). However, participant responses may demonstrate that audience interpret anti-classist satire as attacks on systems of power, facilitating an understanding of the institutional underpinnings of socioeconomic inequality (Rose and Baumgartner, 2013).

Although participants did not report significant differences in chuckle or cringe according to a priori style (i.e., benign or aggressive), the second article elicited less chuckle and more cringe, indicating that audiences may interpret the second article as less safe (i.e., less benign) and more provocative (i.e., more aggressive). Similarly, participants in the aggressive condition (i.e., provocative) rated the second article more positively than the first, demonstrating an effect of repeated exposure (Searles et al., 2022). Ongoing engagement may cause audiences to perceive later anti-classism satire as more provocative and critical, and *repeated* aggressive satirical articles, or satirical articles that are more provocative and critical, as better (see Figure 1). Audiences may develop an enhanced ability to discern and appreciate the intended messages and connect these phenomena, resulting in emotional responses about the absurdity and grotesqueness of socioeconomic inequality (Frye, 1957). As Carlin (2005) famously quipped, "It's called the American Dream because you have to be asleep to believe it."

We also found that higher satirical ratings independently predicted legitimizing income inequality and perceived anti-classism confidence. Even though anti-classism satire actively *de*legitimizes income inequality, this did not mediate the relationship between

1 There was no significant correlation between socioeconomic status and ratings or anti-classism confidence; socioeconomic status was positively correlated with legitimizing income inequality ($r = 0.288$, $p < 0.001$).

TABLE 3 Multiple regression on perceived confidence in disrupting classist structures.

Predictor	*B*	95% CI (lower)	95% CI (upper)	Standard error	ß	t	*p*
(Intercept)	3.337	2.922	3.7353	0.211	–	15.785	<0.001
Overall satirical rating	0.173	0.083	0.263	0.046	0.185	3.769	<0.001
Legitimizing income inequality	−0.159	−0.232	−0.087	0.037	−0.213	−4.336	<0.001

$N = 399$, $F(2,396) = 21.881$, $p < 0.001$; $R^2 = 0.100$.

ratings and anti-classism confidence. This independent effect indicates that anti-classism satire is related to audiences' perceived ability to push back on socioeconomic inequality without considering whether the content problematizes the actual absurdity of income inequality.

4.1 Limitations and future directions

In terms of limitations, we measured the ratings of the articles using a single question, and although this is a commonly used measure to evaluate products, services, performances, and experiences in several domains (e.g., media, the hospitality industry, etc.), we recognize that deploying multiple-item measures could have provided a more robust assessment. In addition, our use of a convenience sample may hinder the external validity of our experiment, even though Prolific samples have generally been found to be representative of the U. S. population and more diverse compared to other online opt-in samples, including MTurk and Qualtrics (Douglas et al., 2022). Finally, our participants were fans and regular consumers of *The Onion,* as well as mostly liberal, complicating arguments about causation and generalizability. Future studies should consider participants with broader media preferences, ideologies, and nationalities to assess the unique impacts of satirical articles. Relatedly, despite the social relevance of *The Onion*, future research should incorporate satirical content from different sources and across formats (e.g., text, meme, video).

5 Conclusion

This is one of the first studies to explore the effects of anti-classism satirical content through an experimental approach employing real articles from *The Onion*. We demonstrate that engaging with anti-classism satire is associated with a greater sense of empowerment to disrupt class inequalities. Furthermore, repeated exposure to satire may enhance feelings of cringe when considering the absurd and grotesque nature of socioeconomic inequality, and encourage audiences to counter the hegemonic trends that are often unquestioned. Although we connect satirical engagement with perceived confidence in countering socioeconomic hegemony, it is unclear how these patterns replicate outside of the unique ecosystem of political communications in the United States. Ultimately, uncovering the effects of satirical content on individuals' understanding of socioeconomic inequality is crucial to dissect and criticize institutional barriers to economic equality that continue to persist in U. S. society. Assessing the potential of satire to make sense of worsening economic realities is a first step toward raising awareness of and changing attitudes about socioeconomic injustice. Therefore, this study recommends that future scholars explore how and when satire effectively serves as a form of resistance.

Data availability statement

The raw data supporting the conclusions of this article will be made available by the authors, without undue reservation.

Ethics statement

The studies involving humans were approved by Office of Research Integrity and Protections at Syracuse University. The studies were conducted in accordance with the local legislation and institutional requirements. The participants provided their written informed consent to participate in this study.

Author contributions

CLCM: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. MS: Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Software, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing. LA: Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Funding

The author(s) declared that financial support was received for this work and/or its publication. Participant fees were paid by Syracuse University.

Acknowledgments

We acknowledge support from the S.I. Newhouse School of Public Communication at Syracuse University.

Conflict of interest

The author(s) declared that this work was conducted in the absence of any commercial or financial relationships that could be construed as a potential conflict of interest.

Generative AI statement

The author(s) declared that Generative AI was not used in the creation of this manuscript.

Any alternative text (alt text) provided alongside figures in this article has been generated by Frontiers with the support of artificial intelligence and reasonable efforts have been made to ensure accuracy, including review by the authors wherever possible. If you identify any issues, please contact us.

Publisher's note

References

Adler, N. E., Epel, E. S., Castellazzo, G., and Ickovics, J. R. (2000). Relationship of subjective and objective social status with psychological and physiological functioning: preliminary data in healthy white women. *Health Psychol.* 19, 586–592. doi: 10.1037/0278-6133.19.6.586

American Psychological Association. (2017). Education and Socioeconomic Status. Available online at: https://www.apa.org/pi/ses/resources/publications/education (Accessed December 9, 2025).

Anderson, L. (2022). Sneering satire. *Aristot. Soc. Suppl. Vol.* 96, 269–288. doi: 10.1093/arisup/akac010

Anderson, L., and Corsbie-Massay, C. L. (in press). "Laughing the racial wealth gap in black American television" in The Oxford handbook of African American humor studies. eds. B. Edmonds and D. Fuentes Morgan (New York, NY: Oxford University Press).

Baym, G. (2010). From Cronkite to Colbert: the evolution of broadcast news. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers.

Behm-Morawitz, E., Miller, B. M., and Lewallen, J. (2018). A model for quantitatively analyzing representations of social class in screen. *Med. Commun. Res. Rep.* 35, 210–221. doi: 10.1080/08824096.2018.1428544

Baumgartner, J. C., and Morris, J. S. (2008). One "nation," under Stephen? The effects of the Colbert Report on American youth. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media,* 52, 622–643. doi: 10.1080/08838150802437487

Boukes, M. (2019). Agenda-setting with satire: how political satire increased TTIP'S saliency on the public, media, and political agenda. *Polit. Commun.* 36, 426–451. doi: 10.1080/10584609.2018.1498816

Carlin, G. (2005). Life is worth losing [television special]: HBO.

Chattoo, C. B., and Feldman, L. (2020). A comedian and an activist walk into a bar: the serious role of comedy in social justice. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Chetty, R., Grusky, D., Hell, M., Hendren, N., Manduca, R., and Narang, J. (2017). The fading American dream: trends in absolute income mobility since 1940. *Science* 356, 398–406. doi: 10.1126/science.aal4617

Coleman, J. J., Garriott, P. O., and Kosmicki, M. T. (2022). Construction and validation of the legitimizing income inequality scale. *Counsel. Psychol.* 50, 67–95. doi: 10.1177/00110000211049544

Corsbie-Massay, C. L. (2023). Diversity and satire: laughing at processes of marginalization. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Corsbie-Massay, C. L. (2024). Mediated socioeconomic injustice: representations of poor and working-class people in mainstream media. In S. Ramasubramanian and O. Banjo (2024), The Oxford handbook of media and social justice. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Davidai, S., and Gilovich, T. (2018). How should we think about Americans' beliefs about economic mobility? *Judgm. Decis. Mak.* 13, 297–304. doi: 10.1017/S1930297500007737

Douglas, B. D., Ewell, P. J., and Brauer, M. (2022). Data quality in online human-subjects research: comparisons between MTurk, prolific, CloudResearch, Qualtrics, and SONA. *PLoS One* 18:e0279720. doi: 10.1371/journal.pone.0279720

Eshbaugh-Soha, M., and McGauvran, R. J. (2018). Presidential leadership, the news media, and income inequality. *Polit. Res. Q.* 71, 157–171. doi: 10.1177/1065912917726602

Ewing, J. (2020). United States is the richest country in the world, and it has the biggest wealth gap. The New York Times. Available online at: https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/23/business/united-states-is-the-richest-country-in-the-world-and-it-has-the-biggest-wealth-gap.html

Flanagan, K. M. (2017). "Playing with the past: the complete and utter history of Britain in the context of sixties television" in Python beyond Python: critical engagements with culture eds. P. N. Reinsch, B. L. Whitfield and R. G. Weiner. Cham, Switzerland, 153–170.

Frye, N. (1957). Anatomy of criticism: four essays. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Garcia, E., and Weiss, E. (2017). Education inequalities at the school starting gate: gaps, trends, and strategies to address them. Economic Policy Institute. Available online at: https://www.epi.org/publication/education-inequalities-at-the-school-starting-gate/

Geise, S., and Maubach, K. (2024). Catch me if you can: how episodic and thematic multimodal news frames shape policy support by stimulating visual attention and responsibility attributions. *Front. Commun.* 9:1305048. doi: 10.3389/fcomm.2024.1305048

Gilens, M. (1996). Race and poverty in America: public misperceptions and the American news media. *Public Opin. Q.* 60, 515–541. doi: 10.1086/297771

Graber, D. A. (2004). Mediated politics and citizenship in the twenty-first century. *Annu. Rev. Psychol.* 55, 545–571. doi: 10.1146/annurev.psych.55.090902.141550

Gray, J., Jones, J. P., and Thompson, E. (2009). Satire TV: politics and comedy in the post-network era. New York, NY: NYU Press.

Higgins, E. T. (2006). Value from hedonic experience and engagement. *Psychological review,* 113:439. doi: 10.1037/0033-295X.113.3.439

Hu, E. (2014). John Oliver helps rally 45,000 net neutrality comments to FCC. NPR. Available online at: https://www.npr.org/sections/alltechconsidered/2014/06/03/318458496/john-oliver-helps-rally-45-000-net-neutrality-comments-to-fcc

Janes, L. M., and Olson, J. M. (2000). Jeer pressure: the behavioral effects of observing ridicule of others. *Personal. Soc. Psychol. Bull.* 26, 474–485. doi: 10.1177/0146167200266006

Kafle, E., Papastavrou Brooks, C., Chawner, D., Foye, U., Declercq, D., and Brooks, H. (2023). "Beyond laughter": a systematic review to understand how interventions utilise comedy for individuals experiencing mental health problems. *Front. Psychol.* 14:1161703. doi: 10.3389/fpsyg.2023.1161703

Kent, A. H., and Ricketts, L. R. (2024). U.S. wealth inequality: gaps remain despite widespread wealth gains. Federal Reserve Bank. St. Louis Available online at: https://www.stlouisfed.org/open-vault/2024/feb/us-wealth-inequality-widespread-gains-gaps-remain

Kim, E. (2023). Entertaining beliefs in economic mobility. *Am. J. Polit. Sci.* 67, 39–54. doi: 10.1111/ajps.12702

Kingston, P. W. (2000). The classless society. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.

Kochhar, R., and Sechopoulos, S. (2022). How the American middle class has changed in the past five decades. Pew Research Center. Available online at: https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2022/04/20/how-the-american-middle-class-has-changed-in-the-past-five-decades/

LaMarre, H. L., Landreville, K. D., Young, D. G., and Gilkerson, N. (2014). Humor works in funny ways: examining satirical tone as a key determinant in political humor message processing. *Mass Commun. Soc.* 17, 400–423. doi: 10.1080/15205436.2014.891137

Landreville, K. D., and LaMarre, H. L. (2013). Examining the intertextuality of fictional political comedy and real-world political news. *Media Psychol.* 16, 347–369. doi: 10.1080/15213269.2013.796585

LastWeekTonight. (2014). Net neutrality (HBO) [Video]. YouTube. Available online at: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fpbOEoRrHyU (Accessed December 9, 2025).

Martinez, A., and Atouba, Y. (2021). Political satire TV shows in the trump's era: examining their impact on Latinx viewers' political knowledge, political engagement, and trust in institutions. *South Commun. J.* 86, 460–471. doi: 10.1080/1041794X.2021.1958913

Matheson, S. A. (2007). The cultural politics of wife swap: taste, lifestyle media, and the American family. *Film Hist.* 37, 33–47. doi: 10.1353/flm.2007.0057

McClennen, S., and Maisel, R. (2014). Is satire saving our nation?: Mockery and American politics. New York, NY: Springer.

McMaughan, D. J., Oloruntoba, O., and Smith, M. L. (2020). Socioeconomic status and access to healthcare: interrelated drivers for healthy aging. *Front. Public Health* 8:231. doi: 10.3389/fpubh.2020.00231

Oliver, M. B., and Raney, A. A. (2011). Entertainment as pleasurable and meaningful: Identifying hedonic and eudaimonic motivations for entertainment consumption. *Journal of Communication,* 61, 984–1004. doi: 10.1111/j.1460-2466.2011.01585.x

Peifer, J. T. (2018). Liking the (funny) messenger: The influence of news parody exposure, mirth, and predispositions on media trust. *Media Psychology,* 21, 529–577. doi: 10.1080/15213269.2017.1421470

Richmond, J. C., and Porpora, D. V. (2019). Entertainment politics as a modernist project in a Baudrillard world. *Commun. Theory* 29, 421–440. doi: 10.1093/ct/qty036

Rose, M., and Baumgartner, F. R. (2013). Framing the poor: media coverage and US poverty policy, 1960–2008. *Policy Stud. J.* 41, 22–53. doi: 10.1111/psj.12001

Rossing, J. P. (2013). Dick Gregory and activist style: identifying attributes of humor necessary for activist advocacy. *Arg. Adv.* 50, 59–71. doi: 10.1080/00028533.2013.11821810

Saucier, D. A., O'Dea, C. J., and Strain, M. L. (2016). The bad, the good, the misunderstood: the social effects of racial humor. *Transl. Issues Psychol. Sci.* 2, 75–85. doi: 10.1037/tps0000059

Searles, K., Darr, J. P., Sui, M., Kalmoe, N., Pingree, R., and Watson, B. (2022). Partisan media effects beyond one-shot experimental designs. *Polit. Sci. Res. Methods* 10, 206–214. doi: 10.1017/psrm.2021.21

Terhune, P., and Corsbie-Massay, C. L. (2020). "Satirical education or educational satire: learning and laughing on last week tonight" in Laughter, outrage and resistance: post-trump TV satire in political discourse and dissent. eds. L. Henson and S. M. Jankowski (New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing).

Wood, E. K., Stamos, G., Mitchell, A. J., Gonoud, R., Horgan, A. M., Nomura, O., et al. (2023). The association between food desert severity, socioeconomic status, and metabolic state during pregnancy in a prospective longitudinal cohort. *Sci. Rep.* 13:7197. doi: 10.1038/s41598-023-32783-2

Young, D. G. (2008). The privileged role of the late-night joke: exploring humor's role in disrupting argument scrutiny. *Media Psychol.* 11, 119–142. doi: 10.1080/15213260701837073

Young, D. G. (2013). Laughter, learning, or enlightenment? Viewing and avoidance motivations behind the daily show and the Colbert report. *J. Broadcast. Electron. Media* 57, 153–169. doi: 10.1080/08838151.2013.787080

Young, D. G., Jamieson, K. H., Poulsen, S., and Goldring, A. (2018). Fact-checking effectiveness as a function of format and tone: evaluating FactCheck.Org and FlackCheck.Org. *Journal. Mass. Commun. Q.* 95, 49–75.