

It's Cool to Burn: An Ethnographic Study of r/RoastMe

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### Introduction

Imagine logging into a social media account and checking your notifications. Everyone performs these tasks by rote multiple times a day. Now, pretend these notifications are filled with savage insults that attack and humiliate based on your personal appearance, ethnicity, handicaps, religion, sexual orientation, clothes, occupation, and lifestyle. You have entered a world where strangers compete gladiator-style to eviscerate through the most clever, cutting, and cunning insults among an audience of 1.5 million members.

Now, imagine you asked for it.

This is the world of [r/RoastMe](#) (r/RM), a subreddit (sub) community wherein members post pictures of themselves and invite people to “roast”—or humorously mock and humiliate—them in a battle royale of burns. Roasters hurl savage snubs and harsh humiliation, describing the things people notice immediately but are too polite to mention (Gatollari, 2018). The sub is designed for humor, and the format is similar to a celebrity roast. But as a social media community, r/RM raises issues of personality, perception, privacy, and personal safety as members utilize self-deprecation (SD) as a communication channel. To that end, the purpose of this paper is to present and to analyze the results and insights of a two-week, non-participatory ethnographic study of the r/RoastMe community from July 14, 2019 to July 28, 2019. This paper is divided into three sections: explanation; observation; and examination.

### Part One: Explanation

#### Reddit: The “Front Page of the Internet”

A massive collective of online forums, Reddit creates a space where members can share news, content, and comments (Widman & Nicol, 2019). The popular platform, created in 2005, is divided into more than one million forums, referred to as “subs” with an /r/ prefix indicative of the reddit URL (Widman & Nicol, 2019, p. 2). Reddit’s branding positions the platform as the

“front page of the Internet” (Widman & Nicol, 2019, p. 1). Users filter posts by “Hot,” “New,” “Controversial,” “Top,” and “Rising.” Members join based on shared interests—often including “diverse content” such as not-safe-for-work and adult-oriented material (Shah, 2017, p. 2).

### **r/RoastMe: “The Thicker the Skin, the Better the Roast”**

It is this type of explicit content that exists in the r/RM community. This is a world where people post pictures of themselves, friends, spouses, significant others, co-workers, etc. and invite users to excoriate them. r/HM mods explain the sub—divided into a post, comment, and sub-comment format—is humor-based and intended for fun (RoastMe, n.d.). Site moderators invite users to “sharpen their roasting skills,” interact, and get roasted in the process” (RoastMe, n.d., p. 1). The sub’s title sets the tone: “the thicker the skin, the better the roast” (RoastMe, n.d.).

**Culture:** The realm of roasting is the opposite of social media (SM). r/RM creates a dislike culture where status and rank are determined by the volume and by the quality of insults. It may be a cliché to use the term “anti-social media,” but the phrase fits in this sub.

**Rules:** This sub has ten mods who monitor content. All roastees must be eighteen-years-old and older. Each roastee must post an unaltered image by holding up an item feature “r/RoastMe” with their arm showing. If there are multiple people in the picture, each person must be touching the sign. This rule prevents roasting of bystanders who do not give consent. For a full list of rules, see Appendix A.

**Boundaries:** If the comment cannot be expected to create reasonable humor, then it is not appropriate. Intimidation, threats, and harassment are not allowed. Also, “inappropriate flattery” is not allowed. Mods remind r/RM is neither a dating site nor a support group. Mods list resources for people who suffer from depression, bipolar, mental health, or suicidal thoughts.

**Privacy:** In the overall Reddit privacy policy—last updated on May 25, 2018—mods explain that Reddit collects account information; submitted content, actions taken, transactional information (purchase of products and services); third-party data (linked services, advertisers);

log-on, usage, and cookie data; advertising technology; and data from forms, activities, promotions (Reddit, n.d.). The policy outlines and justifies data use: to provide, maintain, and improve services; to research; safety and protection of users (spammers, abuse, enforcement); to streamline technical updates; to improve customer service, communication, and promotions; to monitor and analyze trends and usage; to personalize services; and to tailor advertisements based on content and features that match user profiles or interests.

## **Part Two: Observations and Trends**

This community is in growth mode. As of August 4, 2019, there are 1.5 million members (an increase from 1.4 million during this study), and the sub ranks as the 130th most popular site (Sub stats, n.d.). There are approximately 6,321 comments per day—with an all-time top submission of 94,000 comments. A cursory Google search returns many articles about this sub and about roasting culture. r/RM has zeitgeist potential. For metrics-driven data, including best posting times and top posts by day and by hour, see Appendix B.

**Interaction:** r/RM flows like a master class in inner dialogue, and the comments are brutal. Part bravado, part taunt, roastees seemingly dare people to annihilate them. Roasters do not hold back and often go for the social jugular. Some researchers have referred to roasting culture as “consensual cyberbullying” (Dahl, 2018). There is a common theme in the nomenclature. Common phrases like “roast me,” “do your best,” “ruin me,” “I’ve heard it all,” and “make me cry” create a dynamic amalgam of insecurity, self-esteem, hubris, humor, self-awareness, self-loathing, cruelty, condescension, and attention. Comments beget comments, and people reply to replies—creating mini-threads where roasters riff off of each other. One wonders if roastees broadcast are depressed, disenfranchised, light-hearted, and/or highly self-actualized. Many posts generate thousands of comments and sub-comments. Often, roasts incorporate pop culture references, politics, and current events.

Posters often insult themselves in their headlines, offering themselves up in specific ways (“high school drop-out,” “unemployed,” “deaf,” “virgin,” “bald,” “anorexic,” “unhealthy relationship,” “living in my parent’s basement,” “can’t keep a job,” “stupid,” “stoner”) like SM lambs to the slaughter. In another trend, roastees taunt people in creative ways (“decimate me and send me into orbit,” “do your worst,” “put me in my place,” “too much confidence, obliterate me,” “come at me,” “in the mood for some psychological torture,” “destroy my will to live,” “wisdom teeth pulled, make me hurt through the lidocaine,” “I’m invincible,” “make me cry,” “don’t hold back,” “still fat, still anorexic, failed a job interview,” “make me regret it”).

Roasters smart-bomb roastees individually and collectively through attrition as they pile on to others’ comments. There is no correlation between comment and upvote volume. They seem to exist independently on the sub. Of the original poster (OP) replies observed, all of them praise their favorites and urge people to continue; thus, the OP becomes part of the conversation. Thus, as mean-spirited as the roasts may seem, there is a sense of cooperation and of community. Finally, there is palpable competition among roasters to annihilate through witty, clever, and funny commentary. The competitive framework reads like an Olympic roasting even; in fact, roasters are eligible for awards (platinum, gold, and silver) based on roast popularity.

### r/RoastMe Post Examples

Click links for full post thread. These examples are posted as-written.

- [\*\*“Toast me bitches. Please avoid fat jokes unless they are original, I’ve heard them all.”\*\*](#)
  - **Comments/Upvotes:** 6.0k / 17.2K
  - **Sample:** “You look like you’ve been cast as Ursula in China’s knock off version of the Little Mermaid remake.”
  
- [\*\*“A rock climbing accident left me with a concussion, black eye, broken nose, and sprained wrist. How much damage can you do?”\*\*](#)
  - **Comments/Upvotes:** 3.75k / 27.1k
  - **Sample roast:** “I thought goats were supposed to be good at climbing rocks.”

• **"I grew my hair out for 2 years for this moment. Don't let me down."**

- **Comments/Upvotes:** 3.2k / 18.2k

- **Sample:** "Your hair reminds me of Rapunzel. Except with you, you're not just letting your hair down, you're letting your friends and loved ones down as well."

• **"18, fairly closeted FtM. Got mistaken for a middle schooler yesterday. Don't hold back."**

- **Comments/Upvotes:** 2.6k / 11.9k

- **Sample:** "Try to transition into someone useful."

• **"Make me cry before work"**

- **Comments/Upvotes:** 567 / 3.4k

- **Sample:** "You're the only male prostitute who offers discounts for eye contact."

10.0k I joined Reddit two years ago after neither of my parents wished me a happy birthday. Try to make me cry harder than I did that day.

1.4k Comments Share Save Hide Report 91% Upvote

**ikias\_es** 6.8k points · 11 days ago 2  
It's kinda hard for them to remember your birthday when you eat cake everyday.

**32653abC** 844 points · 11 days ago   
I approve this roast.  
[Continue this thread →](#)

**kromatyc** 56 points · 11 days ago   
Nailed it   
[Continue this thread →](#)

**aHFuckIt83** 7 points · 10 days ago  
Clearly that Apple watch was not for fitness

**SQUID\_FLOTILLA** 2 points · 10 days ago  
Maybe you'll get some skin pigmentation for this birthday. You look like an albino Wendy the Ghost.

**Aladen\_ofthe\_Apes** 2 points · 10 days ago  
[r/nukedfromorbit](#)

**fattymemes23** 2 points · 10 days ago  
F  
[Continue this thread →](#)

**23 more replies**

**ProjectPat0803** [http://redd.it/cbh2n8](#) 3.1k points · 11 days ago · edited 11 days ago  
I dont know what's more pathetic, your parents not wishing you a happy birthday, or you pretending that there is someone out there who actually asked you to marry them.

**Lotsygirl** [http://redd.it/ch231m](#) 2.0k points · 11 days ago  
Rings catch girls. Babies trap men.  
[Continue this thread →](#)

**jw1985** 41 points · 11 days ago  
"You wouldn't know him, he goes to another school."

i21 Account who hasn't had a date in years, and still dealing with the "after effects" from the last girl I dated. Just hit 200k roasting karma and feeling too cocky. Make me wish I never joined this sub.

314 Comments Share Save Hide Report 94% Upvote

**canberraham** 548 points · 1 day ago   
You look like the sort of guy that is on roastme to try and pick up underage girls.

**McScuse-Me** 87 points · 1 day ago   
You know he practices that "look" in the mirror

**canberraham** 17 points · 1 day ago   
That hurts!

**1 more reply**

**PeacefulComrade** 63 points · 1 day ago   
and still falls miserably

**fitthy\_hobbitse27** 21 points · 1 day ago   
Well, if the pedostache is any indication...

**khobbs** 18 points · 23 hours ago   
His stache says pedo but his eyes also say pedo

**d57giants** 15 points · 1 day ago   
And that fucked up haircut

**SeattleGreenEyedDad** 4 points · 22 hours ago   
He has Muppet hair

**diggum1996** 310 points · 1 day ago   
The after effects are restraining orders

**gravitin** 55 points · 1 day ago   
And multiple STDs.

**p245n144** 40 points · 1 day ago   
You can't get STDs if you don't have sex  
**2 more replies**

**dogfood87** 275 points · 1 day ago   
Congrats on your MBA.

Magnificent Bowlcut, Ashole.

**tom814** [http://redd.it/cld6h](#) 114 points · 1 day ago   
I'm also a CPA

**Monitoring:** Another trend involves a continuous monitoring and improvement process. This suggests a curious juxtaposition: the mods continuously want to raise the standards of a community that tears people down. During the observation period, three updates were posted:

- **Bullying:** Reddit site administrators notified the r/RM mods of user complaints about members bullying minor children. For example, a bad-faith participant posted a group picture from their school without group consent—a violation of the verification and the underage rules. The user was banned from the sub.
- **Pedophilia:** Mods clarify confusion on this topic. If the joke is at the expense of the pedophile, it is allowed. If the joke is at the expense of the child, it is banned.
- **“Don’t Be Evil”:** Mods ask roasters to refrain from comments that imply physical harm, urge an act of violence, or suggest self-harm. Jokes about “vore,” a fetish where one fantasizes about being eaten alive or of eating another (real or imaginary) are banned (Urban Dictionary, n.d.).

**Growth:** Apparently, insults are “in.” During this study, the sub grew from 1.4 million to 1.5 million. Comments-per-day spiked in June, and posts-per-day spiked in July (Sub stats, n.d.).

### Part Three: Examination

#### Motivation and Participation

**Roastees’ motivations:** An initial reaction to this world might be: why would roastees subject themselves to this punishment? The answer hinges on one’s ability to leverage SD. SD may be defined as “self-talk” reflecting cognitive state and personality dimension wherein a person denigrates, disparages, and self-sabotages oneself (Speer, 2019, p. 1). SD functions also as a defense mechanism—insult thyself before anyone else does—but can lower self-esteem, exacerbate depression, affect personal and professional relationships, and lead to an “often irresistible” urge to attack one’s imperfections (Woo, 2017; Kondis, 2016, p. 9). In a SM context, where users seek constant approval and compare themselves to others, the “like culture” can

make people depressed and envious (Fakkert, 2019). Still, Lord (2019) outlines many positive outcomes: negative attention is better than zero attention; one can become a celebrity (even if briefly); and people share an innate curiosity of others' perceptions.

Thus, in the r/RM community, we see a variety of these phenomena. Roastees may accentuate their perceived flaws to feed low self-esteem issues, to sabotage in a way that attracts attention, to reverse-engineer negativity, or to seek Internet "fame." Fry (2019) describes r/RM as an "anti-Instagram" that traffics in bigotry, vulgarity, and sexism. However, Donovan (2016) disagrees, stating that even though the Internet can create a bullying hub, roasts can serve as an initiation into an exclusive club, create affirm common bonds among participants, and make one seem more attractive through the ability to laugh at themselves. MediaSmarts Director of Education Matthew Johnson states that young people foster a strong need to belong and will do almost anything to gain peer attention (as cited in Dube, 2017). Whether escapism or cruelty, the roasting culture may serve as a mutated, logical balance to the "like"-obsessed culture.

**Roasters' motivation:** On the flip side, why would someone take time out of their day to socially crucify a stranger? Ford (2004) states that light-hearted, disparaging humor serves as a "social lubricant," helps people feel comfortable in society, and need not be perceived as threatening; however, when ones exceeds the threshold, he or she may not amuse (as cited in Donovan, 2016, p. 5). When roasting crosses the line, it maybe manifest as cyberbullying—a persistent and permanent embarrassment or humiliation created in digital form and shared online (Stop Bullying, n.d.). Regardless, the line between serious and comedy is not always clear; subsequently, the author can defend a negative response by "calling it a joke" (Marczyk, 2017; Baker, 2019, p. 22). Finally, roasters display a rollercoaster of the id (limited impulse control in roasts), the ego (disregard for acceptable, reality-based expression), and the super-ego (no sense of right, wrong, or moral standards) (Henriques, 2013).

### Demographics and Frequency

Sattelberg (2019) states that Reddit's primary demographic skews young and male. Considering this audience, one could argue these engagement spikes coincide with an abundance of summer-vacation free time. Hot weather may increase the burns also. University of Iowa professor Craig Anderson states that summer temperatures increase irritability and aggressive behavior (as cited in Dahl, 2012). *Wired Magazine* science reporter Brandon Keim draws a psychological correlation between summer heat and aggression marked by increased stress (which tracks with a fight-or-flight response) and discomfort (which induces thoughts of escape) (as cited in Talk of the Nation, 2011). Based on findings from a crime-and-weather study, Ranson (2014) draws a direct link between, among many outcomes, social disorder and hot weather (as cited in Asher, 2018).

### Staging a Dramaturgical Approach

**Front-stage and back-stage:** Sharing on social media can disrupt social spheres, creating miscommunication in the process (Mourão, 2019). This organized chaos is evident in this bus, and one can't help but wonder if posters and roasters are presenting their true selves or if they are "acting," as if on a digital stage. Goffman (1959) states that people often create curated "performances," when engaging with others, as a means to navigate basic human interactions (p. 15). This approach, referred to as a "dramaturgical" model, finds people presenting "front stage" (intentional and public) and "back stage" behaviors (what a person holds back or keeps private) (Cole, 2019; Crossman, 2019). It is possible that roastees are putting on a face that is braver or bolder than their true selves—inviting criticism as a form of attention. Comparing personality to social media images, front-stage would be the filter and back-stage would be the untouched photo. One could surmise that aspects of each exist in this community—like playing truth or dare, but who but the author really knows what is truly true.

Another explanation could find r/RM as the manifestation of back-stage behaviors that, through anonymity, exists as a stylized reality where r/RM is the stage, and participants are actors. SM sharing is charged with emotions, bound by self-image management, and tied to external relationships (Song, 2013). Posters willingly share (engaging under ease), but reading comments could morph the cognitive implications to strain (Boyd & Ellison, 2008). Finally, the complexity of the text (posts and comments combined) may imply importance, therefore attracting more views and more clicks (Song, 2013). A universal concept may tie front- and back-stage behaviors: relationships generate social capital—the benefits one receives from social relationships—and are crucial to psychosocial development (Steinfeld, Ellison, & Lampe, 2008).

### **Posters-Audience Perceptions**

**How posters perceive audience:** Litt and Hargittai (2016) ask all SM posters to compare their perceived audience to their actual audience as a “mental conceptualization” of the people they are reaching (p. 1). Posters and roasters may suffer from “context collapse,” wherein they broadcast to a diverse audience filled with many personalities (Litt & Hargittai, 2016, p. 2). They may picture certain highly ranked community members. They could not think about it. But the fact remains that intimate details may land on the screens of incongruent recipients with whom they would never share information with in person (an African American private life on the screen of a white supremacist, a gay man’s occupation and spouse details readily accessible to a homophobe, a non-U.S. citizen’s life laid out clearly for a xenophobe). Posters may care more about sharing content than with potential audience consequences (Litt & Hargittai, 2016).

**How audiences perceive posters:** Posters’ create a permanent snapshot of their personality. However, when one’s online reality replaces real life, then he or she opens themselves to real-time misperception outside of comment forums—which, in documented cases, has led to arrests and to murder (Shaw, 2019). The audience responds based on a silent, static

image. Roasters make snap judgements based on what the roastee chooses to show. Posters create the scene but lose control of the narrative.

### **Digital Privacy Issues**

In SM context, the Reddit privacy policy presents as comprehensive and invasive. The entire website is a content-rich jackpot for unique information that could provide keywords and fodder for black-hat SEO practices (nefarious redirects, link farms, phishing, hidden links, doorway pages, click bait). Additionally, with thousands of pictures from which to choose, this sub feed the fake-bot factory with images that can be cropped and with content that can be extrapolated; (Confessore, Dance, Harris, & Hansen, 2018). Experts suggest that SM users embrace a healthy dose of paranoia and compare and to contrast SM data objectively (through actual knowledge) and subjectively (through perceived knowledge) (Klowowski, n.d.; Fox & Royne; 2018; Boyd, 2015). Posters reveal the workplaces, interior backgrounds of their homes, their spouses or significant others' names, personality cues (computer screens in the background, t-shirts depicting schools, geography or interests), age, and medical details.

For a SM actor, r/RM is a quick, one-stop-shop for bot farms and automation. In an influence economy, celebrities and companies purchase bots frequently, and often these fake bot profiles are a mix or actual users' data (Confessore et al., 2018). Government officials scan activities, friend circles, political views, religious beliefs, Facebook "safe check-ins" during emergencies, sexual orientation, naturalistic behavioral data, and every day data sets to profile potential criminals and terrorists (Albrechtslund, 2008; Boyd & Ellison, 2008). One wonders if participants realize that content lives forever on the Internet and can resurface as searchable content for recruiters, law enforcement, advertisers, friends and family, and any third-party. Bonetti, Campbell, and Gilmore (2010) found that socially anxious adolescents embrace the anonymity of the Internet to disclose generic or intimate information online—a practice that eliminates the nuances of face-to-face communication. Because of the younger demographic for

r/RM, this observation fits this community. Long-term SM outcomes give credence to the mantra that one should not post anything on social media they would not want their grandmother to read.

### **Personal Connection to the Material**

Two weeks ago, I started a new job as communication coordinator for the Alzheimer's & Dementia Alliance of Wisconsin. SD is a powerful tool, I find, especially when starting in a new organization. I chose to start quietly, stating my qualifications but acknowledging I had much to learn about the culture and about the unique communication challenges. I would say things like: "By no means do I think I am the world's greatest marketer but I am passionate and love this industry." While explaining concepts, I'll end a suggestion by declaring "I am such a marketing nerd" to balance any perception of a power-play. Thus, I am able to make my point in a non-threatening but credible manner. I am trying to frame ideas in terms of how they benefit the listener—in a humble and articulate manner.

Recognizing others' strengths, while slightly downplaying my role as a threat, seems to have worked. I generated goodwill and positioned the staff to be "on my side" as I start this new position. In fact, after six days, the executive director met with me and discussed an elevated role within the company. I suggested "digital marketing manager," and she liked the idea. So, a little bit of SD and of humility enabled me to start quietly but make a loud impact.

This speaks to my personal brand, but the concept could translate to marketing and to branding also. Outside of a personal connection, SD may prove a viable communication channel in branding and in marketing. I chose an alternative approach to marketing myself. Similarly, some brands stray from the status quo in bold ways and differentiate from the status quo (Bergin, 2017). "Sassy behavior" is a valid approach to corporate SM and can attract a large audience as long as brands do not engage in a discursive integration of deceptive misrepresentation, manipulation, melodrama, hyperpartisan news, misinformation, sensationalization, or in essence, "bullshit" (Bergin, 2017; Mourão & Robertson, 2019; Tavernise, 2016; Frankfurt, 2005, p. 1).

One final thought: In as much as I generated goodwill at my new job, brands could possibly use SD to organize and achieve buy-in through altruism and through a quiet roar. r/RM has succeeded in creating a desirable, inclusive, and insulated community that keeps members coming back for fresh content. If brands could harness this approach, they could create a collective identity—much like the momentum created in social movements—and mobilize their audience to act as brand ambassadors, influencers, or disruptors to competitors. This idea plays into persuasion techniques touted by Cialdini (2014): authority (expert positioning); social proof (people emulate others' behaviors); reciprocity (appearing to “give back” or contribute to a positive SM conversation will endear people to interact).

But hey, what do I know? I’m just a marketing nerd who loves to write.

### Conclusion

Roasting is brutal, but posting is optional. This contradiction feeds the r/RM community. Whether “cold comfort” or attention-seeking gold, roasting culture has become a popular channel for SM story-telling. Ordinary people can become “Internet-famous,” and “Internet-famous” people can be reduced to ordinary people—as was the case when “Internet Model” Niece Waidhofer” posted, got roasted, and deleted her account (Pearson-Jones, 2017). This isn’t a Friars Club roast, and participants are not professional comedians. SD can prove an attractive quality, but it can backfire (Donovan, 2016). Isolated people may find a curious solidarity within a community that socially rips them to shreds. Perhaps negative attention is still better than no attention. By contrast, it takes confidence to display insecurities and weaknesses; roastees may be highly self-actualized. r/RM is community that straddles humor and pity, but r/RM mods warn against “feeling sorry” for anyone. This reaction is insulting and condescending to roastees because it implies he or she does not have providence over their actions and their thoughts. Cruelty or comedy, humor or humiliation, r/RM may support a few universal truths: it’s healthy to laugh at yourself and it’s cool to burn.

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## Appendix A

### r/RoastMe Rules and Guidelines

- **Verification rule:** Must hold up a paper with “/r/RoastMe” clearly written.
- **Photoshop rule:** Use of Photoshop or image editing tools are prohibited and can result in a community ban. Filters are discouraged.
- **Underage rule:** Roastees must be eighteen and older. Images with “context clues” such as high school uniforms may lead to removal. Moderators (mods) may request proof of age, and anyone who appears underage may be flagged.
- **Unfunny Abuse rule:** Comments must reasonably contain humor and cannot intimidate or threaten other users. Community members must agree not to send abusive private messages.
- **Suspicious URL rule:** Links to suspicious sites are not allowed.
- **Inappropriate flattery rule:** Flirting and anything resembling dating-website behavior is not allowed. Attempting to make someone feel better implies he or she is unable to make their own voluntary choice to post.
- **Doxxing rule:** No personal information can be posted or commented.
- **Consent rule:** Everyone in the picture must be aware of the sign and of the intention to post—and must consent. Each person pictured must point to the sign.

## Appendix B

Analysed 933 posts from r/roastme with over 5 points

### Best Posting Times

 Thursday at 2:00 pm

[Click here to schedule a post](#)

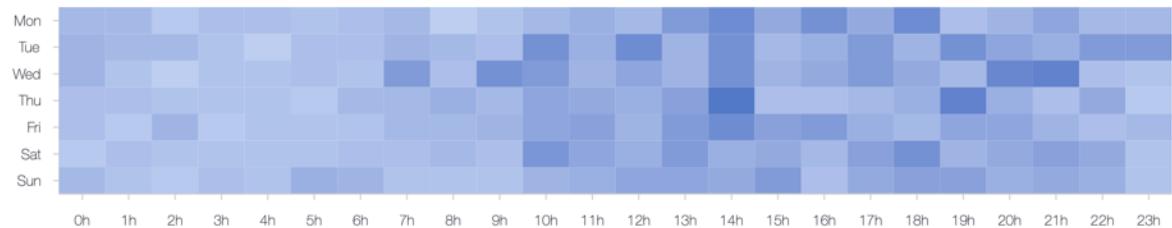
 Wednesday at 9:00 pm

[Click here to schedule a post](#)

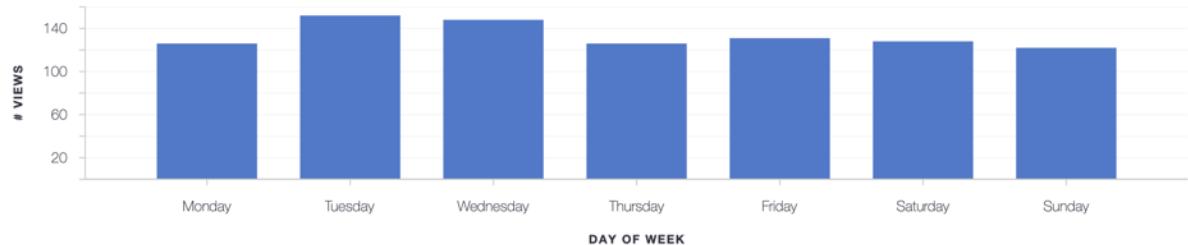
 Thursday at 7:00 pm

[Click here to schedule a post](#)

### All Top Posts



### Top Posts By Day (America/Chicago)



### Top posts by Hour of Day (America/Chicago)

