Marta Dynel* and Fabio I. M. Poppi

Quid rides?: Targets and referents of RoastMe insults

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Abstract: This article offers a qualitative and quantitative socio-cultural examination of RoastMe, a peculiar humorous practice deployed on Reddit and reposted on various social media. First, RoastMe is characterized from the emic (user) perspective and conceptualized in the light of humor theory (superiority and incongruity approaches). RoastMe consists in some users' posting pictures of themselves with a view to being roasted, i. e. pelted with jocular insults, by other online community members. Albeit a type of disparagement humor, RoastMe is an innocuous humorous activity enclosed within a humorous frame; it is a form of affiliative humor based on users' unbounded creativity. Second, this paper reports the findings of a quantitative study on the predominant types of targets/roastees depending on their (lack of) salient features, as well as the source and nature of the jocularly disparaged referents in roasting comments, i. e. the central features that roasters make harmless fun of most often, relative to the different categories of roastees.

Roasting (v.) – To humorously mock or humiliate someone with a well-timed joke, diss or comeback. (...) Hone your roasting skills, meet other roasters, and get yourself roasted! Everybody needs to laugh at themselves! And other people, of course!

(<https://www.reddit.com/r/RoastMe/>)

Keywords: affiliative humor, creativity, disparagement humor, humorous frame, jocular insult, online humor, roast, target

Quid rides? (Latin): 'Why are you laughing?'

***Corresponding author: Marta Dynel**, Department of Pragmatics, Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź, Pomorska 171/173, Łódź 90-236, Poland, E-mail: marta.dynel@yahoo.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4647-946X>

Fabio I. M. Poppi, Department of Pragmatics, Institute of English Studies, University of Łódź, Pomorska 171/173, Łódź 90-236, Poland; Institute of Linguistics and Intercultural Communication, Sechenov University, Sadovaya-Kudrinskaya Street 3A, Moscow 123242, Russian Federation, E-mail: fabioimpoppi@me.com
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0731-3099>

1 Introduction

Over the last two decades, humor studies have drawn copious amounts of data from Computer-Mediated Communication in order to examine chosen forms of online humor or to illustrate the universal workings of humor based on publicly available examples. Some part of the former strand of research, which considers the specificity of online humor, has investigated joint construction of creative verbal and/or visual humor online (e. g. Demjén 2018; Vásquez 2019). This paper addresses a novel form of multimodal humor facilitated by Web 2.0, namely the interactional practice called *RoastMe*, which involves users' hurling creative *jocular insults* at other users who have voluntarily submitted their pictures for *roasting* (see also Dynel and Poppi 2019).

Apart from conceptualizing RoastMe from an *emic* perspective against the backdrop of relevant humor theory, this article reports the findings of a quantitative study that gives a socio-cultural account of the types of *roastees*, i. e. *targets*, participating in the RoastMe practice and the categories of specific jocularly disparaged features, i. e. *referents*, of humorous insults to which targets are subjected by *roasters*. Therefore, the first aim is to discern the predominant roastee types in terms of the roasting potential they evince. The second goal is to elucidate and quantify the referents of roasting comments, and thereby to examine what roasters draw inspiration from and what roastee features they are apt to jocularly poke fun at most often relative to the different target types.

This article is organized into seven sections. Following this introduction, Section 2 briefly presents RoastMe, teasing out the basic workings of, and the assumptions behind, this humorous practice, which reflects the key characteristics of the classical roast. Section 3 conceptualizes RoastMe in the light of relevant humor literature, invoking the notions of creative jocular insults enclosed in a humorous frame, as well as disparagement humor and the superiority theory of humor, which is addressed critically. Section 4 depicts the methodology of our empirical study: the methods of data collection and annotation, together with the main hypotheses. This is followed by qualitative and quantitative analyses of the targets and referents of roasting comments in Section 5. The last two sections offer a general discussion and conclusions respectively.

2 The workings of RoastMe

RoastMe is a social media offshoot of the widespread but under-researched humorous genre: the *roast*. According to the precious few historical accounts (Test 1980; Oring 2003), *roasts* are traditional American rituals of hurling humorous insults,

popular to this day in many countries. The hallmark of this humorous practice is benevolent humorous abuse or belittlement of the target (Oring 2003: 80), which testifies to roasters' respect and affection towards the former (Morreall 1997).

A *roast* (a roasting event) can be defined as a humorous interaction in which one or more individuals is/are subjected to benevolent *jibes*, i. e. *disparaging remarks*, by *roasters* for the sake of humor. Even though these jibes purport to be aggressive and potentially offensive, they are free from spite and genuine aggression. Thus, the *target* (the *roastee*), who has willingly agreed to be roasted, can – and perhaps even should, by design – deem them amusing, together with other participants.

Thanks to the growth of social media and the online *participatory culture*, the traditional roast has given rise to its new spin-off, namely *RoastMe* (see Dynel and Poppi 2019). This humorous trend relies on Internet users' submitting photos of themselves online so that multiple other users roast them. A RoastMe interaction, i. e. a *Roast*, is instigated by a *roasted post* (a roastee's picture in tandem with a title) which inspires numerous individual roasters to submit *roasting posts*, which can be thought of as humorous jibes, jocular insults or disparaging remarks. These are followed by upvotes/downvotes and further comments, whether or not roasting.

The RoastMe practice was introduced on April 22, 2015 on *Reddit*. The RoastMe subreddit (<https://www.reddit.com/r/RoastMe/>) is the venue for all new Roasts, parts of which are reposted on other social media. When this paper is being proof-read (December 2019), the top posts have reached more than 94,000 upvotes and more than 5,000 comments, and the RoastMe subreddit has lured over 1.7 million community members (subscribers), spanning various nations, ethnic groups and age ranges (although roastees must be adults, as specified by the user rules).

Sharing benevolent humor is the primary reason for the functioning of this online community. Its members engage in the humorous activity, cognizant of its overarching purpose and mechanics. Those can be misunderstood by outsiders, not only academics but also media commentators and Internet users who do not participate in the activity (see Dynel and Poppi 2019). Therefore, an adequate academic description of RoastMe necessitates accounting for the *emic*, i. e. community members,' perspective (cf. Pike 1990), as evidenced by their willing participation, metapragmatic evaluations, together with the official instructions for users. Roasters and roastees must observe several rules (see the right-hand column on the subreddit, cf. Figure 1), with their activities being monitored by moderators. Importantly, a roastee must grant his/her consent to be roasted by bearing a clear “/r/RoastMe” text in the voluntarily posted picture, and roasters must not do “hating” or “bullying;” rather, they should aim to make “an audience laugh” through creative roasting comments.

Overall, RoastMe and the traditional roast have the same primary goal: to ritually make creative jibes about someone who has agreed to be their *target* for the sake of

causing amusement but not giving offence. Nevertheless, RoastMe shows a few distinctive features (see Dynel and Poppi 2019). Most importantly, roastees are ordinary Internet users, who must retain their anonymity even though they do need to exhibit their faces without the use of Photoshop. Therefore, rather than invoking any kind of personal knowledge of roastees, as is the case with traditional roasts held for friends, colleagues or celebrities, RoastMe insults are inspired only by anonymous roastees' posts. These are based primarily on pictures (displaying roastees' appearance and/or artefacts), sometimes coupled with brief self-descriptions in the titles. Some of those provide additional details about roastees, involving some elaboration on the visually perceptible features or disclosing completely different information, which cannot be gathered from the pictures. This succinct characterization of RoastMe is illustrated with a random example (Figure 1), which anticipates the foci of our quantitative analyses.

Figure 1: A random example of a Roast.

In the title of her roasted post, the roastee presents herself as an 18-year-old barista who works for a degree in Animation and runs a podcast (a short sound clip). The comments are arranged in one conversational strand that starts with a

roasting jibe, “You have a face for podcasts.” The consecutive posts are added as replies to the previous ones. Also, each response may or may not be immediately relevant to the preceding one. For instance, “Also facial structure of Chewbacca” (cf. a hairy *Star Wars* character) is followed by this topically relevant comment: “I’d rather date Chewbacca.”

Not all comments in the exchange qualify as roasting posts, being rather evaluative comments on the previous ones (e. g. “The thought of that scares me” in reply to “Face like Boo and Sully from Monsters Inc had a kid”). However, still other posts purport to serve solely as meta-comments on the previous posts but are roasting comments. For instance, “Now continue the roast; we don’t want to be getting too nice here” is produced as a response to the roasting post “She is very handsome” (cf. she looks like a man) in order to implicitly suggest that applying to a female a positive attribute normally used in reference to men is still too kind to the roastee.

This exemplifying Roast signposts a few aspects crucial for the present study of roasting posts. The conversational strand intertwines two *recognized* features of the girl, who does not seem to display any evident *salient features* subject to roasting: the idea of running a podcast (stated in the title) with her well-groomed eyebrows reminiscent of Chewbacca. However, seeing some similarity between Chewbacca’s and the girl’s facial structure seems to be rather a case of an *attributed* physical feature, which does not show any validation in the roasted picture. These recognized and attributed features are the main referents of the roasting posts. Additionally, some of the jibes concern the picture alone, specifically the girl’s (allegedly) unattractive face (e. g. the backhanded compliment in the form of “I would love to take those lips and put them on literally anyone else’s face” or “Her face certainly isn’t her strong point”), whilst others address both the picture and the title (e. g. “You have a face for podcasts” [i. e. it is not to be shown] or “The name of her podcast is the Weekly Wookie” [Wookiee is the hairy humanoid *Star Wars* species, which the girl is seen to resemble]).

3 RoastMe in the light of humor theory

The acts of posting RoastMe pictures can be conceptualized as manifestations of roastees’ *self-denigrating* or *self-deprecating* sense of humor (see Dynel and Poppi 2020) insofar as they willingly lay themselves open to *jocular abuse* (e. g. Hay 1994). Self-denigrating humor testifies to individuals’ ability to laugh at themselves, while tacitly communicating, “I am weak, I admit it. To admit means to be strong. So, I am strong” (Zajdman 1995: 338). This shows especially when roastees make manifest their shortcomings, which can be humorous stimuli in their own

right (see Figure 2). On a related note, roastees that inspire the highest numbers of roasting comments and upvotes are held in high regard amongst the online community, being listed among the Top Roasts. Therefore, some roastees are deliberately sporting in the pictures what they could easily hide and what they must consider salient characteristics amenable to roasting. Thus, roastees may boost their chances of success, for instance, by posing shirt-less to expose a hairy body, smiling to show a gap between the front teeth, or having a picture of them taken at a greater distance to exhibit the big stomach (Figure 2). These salient features take visual precedence over other recognized characteristics, such as baldness or long greasy hair, which cannot be deemed atypical in comparison.

Figure 2: Examples of roastees deliberately manifesting their salient features.

Roasting comments bring to mind such notions as *putdowns* (Zillmann and Stocking 1976) or *ridicule* (Ziv 1984; Billig 2005), used as blanket terms for various jibes and taunts which are meant to be offensive to the targets and to amuse others. However, whilst they purport to be overtly offensive, RoastMe jibes are actually supposed to be benevolent. Therefore, they qualify as an online contemporary version of “sounds” or “dozens” (e. g. Dollard 1939; Abrahams 1962) and, more generally, as a special type of *ritual* or *jocular insults* (for a discussion and further references, see Dynel and Poppi 2019). Ritual/jocular insults are not intended to disparage or offend the targets like insults proper (see Dynel and Poppi 2020 and references therein), but rather to invite humorous reactions in all participants, including the jocularly abused targets themselves. Similar to other jocular insults, roasting comments are geared towards building rapport among (anonymous) users and serve joint humor experience based on the competition of wits, with multiple roasters trying to emulate one another.

RoastMe is regulated by a joint agreement between roasters and roastees that they are engaged in a humor-oriented practice and operate within a *humorous frame* (see Dynel 2017, Dynel 2018 and references therein) based on the “this is play” metamessage (Bateson 1956). However, while aiming just to have fun, roasters may communicate their true beliefs (see Dynel 2017) about roastees, albeit usually hyperbolizing them for the sake of humorous effects. Thus, based on the available evidence, roasting comments may be taken to communicate what roasters believe to be true about roastees. On the other hand, due to lack of any validation in the roastee’s picture or self-description, some roasting comments may be devoid of any truthful meaning that the roasters might be regarded as communicating while intending only to produce humor for its own sake (Dynel and Poppi 2019).

Although it is a solidarity-building practice, RoastMe is amenable to analysis in the light of the *superiority theory of humor*. The contemporary state-of-the-art picture of humor research endorsing the superiority perspective is complex and diversified (see e. g. Berlyne 1969; La Fave 1972; Zillmann and Cantor 1976; Gruner 1978; Zillmann 1983; Billig 2005; Ferguson and Ford 2008; Martin and Ford 2018). The central tenet is that humor and amusement stem from enhanced self-esteem thanks to a downward comparison with the target or a feeling of superiority based on the recognition of the target’s infirmities, foibles, weaknesses or misfortunes. The theory of superiority applies to *disparagement humor*, i. e. humorous messages “that (are intended to) elicit amusement through the denigration, derogation, or belittlement of a given target (e. g., individuals, social groups, political ideologies, material possessions)” (Ferguson and Ford 2008: 283–284).

Superiority theory holds for disparagement humor, which rests on target-directed *aggression*,¹ which – we postulate – can be genuine or “playful” (Davies 1990, 2002), or better, *overtly pretended*, based on the Batesonian “this is play” premise. Therefore, disparagement humor may be claimed to encompass *disaffiliative* and *affiliative* types (see Dynel 2013) involving, respectively, genuine or overtly pretended denigration derogation or belittlement of the target. Using disaffiliative humor, through genuine aggression, the speaker antagonizes the target and manifests his/her superiority over the latter whilst attempting to amuse other (non-targeted) individuals, who – together with the speaker – disaffiliate themselves from the deprecated target. By contrast, affiliative disparaging humor is contingent on overtly pretended aggression subsumed under a humorous frame, which RoastMe represents. According to the community’s rules, it is not anchored in genuine negative dispositions towards the target or the intent to cause the latter harm. On a relevant note, Zillmann (1983) addresses

1 The claims that superiority theory obtains for all humour are far-fetched (see Martin 2007).

the parameter of a playful context and stimuli that signify playfulness in aggressive humor: disparagement is humorous if an individual can attribute his/her amusement to the “joke world,” which facilitates moral amnesty, thereby differentiating humorous disparagement from disparagement in serious contexts (Zillmann and Cantor 1976; Zillmann 1983). RoastMe epitomizes such a playful context, being a humorous activity performed for fun only.

While zealous advocates of the superiority theory of humor insist that the feeling of superiority explains why humor works, a view is endorsed here that superiority should be considered only a theory of humor facilitation (Zillmann 1983). To be able to account for humor, it must be supplemented with “collative variables such as novelty, surprise, incongruity, and the like” (Zillmann 1983: 103). Superiority is not a universal mechanism of humor; it is only an optional factor contributing to the humor receiver’s satisfaction and mirthful pleasure consequent upon his/her perception of incongruity. Most contemporary linguists and psychologists studying humor agree that all humor has some form of *incongruity* with *surprise* and *novelty* lying at its heart (see e. g. Forabosco 2008; Dynel 2013; Martin and Ford 2018 and references therein). All three are due to human *creativity* in humor production. The unboundedness of human creativity is integral to RoastMe; one picture can trigger hundreds, if not thousands of novel jibes.

Creativity is a crucial ability to generate new behaviors and utterances based on the combination of patterning and innovative transformations of prior experiences and previously encountered ideas (Vygotsky 2004, see also Vásquez 2019 and references therein). RoastMe may be considered the epitome of creativity understood as a joint socio-cultural practice (see Cekaite 2018). This is because each roastee’s post is geared towards inviting numerous innovative jibes, which present new conceptual mergers, as well as creative language use manifest in various figures of speech (i. e. rhetorical figures, such as metaphor or hyperbole) and language play (Dynel and Poppi 2019).

Roasters can earn recognition (measured by the number of upvotes and replies) via demonstrating their wit and creativity, presumably regardless of the topics of their roasting comments. However, each RoastMe jibe needs to bear some relevance to the roasted post. It is then interesting to explore how roasters capitalize on the images and titles submitted by roastees and what features they poke fun at.

4 Methodology

The central goal of this study is to examine the categories and the distribution of targets and referents of RoastMe insults. The classificatory criteria for both targets and referent dimensions were established jointly by both investigators through a

grounded-theory approach, based on extensive *nethnographic* observation of the subreddit and iterative analysis, to be duly applied to the corpora of Roasts and roasting comments. To ensure the internal reliability of the results, all the annotation tasks for both roasted posts and roasting comments constituting the corpora were performed manually by two competent coders, the two investigators, who evaluated the data independently, using the previously negotiated categories. Due to categorical nature of the analyzed data, Pearson's chi-square, and Fisher's exact tests were used to corroborate statistical significance, while Cramer's V was applied to assess the effect size in the statistical analyses.

The Roasts used as the corpus data were culled from the RoastMe subreddit (<https://www.reddit.com/r/RoastMe/>) on April 2, 2019, following the common ethical practice in social media research: no permissions or informed consent were necessary as the data were/are anonymous (see RoastMe rules) and publicly available without signing in (Townsend and Wallace 2016).

We selected the "Top" criterion to arrange Roasts on Reddit according to the level of users' engagement, i. e. the highest numbers of comments and upvotes, choosing the "of all time" temporal factor. Thus, we compiled a representative corpus comprising the 250 Roasts with the best stats since the creation of the RoastMe subreddit.

The Top roasted posts ($n = 250$) were originally divided into three main categories depending on the target type: targets with "no evident salient features" vs "salient features" shown in the pictures, the latter subdivided into "salient physical features," and "artefacts" not consequent upon any physical characteristics. Hence, the artefacts category did not encompass functional or adorning objects inextricably connected with roastees' health or looks (e. g. wheelchairs, glasses or piercing). No roastee escaped this general three-fold division, proving it exhaustive. In addition, through iterative coding, within the category of "targets with salient physical features," one conspicuous sub-category was discerned, namely "targets with evident disabilities/illnesses,"² and the remainder of the category was labelled "targets with non-prototypical features of appearance." Whilst this need not be a universal norm, in the corpus, each of the targets with salient features was recognized as manifesting:³ only one overarching non-prototypical feature of appearance, one disability/illness, or one artefact/a (usually coherent) set thereof, which evidently took visual priority.⁴ Some of

2 Other sub-categories, such as "attractive targets," were also observed. Nonetheless, it is the disabilities/illnesses category that we considered worthy of investigation.

3 Technically, a roastee could both have a salient feature of appearance and display an equally salient artefact. However, no such example was found in the corpus (see also Footnote 5).

4 But see Figure 9, on the left. The man deliberately displays a collection of unrelated artefacts, which seem to be the most salient feature. Although he is obese and has a long beard, these are common features whose potential salience is eclipsed by the artefacts.

those individual salient features involved two or more interdependent visual components, which fell under one blanket term but could potentially be addressed individually by roasters in their jibes.⁵ The inter-coder reliability for this stage of coding was determined to be 94%, with 15 roasted posts receiving two different category tags (mostly resulting from doubts as to whether some features were evident enough to be called salient). These fifteen mismatched items were duly discarded from the dataset. The Roasts ($n = 235$) taken into account bore one target category label from both coders, as well as the same or synonymous label for the salient feature (if present).

With the roasted posts ($n = 235$) ultimately grouped into 4 target categories, 10 roasted posts (and hence Roasts) were sampled from each. In the case of the category of targets with disabilities/illnesses, to the Roasts from the original corpus ($n = 7$), we added three Roasts from among the Top Roasts of all time beyond the original 250 in order to reach the saturation point of 10 Roasts (with the 298th Top Roast). All 10 Roasts included some extra information about the roastees' features in the titles. As regards the remaining three target categories, the sampling of 10 Roasts for each was done randomly from the corpus of 235 Roasts. However, we manually discarded those Roasts which provided no extra⁶ information about the roastee's features in the title so as to control one of the variables (the potential impact of the title on the referents selected by roasters). The resulting sample of Roasts ($n = 40$) was duly used in the tripartite study of the referents jocularly disparaged in roasting posts.

Similar to Roasts, roasting posts can be collated based on a few criteria. Again, the "Top" ranking helps identify the roasting comments that receive most upvotes and further comments, and hence that are considered the best, presumably the funniest, by the online community. Top 10 independent roasting comments in each of the sampled Roasts ($n = 40$) were selected, and this yielded four sub-corpora of roasting comments ($n = 100$) for each target type. We extracted solely autonomous roasting jibes until the saturation point of 10 was reached. To this end, we excluded any user comments that did not involve roasting (e. g. posts evaluating the previous jibes or the Roast at hand) and replies to previous comments (again, typically evaluating the preceding post, or – if roasting – usually based on the same referents as the comment replied to, which is why adding them to the corpus would have limited the spectrum of referents and skewed the results).

This corpus of roasting comments was examined with regard to their referents (the central jocularly disparaged features) in three independent dimensions distinguished through a grounded-theory approach: the source of inspiration (a

⁵ See Figure 7, right: the cheeks, mouth and nose are jointly regarded as bulbous facial features.

⁶ The mere statement of what was visible in the picture did not qualify as such extra verbal information.

feature in the picture, the self-description in the title or both), the (lack of the) salient feature as the basis for the jocularly disparaged referent, and a recognized feature or attributed feature as the referent of a jibe. Finally, the part of the corpus that involved attributed features ($n = 121$) was examined in the light of three categories, jointly elaborated in a prior iterative process: physical appearance, individual personality traits and social categorization. The inter-coder reliability for the entire study of roasting posts was found to be 83%; the doubt-provoking cases were jointly discussed so that an agreement could be reached in each case. Even though complex RoastMe jibes are possible, each jocular insult in our corpus presents only one key disparaged referent.

The annotation process of roasting posts necessitated negotiating complex operationalization strategies, the most important of which will now be reported based on three examples (Figure 3).

Figure 3: Examples of roastees' posts.

First, determining the roasted referent, the feature subject to jocular abuse, often involves a lot of inferencing. Jibes can be couched in various figures of speech, such as metaphor (“The simulated vagina is on the right?” about the man with the ultrasound screen, seen as a weak person) and wordplay (the pun in “I’d roast you but I’d feel bad ... After all you can’t stand up for yourself” about the man in the wheelchair), or they involve cultural allusions (“It’s a good thing you didn’t become a nurse. I don’t think they give happy endings” about the Asian woman, who is conceptualized as a prospective sex worker).

Second, the three analytic dimensions can cross-section in various ways as the referents (disparaged features) are identified. Importantly, the salient, inherently visual, feature that becomes the central focus of disparagement must necessarily be

a recognized one but not vice versa; a recognized feature need not be salient. The salient feature may affect the referent alone or be coupled with another feature. For instance, the paraplegic man's disability, which is the salient (and thus recognized) feature, may be the focus of disparagement, as in "Markiparalyzed." This jibe's referent meshes the salient feature with another feature recognized in the creative self-description, namely the roastee's allusion to Eminem's single *The Real Slim Shady*, together with its adage "please stand up," which invites the roaster's allusion to another rapper, now retired, Marky Mark. By contrast, a jibe is not labelled as addressing the salient feature if it somehow makes use of this feature but the latter does not constitute or entail (see below) the main referent of the ridicule, being only supportive of an entirely different referent. For instance, the salient feature may only serve a backdrop for comments on the roastee's non-salient recognized feature, the referent like the disabled man's hairstyle ("Is your barber disabled too?" or "I didn't know you needed working legs to get your hair cut").

Importantly, the referents of jibes are the disparaged features that need not be identical to the salient features but may only be directly inspired by, and dependent on, these. This is most pronounced when the referent is an attributed feature consequent upon a salient artefact, as in the roasting of the man whose profession is evident from the artefact and the title: "Good call on the employer to keep this freak away from any real vaginas" (an attributed feature as the referent: a crazy person to be kept away from women).

What this last example indicates is that attributed features also need to find inspiration in the features showing in the picture and/or title (cf. the screen in the picture, and the job description), which is a dimension that obtains for all roasting posts. Finally, as regards the title, the part of the description that merely verbalizes the visual information is ignored by the coders, while only extra information not communicated in the picture motivates the "title" qualification. Therefore, "Thank you for breaking through that stereotype about Asians looking younger than they are" relies on the title only because of the "22 years" revelation, while the Asian provenance is a visually perceptible feature emerging from the picture.

The three central foci of the analyses, together with the subordinate one, are guided by a few research assumptions. Overall, each roastee aims to induce as many roasters as possible to contribute roasting comments, and thus he/she means to inspire them through some visually salient feature manifest in the picture, the central component of each Roast, or a feature prioritized in the self-description in the title of the Roast, or a combination of them both. The pending query is whether roasters do capitalize on these affordances and whether there are significant differences between the four target categories.

This yields several hypotheses/assumptions: (1) As RoastMe relies primarily on pictures, roasters should typically focus on images, while non-visual features

revealed in Roast titles may play a significant role in the case of targets with no salient features. (2) Roastees’ salient, as well as – more generally – recognized physical features, including evident disabilities or artefacts, should play a preponderant role in jibes, coinciding with or affecting their referents. It is also interesting to verify whether the taboo topic of serious disability/illness does become the referent often, leading to *dark humor* (see Dynel and Poppi 2018) to which disabled roastees expose themselves. (3) Attributed features are likely to be more common as the referents in Roasts of targets with no evident, let alone salient, features. (4) Attributed features may represent various dimensions, typically transcending physical characteristics.

The second and third hypotheses may be considered to be at odds with the creativity premise as the driving force of RoastMe jibes. Our initial hunch was indeed that roasters’ greater creativity would entail a variety of features being selected as the topics of jocular disparagement. However, our initial examination of random Roasts led us to believe that jibes tended to center on repeating features (salient, if present), which is why we developed the hypotheses presented above.

5 Analysis

5.1 Targets

In the corpus of roasted posts ($n = 235$), roastees with salient features ($n = 129$) slightly outnumber those with no evident salient features ($n = 106$). Within the former, the number of roastees with artefacts ($n = 68$) insignificantly exceeds that of roastees with salient physical features ($n = 61$) (see Figure 4).

Figure 4: Distribution of basic RoastMe targets.

A noteworthy subcategory of the targets with salient physical features involves roastees with evident disabilities/illnesses. Targets like these ($n=7$), constitute only about 3% of the original corpus of Roasts ($n=235$), and over 11% within the category of roastees with salient physical features, besides those with non-prototypical features appearance ($n=54$) (see Figure 5). However, the presence of this prominent target inclines us to include it in the study to validate whether roastees do not shy away from producing dark humor (Dynel and Poppi 2018) about disabilities/illnesses, premised on the assumption that they are operating within a humorous frame.

Entries

Figure 5: Distribution of RoastMe targets including the sub-category of targets with evident disabilities/illnesses.

The four target categories will now be described and illustrated with examples taken from our corpora. This qualitative examination will depict the nature of roasted posts, as well as the various ways in which roasters can interact with them. Through this description, the dimensions of the analyses of roasting comments' distribution are exemplified.

5.1.1 Targets with no evident salient features

People with no evident salient features lack marked unfavorable physical characteristics that could monopolize roasters' attention, becoming the natural referents of roasting comments. These roastees might then be taken to stimulate a very high degree of creativity in roasters concerning not only the formulation of the insults but also the choice of the referents per se.

Firstly, roasters try to bypass the lack of salient features subject to disparagement by exploiting the countless creative possibilities that roastees' non-salient, but still perceptible, features of appearance allow for. Thus, some roasting comments capitalize on recognized features, as exemplified by that about the boy in the center in Figure 6: "You look like you occupy a lot of friendzones" (lack of sexual attractiveness). On the other hand, the central referents may be attributed features which lack any evident validation in the picture or title, as in the comment about the girl on the right: "You seem like the girl who would wear a Nirvana shirt and not be able to name one of their songs" (pretense to meet mainstream criteria of social desirability).

All my friends got roasted
yesterday. I feel left out

I will present a schoolwork
to my whole class about
Reddit. Help me show them
what a lovely community
you are.

French Canadian law
student in Montreal

Figure 6: Examples of roastees with no evident salient features.

Apart from pictures, roasters may rely on roastees' self-descriptions if these bring to focus potential referents to be recognized or only attributed. This is the case with the girl on the left, who has received this disparaging post: "Your 'friends' didn't even invite you to get roasted, take the fucking hint" (lack of real friends and interpersonal attractiveness). Additionally, roasting comments may be inspired by the self-descriptions in tandem with the pictures. For instance, the girl on the right has been roasted in this way: "Signing a legal contract for Casting Couch does not make you a law student," whereby the attractive enough looks and legal studies, two recognized features, are merged to serve as a basis for an absurd attributed feature in the referent (the girl has a legal contract to appear on a pornographic show).

5.1.2 Targets with non-prototypical features of appearance

Roastees with salient features often cannot hide, and – as already observed – sometimes even make transparent in the pictures, their non-prototypical physical traits that may naturally excite roasting comments. Although roasters may make use of features other than the salient ones, the latter seem to come across as the most easily available referents, which the roastees themselves will also envisage. This is the case with the features of the targets in Figure 7: acne (the girl on the left), the high forehead coupled with the spiky hair that boosts this visual effect (the boy in the middle), and the bulbous facial features (the girl on the right).

Figure 7: Examples of roastees with non-prototypical features of appearance.

Given their salience, each of these features are apt to become the recognized referents of a plethora of creative roasting comments, such as: “Goalie for a dart team” or “So that’s where the Martian was filmed” (left); “You look like Roger the alien from American Dad” or “That space on his head costs more than most NYC apartments” (center); and “I’ve never seen anyone allergic to their own face” or “Get this lady a Benadryl” [an antihistamine] (right).

5.1.3 Targets with evident disabilities/illnesses

Among physical disabilities/illnesses whose symptoms have consequences on the physical appearance, the targets in the corpus exhibit, one can identify, for instance, cancer, muscular dystrophies and other congenital malformations (see Figure 8), which can become the referents of roasting comments, such as “You look like an off brand Pillow Pet” (left), “Stephen Hawking and Willem Dafoe had a kid together” (center), and “This is what happens when you take a turtle out of his shell” (right).

Do your worst

I have muscular dystrophy.
Roast me19-year old heavily
handicapped german guy
waiting for some nice
comments

Figure 8: Examples of roastees with evident disabilities/illnesses.

Taking into account both categories of roastees with salient physical features (disabilities/illnesses and non-prototypical features of appearance), it seems reasonable to assume that the salient, and hence recognized, features will be the most frequent referents. However, similar to roastees with no salient features, roastees with salient physical features may be jocularly disparaged through other recognized or attributed features inspired by their pictures and/or self-descriptions. For instance, the man on the left has received a comment on his hairstyle (a recognized feature), with his handicap (the salient feature) being relevant to the understanding of the jocular disparagement, but not its referent: “Looks like you cut your own hair.” Another jibe about the man on the right, “You’re not the only handicapped german to be roasted ...” (cf. the pun couched in “roast” and the historical allusion: Nazi Germans exterminated also imperfect members of their nation), is inspired both by the picture (the salient handicap) and the title (cf. the man’s nationality).

5.1.4 Targets with artifacts

Within the category of targets with artifacts, the salient features are the objects that roastees present in the pictures, clearly with premeditation (as if the roastees are cognizant of their lack of “roastable” salient physical features), with a view to inviting roasting comments. This is the case with the peculiar combination of two boxes of fiber cereals and curling equipment, as well as a shirt with cats (left), the hat and poster supporting Donald Trump’s election campaign (center), and a set of video game controller accessories (right).

Roasting jibes may refer to the artifacts salient in the pictures in Figure 9, such as the political paraphernalia of the Trump supporter, as in “After seeing this even most conservatives would agree: abortion should be legal up to 312 months,” which disparages the roastee’s political choice. On the other hand, the heavy gamer’s accessories indicative of the roastee’s devotion to games have invited a comment: “It’s a meee! Molestio!,” which is based on a cultural allusion (cf. Mario, from Nintendo’s franchise, saying with a parodic Italian accent, “It’s a meee, it’s a Mario!”) and jocularly conceives of the roastee as a “superhero” whose main power is predilection for molestation (an attributed feature invoked by the salient artifacts). Roasters may, nonetheless, ignore the salient items on display, however uncanny they may be, and address some other referents. This is the case with the roastee on the left, who – despite his best efforts to assign importance to the incongruous items – has received comments on his other recognized features, namely his size (“Men were jumping overboard the last time something this large hit the ice,” which alludes to the *Titanic*’s hitting the iceberg, and possibly also to another recognized feature, his occupation (curling), which is not the referent of the disparagement) and his hairstyle (“How do you even describe that haircut to a barber? A lofted wedge? A side-leaning hairtriangle?”).

Overweight father who wears cat shirts, teaches people how to curl, drinks Malort, and enjoys a good fiber cereal now and then. Go ahead and try to shake my confidence.

26-year-old mormon, Trump fanboy virgin whose gf left him after a year for a guy she married three months later. He thinks his self-esteem is at rock bottom. Prove him wrong.

26 y/o truck drivin' nintendo fan boy

Figure 9: Examples of roasttees with artifacts.

The thrust of all this is that while the targets can be divided depending on the presence/absence of the salient features they make manifest in their pictures (intrinsic characteristics, including illnesses, as well as artifacts), in their jocularly disparaging comments, roasters can make use of the visually salient

features (if available), other recognized features (present in the pictures and/or Roast titles), and/or attribute new (non-physical) features to roastees, all with a view to emulating other roastees with their jocular jibes.

5.2 Referents in roasting comments

We examine the corpus of roasting comments ($n = 400$), divided into 4 target categories, along three primary dimensions. Given that each of the four groups of comments comprises 100 items, most of the findings expressed in percentage terms easily translate into the same cardinal numbers (see Figures 10, 11 and 12). In a follow-up study on the categories of attributed features (Figure 13), only the relevant part of the corpus is examined ($n = 121$).

Figure 10: Distribution of the sources inspiring roasting comments for each target type (expressed as cardinal numbers and, simultaneously, percentages).

5.2.1 Sources of inspiration for jocular insults

The first dimension under investigation is the impact that the picture (and hence, the roastee’s looks or artifacts), the title (specifically, a roastee’s self-description necessarily presenting at least one detail about the roastee that cannot be seen in, or inferred from, the picture), or both of these have on roasters’ choice of jocularly disparaged referents.

Figure 11: Distribution of salient and non-salient features in roasting comments for the relevant three target types (expressed as cardinal numbers and, simultaneously, percentages).

Figure 12: Distribution of recognized vs attributed features in roasting comments for each target type (expressed as cardinal numbers and, simultaneously, percentages).

Figure 13: Distribution of social, physical and personality dimensions among attributed features for each target type (expressed as cardinal numbers).

As depicted in Figure 10, the dependency between the target types and the sources of inspiration for jibes proves to be statistically significant [Fisher’s exact test: $\chi^2(6) = 44.85$ $p < 0.0005$, Cramer’s $V = 0.237$]. In line with the original predictions, all target types invite roasting comments based primarily on the pictures, which is most pronounced in the case of targets with non-prototypical features of appearance (82%) and targets with artifacts (78%), while the roasted posts’ titles alone seem to play a marginal role there. The title alone plays the biggest but still insignificant role in the case of targets with no salient features (18%), which also accords with our predictions. However, the features presented in the picture and title may also interact, which is most often the case with targets with disabilities/illnesses (34%), while each of the other three target types shows the picture-title inspiration for around 20% of comments, totaling 95 comments, i. e. 23,7% of the 400 jibes for all target types.

5.2.2 Salient vs non-salient features as referents

Our second objective is to check whether the salient features found in the three target categories do become the central foci of roasting comments, either constituting or determining the referent features. A distinction is thus drawn

between jibes which do deploy salient features as the central referents (whether or not they should also logically invoke other non-salient ones), and those which do not (albeit possibly otherwise alluding to them).

As Figure 11 shows, the frequency of salient features (vs non-salient features) as the foci of jocular abuse of the three discerned RoastMe targets is statistically significant [Pearson's $\chi^2(2) = 15.66$, $p < 0.0005$]. Consonant with our hypotheses, Roasters typically do use salient features as the referents of their jocular insults, especially in the case of targets with non-prototypical features of appearance (80%). Although salient features are often disparaged also in the Roasts of targets with disabilities/illnesses (62%) and targets with artifacts (54%), this majority is not overwhelming, and so the percentages of comments roasting specifically non-salient features (even if simultaneously alluding to the salient ones in the background) are also relatively high (38% for targets with disabilities/illnesses, and 46% for targets with artifacts).

5.2.3 Recognized vs attributed features as referents

The third research question concerns the distribution of recognized vs attributed features among the referents of RoastMe jibes.

Figure 12 demonstrates that, in accordance with our hypothesis, there is a statistically significant and robust relationship between the categories of targets and recognized/attributed features referred to in the jocularly disparaging comments [Pearson's $\chi^2(3) = 30.18$, $p < 0.0005$, Cramer's $V = 0.275$]. Roasting posts based on recognized features are particularly frequent with reference to these roastees who evince non-prototypical features of appearance (83%), as well as disabilities/illnesses (79%). It is also targets with no evident salient features who invite comments about their recognized features quite often, but this majority is not overwhelming (64%). On the other hand, there seems to be a balance between attributed (47%) and recognized (53%) features among the jibes hurled at targets with artifacts.

5.2.4 Types of attributed features

The last research question concerns the distribution of types of attributed features: physical or personality traits, and social aspects (others' perception of or interaction with targets).

As shown in Figure 13, even though the dataset is not big enough to draw definitive conclusions, the vast majority of attributed features therein concern roastees' personality characteristics. Among the dataset ($n = 121$), 79 comments

(65%) concern targets' personality features. These are especially frequent for the category of targets with artifacts ($n = 28$, 35%), which also shows a relatively high number of comments on roastees' social background ($n = 17$).

6 Discussion

The target categories discerned bifurcate into those without and with salient features, which concern roastees' artifacts or physical appearance, including disabilities/illnesses. This last category is a clear indication that also severely disadvantaged people have a great sense of humor and wish to engage in RoastMe activities. Roasters are invited to poke fun at what the disabled/ill roastees seem to have reconciled themselves to and are willing to joke about. The presence of the category of targets with artifacts is indicative of the roastees' awareness that they do not manifest any marked features of appearance but wish to inspire as many jibes as possible, the aspiration of all roastees craving online kudos. The same effect is envisaged through roastees' deliberate presentation of their physical defects in pictures or self-descriptions that reveal some compromising information. Inciting roasters to action is a testament to roastees' self-deprecating sense of humor (see Martin 2007; Martin and Ford 2018), while some roasted posts may be considered specimens of self-deprecating humor (see Dynel and Poppi 2020) in their own right.

Our study confirms the hypothesis that the primary source of inspiration for roasting, regardless of the target type, is visuals, i. e. pictures rather than titles, proving that in multimodal stimuli, images take priority over verbal messages (see Townsend and Kahn 2013 and references therein). Self-descriptions seem to gain some importance for targets with no salient visual features. The picture and title are also deployed in tandem in almost a quarter of all jocular insults across the target categories, which indicates users' tendency to creatively merge the import of visual and verbal components of roastees' posts.

Additionally, as predicted, roasters typically do make use of salient features, and these become or directly inspire the referents of jocular insults very often for the three roastee categories, especially those with non-prototypical features of appearance. That disabilities/illnesses are the pivotal referents relatively less frequently, albeit often being alluded to, may stem from the fact that roasters do recognize the taboo topic and the possibility of causing offence; although they must acknowledge the disabilities/illnesses, whose roasting is legitimized by the roastees and within the humorous frame, they choose to avoid dark humor and jocularly disparage other (less grave) features. On the other hand, the even less frequent (but still dominant for the relevant target category) use of artifacts as

inspiration for the central referents may be attributed to the fact that some objects trigger further thought processes and abstract, untraceable associations but can hardly be direct indicators of roastees' intrinsic features that lend themselves to jocular disparagement. Additionally, roasters may consider artifacts, however bizarre, too impersonal and seek other features subject to jocular abuse in roastees' self-descriptions or physical appearance.

Moreover, the findings corroborate the assumption that roastees with non-prototypical features of appearance get roasted mainly with the use of their recognized features as the referents coinciding, in most cases, with the salient features. The same concerns targets with disabilities/illnesses, but the recognized features' frequency is lower, presumably for the same reason as to why the salient features are directly roasted less frequently. Recognized features are also often disparaged in the Roasts of targets with no salient features. The almost equal distribution of recognized and attributed features for targets with artifacts can be explained again through the loose associations that the artifacts promote regarding targets' social aspects and, more frequently, personality traits (non-verifiable but not impossible), which dominate among all attributed features across the target categories. The features attributed to roastees most rarely concern the appearance; roasters have most evidence in this dimension, and contriving features seems otiose.

These findings about the new communicative practice cannot be directly compared with any previous studies for lack of similar investigations into the targets of relevant types of humor. RoastMe is an online communicative phenomenon that encompasses the features of the traditional roast, the face-to-face practice of trading jocular insults, as well as canned joke cycles about targets (e. g. Davies 2002). Importantly, like some canned jokes, RoastMe jibes only "play" with aggression, promoting no genuine hostility or conflicts (Davies 1990, Davies 2002). However, RoastMe shows striking differences with each of these forms of humor.

RoastMe targets, rather than public figures (in celebrity roasts or jokes) or social groups (in jokes) with their widely known vices, are ordinary, anonymous people. Little is known about them except for their looks and a few personal details they share, as opposed to the familiar targets of ritual insults in everyday encounters or personal roast events for family and friends. This seriously restricts the range of features that can be subject to humorous disparagement. Additionally, roastees volunteer to be the butts of innumerable jibes for the sake of innocuous playful activity enclosed in a humorous frame (similar to roasts and jocular insults) and joint entertainment of multiple, unknown online community members (unlike in everyday conversational practices, but similar to celebrity roasts or jokes for wide audiences), without communicating any ideological meanings, which may be the case with some canned jokes that offer social commentaries.

In view of these observations, it is hardly surprising that some features subject to jocular deprecation get prioritized based on their obviousness. Interestingly, when a salient feature is missing, and a referent gets selected, even if rather arbitrarily (e. g. an attributed personality feature), further roastees tend to capitalize on it in their necessarily novel and creative jibes. Although using a salient feature or a feature brought up by someone else as the basis for roasting may be seen as picking “low-hanging fruit,” this seems to be a matter of building solidarity among community members through creatively poking fun at a feature that users jointly recognize in, or attribute to, the roastee. Presumably, selecting a referent unavailable, or at least not too obvious, to other users and presenting it through creative, potentially cryptic means, would cause confusion and inhibit humor appreciation.

Overall, the results of this empirical investigation demonstrate that roasters’ creativity resides not in selecting countless novel referents, i. e. topics of jocular insults, but rather in the form these jocular insults take. RoastMe insults cannot be repeated or replicated with no major changes, a hallmark of RoastMe jibes that stands in marked contrast to canned jokes or some ritual insults. Albeit remaining anonymous, both roastees and roasters reap emotional and cognitive rewards for posts which gain acclaim through being upvoted by other community members, as well as circulated on other social media.

7 Conclusions and final comments

This paper has explored the phenomenon of RoastMe. Firstly, we described this online activity, taking account of the users’ (emic) perspective and depicted it in the light of humor theory. Essentially, RoastMe is an affiliative practice enclosed in a humorous frame and premised on the assumption of users’ benevolence (through their overtly pretended aggression) and shared humor experience. RoastMe thrives thanks to playfully disparaging and necessarily creative jocular insults, which the targets, endowed with a self-deprecating sense of humor, wish to be hurled at them generously.

Secondly, this paper has presented the findings of a quantitative study on the distribution of the RoastMe targets and categories of the referents of roasting comments, specifically: the source of inspiration (the picture, the title, or a combination of both), the impact of salient features, the proportion of recognized features to attributed features as the referents, and the categories of attributed features. Overall, roasters do capitalize most often on the pictures and salient features wherever available, as well as on recognized features. Users

thus exploit the obvious, easily available perceptible features, while making formally and conceptually creative jibes.

Interestingly enough, the importance of the picture might decline in future Roasts. At the time when the corrected proof of this paper is to be returned (mid-December 2019), a new option has just been introduced on the subreddit, namely RoastMe Bios (https://www.reddit.com/r/RoastMe/comments/e3f8gv/roastme_bios_have_gone_live/). This feature enables roastees to provide more verbal information about themselves, and hence give roasters more “meat” for roasting. Whether or not this feature is well received by the community is subject to future investigation. Irrespective of the robust quantitative findings reported here, the qualitative analysis supports the idea that every individual can be roasted in various ways given the RoastMe community members’ unbounded creativity and pursuit of joint amusement.

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Bionotes

Marta Dynel

Marta Dynel is Associate Professor in the Department of Pragmatics at the University of Łódź. Her research interests are primarily in humour studies, neo-Gricean pragmatics, the pragmatics of interaction, communication on social media, impoliteness theory, the philosophy of irony and deception, as well as the methodology of research on film discourse. She is the author of 2 monographs, over 100 journal papers and book chapters, as well as 13 (co)edited volumes and special issues.

Fabio I. M. Poppi

Fabio I. M. Poppi, PhD in Linguistics from the University of East Anglia (UK), is Associate Professor at Sechenov University and Assistant Professor at the University of Łódź. His research interests include multimodality, critical approaches to language and conceptualization, ideology and social cognition, all with reference to film, art, and social media discourse. He has published extensively on these topics in international journals (over 20 papers over the past three years).