

Scientists use social media to expose global eating habits

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People in the UK eat their main meal at dinner time, Brazilians eat theirs at lunchtime, and the population of the US tends to eat more throughout the day, according to research by computer scientists at the University of Birmingham in the first study of its kind into eating and drinking habits using social media data.

This research was presented at the launch of the British Science Festival held this week at the University of Birmingham, UK.

The scientists looked at global data from 500,000 people from the mobile phone app Foursquare which details users' specific locations and is a forum where they can share tips and comments about a particular venue with their friends.

The research team wanted to study the 'temporal' habits of people relating to food, for example, the distribution of meals throughout the day, where those meals were being eaten, what types of venues are popular, and whether there is any correlation in the eating habits between different cities and countries.

In the study the researchers also found a strong correlation in drinking habits between Brazil and France – much stronger than the correlation between France and the UK – even though Brazil and France are geographically much further apart. This is because French and Brazilians tend to go to similar venues that serve the same types of drinks, reflecting the same taste for certain types of beverages.

Brazilians also go to 'slow food' venues more often at lunchtime, whereas Americans and British people visit these restaurants at dinner time. The eating habits of people in London are very similar to those in New York and San Francisco, whereas they are very different from those in Paris. London, New York and San Francisco are also more international and diverse: their neighborhoods are different from each other, but at the same time, areas in the three cities are very similar, such as the Chinatown districts.

The researchers also analysed the eating and drinking habits in the different areas of Central London showing that they are highly non-homogeneous reflecting the diversity of the capital.

The study also showed that American cities are very similar to each other in terms of food and drink habits even though they are physically far apart. This is also true for Asian cities: Singapore is similar to Bangkok, Jakarta, Bandung and so on.

The data also showed that [eating habits](#) in London are slightly closer to America than Continental Europe. London reflects the common Anglo-saxon culture but, at the same time, the physical and cultural proximity to the other European countries.

Dr Mirco Musolesi, lead investigator from the University of Birmingham's School of Computer Science, said: 'Eating and drinking is an essential part of the culture and characteristics of a country and can be used to understand how cities are composed of communities of different nationalities.

'The availability of [social media](#) datasets allows us to understand the culture and the habits of people at planetary level and at a granularity that is really unprecedented. Traditionally, these studies have been conducted at a much smaller scale, and have involved a very small sample of people. This is because they are based on questionnaires or interviews and, they are extremely expensive and time-consuming.

'My research lab at Birmingham is investigating the possibility offered by these new data sources, including mechanisms that are able to preserve the privacy of individuals as much as possible. The applications are many: not only for researchers, but also for retail, commerce, industry, government and no-profit organisations. We are really just at the beginning.'

Provided by University of Birmingham

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