

The Role of Migration in Shaping Cultural Proximity across Countries: Evidence from Facebook Data on National Cuisines

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How is it possible that people living in the US show a high interest in Paella? Despite various differences between cultures, many populations share some cultural preferences even living in different places. Migration is one of the main phenomena responsible for shaping cultural proximity across countries. However, studying the relationship between culture and migration is challenging, especially because culture is a difficult concept to quantify. One way of measuring and studying culture is through people's survey responses, however, this approach has limitations, such as limited sample sizes. To overcome part of these limitations, we propose the use of passively-collected data from social media. Social media provide the ideal environment to study online populations since users share a large quantity of information that reveals cultural preferences. By using aggregated information from Facebook we developed a methodology to characterize and measure the cultural distance between countries. Because food is one of the central aspects of culture, we used the number of Facebook users interested in popular dishes across sixteen countries to estimate interest in cuisines across regions, characterizing countries and their cultural similarities. Methodologically, we expand the line of literature that uses social media data to measure culture across countries. We also assess the role of migration in shaping cultural proximity across countries by comparing our measure of cultural distance with international migrant data. In a majority of countries, larger immigrant populations are associated with a high cultural similarity between their countries of origin and destination. Our results show that cuisine is an important indicator of cultural similarities and immigrants help bring the culture of their home countries to new countries. We expect that our measure of cultural distance can also complement other metrics of distance applied to gravity-type models, for example, to explain flows of people between countries.