

EXPLORING CHARACTERISTICS OF US FOOD DESERTS THROUGH THE LENS OF SOCIAL MEDIA

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The United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Economic Research Service has noted that increases in obesity and diet-related diseases are “major public health problems that may be worse in some US communities because access to affordable and nutritious foods is difficult” (*Access*, 2009). Some areas of the country have limited access to supermarkets and easier access to fast food restaurants and convenience stores. These *food deserts* may be linked to poor diets and, ultimately, to obesity and diet-related diseases, and are of particular interest as we explore how people talk about food in social media. Food systems researchers Shortridge and Shortridge noted that there is a lack of food data such as “an idealized set of food diaries from the American population of everything eaten...” (1998). Although such a comprehensive American food diary does not exist, a subset of Twitter data with precise geographic coordinates, or “geotagged tweets,” in the United States serves that purpose for our research. Using the USDA’s National Nutrient Database, we will construct food pyramids to examine the differences in the types of foods that Americans tweet about in Census tracts that have been deemed as food deserts by the USDA versus non-food desert Census tracts. We will then compare these pyramids of tweeted-about foods to the current food pyramid (Choose My Plate) and the marketing dollars food pyramid created by The Produce for Better Health Foundation, a government-industry partnership, which illustrates the disproportionate distribution of marketing expenditures relative to dietary recommendations (Nestle, 2007).