'You' and Bieber top Xmas Tweet wishlists, but the hippo is closing in

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(PhysOrg.com) -- McGill Professor gets insight into human behaviour by mining info from online social networks.

"You" is, hands down, the No. 1 thing people want for Christmas according to Xmas Tweets, the website from Professor Derek Ruths's research lab at McGill University's School of Computer Science. Ruths developed the program that extracts and prioritizes the most up-to-date holiday wishes posted on the social-networking site Twitter.

Other wish-list items include electronic gadgets, money and not one, but two, front teeth. Although the sight is updated every 20 minutes, it bears mentioning that at the time this release was issued, "aliens" came in at No. 25 – and dogs beat out cats.

What people want for Christmas mostly translates into what people buy. "According to the list, Apple products are 10 times more popular than Android phones," Ruths said. "This can give us an indication of how people are going to spend money this season."

How people wish also tells us what they value most – and it's not all consumerism. The combined Tweets seeking meaningful relationships – including "You" in Twitter-speak – outnumber any single product. And there are other non-product wants. "The fact that 'money' and 'jobs' rank 15th and 16th reflects real concerns in these challenging economic times," he said.

For the moment, Canadian pop sensation Justin Beiber is the top single item on the Xmas Tweet site, nosing out "Hippo," which refers to a vintage Christmas novelty song.

The website and its underlying technology are part of a larger research initiative to develop computer-based methods for identifying individual attributes from unstructured, online data. Such attributes contribute to making better predictions about how groups of people might behave on a range of issues, from epidemics to movie-ticket sales.

"You can't take a large enough survey to get this kind of information," Ruths said. His group is actively developing methods for identifying gender, hobbies, different kinds of personal relationships and other demographic details that are not always evident in online profiles. Each is an important factor in better understanding human behaviour.

And the research doesn't end once Santa has slid down the chimney. Ruths has plans for the post-holiday season, too. "Once the wrapping paper is ripped open, we'll start looking at what Twitter users actually got for Christmas."

Provided by McGill University

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