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WHEN A DIATOM IS ADOPTED BY K-POP FANS—THE STORY OF AN ACCIDENTAL OUTREACH HIT

John R. Dolan 

This is the story of a tweet that went wild and that perhaps has a lesson for outreach. In mid-May, I started working on samples of



FIG. 1. The Antarctic diatom tweet got over 900 “likes” in about 24 h.

plankton collected in Antarctica by my Korean colleagues. I came across a diatom that I found especially nice-looking. I went to some trouble to make an image of it, pipetting it into clean water and getting it to sit on its side. I was pretty happy with the results so I tweeted the image with the line: “How about a diatom from Antarctica?”

I need to say that I use Twitter for fun, mostly to post images of microplankton and silly things that catch my eye. I have had an account for a couple of years and I have got about 800 followers. The “success” of my images of microplankton in terms of “likes” ranges quite widely. Since the beginning of 2021, I have posted about 40 images of microplankton with “likes” ranging from 11 to 298. Retweets can be considered as “engagement” as the person posts it to their own account. My posts of microplankton typically get about 11 retweets, often the same people each time I suspect. I have learned that images of diatoms appear to be especially popular compared to radiolarians or dinoflagellates, with sadly tintinnid ciliates, my personal favorite (my Twitter handle is @TintinnidGuy), coming in last. I expected the Antarctic diatom might attract some attention, but the reaction to my picture of *Coscinodiscus bouvet* Karsten 1905 was very surprising. I tweeted the picture at the end of the workday on May 17th and the next day I saw it was really taking off. In about 24 h, it had over 900 likes and 100 retweets, a surprising retweet rate of over 10% of the

“likes.” I texted my kids a screenshot of the tweet (Fig. 1) saying proudly “Check it out!”

I was happy with its popularity but really puzzled by the comments that made no sense to me. Most of the comments referred to a resemblance to a logo and many comments mentioned butter. It only became clear to me on May 20th with the comment shown in Fig. 2. Something called the BTS Army had come across my tweet and folks thought it resembled the BTS logo. By the time I saw the explanatory comment, the tweet was approaching 5000 likes and 1000 retweets. True confession, I still had no idea what BTS was or why they had a logo or an army. Google though explained everything. I quickly learned that BTS was an immensely popular K-pop band and they were about to release their much anticipated first English language song and video, “Butter.” The video was due to appear on May 21st so the timing of the tweet was likely a key element in its success. Fans of BTS were especially keyed-up, and tweeting like mad. By May 21st, the tweet reached over 9000 likes and 2200 retweets. To me, the BTS logo (Fig. 2b) looks like shutters or a saloon door half-open with little resemblance to my diatom. However, who is going to argue with 9000 K-pop fans?

While the success of the tweet was purely accidental, there may be a lesson here. Perhaps to reach people outside of our field and our “bubble” we should try to employ links to popular items and current events, things outside of our field entirely. By posting something apparently resembling the BTS logo, I actually did pick up a few followers. I, for one, will be on the lookout for things in the plankton that look absolutely nothing like what they really are in hope of interesting folks in the plankton.

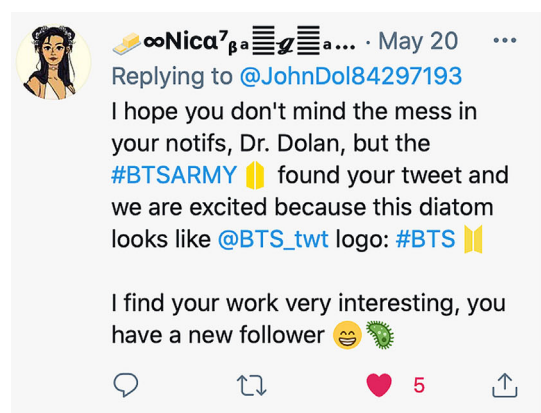


FIG. 2. The comment explaining the unexpected success of the diatom image (left panel). It had been found by the fan army of the very popular group BTS to resemble the logo of BTS (right panel).



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