Unusual reference attracts notoriety

One paper's glaring mistake spurs online chatter after being brought to light on social media.

Chris Woolston

19 November 2014

An editorial oversight has turned a report on fish pigmentation into one of the year's most talked-about papers. Look-alike hipsters and bat acoustics were also hot topics among researchers on social media.

The paper about poeciliid fishes, first published online in July by the journal *Ethology*[1], received scant attention until ecologist David Harris at the University of California, Davis, tweeted his comment and included a screenshot of one of its pages:

Dave Harris
@davidjayharris

Not sure how this made it through proofreading, peer review, and copyediting. Via onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/et … #addedvalue

> Although association preferences documented in our study theoretically could be a consequence of either mating or shoaling preferences in the different female groups investigated (should we cite the crappy Gabor paper here?), shoaling preferences are unlikely drivers of the documented patterns both because of evidence from previous research and inconsistencies with *a priori* predictions. Our methods closely followed those of published mate choice experiments in this system (Tobler et al. 2009a,b; Plath et al. 2013),

RETWEETS 4,174   FAVORITES 2,417

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In one of dozens of responses, Tim Elfenbein, managing editor of the journal *Cultural Anthropology*, tweeted:

Tim Elfenbein
@timelfen

@davidjayharris Note to authors: you are ultimately responsible for the work that bears your name, no matter the level of editing.

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Harris's tweet, which was shared more than 3,000 times in just two days, prompted quick action by Wiley, the publisher of *Ethology*. The paper briefly disappeared from the website and was replaced with a revised version that lacked the "crappy" comment. A Wiley spokesperson told the blog RetractionWatch that "we are in the process of investigating how this line made it to publication".

In a follow-up interview, Harris said that scientists often use strong words when talking about the work of other researchers, but the publisher's main purpose is to ensure quality. However, one of the authors of the *Ethology* paper, Michael Tobler, an evolutionary ecologist at Oklahoma State University in Stillwater, says that he doesn't blame the journal's editors. He apologized to Caitlin Gabor of Texas State University publicly on Twitter and privately in a phone call, he says. The errant comment didn't "represent a scientific assessment of the

paper", Tobler says.

Gabor says that her 1999 paper on mating choice in poeciliids, which that comment was referring to, offered alternative hypotheses to the one proposed in the *Ethology* article. "Personal biases may overshadow an objective evaluation of published scientific work," Gabor said in an interview. Jennifer Gumm, a behavioural ecologist at Stephen F. Austin University in Nacogdoches, Texas, used Twitter to stick up for Gabor, her former adviser:
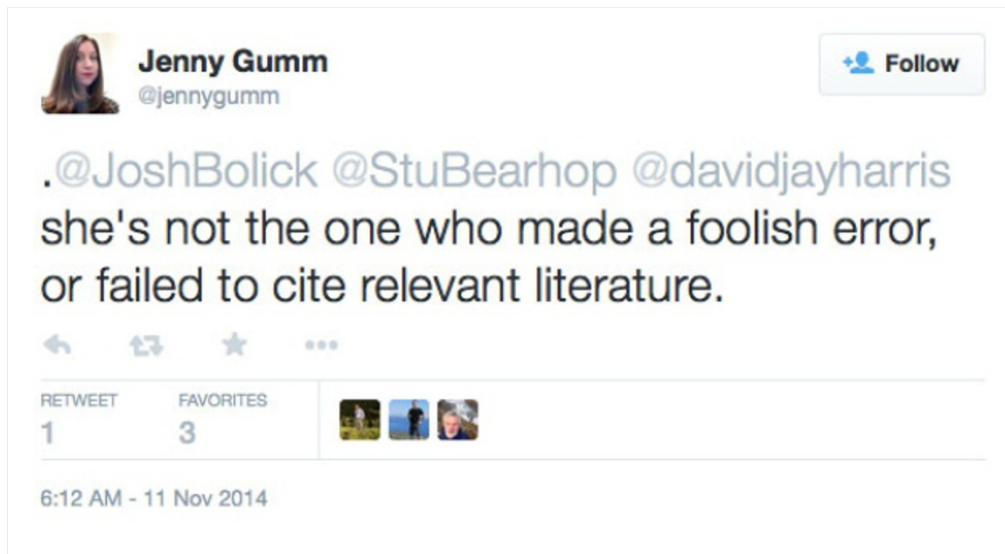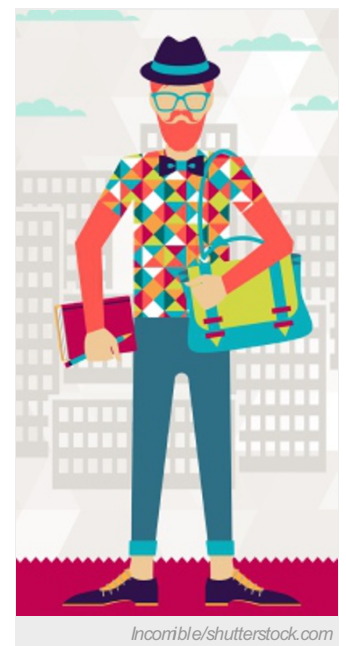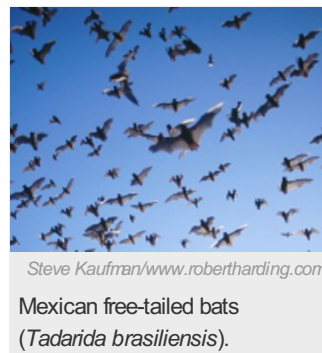

Hipster effect

Another paper[2] making the rounds on social media took a mathematical approach to an intriguing question: why do so many nonconformists end up looking so similar? Jonathan Touboul, a mathematician at the Collège de France in Paris, writes that "2014 hipsters all look alike, although their look progressively evolves."

The paper uses a model often applied to the study of magnetism to show how the presence of both conformists and nonconformists in a population can create predictable cycles. People who want to deviate from the norm often find themselves in the mainstream as fashion trends catch up, forcing them to eventually change styles once again.

Whereas some commenters on Twitter found humour in the topic, Adam Calhoun, who studies computational neuroscience at the University of California, San Diego, had a different take on his Neuroecology blog: "Distinctiveness is a serious matter in ecology and sociology. This is useful!"

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Bat jamming

A *Science* paper about the sonic skills of the Mexican free-tailed bat[3] garnered admiration for the mammal from researchers. Lab studies showed that these bats emit certain calls to jam echolocation signals from other bats — a clear attempt to thwart competition for insect prey. The report was accompanied by a YouTube video that demonstrates the jamming technique, complete with audio of bat calls. Allison Barner, who studies ecology at Oregon State University in Corvallis, tweeted:

Steve Kaufman/www.robertharding.com

Mexican free-tailed bats
(*Tadarida brasiliensis*).

Allison barner
@algaebarnacle

This is the COOLEST. Bats compete w/others in same species by jamming echolocation. sciencemag.org/content /346/62 … Plus, best paper title.

RETWEETS 2   FAVORITE 1

8:17 AM - 7 Nov 2014

‒ References

1. Culumber, Z. W., Bautista-Hernández, C. E., Monks, S., Arias-Rodriguez, L. & Tobler, M. *Ethology* **120**, 1090–1100 (2014).

2. Touboul, J. Preprint at http://arxiv.org/abs/1410.8001 (2014).

3. Corcoran, A. J. & Conner, W. E. *Science* **346**, 745–747 (2014).