Compliment rules or compliments rule? A population-level study of appearance commenting norms on Social Media

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Abstract. This study examines norms concerning appearance-related commenting on social media. More specifically, the focus of this study is on the approvability of positively commenting on other people's physical appearance, commenting on other people's dressing style and commenting on the appearance of public figures. We examined how these norms are predicted by gender and social media usage patterns, while considering also a set of control variables, including age. We approach these questions with unique data, which is nationally representative of the Finnish population aged 18-74 (N=3,724). Our study offers insights into the discussion on the relationship between social media and appearance-related norms. Our findings suggest a generally positive attitude towards commenting on other people's appearance if the comment is positive, with almost half of the respondents approving such commenting. By contrast, commenting on someone's clothing or commenting on the appearance of public figures is considerably less acceptable, with only 20% approving. Our findings reveal that gender, preferred social networking site and age are associated with appearance commenting norms. Women are more likely to approve of positive appearance commentary on social media. However, the propensity to agree on the approvability of appearance commentary is higher for men when it comes to commenting on other people's dressing or public figures' appearances. Overall, the users of Instagram and Facebook seem more liberal towards appearance-related comments as compared to those who do not use social media or use other platforms. Additionally, young people were more positive about appearance commenting in all of these aspects.

Keywords: appearance-related norms · online communities · social media · Instagram, Facebook

1   Introduction

Recent research on body image and social media has emphasized that social networking sites (SNS) offer a central space for engaging in appearance-related social comparisons and appraisals [1, 2]. In the era of so-called selfie culture, internet users are thus considered to face increasing appearance-related pressures and dissatisfaction with their bodies [3]. Just like the consumption of more traditional media such as magazines, exposure to images of idealized bodies online has been associated with the internalization of thin body ideals, appearance comparison and weight dissatisfaction [4, 2]

At the same time, social media has become an important arena for challenging norms regarding physical appearance and binary gender norms. Pertaining to body image, social movements such as fat activism and body positivity are thriving on social media, and are challenging narrow definitions of heteronormative beauty ideals, celebrating bodily diversity, and importantly, advocating for self-acceptance [5, 6]. While social media offers a wide range of different bodily references, it also predisposes individuals to appearance commenting. It may be argued that our extremely visual culture combined with the basic idea of social media - enabling dialogue between people - composes a paradox of people's appearance being evaluated and discussed freely.

Previous research has mainly concentrated on individual responses to appearance commenting. There is a lack of research considering societal-level social rules, i.e. norms, related to appearance-related commenting on social media. More precisely, we do not know to what extent it is normatively allowed to comment on other people's appearance on social media. Previous studies have mostly focused on the effects that exposure to photographs and receiving appearance-related comments have on an individual's body image. These studies have shown that appearance feedback has a crucial impact on appearance satisfaction [7, 8, 9, 10, 11]. Thus, it is crucial to examine the acceptability of appearance-related commenting as these attitudes maintain the status quo, where especially women's physical appearance is subject to constant evaluation and comments.

We begin with a brief discussion about the role of physical appearance and gendered norms regarding it in contemporary society. After that, we discuss the impact of social media on individual body image. Then, we move on to describe our data and present the results. We end with a summarising discussion and conclusions.

2   The norms concerning appearance comments on social media

2.1   The importance of physical appearance in visualized culture

Appearance is an integral part of everyday interaction. People make inferences and judgements of others based on looks, and utilize their own appearances to communicate belonging to social groups and to make distinctions on the other hand. While this is not new, certain social, economic and political tendencies of contemporary consumer cultures appear to increase the significance of physical appearance [12]. Scholars of consumer culture proclaim that physical appearance has become an essential expression of personal identity in postmodern societies. Individuals are thought to project their inner selves with their looks and construct their very identities through consumption [13, 14]. This logic of consumer culture is considered universal and gendered: everyone is called upon to invest in their appearances in order to comply with the appearance-related norms, i.e. social rules of consumer society, such as having a fit body [15]. Much like any norms, appearance-related norms are upheld through social sanctions. These sanctions range from subtle, non-verbal or verbal hints to more tangible perks and penalties for (non-)adherence to norms, including social and economic ones (for reviews, see e.g. [16]). On social media, adherence to appearance-related norms is often verbalized in the forms of comments or likes.

2.2   The gendered logic of appearance commenting

Despite the ethos of consumer culture, there is a widespread consensus that physical appearance is a more constitutive part of life for women than it is for men. The most often used and generally accepted framework for understanding the centrality of physical appearance for women is the sociocultural theory, which claims that contemporary beauty ideals are reinforced and sustained by sociocultural influences, most notably parents, peers and media [17]. Feminist scholars, in particular, have long proclaimed physical appearance is more salient to identities and self-esteem of women, as women are socialized to be more concerned with their appearances than men and more often judged by their appearance [18]. Women face stricter societal norms when it comes to physical appearance [12], and failing to fulfil the societal ideals of beauty comes with psychological costs [18], as well as sanctions.

Prior research reveals a tendency for women to receive compliments on their appearance and to compliment on each other's appearance [19], whereas men seem more likely to trade insults [20]. Actually, "competitive verbal abuse" among men and boys may be regarded as signs of male solidarity [21]. A study about appearance commentary in prime-time television [22] found that although male and female characters comment equally on other characters' appearance, female characters are twice as likely to be the recipients of those comments. Male characters more likely insult other males and compliment females, whereas female characters insult and compliment female and male characters with equal frequency (ibid.).

These gendered discourse patterns also carry over to social media use. For example, Hyart, Lesser & Azran (2017) found evidence of men's assertive and dominant discourse style and social role versus on social media, as compared to women's more cooperative and supportive discourse style: men wrote more posts, while women commented on other people's posts. Another study confirmed that females are significantly more likely to 'Like' posts, to post a public reply and express stronger emotional support towards a Facebook status update than males [23] as well as post twice as many comments and updates on Facebook in comparison to men [24]

2.3   Physical appearance and social media

A casual scroll through Instagram will offer a glimpse to the seemingly perfect lives of women with perfect bodies. These photos are usually accompanied by admiring sighs of (usually female) followers; "I wish I had your body", "I love your hair", "You are so #goals". Previous research on physical appearance and social media has mainly relied on objectification theory [25], which claims that women see themselves as objects, i.e. are dependent upon the approving gaze of others. Additionally, women are said to make social comparisons of themselves [26, 27], and consequently, the socially constructed, normative ideals of beauty are more critical to the self-images of women. Some claim that in a contemporary individualistic culture, selfies' characteristic focus on the body reifies hegemonic beauty norms and invokes the male gaze [28].

Scholars of body image, such as Tiggemann and Barbato [29] claim that objectification theory may be particularly relevant in the context of a photographic social media site like Instagram. According to their study, Instagram is inherently objectifying, as its main function is to post photographs of oneself precisely to be looked at and commented on. The photos and the comments received are publicly visible to one's audience, which may increase the experienced dissatisfaction towards one's appearance. Instagram is known for its visual features and pervasive commenting norms (ibid.)

However, previous research has mainly concentrated on individual responses on the norms regarding the acceptability of commenting other people's appearance seem a rather understudied subject in this field. The social acceptability of (mainly positive) commenting other people's appearance in online forums could also be the driving force on normalizing these conventions on social media, not because people insist other people commenting them. The comments possibly aim to not make the person feel bad about his/hers appearance for the lack of positive comments, but also to obey the platform's commenting norms. These norms appear rather different from offline contexts, where positive appearance commenting is less frequent and normatively less expected in peer communication.

Despite the prevailing norm of giving positive feedback to friends for their appearance, it is worth noting that positive appearance-related comments can also cause body dissatisfaction. The consequences for negative appearance comments in adolescent girls and adult women are well documented: commenting causes, for example, body dissatisfaction, reduced psychological wellbeing and eating disorders [7, 30]. Somewhat counterintuitively, positive appearance-related comments on Instagram photos

can also cause body dissatisfaction and have been associated with self-objectification in adolescent and young adult women [10, 29, 11]. Comments lead to increased awareness of appearance and thus encourage girls and women to adopt an objectifying perspective of themselves (on objectification theory, see [25]). Moreover, it appears that just as offline appearance conversations among friends play a pivotal role in the reinforcement of appearance ideals [31], appearance comments on social networking sites might merely offer a novel medium with negative consequences for women's body dissatisfaction. Studies involving both boys and girls suggest that conversations about appearance-related topics bolster the idea that emulating the ideal appearance of media figures would lead to various positive things, such as popularity and romantic success [32].

It is also apparent that different individuals use social media for different purposes and therefore react to comments and other feedback differently. Fox and Vendemia [33] posited that selective self-presentation on social media enables women with negative body image and low self-esteem to get positive feedback from their peers. Additionally, it has been stated that highly visual social media has the ability to empower users [34], as networked technologies allow for capturing and sharing embodied experience. It has been stated, that groups that have previously been objectified and denied agency may take charge of the way they are portrayed [28]. Young women, in particular, may use networked technologies to develop "selfie esteem", building confidence by successful online self-presentation [6]

Despite such enabling and empowering features, there is reason to be critical. For example, Mills et al. [35] claim that the possibility for selective self-presentation, i.e. retaking and retouching a selfie before posting it on social media for others to see and comment on, actually harmed self-image. Tiggemann and Miller [4] state, that even though photo-editing might increase a sense of control for one's online appearance for a while, it actually made women feel more dissatisfied about the digitally altered aspects of their appearance. Solely browsing through other people's images with positive appearance comments on Instagram photos had negative consequences on women's body image and lead to greater body dissatisfaction [29].

To conclude, a great abundance of the studies on the outcomes of (positive or negative) appearance commenting focus on women, who appear to be more prone to give and receive such comments. Appearance-related comments are usually intended to make a woman feel good or to lift her spirit (for example "You look good", "I would love to have your body", or "That looks good on you"), and usually, the commentators are female peers. The comments are clearly gendered, as directed at a man they might seem a bit peculiar, whereas posed for a woman they appear as normal "girl talk" on social media. Further, selfie-culture and the possibility to encouragingly comment or "like" other people's photos, incorporates a (dis)empowerment paradox, where "personal expressions of beauty may feel empowering at the same moment as those expressions may conform to, and thus reinforce, hegemonic and oppressive cultural norms" [28]. Additionally, compliments, especially ones associated with weight and shape, have negative outcomes also beyond the individuals giving and receiving them. The seemingly innocuous comments also reflect societal norms regarding physical appearance, such as fat prejudice [9, 36].

3   This study

With this previously introduced literature in mind, we propose the fol-lowing research questions:

RQ1: Do men and women equally approve of appearance-related com-menting on social media?

RQ2: Do social media platforms differ in the extent to which their users approve of appearance-related commenting on social media?

RQ3: Is the approval of appearance-related commenting on social me-dia equally gendered among users of different social media platforms?

4   Data and methods

4.1   Participants

Our data are derived from the survey "Finland in the digital age". A total of 2,470 participants aged 18-74 were from the initial sample of 8,000 Finnish-speakers collected randomly from the Finnish census. Additionally, the data were improved with 1,254 participants (also aged 18-74) from a nationally representative online panel of volunteer respondents administrated by a market research company. The final data included a total of 3,724 respondents of which 66 percent comes from the probability sample and 34 percent from the nonprobability sample.

4.2   Measures

We provide information on the measurements and descriptive statistics for all the variables used in the further analyses in Table 1. As for the dependent variable, we used three variables formed on the basis of the following statements:

• It's alright to comment on another person's appearance on social media if the comment is positive
• It's alright to comment on another person's appearance on social media if the comment concerns dressing rather than physical traits
• It's alright to comment on another person's appearance on social media if that person is public figure

In the formation of statements, we consider the potential social desirability bias by inquiring general commentary instead of the respondent's own commentary. The first statement takes into account that also positive commentary can be problematic for so-

cial media users and make them feel dissatisfied and precarious [29]. The second statement assumes that it may be more acceptable to comment on dressing that is more related to people's own choices, whereas physical attributes may have elements that people cannot choose. The final statement consists of the idea that people can, in a certain way, view public figures free of general norms and rules, which may make commenting on their appearance more acceptable than usual [37].

The responses were asked via 5-point Likert scales in which "1 = Completely disagree", "2", "3 Do not disagree or agree", "4", and "5 = Completely agree". In the analysis, we recoded the variable by combining values 1-2 into the category "Disagree", 3 into the category "Neutral", and 4-5 into the category "Agree".

As for independent variables, we used gender and the preferred social network site. Gender was asked via three categories, but due to lack of observations from others than men or women we focused only binary level differences and deleted the "other" category from the analyses. We were especially interested in differences between the users of Facebook and Instagram platforms. Accordingly, we separated the respondents who only use Facebook from those who use both Face-book and Instagram or solely Instagram. Moreover, those respondents who did not use Facebook or Instagram, but used some other SNS, we classified into the category "Other".

We controlled for the age of participants throughout the analyses. We determined respondents' age via an open-ended question in which the respondents reported their year of birth.

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Table 1. Descriptive statistics for the applied variables

Variable	Obs.	Prop./ Mean	Min	Max
Variable 1	3,634		1	3
It's alright to comment on another person's appearance on social media if the comment is positive				
Disagree		.25		
Neutral		.38		
Agree		.37		
Variable 2	3,647		1	3
It's alright to comment on another person's appearance on social media if the comment concerns dressing rather than physical traits				
Disagree		.44		
Neutral		.39		
Agree		.18		
Variable 3	3,642		1	3
It's alright to comment on another person's appearance on social media if that person is public figure				
Disagree		.45		
Neutral		.39		
Agree		.16		
Gender	3,706		0	1
Male		.50		
Female		.50		
The preferred SNS	3,724		1	3
Else/None		.38		
Facebook		.31		
Instagram		.31		
Age	3,711	51.5	18	74

4.3   Analysis strategy

In the first phase of the empirical study, we analyzed the gender and platform differences in experiencing appearance-related pressures on social media. Secondly, we analyzed the modifying effects of the preferred SNS on the gender differences by comparing whether the association of SNS is similar among men and women. Finally, in the statistical model, we tested the associations by employing multinomial logistic regression and held the control variable (age) as constant. Accordingly, the models were equated with respect to each hypothesis:

H1: P(Y)= X1 +C1
H2: P(Y)= X2 +C1
H3: P(Y)= X1+X2+X1*X2 +C1

Here the Y refers to the probability of agreeing with appearance-related commenting on social media. X1 stands for gender. C1 means age, and it is handled as a covariate in each model. Finally, X2 means the preferred social network site.

The analyses were performed with the Stata 15.1 program. We presented the main results of hypotheses as relative risk ratios (rrr) with statistical significances. In order to illustrate the effects in more interpretable and descriptive manner, we post-estimated the estimations as predicted probabilities and showed them in figures by utilizing the coefplot package [38].

5   Results

5.1   Descriptive analysis

We begin our analysis by descriptively examining the distribution of variables. The results are presented in Figure 1. As shown in the figure, there is a generally positive attitude towards commenting on appearance, with over 40% agreeing with a claim if the comment is positive. By contrast, commenting on dressing is generally not considered very acceptable, with only 20% agreeing to the claim. Similarly, only 20 percent approved commenting on the appearance of public figures.
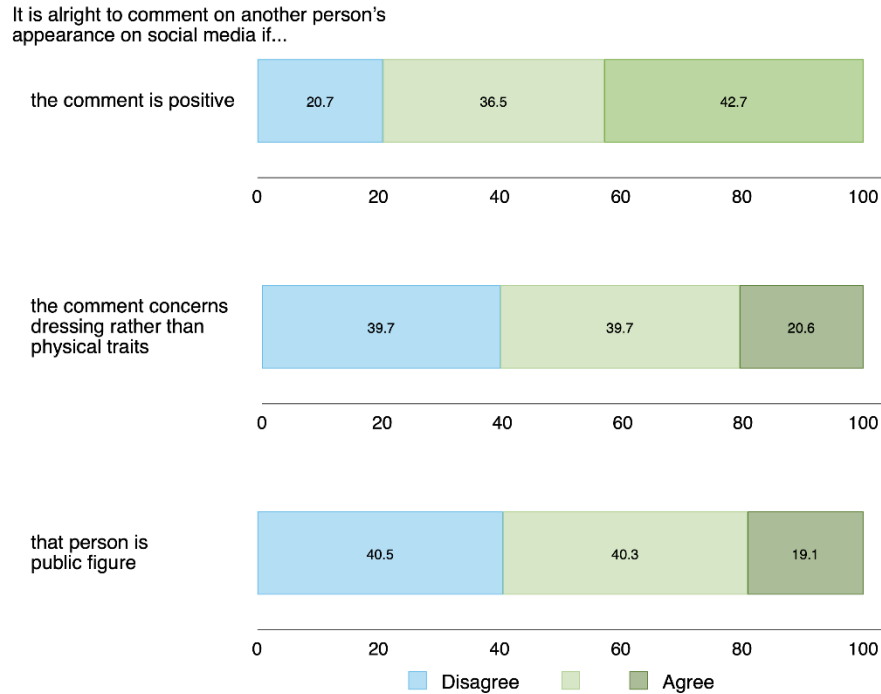
It is alright to comment on another person's
appearance on social media if...

the comment is positive	20.7	36.5	42.7

0   20   40   60   80   100

the comment concerns dressing rather than physical traits	39.7	39.7	20.6

0   20   40   60   80   100

that person is public figure	40.5	40.3	19.1

0   20   40   60   80   100

☐ Disagree   ☐ Agree

Figure 1. Appearance-related commenting on social media: descriptive distribution of responses for three categories, %

5.2   Explorative analysis

Table 2 reveals the results of multinomial logit models alternately for each dependent variable from 1-3. We begin with variable 1. According to model 1, women (RRR=1.42; p<0.01) are more likely to agree with appearance-related commenting on social media if the comment is positive. The model 2 indicates that both Facebook (RRR=1.90; p<0.01) and Instagram (RRR=2.27; p<0.01) users are more accepting appearance commentary. Post hoc analysis revealed that the difference between Instagram and Facebook users was not statistically significant. The model 3 is made up to indicate the multivariate effects of gender, the preferred SNS and their interaction. The model reveals that the effect of gender was indirect through the social media platform as women (RRR=1.09; p>0.05) were not more likely to agree with positive commentary. However, we could not find a significant interaction effect between gender and social media platform. In this sense, we can argue that women are more active in using SNS, which partially explains their attitude towards positive commentary when compared to men. As the table shows, the effect of age was significant in each model, demonstrating that young people are generally more positive about commenting on appearance if the comment is positive.

When it comes to the second variable, we found that women (RRR=0.57; p<0.01) are less likely to agree with appearance-related commenting on social media if the comment concerns dressing rather than physical traits. It was also revealed that only Facebook (RRR=1.45; p<0.05) users are more accepting appearance commentary if it concerns dressing. The difference between Instagram and Facebook was not significant in the post hoc analysis. Finally, the multivariate model (M3) emphasized that also Instagram users are accepting dressing commentary. However, the effect of gender remained significant even after controlling for the preferred SNS. Again, the effect of age was significant in each model, demonstrating that young people are generally more positive about commenting on appearance if the comment concerns dressing.

The last models (Variable 3) are predicting whether it is alright to comment on another person's appearance on social media if that person is a public figure. The first model reveals that women (RRR= 0.40, p<0.01) are less likely to agree with commenting on the appearance of public figures. According to the second model, the use of Facebook or Instagram did not increase the likelihood of agreeing. However, this changed after considering the combined effect of the variables: the final model (M3) indicates that the use of Instagram (RRR=1.43, p<0.05) is positively predicting accepting of commenting on the appearance of public figures. As with other variables, age increases the negative attitude towards commenting.

Table 2. Predicting agreeing with an appearance-related commenting on social media. Relative risk ratios with standard errors derived from multinomial logit models.

	Variable 1			Variable 2			Variable 3		
	M1	M2	M3	M1	M2	M3	M1	M2	M3
Female	1.42**		1.09	0.57**		0.55**	0.40**		0.39**
	(0.14)		(0.18)	(0.05)		(0.11)	(0.04)		(0.09)
Facebook		1.90**	1.58**		1.45**	1.47*		1.12	1.20
		(0.23)	(0.26)		(0.19)	(0.24)		(0.15)	(0.20)
Insagram		2.27**	2.05**		1.26	1.45*		1.13	1.43*
		(0.29)	(0.37)		(0.17)	(0.25)		(0.15)	(0.24)
Female#Facebook			1.43			1.05			1.04
			(0.34)			(0.28)			(0.30)
Female#Insagram			1.13			0.95			0.94
			(0.28)			(0.24)			(0.26)
Age	0.94**	0.94**	0.94**	0.95**	0.95**	0.95**	0.94**	0.94**	0.94**
	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)	(0.00)
Observations	3,616	3,624	3,616	3,629	3,637	3,629	3,624	3,632	3,624

Variable 1: "It's alright to comment on another person's appearance on social media if the comment is positive"

Variable 2: " It's alright to comment on another person's appearance on social media if the comment concerns dressing rather than physical traits"

Variable 3: "It's alright to comment on another person's appearance on social media if that person is public figure"

Relative risk ratios for response "Agree" when "Disagree" is held as a base category.

Standard errors in parentheses

** $p<0.01$, * $p<0.05$

6   Discussion

In this study, we examined the approvability of commenting other people's physical appearance in a variety of situations on social media. We examined how these norms are predicted by gender and social media usage patterns, while also considering a set of control variables.

We found that men are more likely to approve appearance-related commenting on social media when it comes to comments that concern style or a public figure. This might reflect a "male gaze" on the online content. Men may perceive appearance-related commenting differently from women, as they are not exposed to appearance commenting in the same extent that women are. They might consider these comments as something that has relevance for women, as women place more importance on how they look. Women, on the other hand, are more likely to make social comparisons and objectify themselves, which results in feelings of appearance dissatisfaction. As such feelings are more familiar to women, who are socialized to place more importance on their appearance, they even might feel morally obligated to give appearance-related compliments. Indeed we found women are more approving of appearance-related compliments on social media.

It is well known that women face stricter appearance-related norms than men, and that women are more likely than men to form their self-esteem on social comparisons [35, 29]. Normative ideals of beauty reinforce a very narrow definition of beauty which is almost impossible to achieve and such, creates bodily dissatisfaction. Appearance-related comments are partly responsible for bolstering these norms on social media, as they verbally define the socially approved content by complimenting on certain appearances and thus causing appearance pressures for those who are unable to meet these requirements [29].

We found users of Instagram and Facebook are more liberal when it comes to appearance-related comments, as compared to those who use other platforms or are not active social media users. Users of Instagram were the most approving towards appearance-related commenting, however, the differences between Instagram and Facebook users were not statistically significant. This is somewhat surprising, seeing that Instagram is considered *the* platform for appearance-related social comparisons. Instagram also allows for larger imagined audiences and is more "selfie-centred" than Facebook. According to previous research, it also generates more appearance-related pressures than Facebook [39].

Overall, we found the norms regarding appearance commenting seem rather unambiguous: appearance commenting on social media is considered acceptable by the relative majority of our respondents if the comment is positive. Yet according to previous studies, this norm too endangers the wellbeing of many people, who are at the risk of experiencing appearance-related disturbances, such as body dissatisfactions, eating disorders or lowered mood [7, 30]. Therefore, our findings merit consideration and need to be addressed in more detail.

It is worth noting that our results do not reveal whether our respondents themselves comment on other people's appearances online, or had just paid attention to other people's behaviour. Thus, the responses reveal the normative status quo on social networking sites, not personal behaviour or preferences. Platforms like Instagram have their own established practices that encourage appearance commenting, which may reinforce the acceptability of such commenting, as comments can become customary and even a necessary part of communication. In a social environment where appearance-related commenting is customary, not receiving compliments may also be a source of appearance dissatisfaction. Thus, users may comment on their peers' appearances to make peers feel good about themselves and also to obey the platform's commenting norms. These norms appear rather different from offline contexts, where positive appearance commenting is less frequent and normatively less expected in peer-to-peer communication. Instagram has rather frequently discussed possibilities of hiding the number of "likes" and blocking unwanted commentary in order to keep Instagram "a positive space for self-presentation". Considering the results of this study, as well as previous studies concerning the harms of appearance-related commenting, the development of policies to limit likes and commenting or make it private appear worth considering for platforms such as Facebook as well.

The novelty value of our research lies in applying nationally representative data to study the unexplored topic of appearance commenting norms on social media. This present research shed light on commenting norms and showed that the approval of appearance-related commenting differs between men and women as well as between users of different social media platforms. Future research could delve deeper into these gendered social media norms, and for example, use split-ballot designs to consider whether norms are different depending on the gender of the commentator and the gender of the person receiving the comment.

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