Despite women’s economic, social, and political gains in recent decades, the association of women with housekeeping and caretaking responsibilities has stagnated. Throughout the world, women continue to report spending greater proportions of time on housework than men (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Ruppanner, 2010). Because women are often stereotyped as communal and nurturing, they are often believed to have a natural propensity for household tasks such as cleaning and doing laundry (Bem, 1974). Such stereotypes have the potential to relegate women to domestic roles and constrain their behavior (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

Gender role stereotyping is prominent in media and advertisements wherein companies rely on socially prescribed expectations to sell their products (Infanger, Bosak, & Sczesny, 2011). When framed in the context of humor, such stereotypes may evade criticism and perpetuate prejudice (Ford, Boxer, Armstrong, & Edel, 2008). To date, several studies have examined the content...
of gender-based stereotypes in the media as well as how these stereotypes influence perceptions of both women and men. For example, Eisend’s (2010) meta-analysis illustrated the ways in which advertisements “mirror” gender role expectations within a particular cultural context, yet provided little evidence that stereotyped advertisements exacerbate prejudicial values. On the other hand, several researchers have indicated that exposure to stereotypes reinforces negative attitudes toward women and prevents advances in their social status (Heilman, 2001; Romero-Sánchez, Durán, Carretero-Dios, Megías, & Moya, 2009; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004).

Although some researchers have analyzed responses to sexist humor (Ford et al., 2008; Ford, Wentzel, & Lorion, 2001; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002), there has been a lack of research in the area of gender-based humor specifically within the context of advertising and product promotion. The present study attempted to fill this gap, focusing on responses to humor as a marketing strategy. Specifically, the following questions were taken into account: Upon hearing gender-based humor, do people tend to respond with agreement, dissent, or indifference? What arguments or rationalizations do people draw upon when confronted with gender role stereotypes? In light of the mirror perspective (i.e., that advertisements convey the gendered attitudes of a particular culture), these questions were believed to be particularly salient in that they reveal predominant perceptions regarding women’s roles in society (Eisend, 2010). Considering the evidence that stereotypes may exacerbate negative attitudes toward women, understanding how people respond to this type of humor can lead to a greater understanding of the media’s role in the persistence of sexism.

**Stereotypes and Humor in Advertisements**
Advertisements may rely on stereotypes to compensate for a lack of time and space, providing viewers with the most basic information possible. Numerous studies have identified advertisements as a source of gender role stereotypes. In advertisements, women are often portrayed as attractive, young, nurturing, and childlike (Kim & Lowry, 2003). On the other hand, men appear overrepresented as authority figures and are more likely to be shown using logic (Monk-Turner, Kouts, Parris, & Webb, 2007). In addition, men appear in advertisements more often, and when women are portrayed, they are often sexualized or victimized (Stankiewicz & Rosseli, 2008). Stereotyped depictions of women in advertisements are often effective marketing strategies. For instance, Infanger and colleagues (2011) found that advertisements portraying women with communal traits (e.g., holding an infant) were evaluated more positively than were advertisements portraying agentic women (e.g., businesswomen).

Another tactic used in advertising is humor, which can increase an individual’s liking of a product based on positive association. For instance, Strick, Van Baaren, Holland, and Van Knippen (2009) found that products linked to a humorous cartoon were evaluated more positively in a subsequent assessment. Similarly, Krishnan and Chakravarti (2003) found that humor, even when completely irrelevant to the claim made by the advertisement, increased later recognition of the target product. Humor may elicit the attention of the viewer and increase positive emotions, thereby allowing them to look upon the product or company that is being advertised more favorably (Chan, 2011; Eisend, 2011). As Chan (2011) stipulated, humorous advertisements may have added persuasive effects, increasing the likelihood that a person will purchase a product or solicit a company’s services. Indeed, the lighthearted aspect of humor may allow for successful advertisement through the elicitation of positive emotions and product recognition.

**Derogatory Humor**
Offensive humor may be used as an attention-grabbing strategy, but often at a great price. In addition to circumscribing social roles for women, sexist stereotypes may further hostility and negative attitudes toward women. Indeed, derogatory humor may provide a venue in which people can more safely express their prejudices (Ford et al., 2008). For instance, Greenwood and Isbell (2002) found that men who responded positively to misogynistic jokes were especially likely to be hostile toward women (Greenwood & Isbell, 2002). The propensity to find humor in sexist jokes may vary by sex; in their study, Diaconu-Muresan and Stewart (2010) found that women exhibited more negative responses to sexist jokes than did men. Furthermore, participants who endorsed a feminist identity were less likely to respond positively to sexist jokes than were those low in feminist identity. Such results indicated that the propensity to find humor in these types of jokes may be mediated by gender and feminist identity.
Sexist humor has the potential to reinforce negative perceptions of women as well as internalized sexism. For instance, Ford et al. (2008) found that individuals exposed to sexist humor were less likely to contribute financially to a woman’s organization when exposed to a sexist joke; this suggests that exposure to sexist humor may detract from feminist causes. In addition, sexism and sexist jokes have been linked to rape myth acceptance (e.g., the belief that women who experience sexual assault are deserving of their trauma) among those who hear them (Romero-Sánchez et al., 2009). As the aforementioned evidence has indicated, sexist humor may reinforce hostility toward women, subsequently undermining their status, safety, and well-being.

Justification of Sexism

Of key interest to the present study was an understanding of how people respond to sexist humor in advertisements. We were particularly interested in the types of justifications and responses that people draw on when they view a sexist advertisement. Several theories seem particularly useful for understanding how sexism can be justified, minimized, and supported in current day society.

Ambivalent sexism toward women. Ambivalent sexism, introduced by Glick and Fiske (2001), emanates from the fact that men and women are believed to be dependent on one another despite the fact that women are believed to be the lesser sex. This form of sexism has two components: hostile and benevolent sexism. Hostile sexism toward women follows a pattern of contempt, criticizing women who defy traditional gender roles. In contrast, benevolent sexism adopts a seemingly positive perception of women by praising their communal nature and purity. Nevertheless, benevolent sexism reinforces women’s inferior status by emphasizing their dependent nature. As Glick and Fiske (2001) noted, hostile and benevolent sexism are positively correlated, and both correlate with negative perceptions of women as well as internalized sexism.

Ambivalent sexism toward men. In a complementary theory to that of ambivalent sexism toward women, Glick and Fiske (1999) proposed that ambivalently sexist attitudes toward men also serve to uphold traditional gender role stereotypes. Hostility toward men reflects women’s and some men’s anger that men hold greater power and dominate women. However, this hostility does not question the status difference, but rather asserts that men possess inherent traits such as aggression that result in their greater power and status. On the other hand, benevolent sexism toward men upholds expectations that women should take care of men because men are incapable of caring for themselves. Both forms of sexism reinforce gender inequality, providing justification for such inequality based on what are believed to be inherent differences between men and women (Glick & Fiske, 1999).

Social Dominance Orientation (SDO). Similarly, SDO, a theory popularized by Pratto, Sidanius, Stallworth, and Bertram (1994), justifies societal inequality by stating that such inequality is a natural and desirable aspect of social order and is impossible to avoid. SDO is associated with attitudes of racism and nationalism. In addition, those higher in SDO are less likely to endorse social programs that advocate for the rights of women or LGBT-identified individuals. As Pratto et al. (1994) demonstrated, men tend to score higher on measures of SDO than women, an imbalance that may reflect the reluctance among high-status group members (e.g., men, the wealthy) to relinquish the benefits afforded to their positions of power.

Cavalier humor beliefs. Some may claim that offensive humor is only intended to evoke benign laughter. That is, such jokes are not believed to reflect nor promote prejudice. Such claims, labeled by Hodson, Rush, and MacInnis (2010) as cavalier humor beliefs, deny the potential for racist or sexist humor to perpetuate social inequality. However, cavalier humor beliefs are positively correlated with SDO as well as with racism (Hodson et al., 2010). These findings seem to indicate that a joke is not “just a joke,” and may allow joke tellers to disseminate racist and sexist ideas without any negative ramifications.

The aforementioned theories attempt to characterize relationships between social groups and how individuals attempt to create and reinforce a system of inequality. Based on this literature, it is likely that elements of each theory can be found in justifications for sexist humor and provide insight into how gender-based inequality is reinforced.

Current Study

Previous studies have indicated that advertisements often rely on stereotypes and humor to sell a
product (Strick et al., 2009). In addition, research has indicated that sexist humor is pervasive and prominent among individuals who hold implicitly prejudiced attitudes (Greenwood & Isbell, 2007). However, there has been a lack of research pertaining to justifications of sexist humor in the context of advertising and product promotion. The present study aimed to determine such factors by evaluating responses to a controversial label located within a pair of trousers distributed in the United Kingdom. This pants label included the washing instructions, “Give it to your woman . . . it’s her job,” reflecting the common gender role stereotype that women should be responsible for household chores. Of particular interest was how people responded to the stereotype embedded within these instructions. To examine reactions to the pants label, we conducted a content analysis of comments posted in response to news stories about the label in order to understand reactions to and justifications for a sexist marketing strategy.

Numerous major media sources in the United States including ABC®, CNN®, MSNBC®, MSN®, and AOL News® published a photo of the washing instructions on their respective websites, resulting in thousands of responses from readers. From each source, reader comments were examined and coded for their content.

Three primary questions guided the research process: foremost, to what extent do commentators endorse or respond positively to the sexist label, and to what extent do they dismiss or respond negatively to the label? Furthermore, what is the most common reaction to or justification for the label? In adopting the mirror perspective of gender role stereotypes in advertising, the present study aimed to understand the predominant attitudes regarding women, especially with respect to their domesticity, by evaluating responses to and justifications for the joke used in this pants label (Eisen, 2010).

Methods

Procedure

The comments selected for content analysis came from five mainstream U.S. news sources including ABC, CNN, MSNBC, AOL, and MSN. These news sources were selected because they covered the story of interest, have wide popularity, and most have been rated as relatively politically neutral (Groseclose & Milyo, 2005)1. AOL, ABC, and MSNBC each had relatively small numbers of respondents to the story on the article feedback site (AOL n = 19; ABC n = 36; MSNBC n = 31). MSN (n = 2,310) and CNN (n = 1,469) each had large numbers of responders. Thus, 135 MSN comments and 184 CNN comments were randomly selected from larger comment pools. Only the first published response was used for each user, and direct responses to other users were eliminated in order to maintain independence of observations. This resulted in the 406 comments used in the content analysis.

Content analysis coding

Each comment was analyzed and assigned to one or more of the following categories best representing its content: hostile sexism toward women, benevolent sexism toward women, hostile sexism toward men, benevolent sexism toward men, cavalier humor beliefs, expression of perceived humor, agreement with the statement’s observation of gender roles, SDO, denial of sexism altogether, and justification not otherwise specified (see Table 1 for summary of variables). Several comments were lengthy in response and had multiple components. These responses were deemed to fall into multiple categories, and were thus characterized by multiple codes. In the final dataset, 23.9% (n = 97) of the comments contained information that was either irrelevant to the label or too ambiguous to interpret and were thus labeled as uninterpretable.

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1 In the 10 years since Groseclose and Milyo (2005) was published, some of these news outlets may no longer be seen as politically neutral. Liberal-oriented readers may be more likely to perceive sexism in this particular comment, thereby skewing results. We thank a reviewer for noting this point.
as references to negative male stereotypes (e.g., inability to take care of oneself or refusal to ask for directions). Sample comments included “If you can pull your pants up, then you should be able to wash them, pig,” and “All it says is that guys are clueless.” Benevolent sexism toward men was inferred by references to men’s dependent nature and women’s maternal duties to care for them (i.e., men’s incompetence in the domain of clothes-washing). Comments such as “I’ll do anything for my man” and “Sometimes us women are just naturally better at the laundry then men” were categorized in this way.

Comments that were characteristic of cavalier humor beliefs emphasized the positive aspects of joke-telling and minimized the potential social consequences of stereotyped humor. They tended to express sentiments such as “It’s just a joke” or “Lighten up.”

In contrast, comments coded as reflecting a perception of humor in the statement merely stated that “It’s funny,” or “LOL [common Internet shorthand for the phrase ‘laughing out loud’],” but did not explicitly tie the humor to gender-based identity or social disparity. Therefore, perception of humor was distinguished from cavalier humor beliefs when the comment made no attempt to justify the perception of humor.

Comments that were coded as agreement provided a rationale for the accuracy of the pants label. Such responses were distinguished from other categories such as humor or SDO in that they basically reiterated the content of the label (i.e., “It is her job”) without further elaborating on their reasoning for endorsing the stereotype.

Comments were labeled as a denial of sexism if they attempted to justify the statement by denying the continued existence of sexist prejudice. Representative comments included “Women have it just as good as men these days” and “This isn’t 1950 anymore.” Such comments differed from cavalier humor beliefs in that they did not express a perception of humor but rather attempted to suppress the controversy surrounding the label by noting the significant social advances of women.

SDO comments included any sentiment that attempted to illustrate the inherent nature of sex differences. Such comments extended beyond mere agreement by providing explanations of gender roles emerging from biological differences or from long-standing, functional divisions of labor. Comments characteristic of SDO included “Am I the only one getting fed up with all the PC BS [politically correct bullsh*t] we’re subjected to when there are real issues to be dealt with” and “Men are men...and women are women. Let’s not try to be the same!”

Any comment that expressed resistance to the statement, for example, by stating that it was offensive or in poor taste, was classified as an objection to the label. For instance, one respondent stated, “Apparently it is still OK to make condescending [sic] jokes about women, and men’s ignorance and incompetence if that’s how you took it.”

Some responses did not fit into any of the categories listed above, and were thus labeled justification not otherwise specified. Finally, comments that were irrelevant or indiscernible were deemed uninterpretable.

To ensure coder reliability, a subsample of 40 items was coded by two of the authors with a percent agreement of 75% (Cohen’s kappa = .69). Because this level of agreement has been determined to be “substantial” in the literature, the remainder of the coding was completed by only one author (Landis & Koch, 1977).

### Results

Overall, 7.63% (n = 31) of the comments expressed disagreement with or disapproval of the pants label. In contrast, 68.5% (n = 278) of the comments indicated some type of agreement with or justification for the label. A further 23.9% (n = 97) of the items were uninterpretable because of lack of relevance or because their content was too vague or unintelligible to be interpreted with confidence. A chi-square test of goodness-of-fit comparing these three code categories (i.e., agreement, disagreement, or uninterpretable) indicated that all codes were not equally responded to, $X^2(2, N = 406) = 241.70, p < .001$.

The most prevalent types of response are displayed in Table 2. The modal category of comment was cavalier humor beliefs, comprising 25.1% (n = 102) of the dataset. Hostile sexism toward women was the second most prevalent type of response, constituting 10.8% of comments (n = 44).

Justification not otherwise specified characterized 10.1% of the comments (n = 41), and an equal number of individuals (10.8%) responded with mere humor (n = 31) or disagreement (n = 31). Hostile sexism toward men (n = 10) and denial of sexism categories (n = 10) each made up 2.5% of the dataset, respectively, and 2.0% of individuals responded with benevolent sexism toward men (n = 8). SDO characterized 1.7% of comments.
(n = 7), and only 0.5% of comments were characterized by benevolent sexism toward women (n = 2).

Discussion

Results indicated that most respondents (68.5%) endorsed the sexist pants label in some way. In part, the prevalence of endorsement may be explained by cavalier humor beliefs. As the most common type of response, commenters tended to see the statement as “just a joke” and not a reflection of any greater injustice. There are two potential reasons why people might have reacted this way. First, the presence of humor may temporarily sanction offensive comments, allowing individuals to express latent values that might otherwise be rebuked. Indeed, Hodson et al. (2010) found a positive correlation between cavalier humor beliefs and racism, as well as a negative correlation between cavalier humor beliefs and social tolerance. Second, individuals who subscribe to cavalier humor beliefs may bear a certain degree of prejudice and treat offensive humor in a lighthearted manner in order to gain or maintain social acceptance.

On the other hand, the limited number of commentators (7.6%) who expressed objection to the label might have feared potential social ramifications of expressing displeasure with the joke. That is, readers who did find the label offensive might have feared ridicule or name-calling from the vast number of users who promoted the joke or alluded to sexist ideals. Consistent with the conclusions of Becker and Wright (2010), the presence of misogyny might have undermined the motivation for individuals to express distaste for the comment. In other words, the presence of hostile sexism might have silenced women who found offense, for fear that they might be lambasted by their peers or that they might even confirm the stereotype that women are “victimized drama queens.”

Although not nearly as common (7.6%), the humor category parallels that of cavalier humor in that it both endorses the joke and reinforces the stereotype by failing to challenge it. General humor was theoretically defined as a mere observation that the joke was funny without further justification. In contrast, cavalier humor responses justified the statement by downplaying any potentially negative implications of the pants label. However, given more time and space, it is possible that individuals who found humor in the pants label might have elaborated on the lack of negative impact of sexist humor. The expression of humor may also reflect the prejudicial values of respondents; as mentioned previously, Greenwood and Isbell (2002) found that sexist men were more likely to respond positively to derogatory humor. Given these findings, it is possible that a number of commentators embodied sexist values toward women prior to encountering this joke.

As expected, a number of comments (5.7%) expressed agreement, reflecting beliefs that doing laundry is an appropriate role for women. Laundry is a task that has historically been assigned to women, and several have indicated little change in this area over the past several decades (Lachance-Grzela & Bouchard, 2010; Ruppanner, 2010). Agreement with the statement reflects an endorsement of sexist cultural norms and fails to provide speculation as to why such norms exist, thereby potentially reinforcing the association of women with domesticity.

We anticipated that sexism directed toward both men and women would frequently be drawn upon to justify the sexist label. Interestingly, benevolent sexism toward women was not frequently expressed in the comments. One might have expected this to be a frequent category

<table>
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<th>TABLE 1</th>
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<td>Summary of Content Analysis Codes</td>
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<td>Code</td>
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<td>Benevolent sexism toward women</td>
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<td>Hostile sexism toward men</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cavalier humor beliefs</td>
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<td>Denial of sexism</td>
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<td>Social dominance orientation</td>
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<td>Objection</td>
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It's Just a Joke | Peters, Holmgreen, and Oswald

because “good traditional women” are revered for their excellent housekeeping skills. The lack of benevolently sexist comments may reflect reactions to the controversy inspired by this article; indeed, the story was brought to the attention of the media by a woman who was offended upon finding the label in her boyfriend’s pants. According to Glick and Fiske’s (2001) theory of ambivalent sexism, a woman’s rejection of the status quo might have been threatening to a sexist audience who perceived her outcry as an overreaction. Benevolent sexism is usually reserved for women who comply with traditional gender role norms, whereas hostile sexism is a more typical response to gender role defiance (Glick & Fiske, 2001).

A small percentage of individuals (2.5%) exhibited SDO. However, it is possible that such values were subsumed by the more relevant category of cavalier humor beliefs (given the fact that the topic of the story directly involved humor). According to Hodson and colleagues (2010), there is a correlation between cavalier humor beliefs and SDO. Therefore, it is possible that individuals who responded with cavalier humor beliefs were also prone to SDO, although they found expressions such as “It’s just a joke” to be more relevant than a rational and functional explanation of difference in the given situation.

Similarly, few responses (2.5%) were characteristic of the denial of sexism category. One of the functions of cavalier humor is to diminish the consequences of offensive joke telling. Therefore, those who responded with cavalier humor might have been implicitly denying sexism by claiming that the pants label was “just a joke” and not indicative of social inequality (Hodson et al., 2010).

Finally, benevolent (2.0%) and hostile sexism toward men (0.5%) were less frequent responses in our data. Both types of comments would necessarily have required respondents to make negative comments about men despite ambivalent sexism’s overriding function of upholding the imbalance of power between the sexes. Comments that referred to men’s incompetence in any domain might, then, seem unlikely in the context of this story. Alternatively, such comments might simply not have been made because they could have seemed irrelevant given the fact that women were the primary targets of this joke.

Limitations
The generalizability of these results might have been affected by the exclusion of various members of the population based on lack of Internet access. Those with access to the Internet may be more privileged, at least in terms of socioeconomic status, than those without access. Therefore, our results may be inflated in that they largely reflect the interests of high-status group members. Regardless, we determined that our dataset was highly representative of the population exposed to online media content and therefore generalizable to this particular subset of individuals.

The sources of data might have also affected the generalizability of these findings. We selected websites that had been previously identified as fairly neutral in terms of political affiliation. However, it is hard to determine the exact perspective of each news site, and the political affiliations of the readers would likely influence their reactions and justifications of the story. It would be interesting for future research to also integrate the political perspective of the website and commenter.

The present study might have benefited from the inclusion of demographic data such as sex of the commenters who participated. Our initial hope was to code comments for the sex of the writers. Unfortunately, such information was unavailable due to the low frequency of individuals who expressly stated their sex (n = 29). Future studies may explore the role that multiple intersecting facets of identity play in responses and reactions to sexist humor.

In addition, the fact that there were only two coders for the present study is a potential limitation. Because the interrater reliability on the initial

| Table 2 |
| Frequencies and Percentages for Codes Into Each of the Categories |
| Code | Frequency | % |
| Cavalier humor | 109 | 25.1 |
| Uninterpretable | 97 | 23.9 |
| Hostile sexism-women | 44 | 10.8 |
| Justification not otherwise specified | 41 | 10.1 |
| General humor | 31 | 7.6 |
| Objection | 31 | 7.6 |
| Agreement | 23 | 5.7 |
| Hostile sexism-men | 10 | 2.5 |
| Denial of sexism | 10 | 2.5 |
| Benevolent sexism-women | 8 | 2.0 |
| Social dominance | 7 | 1.7 |
| Benevolent sexism-men | 2 | 0.5 |
subset of data was determined to be substantial, one coder proceeded with the coding of the rest of the comments. Given the established interrater reliability, we feel confident in the accuracy of the subsequent coding and the validity of the categories coded. Regardless, future researchers might consider using multiple independent coders for all comments to further ensure coding accuracy.

Despite the limitations of online-based content analysis, there is certainly value in such data. It is likely that the anonymity provided by such venues allows users to provide candid responses, and different results might be obtained in a laboratory due to social desirability demands. Thus, these types of comments provide a rich source of data that we encourage future researchers to consider using for qualitative research. Furthermore, qualitative coding programs such as Linguistic Inquiry and Word Count could help to further identify themes within the comments. Finally, future research could utilize experimental methods to determine exactly who accepts or rejects sexist humor and by exactly which mechanisms.

Conclusion

Many people claim that “a joke is just a joke,” yet evidence has suggested otherwise. As Hodson and colleagues (2010) indicated, individuals who view offensive humor with cavalier attitudes may, in fact, bear a certain degree of prejudice. The positive reaction elicited by this joke provided evidence of an unwillingness to reject the status quo. Furthermore, if Internet users respond publicly and positively to derogatory humor, this may increase the likelihood that companies will use similar marketing strategies in the future. Previous studies have provided evidence that exposure to derogatory humor may perpetuate negative attitudes toward historically oppressed groups (Ford et al., 2008; Greenwood & Isbell, 2002; Romero-Sánchez et al., 2009; Tiggemann & McGill, 2004). Exposure to prejudice such as sexism may be psychologically harmful. For example, Swim, Hyers, Cohen, and Ferguson (2001) found that women who experienced sexism in their everyday lives were more likely to report anger, anxiety, discomfort, depression, and low self-esteem. As this evidence indicated, a sexist joke may not be “just a joke.” Rather, it holds the potential to provoke attitudes of hostility and damage the psychological well-being of women. Determining the dynamics by which individuals justify and perpetuate sexist humor is an important first step in establishing efforts to counteract these processes. The present study contributed to an understanding of what types of comments may frequently emerge in the context of sexist humor, and future studies have the potential to further elucidate why these types of comments are used.

References


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