

**HEALTHIST IDEOLOGIES:
THE CASE OF LULULEMON ATHLETICA**

by

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Abstract

Over the last three decades, ideas about health have been influenced by neoliberal politics. Robert Crawford coined the term healthism to refer to this dominant ideology that places much responsibility on the individual to achieve a level of health while avoiding ill-health. The moral obligation to live a health-promoting lifestyle has become increasingly pronounced in North America, thus activities, services, and products that promote a high level of health have gained considerable attention. In this social context, Lululemon Athletica, a yoga-inspired retail store that sells athletic apparel primarily to “active” women, has flourished. This thesis focuses on Lululemon Athletica as a site in which to examine health ideologies in contemporary North American capitalist culture and exposes the ways in which Lululemon has incorporated health ideologies as a vehicle to corporate success. This thesis is based on a discourse analysis of two primary texts produced by Lululemon Athletica: Lululemon’s website, www.lululemon.com, and a 150-page Lululemon Athletica memoirs book. Three themes emerged from the analysis: Lululemon incorporates 1) healthist ideologies, 2) yoga as a holistic health practice, and 3) lifestyle branding techniques into the company’s promotional materials and retail practices in order to develop a corporate identity that seems timely, relevant and profitable. My analysis affirms the potency of healthism in North American society and reveals that Lululemon’s strategic use of dominant healthist ideologies has helped the retailer to capture a large market and gain considerable corporate success. This project ultimately provides awareness of the dominant, yet largely taken-for-granted health ideologies that currently circulate in North American society.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Lululemon Athletica. If that name is not familiar to you, then chances are you are not a member of Kingston's Goodlife Fitness club on Barrack Street. As a member of Goodlife Fitness club (that attracts middle to upper class people interested in achieving a level of health and fitness), I have witnessed the massive popularity of the retail store, Lululemon Athletica (or Lululemon for short). I have never attended a group exercise class where I haven't been able to browse the equivalent of a full catalog of Lululemon clothing designs. Lululemon has become a staple brand name and the Lululemon logo, which is a stylized "A", has become a recognizable symbol (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Lululemon logo (Lululemon, 2007).

With more than ninety stores across Canada, the United States, Australia and Japan, Lululemon has made its mark on the multi-billion dollar health and fitness industry (Lululemon, 2007; IHRSA, 1995, as cited in Hums, Barr & Gullion, 1999: 52). Yet, prior to 1999, Lululemon was just a funny sounding name with no reference to health or fitness. Today, however, Lululemon is a very popular yoga-inspired retail company that

sells functional athletic apparel, primarily to “active” women, and less so to men¹ (Lululemon, 2007).

The mastermind behind Lululemon is a man named Chip Wilson. In 1998, Wilson recognized that the practice of yoga was in the midst of becoming an extremely popular activity in North America. Furthermore, he observed the absence of functional (as well as stylish and “feminine”) athletic clothing to accommodate yoga’s wide range of movements. Wilson was quoted as saying, “Women were wearing clothing that was either made for men, or was made for women but looked masculine. The clothing just didn’t suit the nature of the activity [yoga]” (Lululemon, n.d: 12). He therefore came up with the idea of producing form-fitting, stretchy “yoga-inspired” athletic clothing. Although Lululemon clothes are designed to look great on the people who wear them, Lululemon does not explicitly focus a lot of their attention on this in their marketing. Rather, Lululemon emphasizes that Lululemon “clothes make people *feel* good” ([emphasis added] Lululemon, n.d: 57). A Lululemon employee is quoted in Lululemon’s memoirs book as saying, “Wearing Lululemon clothes makes me want to be active. Just yesterday, I played tennis in my Lululemon pants and on the weekend I went for a run in my Lululemon shorts. How great are clothes that make you feel like that?” (Lululemon, n.d: 73).

A key aspect of Lululemon products is a fabric called Luon which is “Lululemon’s signature performance fabric” (Lululemon, 2007). Luon (made up of 86% Nylon and 14% Lycra) is a comfortable, stretchy fabric that “wicks away moisture from the body” (Lululemon, n.d: 12). Luon is therefore an appropriate fabric to wear when perspiring since the clothing will not feel damp with sweat. Additional functional

¹ Approximately 20% of the floor space in Lululemon is devoted to men’s clothing (Shaw, 2008).

features of Lululemon apparel include: flat seaming for less irritation, panels in shorts to increase lateral movement, credit card and key pockets, and locking zippers that stay in place (Lululemon, 2007). Although Lululemon is a yoga-inspired retail store, Lululemon promotes its clothing for almost any physical activity.

Lululemon has incorporated various unusual practices and strategies into the company in order to make Lululemon's retail experience unique. First, Lululemon stores have been promoted as health resource/education centers in addition to a retail company. For instance, Lululemon stores are designed to operate as "epicenters of health" that disseminate knowledge and provide tools in order to "raise the level of health and personal success" in Lululemon communities (Lululemon, 2006). Lululemon's website indicates that Lululemon strives "to maintain our personal and professional focus on living healthy, balanced lifestyles" and that "it is important for our guests [Lululemon customers] to feel healthy and balanced" (Lululemon, 2007). Lululemon also promotes the importance of health to their employees. For instance, Lululemon employees get two free yoga classes a week in approved yoga studios in the community. Most Lululemon stores provide shower facilities to encourage staff to walk, bike or run to work (Lululemon, 2006). Given that Lululemon's mission statement is "To provide components for people to live a longer healthier and more fun life", it is evident that health is central to Lululemon's corporate identity (Lululemon, 2006).

Another unique feature of Lululemon is that the company does not rely on traditional advertising techniques such as television commercials, radio ads, or newspaper spreads. Instead, the company relies on word of mouth techniques where "ambassadors", who are "unique individuals" who "embody the Lululemon lifestyle", are given

Lululemon products in exchange for feedback on those products (Lululemon, 2006). Ambassadors ultimately provide Lululemon with feedback from the community which improves product design and implementation. Lululemon is also known for out-of-the-ordinary marketing campaigns. For instance, in 2002, Lululemon held a “nudiefest” to mark the opening of their second store in Vancouver, British Columbia. The first thirty people to arrive naked on the opening day were to be rewarded with clothes to cover themselves. However, when Chip Wilson was ready to welcome the naked guests into the store, his excitement apparently turned to panic when “the first three people lined up at the door were naked girls no older than about 14 years old. Chip thought quickly and decided it would improve the situation if he came out of the store accompanied by his wife Shannon” (Lululemon, n.d: 43). Although this event aroused much controversy, a similar “nudiefest” marked the opening of the Kingston Lululemon store several years later.

Another uncommon feature of Lululemon is that the company has developed its own language to distinguish itself from other retailers. For instance, Lululemon created ‘A Glossary of Lululemon Terms’ since “much of the language associated with traditional business models didn’t speak to our [Lululemon’s] vision” (Lululemon, 2007). Terms include the following: “Educator – Employees that work on our retail floor. They live our core values and educate on our products”, “Manifesto – A truth check. What we live by”², “Greatness – What we all aspire to”, “Guests – Our beloved customers” and “Store Support Center (SSC) – Lululemon Head Office” (Lululemon, 2007). These terms

² The Lululemon manifesto is a series of statements that embody the company’s vision, culture and beliefs. Statements include: “Sweat once a day to regenerate your skin”, “Move your body and your heart will follow”, “Love”, “Friends are more important than money” and “Dance, sing, floss and travel” (Lululemon, 2007).

are among the many things that compose Lululemon's unique "culture". A Lululemon employee is quoted as saying, "Ultimately, we wanted to create an entire culture, complete with its own language and story" (Lululemon, n.d: 99). These unusual business practices and strategies help to promote Lululemon as a retail company that, according to Lululemon, is "more than just a retail store" (Lululemon, n.d: 114).

For this thesis, I will exercise my sociological imagination by investigating Lululemon Athletica through documents and promotional materials produced by Lululemon. I believe that Lululemon is an ideal site in which to conduct research on current health discourses and how these discourses can be taken up and exploited by a business for profit. I therefore have two objectives for my thesis on Lululemon Athletica. First, using Lululemon as a template, I want to expose some of the discourses surrounding health that have emerged in contemporary capitalist culture and second, I want to expose the ways in which Lululemon has incorporated some of these dominant health discourses as a vehicle to corporate success. Ultimately, I hope to present a perspective on Lululemon that can help us better understand our contemporary capitalist culture, specifically in relation to health. In order to accomplish this, I will be answering the research question: *How have current ideologies around health facilitated the corporate success of Lululemon?*

A trip to Lululemon Athletica

A visit to a Lululemon store can be a unique retail experience since Lululemon has made various attempts to step outside the box. To illustrate this point further, I will describe a recent visit to a Lululemon store in Kingston, Ontario. Although Lululemon

stores are not “carbon copies of one another” my discussion of Kingston’s Lululemon will illustrate what a trip to Lululemon might entail (Lululemon, n.d: 84).

In April of 2008, I paid a visit to a Lululemon store located at 270 Princess Street in Kingston, Ontario. As I approached the Lululemon store, I could see a bright red flag secured to the store that displayed the name, ‘Lululemon Athletica’, the Lululemon logo and a silhouette of a woman in a yoga position. As I came closer to the store, I took notice of Lululemon’s window display exhibited under the ‘Lululemon Athletica’ sign (Figure 2).



Figure 2: Lululemon’s window display, April 2008.

At first glance, the window display (which frequently changes) appeared to portray an HIV/AIDS awareness theme since there was a large banner of a person’s palm with a red ribbon on it. On further examination, I noticed that the window display was promoting an HIV/AIDS fundraising event called, ‘Taste For Life’. Three signs read: Dining to Donate – Taste For Life, Wednesday, April 23 2008. In the middle of the window display was a small dining table with two cups, a menu and a vase of flowers. Lastly, a

male mannequin, dressed in Lululemon attire, had a large red ribbon attached to its shirt. I was intrigued to find out more information about this upcoming event and how Lululemon was getting involved.

Looking towards the entrance of the store, I observed a display board that was placed near the sidewalk close to the front door. This display board was advertising an upcoming in-store event called 'Bootcamp with Taylored Training' that was being held on April 20th from 9 to 10 AM. I was aware that Lululemon frequently holds complementary in-store events focusing on health and fitness since I had attended an in-store event on November 28, 2007 at 7 PM. At that event, a yoga instructor from the Kingston community led a fifty minute yoga session. The clothing racks were pushed aside to make room for the class and we all found spots on the floor for our yoga mats. The class began with a few minutes of "meditation" where we were instructed to sit cross legged, close our eyes and get rid of any outside thoughts. As I closed my eyes, I could hear two employees counting a large pile of cash that they brought in that day. Needless to say, I was unable to get rid of my outside thoughts.

As I opened the door and stepped inside the Lululemon store on my most recent visit, I immediately saw a large monthly calendar with the heading, 'Community Events This Month'. This calendar listed in-store events for the month of April such as 'Dance Fitness' on April 13th, 'I am Real' on April 23rd, and 'Yoga with Andree' on April 27th. 'I am Real' was billed as "an inspiring and unique conversation-style lecture" led by Lululemon ambassador, Mandy. The lecture would weave "stories of Mandy's travels with the mysteries of love, healing, truth, and spirituality" (Lululemon, 2007). I also observed two silver bowls on the ground; one bowl contained dog treats and the other

was filled with fresh water. I later found out that Lululemon encourages people to walk their dogs as this contributes to a healthy lifestyle for both pet-owners and dogs. Once I made my way into the main store area, I couldn't help but notice all of the different colours of clothing neatly folded on tables, hung on racks, displayed in cubbies, or organized in the 'pant wall'. The 'pant wall' organizes Lululemon pants by style and size where the largest sizes are located at the bottom for females and at the top for males. The clothes were not at all misplaced. The majority of clothing appeared to be made out of Luon, a "lycra/nylon fabric that wicks away moisture from the body" (Lululemon, n.d: 12). Near the front of the store was an area for men's clothing; the remaining space was filled with items primarily designed for women. In addition to clothing, Lululemon was selling yoga mats, balance (workout) balls, skipping ropes, instructional yoga DVDs, 'dense foam bricks' (used to improve yoga postures), water bottles, gym bags and posters of the Lululemon manifesto.

The décor inside Lululemon consisted of lemons, seashells, various plants, framed art, a life-size head sculpture that I found out symbolizes Hinduism (since yoga evolved from Hindu religious texts) and a live fish swimming in a goldfish bowl. Displayed on the walls of Lululemon were poster-size pictures of some of their local ambassadors in various yoga positions and different motivational slogans around the store such as, "Work it harder. Make it better. Do it faster. Makes us better!" Other items on display in the store included a large yoga book, open to a page showing yoga poses, and a book titled, Doga – Yoga for Dogs. A stylish water fountain offered complimentary filtered water to all customers and employees. I browsed through Lululemon's 'community board' located near their changing room area. This 'community board' is a book of

posters mounted on the wall that highlights health and fitness activities and resources in the Kingston community. I decided to check out the changing rooms so I tried on a pair of Lululemon pants. Inside my changing room was generous mirror space and a poster outlining how to perform a breast self-examination.

After returning the pants to a Lululemon employee, I came across an advertisement for the 'Taste for Life' event. This advertisement revealed that on April 23rd a number of restaurants in Kingston would donate 25% of their sales to 'HIV/AIDS Regional Services' (HARS). HARS is an organization, located in Kingston, that focuses on prevention, education and support programs for HIV/AIDS (HARS, n.d). As I approached the cash desk, I noticed a stack of brochures on the HARS organization. I also noticed that there were red ribbons pinned on many articles of clothing displayed throughout the store.

It appeared that Lululemon was promoting *another* upcoming event since I came across a promotional poster on Heart and Stroke's 'Big Bike' event happening on May 9th. This fundraising event is named after a 30-seat bicycle that is ridden through two-hundred communities in nine provinces (Heart and Stroke, 2008). Seventy-nine percent of Heart and Stroke's donations go to research, health promotion and community programs (Heart and Stroke, 2008). One of Lululemon's motivational posters (located near the entrance) displayed the Heart and Stroke logo at the bottom. My observations led me to wonder whether Lululemon and the Heart and Stoke are collaborating to some extent.

My observations at Kingston's Lululemon store suggest that Lululemon is a distinctive retail store. The company connects itself to health and yoga and incorporates

a number of unique elements in its practices to make itself distinct: special in-store events; complimentary filtered water; treats for dogs; health, nutrition and exercise information; breast self-examination instructions; symbols of Hinduism; unique language; and, non-traditional advertising techniques.

Success of Lululemon

Since Lululemon's opening in 1999, the company has become hugely successful, primarily in Canada and the United States. As of January 2008, Lululemon expanded to include more than ninety stores across Canada, the United States, Australia and Japan (Lululemon, 2007). Two U.S. investment firms, Advent International and Highland Capital Partners, witnessed the vast expansion of Lululemon and bought 48% of the company for C\$108 million in December 2005 (Catto, 2005). In July of 2007, Lululemon went public at \$18 per share and rose to an all-time high of \$58 per share on 22 October 2007, making the company worth \$4 *billion* dollars (Bentz, 2007; Google Finance, 2008; The Economist, 2007). In December of 2007, it was reported that Lululemon had sales of \$66 million in the last quarter alone (The Economist, 2007). The source of its financial success is a "loyal cult following" of customers (Strauss & Waldie, 2007). For instance, when the seaweed content in certain Lululemon fabrics was questioned by the New York Times in November of 2007, The Economist (2007) suggested that it did not affect "the devotion of Lululemon's fanatical customers, of which there are many" and "though it affected the firm's share price for a fortnight, the seaweed brouhaha did not affect sales"³. In the past nine years, Lululemon has been "one of the best growth stories in retail" (The Economist, 2007).

³ See page 22 for more information regarding the seaweed content in Lululemon fabrics.

Why has Lululemon become so successful in such a short period of time? Why is Lululemon often considered to have a “cult-like following” of customers? (Ratner, 2007) Why are so many people prepared to spend more than \$100 dollars on a pair of Lululemon athletic pants? My research on Lululemon will help to answer these questions and provide some perspective on this innovative company.

The remainder of this thesis comprises three chapters that are organized around the research question: *How have current ideologies around health facilitated the corporate success of Lululemon?* In Chapter 2, I will discuss the methodological approach that I have taken to answer my research question. In other words, I will discuss how I conducted my research on Lululemon. In Chapter 3, I will move into a discussion of the themes that emerged out of my analysis on Lululemon. This chapter will produce the foundation from which I answer my research question as it will discuss the dominant discourses evident in Lululemon materials and within our contemporary culture. Chapter 3 will also reveal some of the significant problematic implications associated with the existence of Lululemon in a society preoccupied with health. In Chapter 4, I will discuss the implications of my research project and present my final conclusions on Lululemon Athletica.

Chapter 2 - Methodology

My first interaction with Lululemon was in 2002 when a teammate of mine, who had recently accepted a retail job at a Lululemon store in Toronto, suggested that we order Lululemon clothes for our synchronized skating team. The form-fitting stretchy clothing seemed appropriate for our team of twenty-four female athletes. We therefore purchased Lululemon apparel that was worn by all team members as our off-ice team uniforms.

Apart from having Lululemon uniforms for my skating team from 2002 to 2005, my involvement with the company has been limited. I am connected to my research only through the fact that I occasionally purchase Lululemon garments and I frequently wear Lululemon clothes in active settings (less so in inactive settings). I have never been an employee of Lululemon, nor do I have any personal ties to the company (although a few of my friends have been, or currently are employees of Lululemon). I am also not an experienced yoga participant however I do enjoy yoga from time to time and I do believe that it provides health benefits such as increased flexibility, posture, balance and strength, as well as reduced stress (Taylor, 2003: 116; Strauss, 2005: 57).

My decision to focus my Master's thesis on Lululemon has been influenced by many different factors, especially my interest in understanding better the current historical moment with regard to health and fitness in North America. For instance, North Americans are in the midst of a health and fitness movement that began in the late 1970s (Crawford, 1980: 365). Smith Maguire (2008) notes, "At work in driving the fitness boom in the 1970s was the convergence of a popular cultural interest in self-

improvement and a political economic emphasis on individual responsibility” (4). As a result of this new health consciousness, participation in various health practices skyrocketed. For example, between 1976 and 1978, membership in the New York City Runners Club tripled, and between 1973 and 2000, the number of health clubs in Manhattan grew from only 67 to more than 200 (Frum, 2000, as cited in Smith Maguire, 2008: 4; Smith Maguire, 2008: 10). Due to rising demand, the number of health and fitness products and services began to inflate. From the 1960s to 1970s, “the number of pairs of athletic shoes sold annually in the US rose from 130 to 180 million”, and by the 1980s that number rose to 380 million (Vanderbilt, 1998, as cited in Smith Maguire, 2008: 14). In 2004, athletic footwear had a market worth of \$14.8 billion (US), or 30% of the \$48.9 billion US sporting goods market (Euromonitor, 2005, as cited in Smith Maguire, 2008: 14-5). My decision to focus on Lululemon has therefore been influenced by the current health and fitness movement and the escalating popularity (and profitability) of the health and fitness industry in the North American capitalist society in which I currently live.

I am undertaking this project on Lululemon because I would like to contribute to the literature around dominant health ideologies in North American contemporary capitalist society. It is important to delve into health ideologies further because I currently perceive significant problematic implications associated with the new health consciousness. For instance, I believe that an individualist approach to health has become the dominant approach. Individualist approaches to health however are largely focused on changing lifestyle choices and ignore significant social and cultural conditions that shape health (White, Young & Gillett, 1995: 160). I believe that an analysis of

Lululemon can provide a heightened awareness of dominant health ideologies in our own contemporary capitalist society. In other words, I believe that a successful retail store that focuses on health and yoga will illustrate how North Americans think about health and what we should be doing to attain health. I also believe that Lululemon can provide a distinctive perspective of health discourses since Lululemon is a retail store that profits from its customers. In other words, Lululemon's health messages are not value-free. A critical analysis of Lululemon is therefore important because I believe it will reveal the commodification of health discourses in our contemporary capitalist society by suggesting how Lululemon is able to utilize such discourses to become a profitable company.

I have chosen to focus my research specifically on Lululemon (instead of other sporting retail stores such as Nike) because I perceive that Lululemon is a fruitful site to explore the new health consciousness and the holistic health movement that is pervading North American society. Given that health is central to Lululemon's corporate identity and a holistic health practice (yoga) is the inspiration behind the company, I believe that Lululemon is an excellent setting in which to examine dominant health ideologies, holistic health, and the interconnections between health and consumerism. I have also chosen to focus on Lululemon because of its Canadian roots. Although Lululemon is currently exploding onto the international scene, it is a Canadian company that originated in Vancouver, British Columbia. Focusing on a Canadian company will ensure that my analysis is applicable to a Canadian context. Finally, I have chosen to focus on Lululemon because there are no published academic articles that consider Lululemon

from a sociological perspective. Given Lululemon's increasing popularity, this is surprising.

I believe that the best way to carry out my research is to conduct a *discourse analysis* of Lululemon Athletica sources including Lululemon's extensive website, www.lululemon.com, (Figure 3) and a Lululemon Athletica memoirs book (Figure 4).

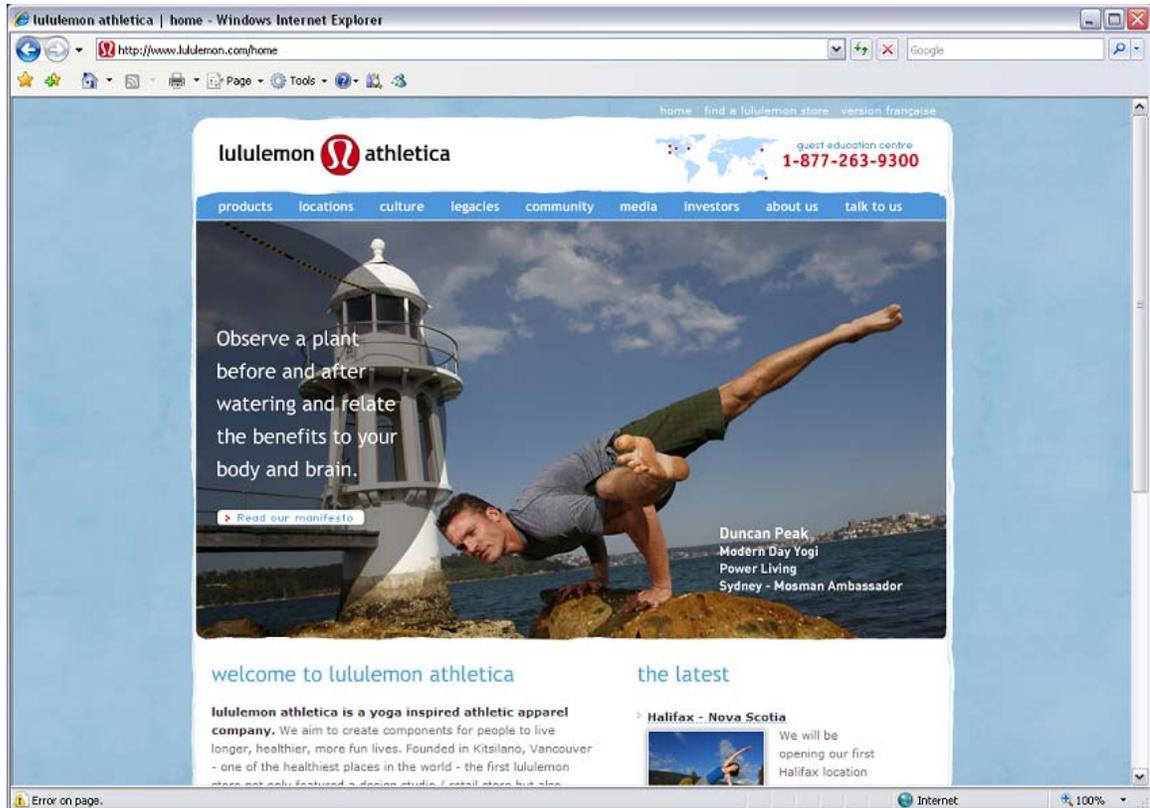


Figure 3: Lululemon's website: www.lululemon.com (Lululemon, 2007).



Figure 4: Lululemon’s memoirs book.

Lululemon’s website is one of the few publicly available sources on the company; it is an excellent source as it contains material that goes beyond product information. The website contains detailed sections (and subsections) such as ‘Culture’ (subsections include Chip’s Musings, Goal Setting, Lululemon Manifesto, and Yoga Info 101), ‘Legacies’ (subsections include Creating Community Legacies, Code of Conduct, Our Focus, Our Factories and Day-To-Day Greatness) and ‘Community’ (subsections include Original Intent, Ambassadors and Charitable Giving) (Lululemon, 2007). In addition, Lululemon’s website contains a 15-page ‘Media Kit’ that describes the basic practices and principles of Lululemon, as well as an online magazine called ‘Luluzine’ (although it appears that Lululemon is removing this feature from their website).

The Lululemon Athletica memoirs book (Figure 4) is a nine-inch by ten-inch soft-cover 150-page book that discusses the origins and expansion of Lululemon in a series of quotations taken from various individuals who have been involved with the company. It also includes newspaper/magazine articles written about Lululemon in Time magazine and the Financial Post, for example, as well as numerous pictures of Lululemon stores, Lululemon events, and Lululemon products. In addition, the last twenty-three pages of

the memoirs book displays 1840 small pictures of Lululemon employees. The book was published by Echo Memoirs Ltd. which is a company based in Vancouver, British Columbia that can assemble a “coffee-table” book to capture any experience or history (Echo Memoirs, 2005). Lululemon’s memoirs book, dedicated to “all of the amazing people who have helped elevate Lululemon Athletica to greatness”, was released to Lululemon employees after Lululemon went public in July of 2007 (Lululemon, n.d). This memoirs book was not for sale to the general public. I obtained a copy from one of my friends who had recently been an employee at Lululemon. This book is useful for my analysis since it contains passages from various employees such as Chip Wilson and Robert Meers. Meers was named the new CEO of Lululemon in January 2006 however, Chip Wilson retains a majority position within the Lululemon company (Gagne, 2006; Lululemon, n.d: 112). Although Wilson and Meers’ words might have been edited by the company’s public relations people as well as Echo Memoirs Ltd., the Lululemon memoirs book provides a sense of how the company wants to be seen. It is crucial to uncover how Lululemon frames the company because this will allow me to explore how Lululemon incorporates ideologies about health into their marketing efforts in order to gain corporate success. In addition to analyzing the website and the memoirs book, I will also contextualize these two texts with relevant newspaper and magazine articles.

According to French philosopher Michel Foucault, discourse “concerns both language and practice and refers to the regulated production of knowledge through language which gives meaning to both material objects and social practices” (Barker, 2000: 20). Foucault argues that “discourse regulates not only what can be said under determinate social and cultural conditions but who can speak, when and where” (Barker,

2000: 79). Discourse *analysis*, which is largely interpretive, exposes the structures of knowledge and power, and locates discourses within wider historical, cultural and social relations (Sardar & Van Loon, 1999: 14). This thesis project uses discourse analyses to provide an analytic framework within which to study the language found within Lululemon texts and its relation to power and ideology (Fairclough, 1995: 1). In sum, a discourse analysis will help me to expose the social, political, cultural, historical and economic power relations and hegemonic ideologies entangled in documents produced by Lululemon.

When “reading” my documents, I used an inductive qualitative analysis that involved “*discovering* patterns, themes, and categories” in my data (Patton, 2002: 453). As I interacted with my sources, categories emerged out of the data “in contrast to deductive analysis where the data are analyzed according to an existing framework” (Patton, 2002: 453). Using inductive analysis encouraged an “openness” to the data which is important to maintain throughout the research process in order to avoid a predetermined research plan (Patton, 2002: 453). After several readings of my documents, dominant themes began to emerge. I organized my themes by using colour-coded Post-it® Flags to identify dominant themes in the memoirs book and on the website. In order to organize dominant themes from Lululemon’s website, I printed each page from the website onto white printing paper and inserted the pages into a 1/2" binder. Once these themes were established, I collected textual evidence in each category and interpreted meaning embedded in these texts (Barker 2000: 11). I acknowledge Barker’s warning that “texts, as forms of representation, are *polysemic*. That is, they contain the possibility of a number of different meaning which have to be realized by actual readers

who give life to words and images” ([emphasis added] Barker, 2000: 11). The interpretation that I produced from my analysis is therefore an “interplay” between the texts and myself as the reader.

My reading of the material is one of many possible readings and my discussion does not reflect truth, rather it reflects my self, my theoretical concerns, my social and historical context, and my experiences. In other words, “what we see and how we see it always takes the pressure of *who* we are, *where* we are and *when* we are – our social, spatial and temporal positionings” (Johnson, Chambers, Raghuram & Tincknell, 2004: 142). I identify myself as a 25 year old, white, able-bodied, heterosexual female raised by a middle-class family. I do not neglect the fact that my social positioning will inevitably shape my interpretation of the texts, and my interpretation will expose my own “truth claims and evaluation” (Johnson et al., 2004: 142).

I also acknowledge that my social positioning has influenced my personal relationship with Lululemon as I believe I “fit” within Lululemon’s target market. In other words, I believe that Lululemon focuses on a particular consumer that resembles the type of person I am. Not surprisingly, I was an avid fan of Lululemon before I began this project. I recognize that my fandom affected my research on Lululemon as it was initially difficult to move beyond my fandom and be open to an alternative perspective of the company. I must note that my conclusions on Lululemon are very different from my initial position on the company as I am more critical and cynical about Lululemon’s retail practices. My reading of the material has therefore been shaped by my social positioning given that I am Lululemon’s perfect demographic.

My reading is also constrained by the fact that my primary interests lie within the sociological study of health and illness. As a result, my reading of Lululemon is “filtered” so that ideas about health remain on the surface, while other subject matter fall below. For instance, although the topics of gender and race emerged intermittently throughout my analysis, they were not the focus of my analysis. Due to the amount of space and time available for this particular project, such filtering was necessary to narrow my focus. Future research however could analyze gender and/or race discourses within the Lululemon company as these are worthwhile elements to explore.

For this thesis, my primary analytic category within my discussion of health is class. I chose to focus on class because I am interested in examining how people of different classes perceive and respond to dominant health ideologies (although class is not a mutually exclusive category). My personal interest in examining class with relation to health filtered my analysis even further which was necessary to direct my focus, yet limiting as it may overlooked other significant factors.

Another limitation of my study is that a focus on corporate promotional documents produced by Lululemon will uncover messages that are shaped by authority figures such as CEOs Chip Wilson and Robert Meers (although likely produced by public relations people) and will largely exclude the voices of customers and many Lululemon employees. Although the Lululemon memoirs book includes passages from various Lululemon employees, ultimately, those with authority would have decided what information was published in order to portray the company in a particular light. Nevertheless, I believe that the voices of those in power, including those who might have been “ghost-writers” in the process, will expose the types of discourses that Lululemon

promotes to their employees and the public. Extracting the health-related discourses embedded in Lululemon texts will allow me to answer my research question.

The following chapter will discuss the three themes that emerged from my analysis on Lululemon. These themes include the following: Lululemon incorporates 1) healthist ideologies, 2) yoga as a holistic health practice, and 3) lifestyle branding techniques into the company's promotional materials and retail practices. These themes will discuss the ways that Lululemon has appropriated and incorporated "healthist" ideologies, symbols and practices linked to yoga and lifestyle branding techniques to develop a corporate identity that seems timely, relevant and profitable.

Chapter 3 – Analysis of Themes

Theme 1: Lululemon incorporates “healthist” ideologies into the company’s promotional materials and retail practices.

Lululemon has made various attempts to connect its company with ideas about health and the importance of living a healthy lifestyle. This connection to health can be seen within the company’s mission statement: “To provide components for people to live a longer healthier and more fun life” (Lululemon, 2006). In fact, Lululemon claims that some of their fabrics have specific health benefits. For example, Lululemon uses a fabric called Vitasea™ that is made up of 23% Seacell™ which is a seaweed compound that “releases amino acids, minerals and vitamins into the skin upon contact with moisture” (Lululemon, 2006). This fabric is also supposed to provide “anti-inflammatory, anti-bacterial, stress reducing, hydrating and detoxifying features”⁴ (Strauss & Waldie, 2007). Other ways in which Lululemon incorporates health into company practices include: offering their employees two free yoga classes a week in approved yoga studios in the community; providing filtered water in all stores for employees and customers; holding special in-store events that focus on health and well-being; displaying breast self-examination instructions in their changing rooms; providing shower facilities for their staff to encourage active transportation to work; and, displaying ‘community boards’ in all stores that highlight health and fitness in their communities (Lululemon, 2007).

⁴ In November of 2007, the New York Times reported that lab results on a Vitasea™ Lululemon shirt indicated that it does not contain any traceable amount of seaweed. The lab could also not detect the vitamins and minerals that Seacell™ is supposed to secrete (Strauss & Waldie, 2007).

Ideas about health have a prominent place in Lululemon's business model. For instance, Lululemon's website says that one key area of Lululemon's business model is, "raising the level of health" for their staff and the community at large, and the model includes specific goals to achieve success in this area (Lululemon, 2006). Some goals include: "create kids karma yoga classes in our communities", "offer yoga, meditation and/or health training in [Lululemon] factories" and "reward employees with fitness testing and personal training" (Lululemon, 2006).

Although Lululemon is a retail company, documents produced by Lululemon suggest that Lululemon wants to be viewed as a health resource/education center in addition to a retail company. For example, company founder, Chip Wilson explains in the memoirs book, "I wanted customers to use the store as a resource to find the best yoga classes, swimming pools or running areas. I thought it would be a great way to teach people about nutrition and establishing a healthy lifestyle" (Lululemon, n.d: 92). A Lululemon employee, quoted in the memoirs book, refers to the stores as community "health hubs" since they are places to get equipment and information on yoga, running, and health (Lululemon, n.d: 80, 27, 44). Lululemon's website refers to the stores as "epicenters of health" and insists that the stores "are designed to be a hub of health in the community. If we [at Lululemon] can positively influence the health of our communities, then we will further our goal of elevating the world from mediocrity to greatness" (Lululemon, 2007).

I believe that the incorporation of ideas about health and healthy lifestyles into Lululemon's promotional materials and retail practices has greatly contributed to the company's success given the current historical moment with regards to health. Before I

discuss the present, I must briefly explain the history of universal health care in Canada. In 1946, the social democratic premier of Saskatchewan, Tommy Douglas, launched “the first comprehensive public hospital insurance program in North America” which granted universal health care to the majority of Saskatchewan’s population (Evans & Law, 1995: 81). The beginning of socialized health care, that reflected collective responsibility for health, was largely a response to the sacrifices during World War II (1939-1945) and the memories of the Great Depression (1929-1939). In 1956, the federal government offered to pay fifty percent of hospital costs and by 1961, all provinces had launched universal health care programs (Evans & Law, 1995: 83-4). However, by the end of the 1960s, governments searched for less expensive forms of health care since governmental health care costs were exceedingly high (Pronger, 2002: 127).

One solution to this economic problem was to place more attention on promoting and maintaining good health and well-being. Thus, in 1974, the World Health Organization (WHO) introduced the term ‘health promotion’ to denote practices that move away from the prevention of illness and towards the promotion of health (Richmond, 1999: 158). The goals of health promotion include educating people about health as well as changing “the environments in which people live and to involve the community in projects to improve health” (Richmond, 1999: 158). However, an examination of health promotion efforts reveals that they are often narrowly focused on changing individual *lifestyles* rather than on changing structural or environmental conditions (Richmond, 1999: 158). Given that much focus is placed on individual lifestyles to attain a health status, illness is commonly viewed as a failure to comply with a health promoting lifestyle (Richmond, 1999: 158-9). Consequently, health-promoting

behaviours, such as physical activity, are seen as not just healthy but morally good. Lupton (1995) explores the field of health promotion in her book, The Imperative of Health and concludes the following:

... public health and health promotion act as apparatuses of moral regulation, serving to draw distinctions between ‘civilized’ and ‘uncivilized’ behaviour, to privilege a version of subjectivity that incorporates rationality, to promote notions of the human body as separate from the mind/will, needful of careful management and control and to represent certain social groups as uncontrolled, and therefore, the threatening Other (158).

The health promotion field is therefore not without significant negative consequences, despite a fundamental grounding idea that is quite positive. Nevertheless, encouraging individuals to change their lifestyles to promote health is both cost-effective and reduces the government’s role in health care (Pronger, 2002: 128; Crawford, 1980: 368). The “solution” to exceedingly high health care costs was to support individualist approaches to health, as opposed to a socialized, collective approach (Fisk, 2000: 163).

The imposition of neoliberal government policies gave rise to a new health consciousness termed ‘healthism’ (Crawford, 1980: 368). Healthism, defined by Robert Crawford (1980), is “the preoccupation with personal health as a primary – often *the* primary – focus for the definition and achievement of well-being; a goal which is to be attained primarily through the modification of life styles, with or without therapeutic help” (368). According to ideologies of healthism, individuals are expected to take responsibility for their own health by living health-promoting lifestyles. Health-promoting activities, such as exercise, stress management or careful eating therefore become a *moral obligation* where everyone *should* submit themselves to such behaviour (White, et al., 1995: 160). Since the 1970s, neo-liberal political-economic practices and thinking have become “hegemonic as a mode of discourse. It [neoliberalism] has

pervasive effects on the ways of thought to the point where it has become incorporated into the common-sense way many of us interpret, live in, and understand the world” (Harvey, 2005: 2-3). Healthist ideologies evolved from neo-liberal thought since it promotes a “pull yourself up by your bootstraps” approach to personal health which lessens governmental burden.

In terms of healthist ideologies, illness is commonly viewed as a failure to comply with a healthy lifestyle. Crawford (1980) explains:

As an ideology, however, which focuses so exclusively on behaviour, motivation, and emotional state, and as an ideology of self-improvement which insists that change and health derive from individual choices, poor health is most likely to be seen as deriving from individual failings” (378).

Greco (1993) also discusses the construction of disease from a healthist perspective and explains that “disease is perceived far less as a function of an individual’s capacity, and more as a function of the moral qualities of the individual” (358). Greco (1993) insists that a moral value has become attached to preventive behaviours (such as physical activity) and therefore personal health has become a visible sign of a person’s “initiative, adaptability, balance and strength of will” (369). Consequently, disease implies personal fault which is a problematic implication of healthist ideologies as it leads to victim-blaming (Greco, 1993: 370).

White, Young & Gillett (1995) argue that another significant issue associated with healthism is that it deflects attention away from the social and cultural conditions that shape and constrain health (160). For example, there is overwhelming evidence that higher socio-economic status is associated with better health (Ross et al., 2006: 203). In fact, “we know that the first determinant of health in Canada is socio-economic status and, therefore, that health is more of a social issue than it is a personal one” (George &

Rail, 2006: 64). The Public Health Agency of Canada reports that low-income Canadians, on average, have a lower life expectancy and endure more illnesses than high-income Canadians (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004). In addition, “only 47% of Canadians in the lowest income bracket rate their health as very good or excellent, compared with 73% of Canadians in the highest income group” (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004). Some explanations as to why working class people suffer more ill health include: lack of choice, poor housing conditions and hazardous jobs (Richmond, 1999: 165).

Pierre Bourdieu examined the relationship between class and health behaviours and found that working class people tend to have an instrumental relation to the body and treat it as a means to an end, whereas the more privileged classes tend to treat the body as an end in itself (Bourdieu, 1991: 370-1). For instance, working class women have been found to be more focused on immediate obstacles in their daily lives such as financial obligations or family priorities than on the pursuit of health (Dumas & Laberge, 2005: 192). The maintenance of health and the search for well-being is not central to their lifestyles (Dumas & Laberge, 2005: 193). In addition, working class women who spend their entire workday on their feet have been found, not surprisingly, to have little time or inclination for health-promoting activities such as exercise (Dumas & Laberge, 2005: 193). Research on men has shown similar findings where lower socio-economic groups report feelings of “body decline and uselessness” (Wandel & Roos, 2006: 3032). It is therefore problematic to believe that health messages are equally embraced by people of different socio-economic status since research has found that working class people do not

necessarily treat their bodies as long-term projects and are less likely to actively search for health and well-being (Dumas & Laberge, 2005; Bourdieu, 1991).

Crawford (1980) explains that,

Those most able to make individual adjustments are more likely to be middle class. Middle-class people not only possess more personal resources for changing life style... but also have acquired fundamental notions about themselves as social actors from work situations... which are individually competitive (384).

The relationship that middle class people have with their bodies is not only influenced by money; rather, it is influenced by the daily circumstances that middle class people endure in capitalist driven societies. For instance, their position in the labour market places much importance on physical appearance since this is what sets them apart from their colleagues (Laberge & Sankoff, 1988: 284). People of the middle class are therefore more likely to “conform to the dominant norms that define what the outward configuration of the body should be” (Laberge & Sankoff, 1988: 284). Middle class people, especially middle class women, therefore have a particularly alienated predisposition towards their bodies and are more inclined to turn towards various commercial health practices, such as mass produced workout videos or exercise classes to attain a socially appropriate body (Smith Maguire, 2002; Laberge & Sankoff. 1988).

It is important to note that, “health promotion messages are created by the middle class and visited upon the working class, who are then castigated for their ‘failure to hear’” which leads to discrimination and victim-blaming (Richmond, 1999: 167). Healthist ideologies, that expect *everyone* to modify his or her lifestyle to attain health, can create an “illusion that we *as individuals* control our own existence” and exaggerate “the ease with which behaviour can be changed” especially for disadvantaged groups (Crawford, 1980: 368-9; Richmond, 1999: 161).

As previously stated, healthist ideologies receive considerable governmental support since “changing one’s lifestyle would not cost the federal or sub-states’ governments anything because preventive ‘medicine’ was ‘behaviour’ modification” (Howell & Ingham, 2001: 338). In other words, governments often support individualist perspectives on health since they reduce the governments’ role in combating ill-health. George and Rail (2006) argue that, “the discourse of personal responsibility for health tends to blame the victims while governments generally continue to disinvest from social spending that affects health” (64). This neo-liberal view of health ignores the fact that health is a *social issue* since there are significant social determinants of health beyond the fact of whether, for instance, one exercises or not (George & Rail, 2006). Social determinants of health include income and social status, social and physical environments, and education and literacy to name a few (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2003). As Crawford (1980) argues, “the ideology of healthism fosters a continued depolitization and therefore undermining of the social effort to improve health and well-being” (368). The healthism ideology receives much support from neo-liberals who promote the idea that health can, and should be, achieved unproblematically through *individual* effort and control. However, there are exceptions to this such as uncontrollable circumstances that reduce health (i.e. second-hand smoke) which demonstrates that there are limits to healthism.

Given the importance placed on health-promoting behaviours in a healthist society, billions of dollars are spent each year on health-related items and services (IHRSA, 1995, as cited in Hums et al., 1999: 52). For instance, consumers are encouraged to purchase and make use of gym memberships, aerobics classes, workout

clothes, health and diet foods, fitness magazines, and exercise equipment (Richmond, 1999: 161). The ideology of healthism has generated a consumer culture where health has become a market commodity (Richmond, 1999: 161). In a society where healthy behaviours have become a moral obligation and sick individuals are often blamed for their poor health status, it is no wonder that the health and fitness industry is a multi-billion dollar industry (IHRSA, 1995, as cited in Hums et al., 1999: 52).

Health behaviours are not the only obligation in a healthist society; rather, enhancing one's appearance has also become a moral obligation (Smith Maguire, 2008: 52). Smith Maguire (2008) notes that "improving one's health *and* appearance has become an obligation, linked to an ideology of individual responsibility as well as a logic of status display in promotional culture" ([emphasis added] 52). In fact, "good health has become a visible sign, demonstrated by the lean, taut, exercising body" (Lupton, 1995: 71). Bordo (1993) explains that the "ideal" (and "healthy") female body is slim, tight, firm, and free of soft, loose or "wiggly" areas (190). Men are also influenced by bodily ideals where a "healthy", "masculine" body is demonstrated through a lean and muscular body (Smith Maguire, 2008: 36). Engaging in healthy behaviours should therefore be accompanied by a body shape that conforms to "the dominant norms that define" what the body should look like (Laberge & Sankoff, 1988: 284). Furthermore, good health is often considered as a result of looking and feeling good. Scambler, Ohlsson and Griva (2004) suggest that "to look good is to look healthy is to feel good is to feel healthy" (109). In other words, they are suggesting that practices that make one look and feel healthy (despite any intrinsic health benefit) can be important practices in order to adopt a healthy identity.

At least part of the widespread success of Lululemon can be attributed to the fact that Lululemon incorporates healthist ideologies in its promotional materials and practices. For instance, a central idea within healthist ideologies is that individuals should be *personally responsible* for the circumstances of their own lives. In the Lululemon memoirs book, we can see examples of how the company incorporates the idea of individual responsibility. Chip Wilson, founder of Lululemon, is quoted as saying, “Ultimately, I believe the most important thing is to live in the moment and take responsibility for how your life turns out” (Lululemon, n.d: 96). A Lululemon employee is quoted as saying, “Lululemon helps people take ownership of their lives, think about sustainability and embrace personal empowerment and health” (Lululemon, n.d: 122). Another employee explains that “the important thing is empowering people to make their own choices” with regards to how they live their own lives (Lululemon, n.d: 98). The recurring theme of “personal responsibility” is also seen throughout Lululemon’s website. The website insists that greatness is about “becoming impactful [*sic*] and personally responsible for your actions” and that “personal responsibility creates global change” (Lululemon, 2007). Given that *personal responsibility* seems to be Lululemon’s preferred approach to health and personal success, Lululemon’s goal to “raise the level of health” in store communities appears to adopt healthist ideas where it is ultimately up to the individual to attain health and well-being.

Documents produced by Lululemon also promote healthist practices which focus on changing individual lifestyles. Some of Lululemon’s suggestions for how to live a healthy lifestyle include: “Drink FRESH water and as much water as you can”; “Do yoga so you can remain active in physical sports as you age”; “Take various vitamins”;

“SWEAT once a day to regenerate your skin”; and “Live near the ocean and inhale the pure salt air that flows over the water. Vancouver will do nicely” (Lululemon, 2006).

By adopting healthist ideologies into the company’s practices and philosophies, Lululemon is reinforcing the problematic implications associated with healthism. For example, we have seen how healthism “deflects attention away from the social and cultural conditions” that effect health (White et al., 1995: 160). My research on Lululemon has shown that the company contributes to this social process. For example, Lululemon’s website says that the company is committed in “raising the level of health” in Lululemon “communities around the world” however documents produced by the company do not address economic or social inequalities. Rather, a Lululemon employee is quoted as saying “the philosophies embraced by Lululemon are *universal* and *accessible* to people *everywhere*” ([emphasis added] Lululemon, n.d: 56). This statement is problematic; working class people and people living in poverty have limited to no access to the Lululemon culture for a number of reasons.

First, Lululemon’s prices clearly demonstrate that Lululemon is a company that caters to middle and upper class people. For example, a pair of Lululemon yoga pants sells for around one hundred dollars (Lululemon, 2006). Although everyone is “free” to enter a Lululemon store or go on Lululemon’s website, people with lower incomes will be largely excluded from Lululemon due to its expensive prices. Second, Lululemon’s health messages such as “Live near the ocean”, “Sweat once a day” and “Do yoga” might be reasonable options for middle to upper class people, however I argue that they are idealized and difficult solutions for disadvantaged people. Ingham (1985) explores the amount of choice that working class people have by saying that “if jogging is not for you,

then there are other routes to fitness – routes which conveniently ignore the fact that millions of people who hover around and below the poverty line cannot afford ten-speeds, tennis racquets, and memberships in health and fitness centers” (50). Lastly, the statement: “the philosophies embraced by Lululemon are *universal* and *accessible* to people *everywhere*” disregards the class differences noted by Bourdieu who found that given the relationship to the labour market and the economy, working class people tend to have an instrumental relation to the body and treat it as a means to an end, whereas the more privileged classes tend to treat the body as an end in itself ([emphasis added] Lululemon, n.d: 56; Bourdieu, 1991: 370-1). As previously stated, working class people have been found to be more focused on immediate obstacles in their daily lives such as financial obligations or family priorities and are less likely to be able to spend time on the pursuit of health (Dumas & Laberge, 2005). Lululemon’s approach to health (which resonates with healthism) contributes to the misconception that health can be achieved unproblematically through individual effort and control.

Lululemon’s website and the memoirs book indicate that the company supports the philosophies explained in the best-selling book, The Secret. The incorporation of The Secret into Lululemon’s promotional materials further demonstrates the company’s neglect of significant social determinants of health. For example, The Secret promotes the ‘Law of Attraction’ which says that “you attract aspects, qualities and people in your life that reflect the type of person who you are” (Lululemon, 2006). Some examples that Lululemon provides are, “health attracts health” and “sickness attracts sickness” (Lululemon, 2006). Ultimately, the principle behind the ‘Law of Attraction’ is that each and every person can attain *any* goal or vision through the power of positive thinking;

whether it be health, love, or wealth (Lululemon, 2006). This approach however is highly romanticized as it assumes that the mind can conquer all; whether it be cancer, depression or poverty. In other words, it places everyone on a level playing field which is clearly not the case in a competitive, capitalist society.

As I mentioned previously, healthism often leads to victim blaming since ill-health is commonly seen as a result of non-compliance to a health promoting lifestyle (Crawford: 1980: 378). Lululemon's website includes an article titled, 'How Lululemon came into being: A gross generalization' that briefly describes how Lululemon was formed. This article, ascribed to Chip Wilson, explains the following: Breast cancer

came into prominence in the 1990s. I suggest this was due to the number of cigarette-smoking Power Women who were on the pill (initial concentrations of hormones in the pill were very high) and taking on the stress previously left to men in the working world (Lululemon, 2006).

Breast cancer, according to this article, is a result of *behavioural choices* including cigarette-smoking, a sexually active lifestyle, and stress. Consequently women are seen as responsible for this devastating cancer. This idea is extremely problematic as it places the blame on women and further victimizes the victim.

Although ideologies of healthism emerged in the late 1970s, Lululemon provides evidence that these ideologies remain prevalent in contemporary capitalist culture. For instance, I believe that Lululemon could not have been worth \$4 billion in October of 2007 if individuals did *not* feel morally obligated to engage in a health-promoting lifestyle or, to present a health conscious appearance or look (The Economist, 2007). Given that the majority of Lululemon clothes are form-fitting and stretchy, Lululemon clothes help to reveal the consumer's body shape and to display an "appropriate" (or inappropriate) body. Kaufman and Kirchheimer (1997) explain that "it makes... sense to

wear clothes that reveal some of your progress. That will serve as a visible reminder that your hard work is paying off” (Kaufman & Kirchheimer, 1997, as cited in Smith Maguire, 2002: 461). Since health and appearance have become a moral obligation, the outward display of a slim, firm body (that has become a visible sign of good health) demonstrates a compliant role that is fulfilling healthist expectations (Smith Maguire, 2008: 52; Lupton, 1995: 71). Displaying an “appropriate” body does not necessarily mean that the consumer is preoccupied with health, however, it does “pass the never-ending tests of the gazing society” (Corrigan, 1997: 158). Given the characteristics of Lululemon clothing, wearing Lululemon apparel is a way to present a “proper” body and to separate oneself from the “threatening Other” (Lupton, 1995: 158).

Lululemon apparel also helps to present a health-conscious look because the Lululemon brand is closely connected to ideas of health and healthy lifestyles. In other words, displaying the Lululemon logo is a way to associate with the “Lululemon lifestyle” (that is centered around health) without necessarily having to engage in healthy activities such as exercise. Lululemon allows consumers to respond to healthist expectations by simply spending money. The success of Lululemon is due (in part) to the widespread healthism ideology that places a moral value on healthy behaviours and a “healthy” appearance.

Using Lululemon as a mirror of our own society, we witness the potency of healthism in present day society and how invested we are in attaining a healthy status. For instance, Lululemon has connected the company to the importance of healthy lifestyles and it has “become one of the fastest growing athletic apparel companies in the world” (Lululemon, 2007). The massive popularity of a company centered on health

suggests that our North American society is interested in the pursuit of health, either fully (by adopting a healthy lifestyle) or artificially (by presenting a healthy look). Ultimately, Lululemon has promoted itself as a viable space to implement healthism, therefore attracting *many* health-conscious individuals who live in a healthist society.

This discussion can be examined further if we envision a society without the healthism ideology. For instance, if health were considered to be a collective responsibility, I believe that consumers would not be as eager to step into a Lululemon store. Within a socialist, collective health care system, individuals would be less morally obligated to submit themselves to healthy behaviours and less likely to be blamed for their poor health status. Given that our contemporary capitalist society is imposed with neo-liberal government policies that support individualist approaches to health, many consumers are willing to spend more than \$100 dollars for a pair of athletic pants to display their moral conformity. Consequently, Lululemon is currently a retail powerhouse since it complements dominant healthist ideologies and provides an avenue to exercise them.

Given that we have an aging population, and that the “baby boomers” have began to turn 60 years of age, I believe that healthist ideologies will become even stronger. Baby boomers, who were born between 1946 and 1965, are undoubtedly going to have a *huge* impact on our health care system since the percentage of the population over 65 years of age in Canada is expected to rise from 13.2% in 2006 to a projected 23.4% in 2031 (the year when the last baby boomers will reach 65) (Statistics Canada, 2006). Furthermore, it is projected that by the year 2056, one in four Canadians will be 65 or older (Statistics Canada, 2006). Given that the health care system in Canada will

inevitably be burdened economically by the aging population, I would suggest that even more responsibility will be placed on the individual to attain and *maintain* his or her health.

It is a brilliant marketing strategy to connect a retail company with the healthism ideology that, to a certain extent, influences everyone. Although *many* individuals (especially working class individuals) living in a healthist society are unable to live a government approved healthy lifestyle, these individuals cannot escape societal implications of their “failure” to conform, such as being labeled as deviant or being blamed for any ill-health they might suffer. Individuals encounter healthist ideas through messages from doctors, health promoters, and politicians however the disciplinary power “is everywhere and it is nowhere; the disciplinarian is everyone and yet no one in particular” (Bartky, 1988: 74). Healthist ideas can be transmitted from anyone, anywhere. Healthism is a widespread *ideology* which is a “socially and culturally constructed way of seeing, interpreting, and evaluating some aspect of the physical and social world and the relation of self to those worlds” (Crawford, 1980: 367). The healthism ideology pervades contemporary North American society and thus, it is virtually impossible to escape healthist expectations.

Lululemon has taken advantage of this pervasive ideology and has used it to increase profit. According to ideologies of healthism, individuals are *morally obligated* to engage in health practices. External force or legal action are not necessary to pressure individuals to participate in health practices since the obligation to devote both time and money to health is so potent. Consequently, individuals living in a healthist society police their own behaviour. Foucault’s notion of ‘panopticism’ helps us see how this

idea of self-policing works. The panopticon was designed by philosopher and prison reformer, Jeremy Bentham (Shogan, 1999: 37). Bentham created a circular prison design where inmates were unable to observe the prison guards located in the center tower, yet the guards were able to observe the prisoners. Since the inmates could not determine if they were being watched by a guard or not, this led to their internalization of the guard's gaze and a self-surveillance of their own behaviour (Shogan, 1999: 37). The notion of panopticism illustrates how individuals can become agents of social control. As Foucault writes, "whenever one is dealing with a multiplicity of individuals on whom a task or a particular form of behaviour must be imposed, the panoptic schema may be used" (Foucault, 1977: 205).

Individuals living in a healthist society are subject to a healthist gaze (similar to the guard's gaze). Although individuals are "free" to choose whether they want to be healthy or not, they cannot escape the social pressures and negative consequences that healthism can generate. Lululemon stores are places where individuals can demonstrate their intentions to conform to healthist expectations. Although many Lululemon customers inevitably do not live a lifestyle centered on health, purchasing and displaying the Lululemon logo and wearing stylish exercise clothing allows them to exude a certain level of health consciousness as well as conformity. Since "perhaps more than any other element of consumer culture, clothing is the most efficient at announcing one's status to the world", Lululemon apparel is a viable way to distance oneself from the disobedient (Corrigan, 1997: 176). Lululemon's connection to health and healthism serves to stimulate the consumer's need to purchase Lululemon apparel.

In sum, Lululemon's incorporation of healthist ideologies into their marketing strategies and retail practices is designed to attract a large market made up primarily of middle to upper class people who are willing to submit themselves and their wallets to health. I believe that it is important to deconstruct the success of Lululemon to expose how a company (that claims that it is "working to make the world a better place") draws on dominant health ideologies in order to appeal to customers and to globalize its brand (Lululemon, 2007).

Theme 2: Lululemon incorporates yoga as a holistic health practice into the company's promotional materials and retail practices.

Lululemon frames itself as a yoga-inspired company and claims that it “has stayed true to what inspired it” (Lululemon, n.d: 76). Lululemon’s connection to yoga has been evident from the very beginning. The story of the brand begins in the summer of 1998 when founder Chip Wilson, took part in a commercial yoga class offered in Vancouver. While he found the activity exhilarating, he felt that the cotton clothing being worn by the yoga participants looked uncomfortable and damp with sweat (Lululemon, n.d: 12). Wilson saw a market for functional athletic apparel that would take yoga as its inspiration. Wilson’s idea evolved into the retail powerhouse that we now know as Lululemon.

Lululemon makes various attempts to associate the practice of yoga with the company such as: holding complementary in-store yoga classes periodically throughout the year; displaying individuals (wearing Lululemon attire) in various yoga poses on their website, on shopping bags and on posters in the stores; including the statements, “Do yoga so you can remain active in physical sports as you age” and “Be yoga” in Lululemon’s manifesto; offering their employees two free yoga classes a week in approved yoga studios in the community; providing basic information on yoga on their website; selling yoga equipment in their stores; obtaining feedback from yogis⁵ in the community to enhance product design; incorporating Hindu symbols in every Lululemon store (since yoga evolved from Hindu religious texts); and including articles about yoga in Lululemon’s online magazine, ‘Luluzine’ (Lululemon, 2006).

⁵ A yogi is one who practices yoga.

Lululemon claims that they are “yoga-based in brand *and* philosophy” ([emphasis added] Lululemon, n.d.: 114). Although it is perhaps impossible to define what a yoga-based philosophy is, broadly speaking, a yogic philosophy is centered on balancing or joining the mind, body and spirit. Indeed, the Sanskrit root of the word yoga, yui, “means to yoke or join together... usually referring to the union of the individual self with the Absolute or Universal Self” (Strauss, 2005: 3). Documents produced by Lululemon claim that Lululemon’s philosophy is connected to yoga’s philosophy which is focused on balancing the mind, body and spirit. For instance, Lululemon’s website reveals that “yoga is our [Lululemon’s] inspiration and being yogis, we [at Lululemon] believe in the inter-connectedness and co-dependence of all beings on our planet” (Lululemon, 2006). One of Lululemon’s core values is “Balance” (Lululemon, 2006). For instance, Lululemon’s website explains, “We [at Lululemon] believe it’s important to maintain a balance between work, rest, and personal activities: to take time out for a coffee break with your best mate and go for walks on the beach” (Lululemon, 2006). On the surface, it appears that Lululemon promotes a brand and philosophy that is congruent with the practice and philosophy of yoga. Given that Lululemon has placed so much of its focus on yoga, it is essential that I discuss briefly the history of the activity and how it became a globalized, commercialized activity in North America.

Yoga began in India where it was a form of spiritual expression based on Hindu religious texts (Strauss, 2005: 5). Traces of yoga date back more than 5000 years. In its earliest versions it was a men’s activity designed to “facilitate spiritual enlightenment” (Strauss, 2005: 5). There are many different variations of yoga and none is the “correct” version. For the sake of space and time, I will use the term “classical yoga” to

encompass traditional forms of yoga that are philosophically grounded in Hindu religious texts.

Over the past century, classical yoga has gone through an enormous transformation. Specifically, “the practice of yoga has transformed from a regional, male-oriented religious activity to a globalized and largely secular phenomenon” that is largely feminine in the West (Strauss, 2005: xix). This transformation was primarily due to Swami Vivekananda who saw a lack of spirituality in the West and who believed that India had an abundance of spiritual wealth. He therefore revised the history, structures, beliefs and practices of classical yoga in 1896 to make it more “suitable” for the Western population (De Michelis, 2004: 3). This revision marked the beginning of “modern yoga” which refers to “certain types of yoga that evolved mainly through the interaction of Western individuals interested in Indian religions” (De Michelis, 2004: 2). Ultimately, Vivekananda transformed yoga into “something of value that could be acquired and circulated among the literate middle class people” (Strauss, 2005: 3). Modern yoga, in Western societies, is largely a middle class activity because as previously stated, it is the “middle class who are predisposed to regarding the body as a project to be managed and improved through education and self-improvement” (Smith Maguire, 2002: 452).

One of the main differences between modern yoga and classical yoga is that modern yoga emphasizes its health and fitness applications as well as its ability to connect the mind, body and spirit. Classical yoga on the other hand does not identify itself as a form of exercise; rather it is primarily seen as a religious experience. In Canada and the United States, modern yoga is “widely recognized and practiced in relatively mainstream and globally available settings, such as youth clubs or public

education programs” therefore commodifying the activity (Strauss, 2005: 8). Modern yoga has become so widespread that it was estimated in 2005 that about 17 million Americans practice some form of yoga, and spend about \$3 billion a year on the activity, of which \$500 million is spent on clothing alone (The Economist, 2007). Although modern yoga has been accepted by millions, the expansion and commodification of the activity has generated much disapproval from individuals who follow classical yoga (De Michelis, 2004). Some consider the commodification of yoga to be an affront to the values and beliefs of classical yoga grounded in Hindu religious texts. In other words, modern yoga as a “transnational cultural product” supported by a multi-billion dollar industry does not complement yoga’s original roots; rather, it is seen as demeaning the sacred practice (Strauss, 2005: 9; The Economist, 2007). Despite this disapproval, participation in yoga increased 136% among adults between 2001 to 2006, making yoga the number one “trending sport”⁶ (Lululemon, 2007).

Lululemon’s success is partially due to its connection to yoga since yoga is currently a popular trend in North America. Yoga’s widespread expansion is attributed in part to a new popular health movement known as ‘holistic health’. Unlike conventional Western approaches to health and medicine, holistic health “sees illness and health as not simply a physical matter, but also as emotional, mental, and spiritual” (Crawford, 1980: 366). The focus of holistic health is to balance the body, mind and spirit in order to achieve optimal health and well-being (Crawford, 1980: 366). Holistic health aims to treat the person, not the disease (Crawford, 1980: 366). Some holistic health practices include meditation, iridology, guided imagery, movement or dance therapy and massage

⁶ This finding was conducted by an ‘MRI Sports Trend Study’ and was included in Lululemon’s ‘Media Kit’ found in Lululemon’s website: www.lululemon.com. It is unclear whether this finding refers to participation rates in Canada or the United States.

(Crawford, 1980: 366). Yoga is also perceived as a holistic health practice since it is promoted as an effective way to “reconnect with the spiritual world, reduce stress, and regain health and freedom” (Strauss, 2005: 6).

The holistic health movement gained much recognition due to the widespread belief that scientific medicine is often inadequate in providing socially meaningful explanations for illness (Crawford, 1980: 373). Scientific medicine has relied on a theory of causation that suggests that “disease can be understood in terms of pathogenic agents” (Crawford, 1980: 371-2). Yet so far, medicine has failed to find a cure for diseases such as heart disease, stroke and cancer (Crawford, 1980: 372). Consequently, a more holistic approach to illness and disease emerged as a result of these shortcomings. Holistic health “rejects the medical destruction of socially grounded interpretation and offers instead an overtly experiential understanding of disease” (Crawford, 1980: 374). Holistic health also aims to counter the conditions of a fast-paced, money-driven capitalist society.

Despite the apparent broadening of holistic health methods, it is burdened by healthist ideologies (Crawford, 1980: 374-5). For instance, a central feature of holistic health is the concept of individual responsibility and active participation in the healing process.

Self or individual responsibility is the mechanism believed to propel the transition from a medically dominated experience to one more meaningful, autonomous, and effective for health maintenance and promotion. As such, it can be understood as political language. It implores individuals to reclaim the power they have given to physicians (Crawford, 1980: 376).

Given that holistic health methods largely rely on an individualist approach to attain health and avoid illness, holistic health is congruent with healthist ideologies. As we have seen, individualist perspectives on health and illness can lead to significant negative

consequences. In short, focusing solely on the individual to attain health deflects attention from significant social and cultural conditions that effect health (White et al., 1995: 160). Crawford (1980) provides further clarification regarding this significant shortcoming of holistic health methods:

Illustrative is an introduction to a holistic health handbook in which the author counsels (50, p. 19) against the “negativity” of blaming the environment and proclaims that “health and happiness can be ours if we desire; we can create our personal reality, down to the finest detail.” When such private efforts become the model for social practice, let alone public policy, they reinforce a medicalization of life which leaves us powerless to control our own fate. They incapacitate precisely because, in both conception and practice, those who adopt such efforts as a model tend to deny or choose to ignore the structural conditions which produce in our society the behaviours, attitudes, and emotions upon which so much attention is now focused (375).

Individualist perspectives (which holistic health and healthism rely on) also lead to victim-blaming since responsibility is placed solely on the individual to attain health and avoid illness. Despite these shortcomings, holistic health (along with healthism) is a popular movement that has gained considerable attention and substantial participation among those who can afford it.

Given the current popularity of the holistic health movement, the popularity of yoga (as a holistic health practice) has dramatically increased. Since holistic health encourages clients to become active participants in the quest for total health, and yoga has been accepted as a way to promote balanced, healthy living, yoga has become a popular activity practiced by millions of health-conscious consumers living in a healthist society (The Economist, 2007). The practice of yoga as a health behaviour has become so mainstream that some medical professionals are prescribing yoga to prevent or alleviate various health problems. A search on MEDLINE (a medical research database) produced 431 results when I searched for articles with “yoga” in the title (Ovid

Technologies Inc., 2007). These articles examined the effects of yoga on epilepsy, fibromyalgia, obesity, hypertension and premature ejaculation to name a few (Ovid Technologies Inc., 2007).

In 1998, Chip Wilson predicted the impact that yoga would have on a healthist, holistic society and began creating a product suitable for this expanding market. Wilson is quoted as saying, “I could sense a trend developing with yoga... I remember thinking, if anything is going to be big, it’s yoga” (Lululemon, n.d: 9). Ultimately, Lululemon has found a way to capture the yoga market that has become an increasingly popular trend in North American healthist society.

Lululemon’s success provides evidence of the strength of the current yoga trend. The fact that *many* customers are purchasing yoga apparel at Lululemon stores suggests that yoga has been widely embraced in North America. Although many Lululemon customers are undoubtedly not directly involved with yoga, their attendance at, and participation with a yoga-inspired retail store demonstrates that yoga is an economic force as well as a fashionable trend. Lululemon apparel has become such a popular trend that many celebrities have been photographed wearing Lululemon apparel. As Scoop magazine explains, “Forget the baggy T-shirt and leggings – today’s sporty silhouette is fitted” (Scoop, 2006, as cited in Lululemon, n.d: 61). The success of Lululemon reinforces the popularity of yoga as well as the “look” of yoga.

The rise of Lululemon also suggests that a great number of North Americans are attempting to achieve, or at the very least, to associate themselves with a state of health that goes beyond the absence of disease. Since Lululemon has closely connected the company to a holistic health practice, the success of Lululemon reinforces the strength of

the holistic health movement. I believe that without the holistic health movement, yoga, as well as Lululemon, could not have flourished as they have. In the case of Lululemon, holistic health has provided a route to corporate success.

From a corporate standpoint, Chip Wilson is brilliant for recognizing the beginning of an enormous yoga trend. Ultimately, Wilson has developed a product that appeals to an expanding market of middle and upper class people who are actively searching for health (either fully or artificially). Lululemon is therefore reaping the benefits of the yoga boom and the current holistic health movement. Lululemon's widespread success and the expansion of its yoga-inspired retail empire has contributed to the current commodification of yoga since Lululemon has played a role in the packaging and selling of the once sacred activity to *many* consumers world-wide. As stated earlier, yoga was, historically, a spiritual practice based on Hindu religious texts. The commodification of yoga in North America is considered by many classical yoga practitioners as an affront and as exploitation of the sacred practice.

Nevertheless, Lululemon claims that it “has stayed true to what inspired it” (Lululemon, n.d: 76). Although Lululemon does not explicitly make a distinction between classical yoga and modern yoga, text from the memoirs book reveals that yoga's philosophy “preaches *self-acceptance* and spiritual transformation, and *discourages competition and judgment*” ([emphasis added] Lululemon, n.d: 88). Lululemon's corporate practices suggest that Lululemon has *not* stayed true to the practice of yoga that “discourages competition and judgment” (Lululemon, n.d: 88). For instance, in 2006, Lululemon hired Robert Meers as the new CEO to lead the company through its “aggressive” expansion plans (Lululemon, n.d: 112). An employee is quoted in the

memoirs book saying that Meers “has the ability to make us a world-class global brand” (Lululemon, n.d: 117). Additional employees are quoted as saying, “I want to see Lululemon stores everywhere. I know we’ll get there” and “I want to see Lululemon take over the world!” (Lululemon, n.d: 121). Given that Lululemon is a competitive, capitalist business that is currently driven by global expansion, it appears that Lululemon has connected the company to yoga in order to gain corporate success while commodifying and exploiting the sacred activity.

In sum, the current success of Lululemon further reinforces the potency of yoga, the holistic health movement, and yoga as a fashionable trend. However, Lululemon is exploiting the current yoga trend by connecting itself with the activity and its philosophies to attract a growing market and to increase profit. Furthermore, Lululemon’s connection to yoga has contributed to the commodification of yoga which does not complement yoga’s original roots; rather it is seen as demeaning the sacred practice. Ultimately, Lululemon has connected itself to yoga in order to take advantage of dominant ideologies and current popular trends. In other words, Lululemon has used yoga to establish a pathway between the retail company and middle to upper class customers who internalize healthist ideologies, practice holistic health methods such as yoga and who see yoga as a fashionable trend.

Theme 3: Lululemon incorporates lifestyle branding techniques into the company's promotional materials and retail practices.

Lululemon frames itself as a 'lifestyle brand', meaning that the Lululemon brand is not only about clothing, it's about a way of life. Broadly speaking, lifestyle branding is a marketing technique that transforms a commodity into a concept, or that frames the brand as experience (Klein, 2000: 21). Lifestyle branding is not a new phenomenon; rather it has been used since the mid-1980s by many profitable corporations world-wide. In the mid-1980s, corporations began to realize that their brand identities were more powerful than their products. As Naomi Klein (2000) writes, "corporations may manufacture products, but what consumers buy are brands" (7). It became increasingly clear that to make a product profitable, it is important to connect the product to "a way of life, an attitude, a set of values, a look, an idea" (Klein, 2000: 23). As Naomi Klein explains, the true meaning of a lifestyle brand is that "you can live your whole life inside of it" (Klein, 2000: 148).

One company that quickly recognized the influence of lifestyle branding was Nike. For instance, in the late 1980s, Nike changed its mission from "selling shoes" to "enhance[ing] people's lives through sports and fitness" (Klein, 2000: 23). Starbucks coffee has also epitomized the idea of lifestyle branding. Naomi Klein (2000) writes the following in her insightful book, No Logo:

Scott Bedbury, Starbucks' vice president of marketing, openly recognized that "consumers don't truly believe there's a huge difference between products," which is why brands must "establish emotional ties" with their customers through "the Starbucks Experience." The people who line up for Starbucks, writes CEO Howard Shultz, aren't just there for the coffee. "It's the romance of the coffee

experience, the feeling of warmth and community people get in Starbucks stores” (20).

Lululemon is unquestionably a lifestyle brand since the company has effectively connected the brand with a particular concept or way of life. Although it is difficult and perhaps impossible to define exactly what the Lululemon lifestyle entails, my sense is that it is supposed to be healthy, balanced, and fun-filled, and that it is supposed to be inspired by a vision of “elevating the world from mediocrity to greatness” (Lululemon, 2006). The Lululemon lifestyle is represented in various vehicles that illustrate how Lululemon is “a way of life, an attitude, a set of values, a look, an idea” (Klein, 2000: 23).

A way of life. As I have shown, documents produced by Lululemon reveal that Lululemon promotes a way of life that relies on healthist ideologies. Specifically, Lululemon promotes a healthy, balanced, self-responsible, goal-oriented way of life. Lululemon’s preoccupation with healthy living is apparent throughout the company’s website. For example, Lululemon stores are referred to as “epicenters of health” because they incorporate health and fitness information and activities. Lululemon’s website also explains, “Our stores are designed to be a hub of health in the community. If we can positively influence the health of our communities, then we will further our goal of elevating the world from mediocrity to greatness” (Lululemon, 2007). The Lululemon way of life also requires being individually responsible for your actions. The Lululemon website explains, “Personal responsibility creates global change” and “We encourage our employees to be responsible for their individual actions so that during their time with Lululemon and beyond, doing the *right thing* is an automatic reaction” ([emphasis added] Lululemon, 2007). Finally, the Lululemon lifestyle involves goal setting since this

encourages self-improvement and growth (Lululemon, n.d). These elements all follow healthist expectations such that individuals are morally obligated to live a healthy, balanced lifestyle while avoiding irresponsibility, laziness and stress.

An attitude. The Lululemon lifestyle also requires a belief in the philosophy promoted in the best-selling book, The Secret. As previously discussed, the book promotes the ‘Law of Attraction’ that “simply says that you attract aspects, qualities and people in your life that reflect the type of person who you are” (Lululemon, 2006). For instance, alcoholics attract alcoholics, athletes attract athletes, liars attract liars, health attracts health and sickness attracts sickness (Lululemon, 2006). The ‘Law of Attraction’ complements healthist ideologies since it suggests that individuals are responsible for choosing the outcomes in their life. The ‘Law of Attraction’ insists that *anyone* can attract health, money and/or love into their life through the power of positive thinking. This law has received much criticism, especially for its position on health, since it assumes that the mind has power over health. For instance, in the DVD version of The Secret, a woman claims that she has conquered breast cancer by thinking positively and visualizing herself as healthy (McFadden, Sherwood & Weinberg, 2007). This assumption is problematic as it may cause people to “reject helpful therapies in favor of positive thinking” as well it may conjure negative feelings toward those who are unable to cure themselves (McFadden et al., 2007). Given that individual thought is “the secret” behind health, money or love, individuals who don’t achieve these aims become the target of blame.

The Lululemon attitude is also shaped by the ‘Landmark Forum’ training program in which its managers participate (Bogomolny, 2006). The ‘Landmark Forum’ is a

program that is “specifically designed to bring about positive and permanent shifts in the quality of your life. These shifts are the direct cause for a new and unique kind of freedom and power” (Landmark Education, 2008). However, this program has been a source of controversy and has been accused of resembling a cult (Bogomolny, 2006). For instance, in the mid 1990s, a commission established by the French Parliament classified the ‘Landmark Forum’ program as one of 200 groups that had cult-like features (ABC News, 2008). The ‘Landmark Forum’ responded by saying that their programs “have no characteristics of sects or cults” (Landmark Education, 2008).

A set of values. The Lululemon lifestyle relies on a manifesto which acts as a “truth check” (Lululemon, 2006). Apparently the manifesto both represents and inspires Lululemon’s vision, culture and beliefs. The manifesto includes various statements such as: “Sweat once a day to regenerate your skin”, “Move your body and your heart will follow”, “Love”, “Friends are more important than money” and “Dance, sing, floss and travel” (Lululemon, 2007). To fully live the Lululemon lifestyle, one must “integrate the manifesto in all aspects” of one’s life as it will promote a “longer, healthier and more fun life” (Lululemon, 2006).

A look. The look of the Lululemon lifestyle includes displaying the Lululemon logo both inside and outside the yoga studio. For instance, in addition to yoga apparel, Lululemon produces dresses, skirts, trench coats and winter jackets for women as well as men’s collared t-shirts, outdoor shorts and business pants, all of which display the recognizable Lululemon logo. While the dresses, winter jackets and business pants are all meant to be worn on the street, many Lululemon customers also wear their Lululemon athletic clothing outside the gym. Smith Maguire (2008) explains:

Athletic shoes and exercise gear – and the more generic “sporty” clothing popularized in the 1970s – are not only suitable to the social space of the health club; they also carry the connotations of physical self-improvement from the health club out to the street. Such diffusion is necessary if a phenomenon is to enter social consciousness; a field must be recognizable to participants and non-participants alike if it is to have broad cultural significance” (15).

Another way to display the Lululemon logo is to carry Lululemon’s eco-friendly, reusable shopping bags. These bags have become a popular fashion accessory. In fact, these bags are sold on eBay even though they are given to customers at no cost with the purchase of a Lululemon item. For example, on 28 March 2008, an eBay member in Vancouver, British Columbia was selling a Lululemon shopping bag for \$6.50 and included the following taglines: “These bags are the new trend for sustainable living – do your part to save the environment and look stylish at the same time!” and “These bags are so popular right now, you can’t go down the street without seeing someone carrying one of these bags!!!” (eBay, 2008).

In April of 2008, controversy arose when a customer reported that her Lululemon shopping bag contained controversial messages underneath the original cover. These messages included: “Our minds are clear to be creative... when we are told we are going to die... when drunk or stoned... just after an orgasm” and “Choose the moment, be creative and be successful. You only have 30,000 days to live and then you are dead” (Figure 5).



Figure 5: Message hidden underneath Lululemon’s eco-friendly shopping bags.

Lululemon printed a great number of these bags before covering these controversial messages with a more subtle message⁷. Despite the controversy, these Lululemon bags are a popular way to “carry the connotations of physical self-improvement from the health club out to the street” (Smith Maguire, 2008: 15). The Lululemon logo has become a recognizable symbol of the Lululemon lifestyle that goes beyond the yoga studio.

An idea. The grand idea behind the Lululemon lifestyle is exposed through Lululemon’s overarching vision. Lululemon’s vision includes: “We believe that if we

⁷ As an occasional Lululemon customer, I have obtained four of these bags with the controversial messages hidden underneath.

can produce products to keep people active and stress-free, the world will be a better place. We aspire towards elevating the world from ordinary to a place of greatness” (Lululemon, 2006). Clearly the Lululemon brand attempts to be “more than just a retail store”; rather the company develops a product to service a particular concept that relies on healthist ideologies (Lululemon, n.d: 114).

The use of lifestyle branding benefits Lululemon by creating a richer connection between the Lululemon product and the customer. Lifestyle branding transforms Lululemon from a company that sells athletic apparel to a brand that promotes healthy, balanced, fun-filled living which is unquestionably more appealing for the consumer. Lifestyle branding is an extremely effective technique since consumers in contemporary capitalist society use material objects to shape their identities and communicate their lifestyles. Warde (1994) explains, “today, people define themselves through the messages they transmit to others through the goods and practices that they possess and display. They manipulate or manage appearances and thereby create and sustain a ‘self-identity’” (878). Anthony Giddens (1991) discusses self-identity in late modernity and observes that “commodification influences the project of the self and the establishing of life styles” (197). The consumption of material objects helps to define and communicate who we are as individuals and what kind of lifestyles we lead. Lifestyles, according to Giddens (1991) “can be identified as a more or less integrated set of practices which an individual embraces, not only because such practices fulfill utilitarian needs, but because they give material form to a particular narrative of self-identity” (81). Nonetheless, Giddens (1991) does not overlook the fact that the creation of lifestyles is influenced by factors such as socio-economic circumstances (82).

To a greater or lesser degree, the project of the self becomes translated into one of the possession of desired goods and the pursuit of artificially framed styles of life... The consumption of ever-novel goods becomes in some part a substitute for the genuine development of self; appearance replaces essence as the visible signs of successful consumption come actually to outweigh the use-values of the goods and services in question (Giddens, 1991: 198).

While consumer goods have become essential in communicating our self-identity and lifestyle, *brand name* goods have become particularly significant. Branding, according to Shipman (2004) is “the creation of an image that adds informational or impressionistic content to the products it is applied to, [and] allows premium-priced symbolic content to be brought to the mass market” (283). In consuming brand name goods, one can communicate one’s ability to pay for expensive, premium products. Shipman (2004) argues that brand names are exclusive since they distinguish “a privileged or sophisticated minority by their consumption of products from which a majority is excluded. They pay extra to associate with co-consumer, and differentiate from non-consumer” (283). Brand names help consumers to communicate their socio-economic status and they are a form of conspicuous consumption. According to Mason (1981) conspicuous consumption “is concerned primarily with the ostentatious display of wealth [and is] motivated by a desire to impress others with the ability to pay particularly high prices for prestige products” (vii-viii). Expensive brand name products have the ability to separate the “have’s” from the “have-not’s”.

“Commodification influences the project of the self and the establishing of life styles” and overt lifestyle branding of products can enhance this process (Giddens, 1991: 197). Given that lifestyle branding techniques have the ability to transform commodities into experiences, the purchase and display of these lifestyle brand names helps to develop, maintain and communicate a particular lifestyle. Shipman (2004) describes this

cleverly by stating that “once a product’s utility moves from discrete experience to ongoing lifestyle, a product’s price becomes a *subscription fee*” ([emphasis added] 283). Often people will pay a premium price for a particular brand in order to gain the status associated with that brand and to become part of the brand’s lifestyle. The consumption of products connected to a particular lifestyle (through the use of lifestyle branding techniques) helps us to define who we are and how we live in contemporary capitalist society.

While many goods can communicate our status to others, Corrigan (1997) argues that “perhaps more than any other element of consumer culture, clothing is the most efficient at announcing one’s status to the world” (176). Clothes have the ability to express our personality, social class, gender, age, occupation and lifestyle (Corrigan, 1997: 162, 174). In the eighteenth century, dress precisely marked social class since the upper class appeared in extravagant costumes, the middle class “wore distinctive decorations, wigs, or ribbons” and “servants were easily distinguishable from laborers” (Sennett, 1978, as cited in Corrigan, 1997: 162). After the eighteenth century, clothing became more subtle and boundaries became blurred. Nevertheless, clothes continue to be important indicators of status as they can be “read” as extensions of ourselves. For instance, Gabriel and Lang (2006) insist that material objects, such as clothes, are useful communicative devices (46, 62).

...material objects embody a system of meanings, through which we express ourselves and communicate with each other. We want and buy things not because of what things can do for us, but because of what things mean to us and what they say about us. According to this view, goods tell stories and communicate meanings in different ways but every bit as effectively as words (Gabriel and Lang, 2006: 47-48).

As a brand largely centered on health, Lululemon easily fits the conditions of our contemporary capitalist culture. For instance, we know that consuming goods (especially brand name goods) helps to communicate our self-identities and lifestyles, and clothes are a particularly effective medium (Giddens, 1991: 197; Corrigan, 1997: 176). Since Lululemon has effectively utilized the lifestyle branding technique, the Lululemon brand appeals to many consumers who wish to adopt and/or communicate the prestigious Lululemon lifestyle. Furthermore, since a healthy lifestyle has come to be seen as a *moral obligation* and failure to comply with a healthy lifestyle is often considered to be a sign of deviance, the Lululemon brand is especially appealing to conformist consumers. For instance, purchasing and displaying the Lululemon logo communicates that the consumer is fulfilling healthist expectations (despite the probability that many Lululemon customers do not live a healthy lifestyle). In essence, the Lululemon logo conveys the message: “See, I am not deviant. I am not lacking. I control my condition. I am in the process of being healthy and whole” (Crawford, 1980: 382). As Crawford notes, “what is important is the adoption of a symbol as a personal identity which matches dominant social expectations and stands in opposition to the identity of deviant” (Crawford, 1980: 382).

Lululemon has also effectively connected their lifestyle brand to stylish, form-fitting clothes that are typically flattering on the people who wear them. Given that we live in a “culture dominated by appearance and image” and “our bodies are on display whether we like it or not” wearing stylish Lululemon clothes is a way to portray the “right image to others” (Corrigan, 1997: 156, 158). Clothes are also an immediate way to respond to expectations surrounding health and appearance. For instance, we live in a

culture of instant gratification that demands immediate results (Smith Maguire, 2002: 455). Since “exercise involves a lot of work if the participant is to see results”, purchasing Lululemon apparel is an immediate way to look and feel good and therefore look and feel healthy (Smith Maguire, 2002: 459; Scambler et al., 2004: 109). Lululemon, as a lifestyle brand, has effectively connected their brand to stylish, form-fitting and flattering clothes that have the ability to display a body that conforms to expectations surrounding health and appearance.

To summarize, Lululemon marketers have effectively connected their brand to a healthy, balanced lifestyle through lifestyle branding techniques. Given the fact that commodities helps to establish self-identity and lifestyle, and healthy living (and a “healthy” appearance) has become a moral obligation, many consumers are willing to purchase and display stylish Lululemon apparel to communicate a lifestyle centered on health (Giddens, 1991: 197; Smith Maguire, 2008: 52). As Richmond (1999) states, “the lifestyle choices that we make are each given a moral value, and how we consume these various commodities helps to constitute our sense of self” (166).

Consuming Lululemon apparel also communicates one’s ability to pay for premium products since Lululemon sells high-priced athletic apparel. For example, a pair of Lululemon pants sells for around one hundred dollars and a Lululemon athletic tank top sells for around fifty dollars (Lululemon, 2006). Lululemon therefore sells luxury athletic clothing; as a result, displaying the Lululemon logo is a sign of economic freedom and prosperity. Although Lululemon customers will inevitably have some variability in terms of social class, Lululemon is clearly a company catering to middle and upper class consumers, consequently restricting access to those with low incomes.

The appeal of Lululemon can therefore be partially attributed to the fact that purchasing Lululemon apparel is a way to engage in conspicuous consumption.

The success of Lululemon is in part due to the fact that we live in a culture where health and appearance is a dominant concern and where wealth provides status. The preoccupation with personal health has generated a massive consumer culture where health has become a market commodity (Richmond, 1999: 161). Millions of people are willing to open their wallets to gym memberships, aerobics classes, diet foods, and athletic clothing to attain a healthy lifestyle (Richmond, 1999). It is estimated that Americans spend \$3 billion dollars a year on yoga alone (The Economist, 2007). The current success of Lululemon is part of this trend.

Given that “good health has become a visible sign, demonstrated by the lean, taut, exercising body” and that Lululemon clothes are stylish, form-fitting and flattering, Lululemon apparel is the ideal attire for someone who wants to present a body that conforms to “what the outward configuration of the body should be” (Lupton, 1995: 71; Laberge & Sankoff, 1988, 284). Lululemon also benefits from the fact that we live in a culture where branded products represent our purchasing power and economic freedom. For instance, we have seen that consumers often pay extra for brands “to associate with co-consumer, and differentiate from non-consumer” (Shipman, 2004: 283). We don’t display our paychecks on our backs so visible brand names are a way to communicate our wealth and prosperity. Since Lululemon has become a huge success story, other companies such as One Tooth, Tuff Athletics, and Angela Fashion have created their own yoga-inspired apparel that greatly resembles Lululemon clothing but sells for significantly lower prices. However, Lululemon sales remain high because knock-off

products do not contain the same symbolic value as the Lululemon logo. Logos in contemporary capitalist society have “transformed from an ostentatious affectation to an active fashion accessory” that communicate various messages (Klein, 2000: 28).

Like other profit-driven retail companies, Lululemon exploits dominant ideologies and trends through tactful branding of their product. Lululemon has successfully created a brand that captures the essence behind a lifestyle that has become a moral obligation in a healthist, capitalist society. Shopping at Lululemon has therefore become a morally “good” behaviour. Consequently, *many* consumers are willing to spend more than one hundred dollars on a pair of Lululemon pants to associate themselves with the Lululemon brand. Naomi Klein (2000) explains that for companies, branding is “about thirstily soaking up cultural ideas and iconography that their brands could reflect by projecting these ideas and images back on the culture as ‘extensions’ of their brands” (29). This is exactly what Lululemon has accomplished; the company has “soaked up” dominant trends (yoga) and ideologies (healthism) in order to attract an expanding market of consumers who define and express themselves through consumption.

Chapter 4 – Conclusion

My research on Lululemon has not only revealed important aspects of the company, it has revealed important elements of the culture within which I live. For instance, this thesis project has facilitated a discussion of an ideology that shapes the way North Americans currently think about health. This ideology, termed ‘healthism’ by Robert Crawford in 1980, has invaded our consciousness. Health is now considered an individual responsibility, rather than a collective responsibility as it was in the era following World War II (Crawford, 1980: 368; Fisk, 2000: 163). Healthism, that gained currency in the late 1970s with the rise of neoliberal politics and economics, has become so potent that healthy behaviours, such as physical activity, have largely become a *moral obligation*; consequently ill-health is often considered as a failure to comply with a health-promoting lifestyle (White et al., 1995: 160; Richmond, 1999: 159).

The current ideologies around health have greatly facilitated the corporate success of Lululemon. Given the fact that Lululemon is closely identified with health, and that healthy behaviours (and maintaining “healthy” appearances) have largely become a moral obligation in a healthist society, Lululemon (and the company’s flattering clothes) is of great appeal to many individuals who are faced with healthist expectations. Ultimately, Lululemon has created a product that responds to the conditions of a healthist society therefore attracting a large market of people who are willing to submit themselves and their wallets to health. The success of Lululemon is largely due to current health ideologies and the construction of a “healthy” appearance that have indirectly steered consumers into Lululemon stores.

The potency of healthist ideologies have given rise to a holistic health movement that promotes health as a balanced state of physical emotional, mental, *and* spiritual well-being (Crawford, 1980: 366). The current holistic health movement has facilitated the corporate success of a yoga-inspired retail store since yoga is currently a popular holistic health practice in North America that is increasingly seen as an effective way to “reconnect with the spiritual world, reduce stress, and regain health and freedom” (Strauss, 2005: 6). Lululemon’s success is therefore partially due to its connection to yoga since the practice and fashion of yoga is a current trend. Ultimately, Lululemon, is reaping the benefits of the yoga boom while commodifying the sacred practice (The Economist, 2007).

In the context of healthism, health has become a market commodity (Richmond, 1999: 161). Billions of dollars are spent each year on health products and services (Crawford, 1980: 366, 368; Richmond, 1999: 161; IHRSA, 1995 as cited in Hums et al., 1999: 52). Healthist ideologies are fueling the expansion of the health and fitness industry and inspiring the desire of consumers to adopt and/or associate with a lifestyle centered on personal health. Since we communicate our lifestyles and self-identity through the commodities that we purchase, the consumption of health products can suggest that we “conform” to healthist expectations (Giddens, 1991: 197). I believe that Lululemon has “become one of the fastest growing athletic apparel companies in the world” because as The Economist writes, Lululemon “has a winning formula” (Lululemon, 2007; The Economist, 2007). Lululemon’s formula consists of a fashionable product that relies on dominant ideologies (healthism) and trends (yoga) in order to attract a large market and to generate considerable profit.

Although Lululemon has been praised for its considerable success, my research suggests that Lululemon is a huge success story because the company has played on our vulnerabilities. Lululemon has recognized the current pressure to achieve health as well as the societal pressure to look good. Ultimately, Lululemon has created a product that responds to both by connecting their brand to health, and producing fashionable, flattering clothes. Lululemon deflects attention away from their strategic business practices by claiming that the company is “working to make the world a better place” (Lululemon, 2007). Nevertheless, it is important to recognize that Lululemon is first and foremost a business that relies on strategic business practices in order to achieve corporate success.

Lululemon’s entrance into the Stock Exchange in July of 2007 provides evidence that Lululemon is motivated by financial success and global expansion of their brand rather than altruism (Bentz, 2007). If raising “the level of health and personal success” in the world was in fact the primary goal of the company, Chip Wilson would not have developed a product that could, as he put it, “capture this female market” (Lululemon, 2006; Lululemon, n.d: 12). We can also see Lululemon’s devotion to profit in the company’s manufacturing practices. Although Lululemon used to manufacture all its clothing in British Columbia, growth of the Lululemon company has resulted in factories based in Canada, the United States, China, Taiwan, South Korea, South America, Israel, Indonesia, Thailand and Vietnam (Lululemon, 2007). Although Lululemon insists that their factories are “safe, clean, ventilated, well lit, healthy work environments”, relying on mass-produced factories around the world seems contradictory to Lululemon’s

commitment to raising “the level of health and personal success” in the world (Lululemon, 2006).

Another example of Lululemon’s strategic business practices is the creation of the ‘Lululemon Athletica’ name. For example, ‘Lululemon’ was chosen by Chip Wilson because he believed that a name with many “L’s” in it would be highly appealing and profitable with the Japanese market. Lululemon’s website states the following:

It was thought that a Japanese marketing firm would not try to create a North American sounding brand with the letter “L” because the sound does not exist in Japanese phonetics. By including an “L” in the name it was thought the Japanese consumer would find the name innately North American and authentic... so he [Chip Wilson] challenged himself to come up with a name that had 3 “L’s” for his new company. In essence, the name “Lululemon” has no roots and means nothing other than it has 3 “L’s” in it. Nothing more and nothing less” (Lululemon, 2006).

I find it odd that a company that claims that it is “working to make the world a better place” could admit to creating a name that is so strategic and marketable; as well as politically incorrect (Lululemon, 2007).

Lastly, Lululemon has incorporated questionable marketing efforts in order to maximize profit. For instance, on April Fool’s day in 2007, Lululemon’s New York locations “covered their windows in paper, leading many consumers to believe they were closing, sparking a run on sales” (Shaw, 2008). This April Fool’s day joke tricked consumers into purchasing their apparel which resulted in high sales for the Lululemon company. It has also been suggested that Lululemon has deceived their customers into believing that their fabrics have specific health benefits. As previously discussed, the New York Times challenged Lululemon’s assertion that their VitaseaTM fabrics contain a seaweed compound which “releases amino acids, minerals and vitamins into the skin upon contact with moisture” (Lululemon, 2006). According to the Times, lab results

showed no traceable amounts of seaweed (Strauss & Waldie, 2007). Although Lululemon claims that the company is “working to make the world a better place”, these examples suggest that their primary goal – like any business – is financial success. What makes this business different is the particular set of ideologies that has made that success possible.

What would a retail company look like if it was truly working to “raise the level of health” and “make the world a better place” (Lululemon, 2006)? Although my thoughts to this question might be idealistic, I offer the following suggestions.

I believe that a retail store that has altruistic intentions would not sell expensive apparel. Lululemon’s high prices make it virtually impossible to reach working class groups. In order to reach all members of a community, a retail store should, at the very least, supply “affordable” athletic apparel so that low income individuals would be more likely to enter the store and receive health information and equipment. *Ideally*, it would be far more effective if a store that promotes itself as a health education/promotion center was subsidized by a socialist government so that disadvantaged groups could receive health and fitness information and the necessary tools (at little to no cost) to become more active and live a healthier life. A socialist health care system that reflects a collective responsibility for health would therefore be the best approach to “raise the level of health” in store communities (Lululemon, 2006). A government subsidized health education/promotion center would be able to reach those groups that report lower levels of health and provide them with information, exercise equipment, and athletic apparel. Although this center would not target middle to upper class people, these groups

report higher rates of health and participation in health-promoting activities (Public Health Agency of Canada, 2004; Laberge & Sankoff, 1988).

In order to “raise the level of health” and “make the world a better place”, I believe that it is important to choose store locations based on need, rather than how affluent or active the community is (Lululemon, 2006). Lululemon’s memoirs book explains that the company opened up a store in Calgary because the “city is full of active people who fit perfectly in the Lululemon demographic. We [those living in Calgary] have a highly educated and economically booming atmosphere” (Lululemon, n.d: 42). It therefore seems that Lululemon is making the world a better place for those who are already living in an advantaged community.

Lastly, if Lululemon wants to “raise the level of health” in Lululemon communities around the world, Lululemon should consider a community-based participatory approach that involves the community in order to combine knowledge and social action to “improve community health and eliminate health disparities” (Lululemon, 2006; Wallerstein & Duran, 2006: 312). Although Lululemon ambassadors serve to bridge the gap between the company and the community, I argue that Lululemon has limited to no contact to those groups who report lower levels of health.

Although this project has not deterred me from wearing Lululemon clothes or spending money at Lululemon, I have gained a great deal of knowledge and awareness of myself and my surroundings. This project has developed my critical consciousness and has made me a critical consumer. Although this project focuses on Lululemon Athletica, I find that I am applying my sociological imagination to other venues and trying to locate them within wider social, cultural, and historical contexts. I also feel that I am better able

to locate myself within the world I live in and challenge some previously held taken-for-granted assumptions. I believe that developing a critical consciousness is important because it prevents us from being imperceptive to our surroundings which is disadvantageous in a capitalist society.

Lululemon Athletica, a yoga-inspired retail store that aims to “elevate the world from mediocrity to a place of greatness”, has a grounding idea that is undeniably positive (Lululemon, 2006). However, I believe that Lululemon is far from reaching this goal. Ultimately, Lululemon has recognized our dominant ideologies and trends and has strategically incorporated them into the company’s promotional materials and retail practices in order to attract a large market and generate corporate success. Through relying on healthist ideologies, symbols and practices linked to yoga and lifestyle branding techniques, Lululemon has developed a corporate identity that is timely, relevant and profitable in our contemporary North American capitalist society.

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