HOW BRANDS CARE:

RHETORICS OF SELF-CARE IN CONTEMPORARY CONSUMER CULTURE

by

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Abstract

Rooted in feminist activism, self-care has become a commodified survival skill, practiced by

individuals seeking temporary relief from everyday stress and exhaustion and to prevent or

mitigate burnout. Under today's challenging political and economic circumstances, the term

'self-care' has permeated popular culture and has shaped the discursive strategies of pro-care /

lifestyle brands such as lululemon, the popular fitness apparel company. Through a review of the

feminist and mainstream rhetorics of self-care as well as a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of

lululemon's brand communication, this Masters Research Paper (MRP) analyzes how lululemon

communicates self-care as a means of restorative pleasure and optimization to their

predominantly female demographic.

Keywords: self-care, collective care, corporate care, neoliberalism, lululemon,

exhaustion, optimization, retail resilience

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Territory', a treaty that bounds the Anishinaabe, Mississaugas and Haudenosaunee to share and

protect the land and invites newcomers to do the same. Within the Ryerson Land

Acknowledgment (2014) it is written,

> We all eat out of the Dish, all of us that share this territory, with only one spoon. That
> means we have to share the responsibility of ensuring the dish is never empty, which
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Introduction

Following Donald Trump's victory in the 2016 American election, multiple concerns involving race, gender, and LGBTQIA+ rights have been voiced by progressives in response to the xenophobic discourse of far-right groups, the way Trump has seemed to normalize expressions of gender-based violence, and the undermining of feminist causes by the Trump administration. As a result, racialized minorities and women experiencing politically driven feelings of anxiety and helplessness have increasingly been seeking alternative ways of coping such as personal wellness pursuits and self-care practices (Michaeli, 2017). Additionally, thanks to the ongoing intensification of neoliberal policies in the United States and Canada, this pursuit of wellbeing has continued to shift away from being a collective responsibility (i.e. that of a society or groups formed within a society), to being the responsibility of the individual (Larner, 2000; Michaeli, 2017; Rose, 2001; Rottenberg, 2014). Rooted in feminist activism, self-care has become a commodified survival skill, practiced by individuals seeking temporary relief from everyday stress and exhaustion.

While self-care existed long before Trump's presidency, according to Google Trends, online searches for "self-care" reached a new peak immediately following the 2016 American election (Google Trends, 2016). This self-care explosion inspired a multitude of op-eds published in *The New York Times*: e.g. "Soak, Steam, Spritz: It's All Self-Care" (Meltszer, 2016); "Can Yoga Help Chase the Post-election Blues?" (Green, 2016); and *The New Yorker*: e.g. "The Politics of Conspicuous Displays of Self-Care" (Kisner, 2017). Similarly, the Instagram tag #selfcaresunday grew to having well over a million interactions and largely features selfies of face masked women in bathtubs or legging-clad ladies glistening with post-workout sweat. A recent article published on the Forbes website reads, "Practicing Self-Care Is

Important: 10 Easy Habits To Get You Started" and includes meditating, exercising, eating healthily while not overeating, and taking breaks (Nazish, 2017) and a 2020 Buzzfeed piece entitled, "27 Self-Care Products To Help You Relax If You're Feeling On Edge," finds self-care being described as a practice reliant on products and services such as wine glass holders for your bathtub, various face and eye masks, and a $36 scented candle (Boyd, 2020).

Under today's challenging political and economic circumstances, the term 'self-care' has permeated popular culture and has shaped the discursive strategies of pro-care / lifestyle corporations such as lululemon, the popular fitness apparel company. lululemon has always used health and wellness in their marketing, at one point advertising health benefits from seaweed-infused clothing ("Lululemon to remove claims from seaweed clothing line, 2007). The brand uses these themes to sell their yoga pants and running gear, but they also communicate messages of self-care using their bespoke bags marked with self-care platitudes such as "breathe deeply", "do one thing a day that scares you", and "stress is related to 99% of illness" (lululemon, n.d.). These platitudes communicate lululemon's clever messaging that active people -- those who wear their clothes and use their products -- are happy people. In June 2019 lululemon launched its first skincare line, aptly named, "selfcare", which markets cruelty and paraben-free skincare and bodycare designed to ease the transition from active to professional life, thereby reproducing their communication tactic that buying lululemon care products is indeed an act of self-care.

While self-care has existed for decades within feminist and also racialialized contexts, the mainstream trendiness of self-care has been capitalized on by countless brands in order to sell products such as skincare, makeup, and clothing at varying price points. Self-care's trendiness is captured by Aziz Ansari's character, Tom, in the television program *Parks and Recreation* who coined the term "treat yo-self" (Poehler, 2011), a practice enacted by him and his coworker,

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Donna, buying expensive products and *treating themselves* to annual lavish meals as a form of self-care for a year's worth of anxieties, responsibilities, and stress. To Tom and Donna, who is a woman of colour (WOC), self-care in the form of product consumption offers restoration and reward at the end of an overwhelming year. As Audre Lorde (1988) says, "Caring for myself is not self-indulgence, it is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare" (p. 109). Lorde, as a WOC and intersectional feminist activist, believed that social and economic privilege determines the levels of care afforded to women and racialized groups of people. She also explained the often gendered processes of care-giving and confronted the double standard of care wherein a woman is expected to offer care freely while seldom permitted to take care of herself. For marginalized groups living in a neoliberal society that does not offer the same level of care to all communities, it is indeed an act of self-preservation to practice self-care, even if that means finding resiliency in retail settings.

In a time when people's bodies are literally being treated as inhuman objects or as commodities to be consumed by capital (see, for example, police brutality towards Black and Indigenous communities, the gig-economy, the working conditions of Amazon warehouse employees, UberEats couriers, etc.), the idea of treating oneself or treating one's body by moisturizing or by being coddled by luxurious clothing should not be unexpected (Micheali, 2017); rather, self-care or wellness-seeking can offer the contemporary neoliberal subject a reason to go on living (Derkatch, 2020). Indeed, the satisfaction of rewarding oneself with products and goods remains a way to unwind and to facilitate further health and wellness rituals; for example, buying lululemon leggings might facilitate participation in a mindful yoga practice prior to applying lululemon skincare products that inspire the newly refreshed yogi to get back to work.

This Masters Research Paper (MRP) will discuss the origins and existing discourses of feminist self-care as a tool for avoiding burnout. It is not my aim in this MRP to comprehensively critique consumption-based or mainstream self-care; rather, my objective is to explore the rhetorics of self-care and the nuanced motivations that push individuals to seek, practice, and buy into self-care discourses and marketing. I will consider these rhetorics as a necessary response to neoliberal forms of governance and the tumultuous political and social circumstances they generate. To do so I will enter into dialogue with lululemon's brand messaging and will examine whether Lorde's suggestion that self-care can serve as a political tool for self-preservation is a useful way of interpreting the mainstreaming of self-care practices and products.

Research Questions

This MRP will be driven by two primary research questions:

    1. How can "self-care" be understood as a response to contemporary social, political and environmental circumstances?

Responses to this first question have offered divergent opinions. Kaplan (2019), for example, is pessimistic about stress management and self-care strategies in a post-truth North America. On the other hand, Weybright et al. (2019) and Yang et al. (2018) suggest that the main objective for struggling individuals is to recognize their unhealthy habits and to create balance in their day-to-day lives which can be achieved through self-care.Weybright et al. (2019) suggest that balance can be reached through practices of healthy leisure or designated time for self-care, while Yang et al. (2018) suggest that a sense of balance can be achieved by depressed young adults through ritualistic acts practiced on an everyday basis. The language of wellness, as Derkatch (2018) suggests, is predicated on two intertwining logics of restoration, i.e. when individuals consume

products to restore their bodies to "prior states of ideal health" (p. 135) and enhancement, or when individuals purchase products to optimize their health and themselves. Individuals, otherwise impacted by neoliberalism's emphasis on rugged individualism and its attacks on collective care and wellbeing, practice self-care through the maintenance of rituals, leisure, and shopping. My aim with this first question is to explore how these practices offer restoration and enhancement to individuals in ways that allow them to continue their (neoliberal) lifecycle by returning their depleted bodies to functional and/or optimized states.

2. How do companies, specifically lululemon, package and sell self-care to customers?

The term self-care originates from Black feminst activism in the 1970s and is further explored in the scholarship of Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and more recently, Sara Ahmed. Michaeli (2017) argues that for women the selling of self-care services and commodities should be set aside in order to champion intersectional feminist self-care through the act of collective empowerment. While I agree that consumption-based self-care has co-opted and disturbed feminist definitions of the concept, I do not believe it is possible to separate the mainstream rhetorics of self-care from everyday life, at least not outside close-knit or insular feminist groups. In this regard, I will explore with my second research question the discursive strategies of the pro-self-care brand lululemon in order to analyze successful strategies of consumer enticement through the use of self-care rhetorics and the ways they are understood by the public. As Derkatch (2020) argues, "wellness becomes a way for people to fight for their health because everyday life makes people sick" (p. 11). She suggests that perceptions of health can be achieved through retail resilience by buying "products intended to treat stress, anxiety, and fatigue" (2020, p. 14) such as vitamin blends, essential oils, and natural sleep solutions. In a similar way that wellness products offer fleeting remedies to health-conscious citizens, the purchase of skincare or lululemon athleisure

(athletic apparel) for the purpose of self-care provides temporary relief and pleasure in the midst of continued labour exhaustion within our highly competitive capitalist societies. I adopt Derkatch's term "retail resilience" (2020, p. 14) in order to consider not only the everyday purchases associated with pleasure, but rather the purchases of products for an individual's self-defined self-care practice in ways that, as Derkatch (2020) suggests, provides imaginary relief and resilience without tangible or long term benefit. Many self-care trends now involve the daily ritual of working out or skincare application since they offer the individual (usually female) a sense of agency in a society often driven by patriarchal priorities.

By pursuing these research questions this project closely aligns itself with Derkatch's (2020) wellness scholarship, in which she discusses the cyclical nature of wellness, an ongoing process that self-generates "at the level of systems" (p. 2). Similarly, this project will examine the tension that exists when individuals pursue self-care in order to reclaim a sense of control while, at the same time, their purchases are fueling the very system that they are trying to escape.

Literature Review

My literature review and research on self-care focuses on three primary themes. These themes include: (1) The Language of Self-Care, (2) Neoliberalism and the Societal Lack of Collective Care, and (3) Self-care, Gender, Politics, and Popular Culture.

The Language of Self-Care

Foucault (1986) described self-care, or as he called it, the "care of the self" (p. 12), as a technological power, that, much like Lorde's (1988) definiton of self-care as a form of self-preservation, has political roots and ramifications. Lorde (1988) emphasizes the necessity for marginalized groups such as women, POC, and LGBTQIA+ to take care of themselves in a society that systemically does not take care of them. Feminist discourses of self-care originate from activism against gender and race discrimination and often promotes avoiding burnout from mental and physical exhaustion. Upholding Lorde's description of self-care as warfare, Sara Ahmed on her blog, *Feminist Killjoys* describes how by:

> directing our care towards ourselves we are redirecting care away from its proper objects, we are not caring for those we are supposed to care for; we are not caring for the bodies deemed worth caring about. And that is why in queer, feminist and anti-racist work self-care is about the creation of community, fragile communities, assembled out of the experiences of being shattered. We reassemble ourselves through the ordinary, everyday and often painstaking work of looking after ourselves; looking after each other. (2014)

Ahmed's practice is deeply political and calls on individuals to form communities to practice collective and individual self-care alike. By forming collectives out of institutionally-ignored bodies, she, like Lorde seeks to reclaim lost agency from those forces that govern us. Michaeli (2017) likewise discusses how the act of self-care means "revolting against the unequal distribution of life and death, health and illness, well-being and suffering, of care-giving and receiving roles, as fixed by patriarchy, white supremacy, global capitalism, and other systems of domination and exploitation" (p. 53). The aim of self-care has always been to form communities

out of necessity and to collectively fight against the very systems that oppress them. As Ahmed says, self-care allows us to find "ways to exist in a world that is diminishing" (*Feminist Killjoys*, 2014). Another key voice in the feminist self-care narrative is American feminist activist and author, Angela Davis. Davis has proposed the practice of what she calls radical self-care, which is necessary for activists because "anyone who's interested in making change in the world, also has to learn how to take care of herself, himself, theirselves" ("Angela Davis on Radical Self Care", 2018). At this level, Davis suggests that ongoing and holistic self-care is necessary for individual mental wellness as well as sustained organizing. She continues:

> I'm thinking about one of the leaders of the Black Panther Party, Ericka Huggins, who began to practice yoga and medication in the 70's, and she encouraged many people including Huey Newton and Bobby Seale to join that practice... I think they did a little bit of it, but I think that movement would have been very different, had we understood the importance of that kind of self care. Personally, I started practicing yoga and meditation when I was in jail. But it was more of an individual practice; later I had to recognise the importance of emphasising the collective character, of that work, on the self. ("Angela Davis on Radical Self Care", 2018)

Davis underscores the importance of radical self-care in the form self-driven practices such as yoga and meditation acts as a way to avoid burnout and to ensure the longevity of activist movements. Recently, Rachel Elizabeth Cargle, a well-known Black feminst and activist, posted a screen capture on Instagram that read, "Reminder: our self-care practice can be proactive as opposed to reactive. Burn out doesn't have to be the catalyst to rest. We can rest as a gift to our future selves" (2020). The post comes as a response to the emotional and physical labour Black people have been putting in to advocate for the many Black lives lost due to police brutality in North America and to promote continued support for the Black Lives Matter movement. Cargle's reminder is an important one as it details a cycle of exhaustion that is experienced by all individuals living in a neoliberal system, but most especially by racialized and marginalized

communities. Here, Davis and Cargle implore people to be proactive rather than reactive about their self-care. I will revisit this notion in the section, "Wellness Rhetorics".

While neoliberal forms of governing have effectively pushed individuals to practice self-care, self-managing, and self-surveillance due to a lack of adequate institutional supports such as health-care and social assistance, people with social privilege in western contexts (any combination of the following: white, male, middle-upper class, heteronormative, wealthy) have the luxury of using it as a support system (Ahmed, 2014). Meanwhile, 'othered' groups are doubly oppressed by these systems. For example, in response to the queer communities who cannot capitialize on the social support of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Ahmed, 2014), Micheali (2017) notes that, "queering self-care also involves a suggestion to go beyond binaries of healthy/unhealthy, positive/negative ways of coping, thereby opening radical possibilities of what being well can mean for you, in this time and place" (Michaeli, 2017, p. 55). Self-care can look different to many groups of people; to some, it is "an act of political warfare" (Lorde, 1988, p. 109) bound up with self-preservation, for others, thanks to mainstream understandings of the term, as well as allocated social privilege, it can simply be a long bath at the end of a tiring workday. For Angela Davis, self-care began as an individual yoga and meditation practice while incarcerated. In all instances, albeit to varying extents, individuals enact self-care in order to practice resilience in the face of everyday struggles. Similarly, self-care can impact the longevity of movements and the people who participate in them, leading back to the goal of avoiding mental and physical burnout.

To accommodate the mainstream discourse, the popularity of self-care has since become a marketing trend to sell pro-care products such as skincare, supplements, and workout gear. The idea that consumers can reclaim a portion of agency through their wallets speaks to Derkatch's

(2020) definition of retail resilience as marketing and purchasing "products intended to treat stress, anxiety, and fatigue" (p. 14). The marketing of such wellness products demonstrates resilience rhetoric in the sense that "marketing lays bare the ideological currents that animate the retail landscape" (Derkatch, 2020, p. 14). As mainstream self-care becomes more prominent, consumer markets are being oversaturated with products that claim to offer resilience, restoration, and optimization.

Medical Rhetorics of Self-care

Interestingly, much of the recent scholarship on the rhetorics of self-care is medically related and is focused on narratives of mental and chronic illness and the patient's responsibility to self-monitor. Emmons (2010) highlights the rhetorical nature of mental illness diagnoses and contends that discourse is a "form of power" (p. 10) and thus *forms* the notions of power. Schillace (2011) suggests that there has been a "returning respect for the *illness narrative*" (p. 441) insofar as the verbal and written lived experience of those living with mental illness has deep resonance. The illness narrative has thus been recognized as a medium of catharsis and self-care through the process of self-help. Indeed, today it is the individual's responsibility to 'unplug' or find mental distance from social stressors for their own self-care and self-preservation. Kaplan (2019) speaks predominantly on the issues of stress management and the connections between self-care and health. These connections are seen in countless analyses of medical care and the patient's responsibility to self-monitor, e.g. women self-examining their bodies for diseases such as breast and cervical cancer. As Levin and Idler (1983) note, self-care can be defined as "activities individuals undertake in promoting their own health, preventing their own disease, limiting their own illness, and restoring their own health" (p. 181). In this instance, the process of self-care intervenes at every stage of health and/or sickness. Promoting

health, preventing illness, intervening in the case of illness, and restoring the body all respond to a spectrum of wellness wherein everyone is either a future or current patient who is largely responsible for her own wellness. Levin (1976) describes self-care within a medical context as a "process whereby a layperson can function effectively on his own behalf in health promotion and prevention and in disease detection and treatment *at the level of the primary health resource in the healthcare system*" (p. 206, emphasis added). In lieu of an accommodating healthcare system, benefit packages, and sick leave, individuals must actively promote their own health or mitigate its concerns by performing self-care. Self-care can take the form of performing self-examinations, exercising and eating a balanced diet, or perhaps purchasing products such as vitamins and services such as yoga classes, and spiritual retreats. The responsibility of health management almost always falls on the individual and benefits a consumer-driven society that seeks to sell coping mechanisms and mindfulness.

According to numerous studies, self-regulation and self-care, or a lack thereof, can majorly affect rates of depression. By studying the effects of self-regulation through the use of imposing routines on young-adults with depression, Yang et al. (2018) found that the program was "effective in enhancing self-control capacity and improving depressive symptoms in depressed patients, especially in those with mild to moderate depressive symptoms and greater participation enthusiasm" (p. 258). The structure of imposed routines supports the idea that small accomplishments for people with depression create a sense of self-control while they struggle with mental illness, while also encouraging self-control through ritualistic practices. In the absence of institutional and government-based aid for mental health, self-control and self-care are key facets to the shift towards a neoliberal framework in medicine. Brijnath and Antoniades (2016) note, "Finding a responsive health provider, seeking treatment, opting to take medication

and pursuing a suite of self-management activities (e.g. exercise, yoga, further education) to craft their own therapeutic toolkits are examples of participant's self-managing their illness" (p. 6). Such toolkits further encourage patients to confront realities of "self-directed help-seeking" (Brijnath & Antoniades, 2016, p. 7) that further emphasize the individual need to self-diagnose, self-manage, and provide self-care. With partial thanks to Web 2.0, an individual is implicitly and explicitly encouraged to participate as a "digitally-engaged patient" (Lupton, 2013, p. 260) or as someone who personifies responsible "health citizenship" (Groleau, 2011, p. 811). The patient is urged not only to take responsibility for his or her own wellness, but should, in doing so, feel empowered. Furthermore, Lupton (2013) writes that "patient bodies that are 'digitised'" are "ready to become 'engaged' and 'activated', to 'take control' of their health and to produce their own data on themselves and share these data with others as well as access the data produced by medical testing and medical records" (p. 260). According to contemporary understandings of patient self-care and empowerment, the obligation is to expand the data-centric, self-care model while limiting doctor-patient interactions; this understanding comes in response to limited healthcare resources, the focus on individual responsibility and, indeed, the profit motive that increasingly defines healthcare systems in neoliberal societies.

Wellness Rhetorics

Closely linked with the medical discourse of self-care is the rhetoric of wellness and the advertising of wellness products. According to Derkatch (2020), wellness rhetorics inform individuals of who they ought to be and assign them the role of health citizens who are responsible for their own health. In exploring the popularity of wellness markets, Derkatch (2020) examines wellness through a performative lens, and argues that it is "enacted and

embodied, and that it unfolds at particular times and places to particular effects" (p. 2). Further, she delineates the six vectors of wellness as:

> (1) incipient illness, a state of pre-disease that requires monitoring and care; (2) self-management, the regulation of the body under neoliberal logics of health citizenship and choice; (3) harm reduction, the use of natural health products to counteract everyday "toxic" life; (4) survival strategy, to mitigate the exhaustion of everyday life; (5) optimization, a desire to become "better than well" (Elliott 2003); and (6) performance, the self-conscious enactment of self, identity, and virtue. (Derkatch, 2020, p. 1)

While all six vectors of wellness correlate with patterns of self-care, and emphasize Levin and Idler's (1983) phases of health promotion and illness prevention, I focus mainly on the fourth and fifth vectors of survival strategy and optimization. Expanding on Derkatch's scholarship, I explore first, the ways individuals are exhausted by everyday life. Derkatch (2020) describes, for instance, how people restore themselves through wellness and self-care products. Carl Cederström and André Spicer (2015) also write in *The Wellness Syndrome* that wellness as an ideology in mainstream culture is harmful as it makes people obsessed with personal wellness at the expense of the collective. While most scholars comment on the popularity of wellness culture without offering intervention, Derkatch (2020), argues that wellness is a form of "multidimensional self-actualization" (2020, p. 5) and although brand co-optation of self-care is exploitative and capitalizes on "collective exhaustion" (2020, p. 41) it is far more necessary to explore why consumers buy into them. She discusses, "the products themselves may serve as lifelines for people who feel they are out of options, out of energy, and out of health" (Derkatch, 2020, p. 41). As self-care becomes increasingly necessary as a survival strategy, brands like lululemon, who sells skin care products in a line named 'selfcare' is unabashedly capitalizing on not just the trendiness of skincare, but also the need for individuals to restore their bodies with pleasure and calmness, usually through products, while also selling activewear as a form of personal enhancement. My research is not focused on how lululemon capitalizes off of trendy

feminist jargon, but rather critically analyzes their language as it seeks to target a weary and exhausted customer base. Derkatch (2020) captures the need to buy into products that can potentially restore and aid us in "surviving life in a state of exhaustion" (p. 3). She suggests that wellness:

> promises us that if we can get through the labors of the moment by giving ourselves a little boost, we will be ready for what comes next. It promises us that we will not always feel so tired, so powerless, so overwhelmed. It promises us that we can and will feel better. (p. 3)

The promise of better is inherent within both the logics of restoration and optimization, which I will discuss later in this paper.

Self-Care Practice

In a study conducted with a dozen post-secondary students to measure acts of healthy and unhealthy leisure, the results showed that students participated in healthy leisure for restorative purposes and oftentimes, leisurely alone time was preferred over time spent with loved ones (Weybright et al., 2019). The authors of the study explain that "When describing healthy leisure, students referred to instances of autonomous behavior that served to actively seek to take care of oneself, deal with stress and pressures, and become a better self" (Weybright et al., 2019, p. 254). Although not all subjects preferred solitary leisure time, the significance of needing "time off" (Weybright et al., 2019, p. 254) from the subjects' respective groups suggests a step away from finding restoration or peace within groups or communities. Individual restoration, then, was favored over seeking restoration through the collective. As Ahmed (2017) rationalizes, "time out is required for time in" (p. 240). Additionally, "Descriptors of healthy [leisure] were restorative, self-determined, and including a social element while unhealthy [leisure] was excessive, lacked self-control, and included elements of escape" (Weybright et al., 2019, p. 239). Just as self-care

has become an elusive and highly subjective term, healthy leisure, which can be understood as acts of self-care, is not merely defined by one universal act, although there seemed to be a consensus amongst the undergraduate participants that healthy leisure or self-care is often entwined with "relaxation" and "taking time to take care of personal needs" (Weybright et al., 2019, p. 248). One undergraduate student described self-care as, "if you had a really busy week, like healthy leisure too is like relaxing and doing yoga or like stretching" (Weybright et al., 2019, p. 248). A handful of other students referenced yoga as an example of healthy leisure or self-care, citing it as a moment for the mind and body to restore itself or "decompress" (Weybright et al., 2019, p. 248). When it came to examples of unhealthy leisure the *Parks and Recreation*-inspired slogan, "Treat yo'self" (Poehler, 2011), was mentioned in three focus groups as well the act of rewarding oneself with expensive products or junk food (Weybright et al., 2019). Despite popular culture references and overall understanding of mainstream self-care opportunities, the students in the study recognized the differences between healthy and unhealthy leisure or self-care practices. While the concept of self-care has deeply political roots, the mainstream understanding of the practice has since been co-opted by brands in order to sell products. Self-care is deeply personal, however in a brand-driven context, its connotation is less about the feminist need to collectively organize, and more about products that offer the feeling of personal rest and relaxation. In the case of lululemon's selfcare line, the name itself, although highly politicized, is not contextualized within the feminist understanding of self-care. Rather, the skincare line, which markets functional and safely-formulated products for the active individual, communicates the language of self-care as a highly individualized practice of necessity and reward. This will be further discussed in my analysis below.

Neoliberalism and Societal Lack of Collective Care

Neoliberalism can be a bit of an all encompassing buzzword. For the purpose of this paper, I use the term to define an economic ideology that encourages the privatization of public services offered by the government and that places responsibility on individuals to self-govern in order to contend and compete with unconstrained market forces. Scholarship on neoliberalism often discusses the role played by self-care as a form of individual self-management. Godrej (2017) emphasizes that neoliberal forms of governance seek "to incite a set of specific transformations through the intentional curtailing of the apparatus of government itself, thereby effecting an indirect manipulation of the background conditions for individual conduct" (p. 907). Critics of neoliberalism argue that practices of self-care emphasize the responsibility of the individual in response to a lack of societal care. As discussed previously in a medical and wellness context, individuals who do not feel supported by their governments are made to feel responsible for their own physical and mental upkeep. Neoliberalism, according to Rottenberg (2014) is a pervasive political rationality that "moves to and from the management of the state to the inner workings of the subject, normatively constructing and interpellating individuals as entrepreneurial actors" (p. 420). Individuals who are not adequately taken care of must then act in self-serving ways. Rottenberg (2014) also discuses the emergence of the neoliberal feminist, one who is "mobilized to convert continued gender inequality from a structural problem into an individual affair" (p. 420). A prominent example of internalized gender inequality is the pressure on women to achieve a fulfilling work-family balance, a vernacular that has always pervaded women's careers but especially in the wake of Sheryl Sandberg's (2013) best-selling self-help book, *Lean In: Women, Work and the Will to Lead*. Sandberg (2013), who has been criticized for putting the onus on women to self-manage motherhood and professional schedules without critically considering the larger patriarchal structures at play, instructs her readers, among other

things, not to let internal self-doubt inhibit their careers. Self-help literature within today's neoliberal circumstances contributes to the training of the self-governing individual who is responsible for her own well-being, therefore reinforcing the idea that a person's health and position is directly linked to their own choices. Self-help defines an ideal individualism, in which, as Riley et al. (2019) describe, "the focus on the individual is at the expense of the social, reducing the possibility of seeking solutions in collective feminist activism" (p. 4). Indeed, if self-help is predicated on a flawed self, then self-care is predicated on an exhausted self (Derkatch, 2020; Riley et al., 2019). The woman who struggles with the impossible pressure to maintain work-life balance alongside health, personal fulfilment, and happiness while not challenging the overarching institutional biases that undermine womens' efforts is an embodiment of the neoliberal feminist, indicating that the notion of individual balance "unravels any notion of social inequality by placing the responsibility of well-being, as well as the burden of unhappiness, once again, on the shoulders of individual women" (Rottenberg, 2014, p. 423). In what Lauren Berlant (2011) terms "cruel optimism" (p. 1), she explains this continuing move towards individualism, the sense that an individual's desires or pursuits are also obstacles to her flourishing. The expectation of individual responsibility is supported by Rose's (2001) definition of "ethopolitics" or "the politics as life itself and how it should be lived" (p. 18). He argues that ethopolitics has created a somatic individuality that allows for the experimentation of subjectivity, citing vitamin use, diet, exercise, tattoos or piercings, and surgery as key examples of subjective body modification (Rose 2001). Rose (2001) continues, "the management and maximization of life itself have become the life's work, not only of each individual, but of their doctors, together with the scientists, entrepreneurs and corporations who make the reworking of life the object of their knowledge, inventions and products" (p. 16). As individuals become

increasingly pressured to take care of themselves and to practice somatic individuality, corporations and brands are more likely to hop on the bandwagon and saturate the market with products that are ideologically linked to this concept.

As Godrej (2017) discusses, everyday rituals of self-care can allow individuals to take "a resistant posture toward neoliberalism and biopolitical power while remaining cognizant of the ubiquity of such power relations" (p. 913). However, as she notes, self-cultivation is not simply about capitulating to, or resisting, power; rather, self-cultivation must navigate between the two while considering the effects of power-knowledge on the process. Although self-care is a response to a neoliberal lack of collective care, individual acts of self-care can be seen as forms of resistance that have the potential to contribute to political and social change. Godrej (2017) defines self-care specifically as the "active process of recovering, maintaining and improving one's health" through "physical techniques of the body...[and] techniques of the self aimed at sustaining mental health by managing one's self-identity, self-perceptions, feelings and relationships" (p. 894). Recalling Derkatch's (2020) use of retail resilience, purchasing power in particular allows individual consumers to reclaim power and collectivize for common causes in order to support ideas and businesses that are aligned with personal and political ideologies. For instance, an individual may choose to support brands that support women and POC over a brand that has a history of mistreatment, or, for environmentally conscious citizens, small businesses that sell locally grown, or bulk products.

The politics of health and wellness has never been more significant. As I write this, the COVID-19 pandemic is leaving many communities without enough government support and resources, meanwhile protests in the United States and Canada are being organized in support of Black Lives Matter and justice for the murders of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor, victims of

police brutality, and Ahmaud Arbery, who was murdered while jogging by a white former policeman and his accomplice. Social media posts are encouraging people to support Black-owned businesses, protester bail funds, and memorial services for Black victims of police brutality. Collective calls to action include cutting police force budgets to reallocate funds to community initiatives that support education, mental health, and homelessness issues across North American cities. Exorbitant policing budgets are rallying individuals into collective demand for better policies in the wake of injustice. In this case, activists are fighting to reclaim the way their money is being allocated. In the midst of social and political turmoil, the individual faces an overwhelming need to seek alternative care practices. As Shayla Love asks, in *Vice*'s "The Burnout and Escapism Issue", "Why can't we get the care we need, and instead have to hope matcha and meditation can take the reins?"

Self-care as a means of reclaiming agency is also deeply entrenched in feminist practice. Michaeli (2017) suggests that the "neoliberal version of 'self-care' embraced by mainstream society is profoundly different from self-care and well-being as rooted in radical feminist thought and activism, and that these differences are important to account for" (p. 52). Michaeli (2017) describes the neoliberal self-care as featuring the following characteristics:

1. The privatization of responsibility, wherein the individual is responsible for her own well-being rather than society as a whole;
2. Obscuring the social, economic, and political sources of physical, emotional, and spiritual distress and exhaustion;
3. Its effects are deeply depoliticizing. (p. 54)

The neoliberal framework of self-care has been used to change the expectation of who is permitted or worthy of care based on equity markers such as: gender, class, ethnicity, race, and ability (Michaeli, 2017). On the unequitable standards of female care, Michaeli (2017) emphasizes, "If we are frustrated, sad, or angry, we mustn't act on it, get angry together, protest and organize for change. The mainstream [i.e. neoliberal] self-care discourse invites us instead to

breathe, meditate, and—if we can afford it—enjoy a day at the spa" (p. 53). She further centers her self-care discourse within the understandings of feminist traditions and self-restoration. While the author does not argue that neoliberalism is embedded in mainstream self-care, she is eager to "move the neoliberal frame aside, rather than allowing it to take over and monopolize our discourses and imaginations" (Michaeli, 2017, p. 52) and suggests a dismantling of neoliberal structures. While the neoliberal framework is enmeshed in mainstream discourses of self-care, recent collective action regarding community-supported initiatives is leading to a shift in public discourse regarding the allocation of taxpayers' money. The embeddedness of self-care ideologies within neoliberalism is thus perhaps being challenged in this moment, furthering Rodriguez Acha's (2017) argument that in order to shape policy and social aid for the common good, we must all "striv[e] to re-centre the sustainability of life, care, the commons, and collective forms of co-existing" (p. 39). If this were to happen, perhaps self-practices and products would not be nearly as necessary.

Self-Care, Gender, Politics, and Popular Culture

There is a societal tendency to perceive women as being more empathetic than men and as carrying "greater emotionality and greater risk" when faced with the consequences of not being proactive or "self-vigilant" (Emmons, 2010, pp. 64-65). The pressure on women to be self-aware, self-vigilant, and self-surveilling has lead to mainstream phenomena like rape culture and victim-blaming. Although western society has seen recent social change following the social media movement #MeToo, sexist and gender-based misconduct has not ceased. As noted by many feminist scholars, violence against women and environmental exploitation can be understood to be intersecting areas of feminist concern. Michaeli (2017) notes that, "making self-care an act of political warfare (in its feminist sense, of course) involves historicizing and politicizing the 'self' and the 'care,' inevitably placing them in context, thus bringing into the picture the collective and the community" (p. 54). Recalling Lorde's definition of self-care as an act of political warfare, as well as the second-wave feminists' slogan "the personal is political" (officially coined by Hanisch, 1969), Micheali (2017) is in a dialogue with ecological oppression and exploitation. As governments continue to ignore climate change, for example, Rodriguez Acha (2017) writes, "climate and environmental impacts along colonial, class, racial and gender lines… will continue and rise in frequency and intensity" (p. 35). As a result, younger generations worldwide are experiencing major environmental anxiety and are questioning the ethics of having children in the midst of intense ecological, political and social injustice (Ojala, 2018). While the bodies, sexuality, capabilities, and relationships of women have always been politically considered, Michaeli (2017) suggests that collective action against institutional injustice is needed in order to reclaim feminist agency. Intersectional feminist approaches to self-care, in effect, transcend the individual in favour of holistic and collective care-taking and care-giving. Alternatively, the popular culture reference "treat yo'self" (Poehler, 2011) capitalizes off

of individual consumerism rather than positive interaction with others. Women especially are "trapped at the intersection of capitalism and patriarchy—two systems that, at their extremes, ensure that individual success comes at the expense of collective morality" (Tolentino, 2019, p. 175). In the face of injustice, Rodriguez Acha (2017) writes, "Key to this is the survival, well-being, collective care and self-care of women environmental defenders. Our bodies and selves are our first site of resistance and power and must be kept safe and cared for" (p. 39). But, as Derkatch (2020) suggests, the need to treat ourselves or to engage in wellness activities is a survival strategy in the face of extreme exhaustion within neoliberal western society.

So many factors are at play in our everyday experiences at school, work, home, that it is no wonder individuals who are being pushed to self-manage their health, their schedules, their optimization, are seeking restoration in products for the sole purpose of carrying on the cycle. In her essay, "Always be Optimizing" Jia Tolentino (2019) writes, "the worse things get, the more a person is compelled to optimize" (p. 129). Using the example of the American salad chain, Sweetgreen, she discusses the ritualization of employees as cogs in the machine who require efficient and sustainable fuel to keep going. The routine of going to work and being subsequently overworked is normalized to the point that other business models, such as 'on the go' lunch spots exist solely to serve assembly lines of employees rushing to get back to work. Tolentino (2019) describes the situation:,

> The ideal chopped-salad customer is himself efficient: he needs to eat his twelve-dollar salad in ten minutes because he needs the extra time to keep functioning within the job that allows him to afford a regular twelve-dollar salad in the first place. He feels a physical need for this twelve-dollar salad, as it's the most reliable and convenient way to build up a vitamin barrier against the general malfunction that comes with his salad-requiring-and-enabling job. (p. 130)

The reliable and convenient chopped salad at lunchtime offers just enough midday nutrition to ensure continued productivity. The so-called 'need' for it responds to the ongoing cycle of work-exhaustion-replenishment that overworked bodies experience. Workplace responsibility for employee care is diminishing alongside government-based care, meanwhile some workplaces provide benefit packages that include "self-care" experiences such as going to the spa, yoga classes, or meditation applications (Bostock et al., 2019). The inclusion of workplace self-care packages perpetuates the reactiveness rather than the proactiveness of mainstream self-care in that it comes as a response to extreme exhaustion, as Derkatch (2020) argues, the need to support workers so they can keep working because "sick bodies and tired bodies are not productive bodies" (Derkatch, 2020, p. 27). A likely response is consumption-based wellness or self-care offered to consumers by a multitude of brands selling restoration and enhancement, oftentimes through persuasion (Derkatch, 2012). Of course, when expensive brands implore you to take care of yourself, it does not seem so hard to resist.

In an interview with *Into the Gloss*, a popular skincare and cosmetics blog, Tolentino said "I have conflicted feelings about working out—am I taking care of myself? Or am I trying to look better, so my face will look better on the paraprofessional world of Instagram, and have more energy to work all the goddamn time?" ("Jia Tolentino, Writer, The New Yorker", 2019). Tolentino, who authored the popular collection of essays, *Trick Mirror: Reflections on Self-Delusion*, remarks on the concept of the ideal woman, who, in western society at least, is "always optimizing", "conceptually overworked" and "an inorganic thing engineered to look natural" (2019, p. 124-25). Her emphasis on the cycle of self-optimization concludes with:

> This woman is sincerely interested in whatever the market demands of her (good looks, the impression of indefinitely extended youth, advanced skills in self-presentation and self-surveillance). She is equally interested in whatever the market offers her—in the

tools that will allow her to look more appealing, to be even more endlessly presentable, to wring as much value out of her particular position as she can. (Tolentino, 2019, p. 124)

Tolentino captures the perceived and tangible demands of women and the ways these demands have reproduced a gendered code of conduct. While the notion of the ideal woman has existed across every generation, exemplifying values pertinent to each timeframe, the contemporary ideal woman, as Tolentino explains, "has been whatever she wants to be as long as she manages to act upon the belief that perfecting herself and streamlining her relationship to the world can be a matter of both work and pleasure—of 'lifestyle'" (p. 126). The concept of self-care works its way into the female psyche as a response, firstly, through its feminist origins, and secondly, through the pressure places on women to restore and especially to enhance themselves. Finally, Tolentino (2019) emphasizes, "Today's ideal woman is of a type that coexists easily with feminism in its current market-friendly and mainstream form" greatly "valori[zing] women's independent success" (p. 127). The pressure on women to constantly enhance themselves is further propagated by the mainstream rhetoric of self-care and the need to refuel and optimize on an ongoing basis.

Davies (2015), who discusses what he calls "the happiness industry" (p. 1), describes societal anxiety as a direct response to corporations and advertisers who sell us fleeting moments of joy packaged into consumable products. This results in consumer wanting more in order to chase that short-lived euphoria. Consumption then becomes a cycle of seeking pleasure in the midst of everyday exhaustion. Although Derkatch (2020) agrees with this notion, she aptly notes, "When we bracket off the question of whether or not natural health products actually do boost energy, sleep or mood, we can instead examine how these products can restore life even if only by restoring one's sense of comfort and control over their lives" (Derkatch, 2020, p. 30). Nelson et al. (2016) suggest that while acts of self-care such as visiting a spa or allowing oneself a

momentary treat *do* extend positive rewards and feelings of rejuvenation or restoration, more social and outward-focused acts of kindness, either for another individual or for society in general, lead to "greater flourishing over time" (p. 858). They explain that "self-focused behavior may feel selfish and undeserved, leading people to feel guilty that they should be doing something other than focusing on themselves" (Nelson et al., 2016, p. 852). The authors conclude that lasting feelings of happiness were linked to individuals treating or caring for others over and above themselves. The 'treat yo'self' (Poehler, 2011) ideal can trouble mainstream discourse of care and pleasure when it champions the individual over the collective. For Michaeli (2017), self-care within a neoliberal framework means, "revolting against the unequal distribution of life and death, health and illness, well-being and suffering, of care-giving and receiving roles, as fixed by patriarchy, white supremacy, global capitalism, and other systems of domination and exploitation" (p. 53). In a society that forces the individual to be responsible for her own care, it is also the responsibility of that individual to form caring collectives that then subvert harmful power dynamics. I situate this notion within my own understanding of mainstream self-care rituals that enforce unhelpful consumption patterns onto the wider consumer public without acknowledging the benefits of prosocial behavior or seeking to question the efficacy of mainstream self-care practices. The tension between neoliberalism which necessitates the individual to choose herself, and the feminist view which encourages the individual to form within the collective, exists within the context of maintream self-care.

Methodology

Given the politized origins of self-care, as well as its racial and gendered roots, the

method for this research is a critical discourse analysis (CDA). CDA seeks to critique the ways

that "unequal language can do ideological work" (O'Halloran, 2011, p. 445). As I have

previously discussed, self-care discourse, while originally a response to inequitable access to

state care, has permeated popular culture and has been adopted by many brands in order to sell

products. The permeation of self-care into the mainstream is significant and requires analysis in

order to understand how brands communicate self-care and why consumers may be drawn to

those messages. O'Halloran (2011) defines discourse firstly as, "language in use" (p. 446) and

secondly, inspired by Foucauldian thought, as generated by those who hold institutional and

societal power. Language in use, as articulated by O'Halloran (2011) references how language

can be reproduced within the confinements of "the knowledge we possess, the amount of effort

we invest, our values, how we have been educated and socialised, our gender, etc." (p. 446).

With respect to O'Halloran's (2011) second definition that discourse is generated and reproduced

through systems of power, he states that "discourses place limits on the possibilities of

articulation (and by extension, what to do or not to do) with respect to the area of concern of a

particular institution, political programme, etc" (p. 446). Although Foucault (1986) discusses the

discourse-power-ideology framework through predominantly political and institutional

perspectives, I believe a critical discourse analysis applies to corporate-driven communication as

it has the potential to shape mainstream discourse while reproducing discourses of dominance

and inequality.

Informed by Fairclough's (2001) model, which consists of three stages, I analyzed the

brand messaging and communication tactics used by lululemon to advertise their skincare line,

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selfcare (launched June 2019). Fairclough's (2001) stages of analysis include: description

(rigorous description of the text), interpretation (capturing audience interaction with the text) and

explanation (critical explanation of connections between text and socio-cultural discourse). The

socio-cultural approach "trains its focus generally on how socio-cultural change, the

globalisation of capitalism and modification in discourse are related" (O'Halloran, 2011, p. 450).

Specifically, Fairclough argues that with the onset of informal advertising and messaging

towards consumers, private and public discourse has become increasingly blurred, often

becoming more conversational in tone by employing what he describes as

"conversationalisation" (1995, p. 6). For Fairclough, advertising or corporate branding indicates

significant turns in contemporary capitalism and argues that these turns are reflected in textual

hybridity or "the mixing together of different genres, styles and discourses" (O'Halloran, 2011,

p. 450). Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), who also refer to contemporary capitalism as late

modernity, further contend, "Late modernity entails a radical unsettling of the boundaries of

social life – between economy and culture, between global and local, and so forth – one aspect of

which is an unsettling of the boundaries between different domains of social use of language" (p.

83). Fairclough (2002) has further defined "new capitalism" as a capitalism that has been

restructured by various domains of social life, notably by the "colonization of other fields by the

economic field" (p. 163). His examples of advertising, branding, and targeted messages discuss

the ways these newer discursive methods can alter the global/local dialectic within a globalized

model. To this end, I position lululemon as an economic body that has colonized popular

discourse.

For my analysis, I selected two communication samples from lululemon's website that

advertised either the selfcare line as a whole or a specific product in order to identify brand

themes and strategies. *Sample 1* includes the landing page for the selfcare line, entitled "The

Selfcare Formula," which communicates the line's mission, technology use, and general

ingredients. *Sample 2* is the website page that features the product, the "On The Go Sweat Kit",

the four-piece travel set that includes varying body and skincare products in two different scents.

I chose these samples because I wanted to analyze how lululemon discussed self-care (the

concept) and selfcare (the line) for the purpose of marketing to their predominantly female

demographic. My original intention was to capture social media content that specifically

mentioned and advertised the selfcare line. However, although the line was released in June

2019, I only found two posts that mentioned the launch of selfcare products and neither had

written content that was adequate for a critical discourse analysis. By drawing on Fairclough's

(2001) discussion that the construction of the self can be a product of "discourse, power,

ideology, social practice and common sense" (p. 3), I then compare lululemon's use of 'self-

care' marketing to feminist discoursees of self and collective care in order to identify ways that

the term has been appropriated and put to use by lululemon. In contemporary, or "new

capitalism" (Fairclough, 2002, p. 163), brands like lululemon have high social capital and can

use it to influence consumers in ways that legitimate co-opted discourse. On the process of

legitimation, Chen (2019) notes that:

> Only when the reasons presented are collectively accepted and recognized can a
> justificatory practice be considered as a (successful) legitimation act. In other words,
> legitimation is a particular type of justification built upon public deliberation. As such,
> public discourses generated by noninstitutional stakeholders (e.g., corporations, news
> media, and NGOs) also play a role in illuminating legitimation processes since these
> discourses shape the "common sense" held by the public. (p. 258)

The mainstream understanding of self-care has been co-opted and legitimized through popular

communication and the branding of products deemed necessary for practices of self-care. Most

people practice self-care as a way to self-restore and self-optimize (Derkatch, 2020) which, as

wellness strategies, are not inherently wrong or harmful. However, I wanted to conduct a discourse as well as a partial brand analysis on lululemon in order to critically consider the communication tactics of the brand alongside the popular discourse of self-care and self-optimization. The brand promotes a lifestyle with their apparel and products and while this is nothing new in the world of brand marketing, I wanted to consider the discourse of self-care through a corporate lens. In dialogue with the feminist origins of self-care, I again wanted to consider the efficacy of brand tactics and the reasons why consumers may be drawn to them.

Findings and Discussion

For some context, as a 24-year-old cis-woman, I have bought lululemon athleisure. Almost every cis-female friend I have owns some variation of lululemon legging or sports bra. A female friend of mine, who is also a Ryerson student and who, pre-COVID-19, would often accompany me to weekly yoga classes at the Ryerson Mattamy Athletic Centre, recently said to me that although she did not necessarily enjoy supporting lululemon as a brand, she bought their athleisure because she knew the quality of the product was a solid investment and, incidentally, the clothes made her feel good. For the right price (usually between $60-$150), anyone can purchase stomach sucking, body enhancing, sweat-wicking clothing from the brand. Every purchase at lululemon comes wrapped up in its hefty receipt and one of the brand's trademark reusable bags that have long been used to tote gym shoes or packed lunches during a commute. The bags are inscribed with self-help mantras such as "creativity is maximized when you are living in the moment", "do one thing a day that scares you", and "have you woken up two days in a row uninspired? change your life!" among others (lululemon, n.d.). With its sweat-wicking fabric, flexible material, and 0-12 size range, lululemon apparel is designed for active bodies. In 2013, after 17% of the brand's black yoga leggings were recalled due to the material pilling and becoming see-through after a few wears, Chip Wilson, founder and former chairman explained "some women's bodies don't work for the pants" (Hsu, 2018). Consequently, 'some women' who tried to return the recalled pants were asked to try them on and demonstrably bend over in front of employees. lululemon apparel has consistently dominated the billion dollar athleisure market not just because of the exclusivity of their products but also due to the success of their brand. In a 2015 *New York Times Magazine* feature about Wilson's corporate legacy, titled "Chip Wilson, Lululemon Guru, Is Moving On", he explains the brand's female demographic or "muse" as a "32-year-old professional single woman named Ocean who makes $100,000 a year"

(Hsu, 2018). Wilson described Ocean as, "engaged, has her own condo, is traveling, fashionable, has an hour and a half to work out a day." As the imagined embodiment all women supposedly want to be, Ocean incarnates Tolentino's previously described ideal woman - someone to aspire to be as a young woman or, alternatively, someone to reminisce about being if aged out of the demographic.

Wilson's muse, Ocean entices the demographic to not only buy the product, but, as Wiegel (2016) writes, "the [product] encourage[s] you to produce yourself as the body that they ideally display" thereby inciting "self-exposure and self-policing" (p. 12) not to mention self-optimizing in physical and professional form. In essence, the clothes promise a certain lifestyle that could act as a mere status symbol or could arguably project a concept called enclothed cognition (Adam & Galinsky, 2012; cited by Tolentino, 2019). Enclothed cognition is, as Adam and Galinsky (2012) explains, "the symbolic meaning of the clothes and the physical experience of wearing them" (p. 918). Their study, which tested the theory of enclothed cognition, measured levels of attention in participants who wore a lab coat described as a doctor's coat versus participants who wore a lab coat described as a painter's coat. The authors noted that participants wearing doctors' coats held a greater attention to tasks over the participants wearing painters' coats and concluded that both the symbolic meaning and physical experience of the clothes were significant in behavioural patterns of the person wearing the clothes (Adam & Galinsky, 2012).

In this regard, lululemon does not just sell clothing or products, but also the feeling of fulfilling a certain role within society, of being a prosperous health citizen, the positive feelings potentially "produc[ing] the pleasure of *feeling* good, physically" (Derkatch, 2020, p. 40). Similarly, Derkatch (2020) observes that even the act of putting on activewear with the later intention of exercising offers a sense of wellness and self-care. She explains: "The workout

clothes change my posture (I feel more limber, my limbs more organized), my mindset ("I am going to do something good for myself today"), and my affect (I feel like I am caring for myself, even when I am, at that moment, technically not)" (p. 30). She contends that the mere act of wearing activewear is an act of self-care as it allows us to feel agentic where we are usually rendered exhausted or powerless in other aspects of life. Athleisure as a pseudo-uniform, for lack of a better word, has, as Tolentino (2019) discusses, "carved out the space between exercise apparel and fashion: the former category optimizes your performance, the latter optimizes your appearance, and athleisure does both simultaneously" (p. 162). The term "athleisure" (i.e. 'athletic' and 'leisure') is a reaction to an economic reality that requires employees to be both overly flexible and overworked in their jobs, as "work is rebranded as pleasure so that we will accept more of it" (Tolentino, 2019, p. 162). The aesthetics are usually flattering and designed to enhance the figure. Founder Chip Wilson prophesied the popularity of the brand because, as he has said, "I was probably the only straight guy that was making women's apparel, and I knew what a guy liked. Girls ended up wearing it, and guys commented on it." (Wallace, 2015). On the flip side, athleisure is "reliably comfortable and supportive in a world that is not" (Tolentino, 2019, p. 160).

Brands are often an extension of an idea, usually an idea of a single person. In a brand analysis, context is significant. In the case of lululemon athletica, the brand was born from the man Chip Wilson. Chip Wilson's muse for the brand has already been discussed, which, in my opinion, is pretty representative of his ideas on women and his target market. The skincare line, selfcare, provides low-maintenance skin and bodycare products in order to ease the transition from active to professional life. The following is an excerpt from the official press release launching the selfcare line:

Over the years, we've heard the feedback that transitioning from sweat to life isn't always easy. Lululemon has always been in the work of creating solutions for sweaty problems and our Selfcare line is an extension of that approach," said Sun Choe, chief product officer, lululemon. "Like our apparel, Lululemon Selfcare has been designed with function at its core and created to support guests pre- and post-workout." (2019)

Notably, the aim of the line is to ease the transition from workout to regular life. In the section that follows, I outline the CDA implemented for the *Sample 1* and *2*.

Description

Sample 1: "The selfcare formula." (n.d.)

lululemon's landing page for the selfcare line is titled, "The Selfcare Formula" (Figure 1) and includes navigation headings such as: "Sweat-tested", "Good Ingredients", "Cruelty-free", and "Functionality".
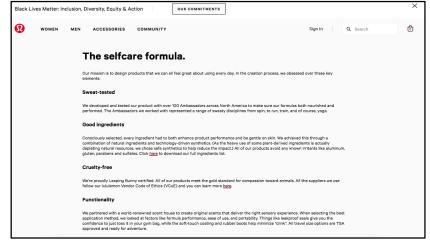

Figure 1: "The selfcare formula"

The mission for the line is communicated quite simply as "function-driven" and seeks to provide products that are designed for everyday use for the everyday active person. The formula was sweat tested by over 100 brand ambassadors participating in varying activities to ensure that the formulas "both nourished and performed" while being used. Under "Good Ingredients" it is written:

Consciously selected, every ingredient had to both enhance product performance and be gentle on skin. We achieved this through a combination of natural ingredients and technology-driven synthetics. (As the heavy use of some plant-derived ingredients is actually depleting natural resources, we chose safe synthetics to help reduce the impact.)

> All of our products avoid any known irritants like aluminum, gluten, parabens and sulfates […]

The parenthetical outlines the use of safe synthetics in lieu of naturally-derived ingredients and assures that the customer is protected from some well-known harmful ingredients, despite not actually listing the full ingredient lists on any of the product pages. Instead, customers have to click to download the full ingredient list, a 10-page pdf that lists all ingredients by name and purpose (e.g.: "Water/Eau - Mineral derived. Because we can't live without it"; "Butylene glycol - An alcohol that boosts the effectiveness of the preservative system"). The page also communicates that the line is cruelty-free and does not test on animals, thereby meeting the "gold standard for compassion toward animals" and insinuating that by buying these products, customers mitigate toxins normally found in other brands' products and participate in harm reduction for themselves and for others.

The "Functionality" section communicates:

> We partnered with a world-renowned scent house to create original scents that deliver the right sensory experience. When selecting the best application method, we looked at factors like formula performance, ease of use, and portability. Things like leakproof seals give you the confidence to just toss it in your gym bag, while the soft-touch coating and rubber boots help minimize "clink". All travel size options are TSA approved and ready for adventure.

The selfcare line is advertised as a highly functional line of products that are enhanced safely and somewhat naturally for the everyday active person.

Sample 2: On The Go Sweat Kit (n.d.)

lululemon's On The Go Sweat

Kit (Figure 2) is a four-piece

travel and carry-on friendly

assortment of skin and body-care

items and comes in either aloe

lotus or black pepper

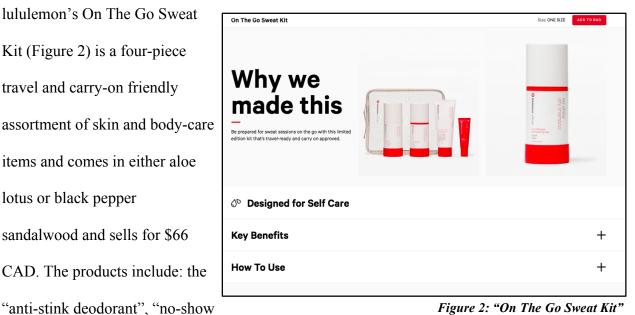sandalwood and sells for $66

CAD. The products include: the

"anti-stink deodorant", "no-show

Figure 2: "On The Go Sweat Kit"

dry shampoo", "speed up cool down body lotion", and "basic

balm" lip conditioner. The line advertises these products as perfect for athletes or anyone who

lives a fast-paced lifestyle. The packaging is simple and features their red, white, and black brand

colours and typeface. Stylistically, the products are branded as "no fuss" and travel friendly.

Directly underneath the product description is the phrase "Designed for Self Care" but does not

expand on this premise. The "key benefits" are described as follows: (1) Travel size products are

perfect for your carry-on or gym bag; (2) Water-resistant and transparent so you can always see

what's inside; (3) Pouch is expandable and can stand on its own (lululemon, n.d.).

Interpretation

　　Now that I have described the samples, I will analyze their discourse practices and

possible ways that a 'reader' (customer) may interact with the text. Fairclough (2001) refers to

this stage as "processing analysis" (p. 10) and explores possible misrepresentations inherent

within the text. In a branding or public relations context, this method is called framing, wherein

certain perspectives are amplified while others are absent in order to serve a particular narrative. When it comes to lululemon selfcare, the most glaring omission is the reasoning behind its name. Instead, the web page offers the above mentioned headings and explanations for its prime mission to provide functionality and support to active, health-conscious individuals. This is an interesting move because without explicitly communicating the name choice, the line has the potential to capitalize off self-care's trendiness without politicizing its true origins. A mix of formal and informal language is present in the two samples. Formal language is seen in sections that rationalize the formula process and choice of ingredients for the product line while informal language or "conversationalisation" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 6) registers in the product names themselves as they connote a colloquial nature (anti-stink, no-show, for instance) as well as a known language of workout culture, for instance, the process of a cool down as the last step of a workout, is represented in the "speed up cool down" body lotion that features the ingredient menthol.

The order of the page's headings suggests an interesting hierarchy of information which suggests the order that readers will ingest the given information. Following the line's mission, is the "sweat-tested" development that ensured the nourishment and performance of the product. Then comes the "good ingredients" section, which was "consciously chosen" to "enhance product performance and be gentle on skin". As an aside it is mentioned that they do use synthetics over some unspecified "plant-derived ingredient" in the formulation but only to reduce environmental impact. Immediately after is the "cruelty-free" section which assures that no animal testing was done throughout the production of the line and finally, the "functionality" describes their production of original scents to offer the "right sensory experience" and highlights leakproof and soft-tough packaging choices to enable travel and "help minimize

'clink'". The use of the word "enhance" throughout the pages is in reference to how ingredients were chosen to enhance product performance but it can be interpellated by the consumer that the product enhancement also translates to individual performance optimization. In this case, conscious ingredients make a worthwhile product that enhances personal performance and active life transitions. The central goal is to "design products that we can all feel great about using every day" (n.d.). Highly selective of their ingredients, as outlined in their 10-page document that lists all ingredients and their direct purpose within the formula promotes a sense of transparency between the brand and the customer. The selective process of choosing ingredients for the skincare range communicates that the brand knows their demographic well, in that the average customer of lululemon's side line, selfcare, is most likely to be an existing customer of their activewear, someone who is predominantly female, has a certain amount of expendable cash flow, and who is active and health-oriented in some capacity. This general demographic is likely to care about the things they put in and on their body on a regular basis and thus would be more inclined to purchase products that are formulated with conscious ingredients. In other words, lululemon's communication tactics attract a good health citizen (Groleau, 2011; Derkatch, 2018) who uses their purchasing power to buy products that are designed to restore or enhance the body in some way. This is once again connected to Derkatch's (2020) idea of retail resilience in which health citizens are filled with virtuous feelings of doing good for their physical and/or mental selves. With selfcare's products being cruelty, gluten, paraben, sulfate, etc. free, it allows the customer to buy into the line guilt-free while being able to indulge in the trendiness of skincare. The products afford its consumers such luxuries as travel and convenience, referring back to Jia Tolentino's (2019) emphasis that we must always be optimizing as it demonstrates the individual's need to have products that abide by their lifestyle.

In regards to "Skin Safety", the brand emphasizes their highly selective process for choosing ingredients that supplement "efficacy and safety" in combination with "natural ingredients and technology driven synthetics". The balance of both creates a seemingly eco-friendly yet scientific formula that contains "clean, good-for-you ingredients, avoiding known irritants like gluten, parabens, and sulfates". Although the line does not explicitly mention practices of self-care, it is implied that the products aid consumers with the tools to individually care for themselves, whether that be with safe skincare products, or by leading an active lifestyle. Self-care is, as previously discussed, a highly individualistic process, one made more accessible by lululemon, which is seemingly communicated as "the selfcare formula".

Explanation

Here I will discuss the connections between the text and discourse in order to analyze the wider "sociocultural practice" (Fairclough, 2001, p. 9) present in lululemon selfcare's brand messaging. As Chouliaraki & Fairclough (1999) discuss, this portion demonstrates how "ideological function of the misrepresentation or unmet need" helps "in sustaining existing social arrangements" (p. 33). The misrepresentation or framing of the line is apparent in the lack of explanation for the name itself. It is not clear whether the line seeks to offer self-care through the consumption of skincare products or if the skincare products allow for a process of self-care by easing the transition between active and everyday life, thus establishing a health-conscious lifestyle worthy of any self-care practice. In a greater context, the selfcare line does very little to communicate self-care to their consumers. Rather, much like most mainstream discourses of self-care, the practice is highly individualistic but also mandated by the purchasing of products. In this sense, lululemon does not need to explain the concept of self-care to their customers, as they, of course, already know what will make their lives easier and by extension, allow for themselves

to provide an idea of self-care. It is not surprising that lululemon does not specify the reasoning

behind the name, it merely captures a popular concept that holds meaning in Fairclough's (2002)

understanding of new capitalism. Corporations such as lululemon act as a pseudo-governing

body that reproduce mainstream discourses of self-care in order to sell products to individuals

seeking restoration, health, and enhancement. The ideological function of this misrepresentation

acts to stifle the origins of the racialized and feminist discourses of self-care.

lululemon's marketing and brand ethos has been consistently aligned with self-improvement and self-empowerment, often using brand messaging that communicates that you

are the only one holding yourself back from greatness, demonstrating, as some skeptics argue,

"kumbaya capitalism connecting the ideals of empowerment and personal development to $90

yoga pants" (Rosman, 2015). The pressure to "always be optimizing" (Tolentino, 2019, p. 129)

is inherent within selfcare's 'on the go' narrative that takes you, as lululemon suggests, "from

sweat life to real life." (lululemon, n.d.). Common themes of lululemon's branding is retail

resilience and the pleasure of being good health citizens, as well as the underlying current of

enhancement and optimization.

Limitations

      The research on self-care communications conducted for this MRP is by no means exhaustive and has various limitations given the timeline and scope of the project. The first limitation is the small sample size of written communications I chose for analysis. Although I tried to contextualize the brand's ethos and history, the sample size reflects a specific moment in time per lululemon's communication tactics and does not necessarily reflect the entire timeline of its communication strategy. Because the methodology includes a critical discourse analysis, I chose samples of brand communications since I believe Fairclough's (2002) understanding of new capitalism coincides with the contemporary brand loyalty and subsequent brand power. The purpose of this analysis is not to make solid or conclusive claims about lululemon's brand messaging, but rather to outline possible interpretations of the company's communication strategies and their efficacy of marketing self-care through the evocation of restoration and optimization.

      A future study could compare data from multiple pro-care brands in order to analyze trends, overlaps, or gaps in the popular discourse of self-care. As I was mainly interested in the contextual markers and specific wording choices on behalf of lululemon's branding and marketing strategy, I did not gather quantitative data on consumer demographics or social media followings. This is something a future study could explore as well. Furthermore, after the conception of this project and during my research phase, several issues of public health shifted the public discourse of self-care. Firstly, the COVID-19 pandemic became rampant across the world. As of mid-July the total cases globally amount to 13.4M and have resulted in 580K deaths ("COVID-19 pandemic data", n.d.). In the United States, a disproportionate number of Black people and marginalized groups account for pandemic-related deaths; meanwhile in Canada, systemic inequities pose a great threat to our marginalized and Indigenous populations.

Due to the timeline and scope of this project, I was unable to adequately capture the political and health concerns being reflected in the current self-care conversation, however a future study could explore these challenges faced by marginalized communities in order to capture more clearly the continued significance of Audre Lorde's words. Truly, in the midst of two such extreme public health crises presented by COVID-19 and police brutality towards Black people, the rhetoric and roots of self-care as "self-preserv[ing]" "political warfare" (Lorde, 1988, p. 109) have not lost their meaning.

Conclusion

Using Derkatch's (2020) vector model, I found evidence of discourses of restoration and enhancement within lululemon's branding of their skincare line, selfcare. As individuals living in a neoliberal society become more reliant on themselves and less reliant on government-funded institutions, individuals are more likely to practice self-care through the maintenance of rituals, leisure, and retail resilience in order to continue a lifecycle that returns depleted bodies to functional and/or optimized states. lululemon as an activewear, and more recently, skincare brand, offers customers athleisure that potentially enclothes them in the cognitive state of good health citizenship while aiding them on their journey of ritualized workouts. Athleisure, as previously discussed, is an intermeshing of workout gear and fashion, where both athletic performance and physical appearance are simultaneously linked and optimized. As such, the aesthetics are flattering and designed to enhance the figure while lending comfort through stretchy fabric in an otherwise uncomfortable and inflexible society (Tolentino, 2019).

Meanwhile, their skincare line, aptly named selfcare, markets functionality alongside an eco-friendly and safely synthesized formula, which provides a low-maintenance skin and body care routine in order to ease the transition from active to professional life. Mainstream self-care promises equal parts rest and empowerment to balance the everyday stress of life, work, health, and recreation. The promises of restoring oneself post-workout through skincare as well as the ability to physically enhance one's body are both key messages. The hybridity of language or the brand's use of "conversationalisation" (Fairclough, 1995, p. 6) indicate an understanding of popular active discourse while maintaining colloquial trendiness in the names of the products within the line.

Feminist scholar Inna Michaeli (2017) argues that "In the face of shrinking civic spaces and persecution of human rights defenders, energy and resilience are indispensable" (p. 52).

While we know that self-care in its original conception is an essential act of political self-preservation, the mainstream conception of self-care is understood differently. Collective self-care does not involve lululemon skincare or activewear products. The self-care targeted towards Chip Wilson's Oceans of the world is not the self-care that the pioneering women of colour activists and feminists had in mind, that Audre Lorde, Angela Davis, and Sara Ahmed championed in their writings. The practice of self-care in its original conception is not prescriptive, but rather offers individualized strategies to achieve collective flourishing. As self-care and mental health educator, Minaa B has said recently, "Yes, self-care is necessary, but so is community care. We heal for ourselves first so that we can collectively create change together" (2020). lululemon's power as a popular brand and as a pseudo-governing body reproduces mainstream discourses of self-care in order to sell products to individuals seeking restoration, health, and enhancement while ignoring the concept's original intention towards collective flourishing. The origins of lululemon, as conceived by a man who constructed activewear for the male gaze, is closely linked to the brand's current communication strategies of appealing to the masses without recognizing the underlying discourses at play. Without acknowledging the intersectional feminsit roots of self-care-care, lululemon, whether intentionally or unintentionally, effectively silences these discursive roots.

Corporations such as lululemon have coopted the term self-care for product sales in order to capitalize off of the widespread consumer feeling of exhaustion. As Fairclough (2002) stresses within a new capitalist perspective, the discursive and marketing strategies of businesses continue to adopt popular ideology and saturate the consumer market, therefore shaping how mainstream discourse is used and changed. Neoliberal self-care is framed through the discourse of restoration and rejuvenation and thus regenerates through this discourse. A recent addition to

lululemon's website landing page is a banner titled, "Black Lives Matter: Inclusion, Diversity, Equity & Action," and navigates to a page that outlines the brand's commitment to donate USD $7 million in 2020, to "disrupt inequity in wellbeing through movement, mindfulness, and activism" (n.d.). As corporations and brands become more significant to the everyday neoliberal individual, brands must stay current with the issues. lululemon, in particular, has always communicated wellness and mindfulness as part of their brand ethos as a way to market their yoga-inspired products. With the launch of their selfcare line in 2019, the brand further induced mainstream rhetorics of wellness, thus normalizing the practice of self-care as a means of retail therapy or retail resilience in the face of intense exhaustion from everyday living.

The mainstream rhetorics of self-care offer temporary relief from collective crisis and exhaustion that exists in an everyday context. lululemon's brand tactics emphasize an individualized practice of restoration and enhancement as a strategy that continues the neoliberal lifecycle of labour, exhaustion, and rejuvenation. In this era of self-care, self-care takes the form of "retail resilience" (Derkatch, 2020, p. 14) and the purchase of products that provide imaginary relief without proven long term benefit, save for the potential for personal pleasure.

Looking to the future, Angela Davis says that, "the world to come, should be one in which we acknowledge collectivity and connections and relations and joy. And if we don't start practicing collective self-care now, there's no way to imagine, much less reach, a time of freedom" ("Angela Davis on Radical Self Care", 2018). The expectation of individual responsibility for personal care has of course transcended physical health to mental wellbeing. Indeed, the value of the practice of self-care is due to its scarcity, since healthy, cared for individuals would not need to practice self-care. A solution to an all-encompassing problem such

as this is a societal shift in the ways that we use time, space, economic resources, etc., one where

self-care becomes less valued, less necessary because a larger level of care and support is offered

equally. This could take the form of life-enhancing collective care, more green spaces, a greater

connection to the environment, greater levels of empathy towards all communities, amplifying

voices of marginalized people, holding corporations and the wealthy accountable, publicly

funding healthcare and social spaces designated for healing, daycare, and developing sexual

education that extends to all identities. I could go on. But for now, I will just say that the aim of

this research was not to explicitly call out lululemon as a brand that has not remained true to the

origins of the term self-care, but rather to explore how self-care is communicated to the

mainstream public, and how, whether for better or worse, self-care is more necessary than ever,

if not, as Derkatch (2020) argues, for the mere act of survival.

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