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SHOULD MEN WEAR LULULEMON?

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Technically, no, this was not a rugby match. Rugby matches only last 80 minutes.

Late afternoon last month in downtown Vancouver, Canada, a day after its grand-opening, hundreds (thousands? millions?) of customers jostled one another in Lululemon's sparkling-new, 4,400-square foot flagship store on the southeast corner of Robson and Burrard streets. These young, beautiful people scooted around racks of T-shirts and hoodies and pants, hoping to snag one of the latest creations from the athletic-wear behemoth that traces its roots only a few miles away.

Dressing room lines stretched 20 minutes long. There was a professional seamstress on site sewing customized shorts. Several people (already clad in old Lululemon clothes) waited in line at the shelves. This was for the men's underwear, labeled as ABC—Anti-Ball Crushing. Medium sizes, of nearly every item, were scarce. Long-sleeve, silver-lined shirts disappeared by the minute. One

customer couldn't decide between two colors of the shirts (each priced at \$79.99), so he picked up both, saying to a friend, "One will be gone if I leave it. I'll decide at checkout." Smart move. Four minutes later, the entire rack was cleared. Sweat-wicking, four-way stretch pants (\$98.00), hanging on a nearby rack, vanished. So too, it seemed, did some of the people. Said another customer to his friend, "I'll see you outside. This is f***** insane."

To be clear: *this was the men's section*. The men's section of a what's known internationally as a women's brand. Yes, **Lululemon**, your girlfriend's yoga pants-maker, designs clothes for men. Like, every type of athletic gear you could ever imagine owning. And it's not stopping any time soon. Lululemon is making an enormous push to capture the **men's market for athletic wear**. Nearly every current Lululemon store is overwhelmingly dedicated to women, but the company appears likely to shift that balance to a more even distribution in the coming months and years.

And if the scene in Vancouver is any indication, Lululemon is all-in. It's going for broke, looking to achieve world domination, or die trying. (Later this week, the company will announce its second quarter earnings report; analysts expect revenue to be around 11 percent gains, which would be up 12 percent for the year.) This, then, leads us to a rather important question. Should you wear Lululemon?

Yes. But it's complicated.

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[Editor's Note: In the interest of full disclosure, Supercompressor was a guest of Lululemon's in Vancouver a part of a media tour last month. Meaning, of course, Lululemon covered our accommodations, and offered samples of their product to wear for review. Lululemon as a company, though, has no editorial control over this article or any subsequent reviews of its products.]

Founded in 1998 by Chip Wilson, Lululemon has grown from a small private company in Vancouver to a multi-international athletic wear powerhouse with more than 200 store locations, roughly 7,500 employees world-wide, and over \$1.3 billion in sales in 2013. Impressive stats, sure, but it's likely you've heard of Lululemon through a number of separate headlines over the years.

You may know of Lululemon because last year it had to recall a line of its women's yoga pants for being see-through. You may also know of Lululemon because Wilson worsened this controversy by saying that not all women were meant to wear its yoga pants, which translated to the mainstream as the Lululemon CEO calling women who wore the yoga pants too fat. You may also know it from [this](#) Or [this](#). Or, well, all of the rest here from Mr. Wilson, who was forced to resign last December

because of his remarks. (The company caused another stir earlier this year after spouting some apparently not-so data-driven ideas about sunscreen.)

It's been a tumultuous 16 years, and a rough last year, to say the least. It was no surprise, then, when earnings took a tumble in 2013 as part of the fallout from the pants debacle. "No matter what we were doing for about a year, it felt like it was wrong," says Deanne Schweitzer, vice president of women's design. "Somebody was going to attack. We were the brand [everyone] loved to hate."

Throughout the weekend in Vancouver several Lululemon staffers did (not incorrectly) point out the fact that Lululemon simply makes athletic gear; it's not trying to save the world, in other words. A fair sentiment, of course, but by selling those workout pants that near or exceed \$100 a pop, well, you inherit a certain level of trust that customers come to expect.

Ah, that damn price point.



LULULEMON

We're here to talk about whether you should buy Lululemon. Should you? Well that depends. An indisputable fact is that you don't need expensive clothes to go for a run or do pushups. A \$60 shirt will not help you squat more weight; a \$75 tank-top will not speed up your bike pedals. Lululemon, for better or worse, knows this. But it also knows that those who take training and working out seriously will settle for nothing less than the highest-quality of gear available, while also looking good. Lululemon promises to be both.

"When we think about the guy we are appealing to, he is confident—he doesn't have to look or be like everyone else—he's very self-aware," says Felix Del Toro, senior VP of Lulu's men's design. "So the goal here is to give [guys] a product that does a variety of things that's based upon versatility in performance and so he can still look good when he's working out."

This of course comes at a price. Lululemon's menswear, built to be versatile, is for consumers to feel like they can run, lift weights, ride a bike, play softball, or even swim in, say, a single pair of shorts.

"It's product that spans all the things we think the modern guy does," VP Schweitzer says. Our guy has a personal trainer, he goes and plays pickup basketball, or he's in men's league hockey. Not all athletic gear out there has the same breadth."

To create such a garment takes time. It takes the right fabric. It takes the right amount of testing. It takes some of the smartest designers in the country to build. In short: it's expensive to make, therefore it's expensive to sell.

"We have a very focused target on who he [the target consumer] is, what he does, what he makes," Del Toro says. "There is absolutely a focal point of, 'We think he is X-age, he makes roughly X-amount.'"

Those X numbers? Del Toro says the guy is likely aged in his mid-30's, and notes: "We know we're not inexpensive," he says. "You have to be at a certain point in your life to say, 'I'm going to invest in quality and invest in myself,' so that's how we look at the conversation with him."

Quantify however you see fit; income levels mean different things in different parts of the country. Here, then, are a few admittedly enormous generalizations that Lululemon may not disagree with:

1) Are you 23-years-old, just out of college, broke, and taking a temp job in New York City? Perhaps skip the Lululemon store, for now, and make sure you stay fed.

2) Are you 29-years-old, just got your first bonus after a big year of sales and you live with your girlfriend in the Washington D.C. suburbs? Go ahead, maybe treat yourself to a Lululemon workout shirt that your friends would likely disapprove of.

3) Are you 38-years-old, own your own tech startup and sit in board meetings a few times a week? Congrats, dude.

But another question lingers. How do you get men to wear women's clothes?



LULULEMC

"Why are you going? To do a story on women's clothes?"

I got this question from every single person who I told that I was doing a story on Lululemon. Not on person, male or female, whom I spoke to knew that the company sold menswear. This of course is anecdotal, but even Lululemon will admit that the perception of being a women's-only brand is the company's biggest challenge in terms of bridging the gender gap. Where, really, does it even start?

Apparently where men feel it most.

"Our gateway drug has been the underwear," says Schweitzer, of the anti-ball crushing garment. "Often times we get guys in the underwear and it's like, as soon as you can get guys to trust the underwear, you can get them to trust the outwear."

The drug analogy isn't a poor one; Lululemon seems to embody characteristics of a drug supplier. It rarely advertises on a large scale, much of its brand awareness and popularity comes from word-of-mouth, and its exclusivity allows members to feel part of the club, like they have a secret no one else knows. Call them the Heisenberg of athletic gear—get 'em hooked, and they're all yours while you build an empire.

Chief product officer Tara Poseley said that after its third annual half-marathon ("Seawheeze") in Vancouver sold out in just under 40 minutes, the company flew in over 170 people from across North America—all expenses paid—via a golden ticket system so that they could run. "It's not about that," Poseley says when asked if, overall, Lululemon makes money off the marathon.

On race day in Vancouver, though, it was clear very few men were out for the race. Lululemon said only 13 percent of the runners were men. Will Lululemon be able to figure out how to transfer the frenzy that women's clothes create to the men's side?

"The best thing we can do is get you in the [clothes]," Schweitzer says. "And you experience it. And you're like, 'Okay, now I need more. This has become my go-to in my closet'."

Indeed, Lululemon can count at least one skeptic whose view has changed.



LULULEMON

In Vancouver, for some reason, I decided to run in the half-marathon. I don't know why. I don't run. I hate running. I'm "active," but I haven't run more than a 10K in my entire life. But here I was staring down 13.1 miles of pure, unadulterated horror. What better way, I thought, to wear for the first time all Lululemon clothing, and put to rest this crap about it being so great. I wore its **shorts** and **long-sleeve shirt** for the 7 a.m. race. Bring on the thigh-chafing; here comes the nipple burn/bleed.

Nope. None of it. I ran (and walked) the race in two hours and 16 minutes, finishing with not a single problem concerning my gear. Nipples in tact. Legs unscratched and un-red (and I'm not exactly "thin in the legs), and my balls were anti-crushed even after two-plus hours of concrete pounding. My kidneys, heart, and lungs nearly quit, I'm sure, but I would have looked and felt great on the outside had I actually collapsed and died. Since the race I haven't been able to find an excuse not to wear the clothes.

I wanted to hate these clothes. Like really, really badly. Why? Well because I'm like that, and I don't believe you need expensive things to enjoy yourself. (Also, see the above links.) Lululemon seems to

border on being a **cult**. I generally am opposed to cults.

But goddamnit, Mr. Del Toro is right: you feel more confident in their clothes when you work out. They do what they promise. They are well-built, durable and, for instance, you can wear their shorts with built-in lining almost anywhere.

My last two Fridays in NYC could be one long, sappy advertisement for the company. Beginning at 9 a.m. in the office, I wore its shorts (we're a casual office), which are laid-back yet stylish enough that, from 10 feet away or more, they appear as a nice khaki pair from Ralph Lauren.

Later in the afternoon I found myself diving into a pool. Wearing the shorts. In the pool. About 30 minutes later I was by the bar, wearing the shorts, which had already dried. Later in the day I played Wiffle ball. In the shorts. That night at a concert, I was wearing the shorts, which, because it has a zipper, properly secured my wallet and phone throughout. There is, to my knowledge, not another piece of clothing in my closet that could perform to such a degree.

Lululemon's men's clothes break down three fold: sweat, post-sweat, no sweat. That's all well and good, but it seems Lululemon's being modest. In practice, many of its clothes can fit all three categories.

As I've mentioned before, Lululemon is not cheap. If you're surviving on Ramen noodles every night, Lululemon should not be your regular hangout. Put 'em on your Christmas wish list.

But if you have the money and you care about quality and want to look not like your father at the YMCA in the early '70s, perhaps see if you can prove yourself wrong and wear its clothes for a week

Here's guessing you won't need the receipt.

Ryan Hatch is the deputy editor at *Supercompressor*.

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