

# You Aren't What You Wear: An Exploration into Infinifat Identity Con- struction and Performance through Fashion

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## Abstract

Through remote wardrobe interviews with five self-identified infinifat participants, this paper explores how those existing in a body larger than a US dress-size 32 access fashion. The majority of research that has occurred at the intersection of fat studies and fashion studies has focused on the fashion and dressing experiences of women who fit the conventional definition of "plus-size." Commercially available, mass-produced fashion options drop off dramatically for women larger than a US dress-size 28 and become almost non-existent for those who are a size 32 or larger. By focusing on infinifat or superfat people who exist beyond a size 32 I draw attention to the impact that the lack of access to fashion has on the subjectivities infinifat people can perform. The findings in this paper build from existing literature on plus-size dressing that focuses on limitations in identity construction and performance experienced by those who are able to access commercially available plus-size fashion. Without readily-available, situationally-appropriate clothing, infinifat and superfat people are limited in the subjectivities they can perform and are excluded from specific social spaces. This exclusion serves to remarginalize an already marginalized group and is felt most acutely by those who embody additional marginalized identity markers, such as those who are racialized or living in poverty. In this way, the findings presented in this paper further address the infinifat-sized gap in existing literature on plus-size dressing and lay the foundation for future work that engages with the infinifatshion community.

## KEYWORDS:

INFINIFATSHION

SUPERFAT

INFINIFAT

PLUS-SIZE

FATSHION

**“The bigger you are, the smaller  
your world becomes.**

**The bigger you are, the smaller  
your world becomes.”**

**Roxane Gay, *Hunger: A Memoir of (My) Body*  
(2017, p. 210, repetition in original)**

This paper explores how five self-identified infinifat people, those existing in a body larger than a US dress-size 32, access fashion. The majority of research that has occurred at the intersection of fat studies and fashion studies has focused on the fashion and dressing experiences of women who fit the conventional definition of “plus-size.” Commercially available, mass-produced fashion options drop off dramatically for women larger than a US dress-size 28 and become almost non-existent for those who are a size 32 or larger.

**By focusing on infinifat or super-fat people who exist beyond a size 32 I draw attention to the impact that the lack of access to fashion has on the subjectivities infinifat people can perform.**

The term “infinifat” is attributed to Ash, a superfat activist and host of *The Fat Lip* podcast. Ash introduced the term on her blog in 2016 as a way to describe her fat body as existing beyond the size range of commercially available plus-size clothing options and she continues to employ it through her #infinifatshion activism on Instagram. Infinifat directs consideration towards a “fat spectrum” where those at the largest end of the spectrum may face marginalization in ways that are not experienced, either at all or to the same degree, by those at the smallest end. This paper directly engages with Ash’s infinifat activism and the infinifat community who have been united by her podcast and Instagram account. This work offers a path forward to the inclusion of infinifat voices within the “fatshion” conversation through a greater engagement with fat activist work that challenges our contemporary understandings of what fat fashion activism is and who it is for. This intention towards greater, more meaningful engagement is at the core of my methodological approach and research design.

Framed by Judith Butler’s theories of gender performativity (1989; 1993) and Joanne Entwistle’s concept of dressing as a “situated bodily practice” (2000; 2015) my work in this project foregrounds the voices of those who are seldom heard in the field of fashion studies in order to bring their experiences from the margins to the center of the “fatshion” conversation. The findings in this paper build from existing literature on plus-size dressing that focuses on limitations in identity construction and performance experienced by those who are able to access commercially available plus-size fashion. Clothing is one of the primary ways that we indicate belonging. Without readily-available, situationally-appropriate clothing, infinifat and superfat people are limited in the subjectivities they can perform and are excluded from specific social spaces. This exclusion serves to remarginalize an already marginalized group and is felt most acutely by those who embody additional marginalized identity markers, such as those who are racialized or living in poverty. In this way, the findings presented in this paper further address the infinifat-sized gap in existing literature on plus-size dressing and lay the foundation for future work that engages with the infinifatshion community.

## As with most research at the boundaries of fatness and fat identity, this work is both political and personal.

My lived experience with fatness, fat stigma, and fat-based discrimination permeates every aspect of this project. I have presented iterations of this work at numerous conferences and in university classrooms in an effort to bolster the actions of infinifat activists and challenge the boundaries of “acceptable” fatness. My own fat activism practice has benefited greatly from this experience. I am grateful to the participants of this project for not only sharing their knowledge and expertise with me, but also for challenging my own perceptions of what a lived superfat or infinifat experience entails.

### METHODS

Through photo elicitation and semi-structured interview methods with five self-identified infinifat subjects, I follow Marisol Clark-Ibáñez’s (2004) example of mobilizing self-identification and auto-image production to complicate the lines between subject and object within ethnographic study. The qualitative methodological approach of critical ethnography moves beyond the classic ethnographic method of a “neutral” researcher recording, contesting the often assumed position of knowledge holder and expert — and the corollary mirror image of the passive object of study — by centering the question of how knowledge is constructed by dominant powers, and how that knowledge maintains or reinforces unequal power dynamics, including within and through the study itself (Grbich, 2013). Through purposive subject sampling and a semi-structured creative interview approach to data collection, I privilege the voices of self-identified infinifat subjects and center them as the experts of their own lived infinifat experience.

## OPERATIONALIZATION OF INFINIFAT

As mentioned, the origin of the term “infinifat” can be traced back to Ash, superfat activist and host of the podcast titled *The Fat Lip*. On her blog of the same name, Ash writes:

So if [US dress size] 12 is small fat, 20 is midfat, and 26 is superfat, what exactly does that make a size beyond-36? Because the reality is that my body is as similar to a size 26 as that 26's is to a size 12 — that is: not really similar at all. My experiences and struggles are completely different than a 300 pound person's. I weigh an entire fat person more than that. How can we be in the same fat spectrum category?

Honestly, I don't know if this is a question that ever gets asked because my feeling is that a lot of fats don't even know that beyond-36s exist. But we do. And we need fat positivity too.

But what should we fats on the very very very fat end of the fat spectrum be called? I humbly propose “infinifat.” Because what size am I? I really have no fucking idea. A size greater than any assignable size number. Infinity? (*thefatlip.com*, 2016)

Ash has also created this graphic, connecting categorizations of fatness with US-based clothing sizes, which serves to further illuminate the need for consideration of a fat spectrum:



**FIGURE 1**  
From [www.instagram.com/fatlippodcast](http://www.instagram.com/fatlippodcast).

For the purposes of this research project I operationalized the term *infinifat* as a person who self-identified as regularly wearing clothing that is larger than a US dress size 32, aligning myself with Ash's definition of *infinifat* as explored above. However, it's important to note that while my research specifically explores how those who identify as *infinifat* approach clothing and dress, many of the concepts and themes apply to those who might identify as *superfat*. Indeed, there has been some controversy in fat activism communities around adoption of the term *infinifat* and its erasure of the *superfat* identity.<sup>1</sup> My use of both terms is meant to identify areas where there could be some overlap in experiences and to acknowledge that the term *infinifat* has not been universally adopted by those who may still fit the size "criteria" of being larger than a US dress size 32.

## REMOTE WARDROBE INTERVIEWING THROUGH PHOTOGRAPHS

My semi-structured interview approach draws from social anthropologist Sophie Woodward's (2007) ethnographic research method of merging formal interviews with casual conversations about dress, also known as "wardrobe interviews," and combines it with aspects of photo elicitation interviewing (PEI). Woodward (2007) describes her wardrobe interview approach as akin to "hanging out" with women in their bedrooms and closets as they navigate the process of selecting what to wear for the day. This process allows her to "arrive at an in-depth understanding of the multiple and often contradictory issues and identities that are articulated through the material culture of clothing" (Woodward, 2007, p. 31). When applying Woodward's wardrobe interview technique to my own study I was most interested in the conversational, casual tone she references: this approach of "hanging out" with my participants and talking about their clothing challenges and successes. However, as in-person wardrobe interview sessions were not possible in my study due to the geographic distance between myself and my participants, I attempted to recreate important aspects of the wardrobe interview process through photo elicitation.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <https://fatpositivecooperative.com/2019/01/03/exact-numbers-and-levels-of-fatness/>  
<http://thefatlip.com/2016/12/20/beyond-superfat-rethinking-the-farthest-end-of-the-fat-spectrum/>.

I asked my participants to send me digital photographs of themselves in outfits that brought them joy and outfits that caused them to feel frustration.

**These images provided an invaluable entry point for our semi-structured interviews, framed as casual conversations around their experiences with dressing.**

However, unlike traditional PEIs, the participants in my project did not create or engage with images as a key component of our interview process, with many of them submitting images that had previously been taken in response to my elicitation prompts, nor were the visual elements of the images discussed in detail with participants beyond the clothing they were pictured wearing. This marks a significant deviation from the traditional implementation of PEIs and illuminates a new possibility of the use of photographs to accomplish remote wardrobe interviews through the combination of two established interview methodologies.

## SAMPLING, PARTICIPANT DEMOGRAPHICS, AND ETHICS

Five participants (Ash, Kristen, Kelly, Jossie and Amanda) were interviewed for this project. Four of the participants self-identified as infinifat and one participant stated that while they fit the size criteria of infinifat as outlined by Ash on *The Fat Lip*, they are only beginning to use the term to describe themselves in their day-to-day life. Two participants identified as non-white (one as African American, the other as Hispanic), one participant identified as disabled and one participant identified as gender non-binary (the other participants identified as cis-women). Mentions of sexuality, class and socio-economic status happened throughout the interviews. I first approached Ash, from *The Fat Lip* podcast, to be interviewed for this project. She then approached others in her infinifat community with information about me and the project. I was upfront with Ash about my desire to include participants from as wide a variety of backgrounds as possible, specifically because fat studies has been critiqued for privileging the voices of white, able-bodied, middle-class, straight, and cis-gendered fat subjects (Rice, 2007; Cooper, 2010; Gurrieri, 2013). While the final sample size is only five participants, my purposive snowballing approach to participant sampling was, in my opinion, successful in terms of capturing a diverse array of infinifat voices. It's important to consider, however, that in many ways Ash was the "gatekeeper" in my research design and while I am grateful to her for "opening the gate" to her infinifat community, I also want to acknowledge her role in selecting participants for this specific project and how that could be seen as a limitation of this project.

Demographic data was collected as an optional question at the conclusion of our interviews with the preamble that this data was being used primarily to establish the demographic makeup of the participants as a group and to address how intersecting identities and lived experiences may interact with dressing practices. The question was purposefully phrased in an open-ended manner, allowing participants to work from their own definition of what “demographic” information to include. Participants completed a consent form where they were provided with various consent options, including the option to have their provided images included in the dissemination of the project’s findings and the option to be referred to by a pseudonym or by no direct reference at all. All participants consented to having their images included in disseminations such as this paper. Additionally, all of the participants gave consent to be referred to by the names indicated in this paper. Ethics clearance was provided for this project by the Toronto Metropolitan University (formerly Ryerson University) Research Ethics Board.

### THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

This project draws from two main theoretical frameworks: Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity as citational practice as employed by foundational fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco (2004) and Joanne Entwistle’s (2015) engagement

with Foucauldian theories of power and knowledge in her concept of dressing as a “situated bodily practice.” Both LeBesco and Entwistle are essential scholars in their respective fields: fat studies and fashion studies. As this project serves to further knowledge in both of these areas of study, I have intentionally drawn from both LeBesco and Entwistle in an attempt to further that objective.

### PERFORMING SUPERFATNESS

In *Bodies That Matter: On The Discursive Limits of “Sex”* Judith Butler (1993) states that gender identity, and arguably also embodied identity, are performed through a reiterative and citational practice as opposed to a singular or deliberate act. She puts forth that while the fixity of the body is established through materiality, this materiality is not benign. Instead, it can be viewed as the productive effect of power (Butler, 1993). In this way, embodied identities are the product of a framework of norms, practices, knowledge, and power. Fat studies scholar Kathleen LeBesco builds directly from Butler’s theories on identity construction and performativity in her 2004 book titled *Revolt Bodies? The Struggle to Redefine Fat Identity*. LeBesco’s theorization of the use of rhetorical communication strategies by a politically charged public to destroy fat bodies also relates to the ways in which the fat body is established as monstrous, or Other.



## These pervasive socio-cultural framings of fat impact the lived experience of those inhabiting fat bodies and the ways in which fat identity is socially constructed.

I would argue, however, that some fat bodies are seen as more monstrous than others and that within current Western social and commercial realms, there is a hierarchy of size, with some fat bodies being seen as more socially acceptable or normative.

The concept of micro-hierarchization is helpful in highlighting the distinctions I am making within a marginalized identity group. Micro-hierarchization describes how Western society views fatness and fat bodies as less than or least desirable and is also descriptive of the hierarchization that happens within the fat community (Wann, 2009, citing Hogan, 2001). Research participant Ash mentions this in our interview, stating:

It's hard because you just don't see a lot of infinifat people on social media, even. I think part of that is because of the standard fat bias that is everywhere but I think also part of it is being marginalized even within the plus-size community.

Ash's mention of being marginalized "even within the plus-size community" is reflective of Hogan (2001)'s concept of micro-hierarchization. As Hogan states, "Every society hierarchizes its members in such a way as to grant each stratum some degree of relative privilege with respect to system-internal goals" (2001, p. 46). He goes on to explain that the micro-hierarchization that occurs within societal groups, such as those who are fat, posits some members as higher up the ladder of success than others, with their success coming at the expense of those occupying the lower rungs. Members remain committed to the system as they can see a path towards success: they simply need to climb higher on the ladder. As Wann notes, "Each micro-rung on the weight-based hierarchy exerts pressure to covet the next increment thinner and regret the next increment fatter, leaving little room for people to recognize and revolt against the overall system" (2009, p. xv). This regret of the lower, fatter, rungs of the ladder contributes to Ash's feelings of being marginalized within the plus-size community.

Micro-hierarchization, according to Hogan (2001), relies on the success of some at the expense of others. In *Revolting Bodies?* LeBesco draws on Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's concept of the "normate" or those who "command power based on a combination of bodily configurations and cultural capital" (LeBesco, 2004, p. 76). LeBesco uses this framework to examine how fatness is represented as both a physical and social disability in the television show *The Simpsons* and the movie *What's Eating Gilbert Grape?* Similarly, we can apply LeBesco's use of the "normate" to subsequent representations, such as TLC's reality television show *My 600-lb Life*, where the superfat subjects are constructed as wholly socially and physically disabled by their superfatness and unable to participate in any activities we would associate with "normate" life. Such extensions of LeBesco's work add to our understanding of how the superfat identity is constructed and performed. *My 600-lb Life* is mentioned by multiple interview participants as being the only mainstream cultural product where they see themselves or bodies that look like theirs represented. Ash outlines the impact of this specific television show as such:

And I think shows like *My 600-lb Life*, that's the only representation that people my size ever see. It's hard. It's hard to think of yourself as a whole healthy vibrant person living an active life in this world when the only other people you've ever seen who look like you are in hospital beds being told that they're going to die and they need to do something about their lives immediately. That's just not reality for a lot of 600lbs people. A lot of 600lbs people have perfectly active lives. You know, I have a very hot husband. (laughs)

That is something that 600lbs people can have but I think that having the only repre-

sentation of someone your size being a sad person in a hospital bed it really affects you.

As Ash mentions above, in each episode of *My 600-lb Life* the superfat protagonist is often bedridden, unable to step outside of their home or participate in any life that exceeds the confines of the hospital bed. At no point in the show is a superfat person represented as anything other than, literally, exceeding the bounds of normality; they are categorically socially and physically disabled. The journey towards weight loss (through surgery) is the only narrative of redemption, allowing the hope of a "normal" life.

Ash's quote also speaks to the difficulty superfat individuals face when challenging or resisting the *My 600-lb Life* construction of a wholly socially and physically disabled superfat identity. She states that it is difficult to view herself as a vibrant participant in life in the face of this mainstream discourse of superfatness. Returning to the notion of how identity is constructed and performed through the practice of dressing, and how that identity performance is an act that cites and reiterates cultural frameworks of norms and power, we can see how the extreme lack of clothing options available to superfat and infinifat people further inscribes the mainstream discourse of superfatness as performed in *My 600-lb Life*. Without access to a variety of clothing options it can be difficult for superfat individuals to challenge or resist the *My 600-lb Life* performance of the superfat identity. Yet, why would the fashion industry consider superfat individuals as a viable market when this is the pervasive narrative of superfatness? Indeed, the majority of superfat protagonists in *My 600-lb Life* are often naked or covered only by a non-clothing item such as a sheet or towel. They are simultaneously unworthy of being clothed and also without need for fashion through their assumed wholly physically and socially disabled existence.

## THE SITUATED BODILY PRACTICE OF DRESSING AN INFINIFAT BODY

In her benchmark fashion text *The Fashioned Body: Fashion, Dress & Modern Social Theory*, Joanne Entwistle introduces the theory of dress as a “situated bodily practice” (2015, p. 34). She establishes the act of dressing as key to the performance of embodied identities and speaks to the effect clothing has on how our bodies are read within prescribed societal norms. Drawing from Foucault’s theories around the body as a site upon which discourses of power and knowledge are exerted, Entwistle argues that the dressed body “is a product of culture, the outcome of social forces pressing upon the body” (2015, p. 41). Approaching the act of dressing as a “situated bodily practice” encourages a deeper investigation into these structural and political forces and acknowledges that clothing is key to the way we move through the world. There are very few social situations where bodies are

not dressed. Contemporary structures of power and knowledge impact what clothing is considered appropriate for specific situations and environments and therefore establishes which bodies are appropriate in specific situations and environments. In this way, we can consider Entwistle’s theory of dress as a “situated bodily practice” as speaking not only to how bodies are situated in the context of greater structures of power, but also towards how bodies are situated within particular environments with specific “clothing codes” and how the dressed body can reinscribe these codes. Power and authority are dynamic fields in which even those at the bottom contribute to the reinforcement of dominant structures.

This type of bottom-up reinforcement contributes to the micro-hierarchization occurring within the fat community by establishing certain types of fatness, including superfatness, as less desirable than others.

**As all of my participants expressed in their interviews, clothing options for bodies in the small to mid-fat range continue to increase at a rate that is disproportionate to any increase in options for those in the super to infinifat range.**

Referring to the increase in use of the term “inclusive” by clothing companies, particularly by plus-size clothing companies, Ash addresses this discrepancy by stating:

That's what's the most offensive. Places that — and I've even seen it from plus-sized business owners that are offering up to a [size] 30 now. They'll say, "Finally! Inclusive sizing!" or, "Finally, fashion for all curvy women!" And I'm like, "But you do realize that there are those of us who are wearing above a 30." And it makes— I don't know. I don't know. Sometimes I'm like, "Does a size 24 realize that there's something above a size 30?" Or do they think that that's as fat as people can possibly be?

I don't know. It's hard to understand their motivation, in that way. Do you just not know that I exist? Or are you consciously trying to not include me? What's going on in there? It's hard to know.

At a later point in our interview Ash relates this discrepancy back to the concept of access:

It's like, it's hard to make people realize or hard to — I think most people don't even think about it. I think even regular plus-size, standard plus-size people don't often think about all of the things that their access to clothes allows them to do and how people that don't have access to those clothes then can't do those things.

Ash's comment on the lack of consideration towards the infinifat experience by those who are “regular plus-size” illuminates how those at the smaller end of the fat spectrum contribute to the micro-hierarchization occurring within the fat community. When you are unable to find kinship with those who also identify as fat it can be near impossible to imagine that normatively thin bodied individuals will be able to understand the infinifat experience and engage in meaningful inclusive activities.

## LIMITED SUBJECTIVITIES AND RESTRICTED SOCIAL PARTICIPATION

**Calla<sup>2</sup>:** Do you feel you have a fashion style?

**Amanda:** One hundred percent no. (laughs)

I literally wear what lets me go out of the house not nude and... (exasperated slap) It blows my mind to think that there are so many people in the world that can... you can literally wear whatever you want. You can look however you want whenever you want to look it. Because that's just never been my experience.

**Calla:** Right.

**Amanda:** It's gotta feel amazing.

(Interview with Amanda, December 11, 2018)

The overarching finding of this project is that the infinat participants felt they were limited in the subjectivities they could perform. I explore how these limitations were expressed by the participants through their feelings towards fashion and dress.<sup>3</sup> This exploration is structured around four main areas of concern: limited expression of age, limited expression of gender, limited expression of sexuality, and limited expression of, or participation in, economic roles. By utilizing these categorizations I illuminate the ways in which these themes connect with existing literature on plus size dressing while demarcating areas worthy of further study.

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<sup>2</sup> As identity is an important marker in my research, I have decided to refer to myself by first name in any included interview quotations, where appropriate. Consent was provided by each participant to be referred to by the name they indicated.

<sup>3</sup> Drawing from the work of Wilkinson, Carter & Shokrollahi (2018) I use the terms clothing, fashion, and dress somewhat interchangeably to reflect the considerable overlap in these terms and to be inclusive of the terminology used by the participants of my research project.

## CHILDHOOD MEMORIES AND "OLD LADY DRESSES."

The majority of participants describe their childhood experiences of dressing through lenses of exclusion and difference. Specifically, as fat and superfat children, they were forced to adopt identities older than their chronological age, and the age of their peers, due to a lack of age-appropriate clothing available in their size at that time. Jossie, Ash, and Kristen all spoke about specific garments and experiences that reflected these feelings of separation and isolation. For Jossie and Ash, the specific garment was jeans. As Ash states here:

Then when I started to get into junior high I noticed kids were saying things about the fact that I didn't have jeans. Like, "Why don't you wear jeans like everybody else?" And, there were no jeans to fit me at that point. So it was like... and I remember talking my grandma about it, we were super close, and she's like, "Well, we'll see what we can do, we'll see what we can find." I remember the first pair of jeans that I wore — it was probably like... 8th grade, and I was already a [size] 24. So I'm like, "Wow, this is the last size there is, in jeans, and I'm already there." And so that became something I was super conscious of. That and the kids at school would be like, "What brand are your jeans?" because obviously

plus size jeans are a different brand than straight sized jeans. Even if you're shopping only at Wal-Mart like — I grew up with a lot of poor kids too, but of course my jeans were a different brand. They were looking — you know that little brown patch on the back of your jeans- they were like, "What does that say? Why is that a different brand?" I was mortified of course, because when you're in 7th and 8th grade the last thing you want to be is different.

Jossie reflects a similar feeling of difference related to jeans here:

I didn't wear jeans until I was in my late teens, when [plus size clothing store] Avenue came out. I couldn't wear jeans to go to elementary school like every other kid because they just didn't fit me. They just didn't make them in my size. So I remember having to wear — (laughs) I called them old lady's pants, you know, with elastic on the waist because you couldn't find the one with a button. You couldn't get slacks, you just had to wear the old lady pants with elastic in the waist. And again, I tried to rock it the best that I can and try to pair it with something that made me less older. But, you know, that's what it was. It was horrible. I fucking hated it.

Jossie goes on to explain how even though she was the only fat student between five classes of sixth grade students and was bestowed with a negatively charged fat related nickname (“gorda”), it was the lack of connection with other fat children around what to wear that underscores her feeling of being an outsider in elementary school. As she states:

Instead of calling me Jossie, which is my name, most of the time they called me gorda, that became my nickname. I didn't take it as an insult, I just took it as a description. Like this is me, I'm gorda, I'm fat. I didn't ever take it as someone was trying to make fun of me or hurt my feelings, it was just something that happened... I remember, you have — sixth grade classes had different classrooms, so it's like five classes of sixth grade and all between the five classes I was the only fat one. I had nobody to go like, "Oh hey, how do you do this?" "Oh wait, where did you find that?"

I could never tell my friends, "Oh hey, that's a really cool coat, where you got it?" Because I knew that even if I asked, there was no place for me to go get it. There was nowhere that's going to fit me.

In addition to a sense of disconnection, Jossie mentions the concept of adopting an identity that is older than her own by virtue of limited availability of age-appropriate clothing in her size. This performance of an assigned older identity was also experienced by Kristen. Kristen relates this adopted identity to her family's past poor economic status and reliance on donated clothing through their church. Kristen and Jossie were the only participants to send pictures from their childhoods. Although I did not specifically ask for images related to a participant's past experiences with clothing and dressing, for both Kristen and Jossie these past experiences ground their current feelings towards fashion. During our interview, Kristen used the image below as an entry point for discussion around her history with clothing:



FIGURE 2 From participant Kristen.

When asked to talk further about her childhood and clothing, she states:

It was horrible because I was so large. My mom was intent on keeping me as a little girl, so instead of buying me — well, a lot of the clothes that she would have normally bought me wouldn't fit so I bought like — dress me in like husky and maternity clothes. Literally, like. My father's a pastor, well he's not a pastor now, but all my life I've been a PK [pastor's kid] and so to church I would wear maternity dresses. Thirteen, fourteen years old, wearing maternity dresses just because that's all she thought would fit me — and it probably was, you know.

Kristen goes on to describe a specific instance of dressing in an “old lady” style at a school dance due to her family’s reliance on donated clothing items. She relates this experience back to her childhood feelings of disconnection and social isolation, as well as to a more general sense of exasperation. She concludes the story by stating, “Like, this was my life, you get what I'm saying? I was bullied, I was picked — you know, typical. Just because I never really felt good in my clothes, I never had any clothes that I was proud of. I just wore what I could find that would fit on my body.” This concept of “if it fits, I wear it” is referred to by all participants, both when speaking to their past and current experiences with dressing their superfat bodies.

When asked about her experience with clothing in childhood, Jossie references this picture:



**FIGURE 3**  
From participant  
Jossie.



She describes this dress as “the worst,” explaining:

The yellow one is the worst! I was 14 years old, my dad wanted to take me to my first “grown up” party with him, like a Christmas party... My mom and dad are kind of like freaking out, because they really want me to go to this party, kind of like show off their young daughter, and I couldn't find a dress. I remember we went to [store name]. They had these boutiques — I mean, they still have them now — where they sold these dresses that you didn't know where the hell they came from. I call them the mother of the bride kind of dresses. You know, the long skirt with the jacket on. That's the only thing I could fit in! I remember my mom feeling bad for me that I have to wear these old lady dresses because they were the only thing that would fit me. I try to put my brave face [on], I was trying to wear my really nice dress, do my hair. Trying to look as nice as possible. I was like, okay if I have to wear this crap, I'm going to try to rock it as best as I can... Because if I'm going to wear something that makes me look older at least I'm going to try and act older.

In addition to creating a sense of separation and isolation from their peers, this adoption of an older identity impacted the way Jossie was perceived by adults. In reference to being a fat child, Jossie states, “I was 14 and I had a woman's body. I had a woman's body. I had men come to me and like give me lines and flirt with

me because they thought I was older, they thought I was 17, 18 years old. I was not, I was 14, 13 years old.” Kristen also mentions this sexualized aspect of growing up as a fat child as further heightening her sense of isolation from her peers. Premature sexualization is often combined with weight-based discrimination and bullying directed towards fat children, particularly towards children from historically marginalized groups (Garnett et al., 2014). Both Kristen and Jossie's experiences speak to the compounded nature of their exclusion as multiple identity markers (race, class, weight) contribute to a sense of difference and isolation from their childhood peers. As clothing is one of the key ways to indicate belonging within social groups, not having access to situationally and age-appropriate fashion in their size during childhood made it challenging for participants to “fit in” with their young peers.

**For most participants, this difficulty “fitting in” has continued into adulthood and continues to be felt most acutely by those who embody intersecting marginalized identity markers.**

I look at the specific experience of Kelly, a participant who is gender non-binary, in the next section.

## “I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHAT GENDER NEUTRAL LOOKS LIKE A LOT OF TIMES.”

In considering the relationship between the infinifat experience and identity performance through fashion, it is important to also look at the ways in which the challenges around fashioning identities that exceed constructed norms or binaries are further compounded by the lack of clothing options available to infinifat people. In the context of this project, this is revealed most sharply in Kelly's experience; Kelly is gender non-binary, and emphasizes their compound exclusion through fashion.

Gender queer or transgender communities provide a rich history of gender “play” via clothing; current news and social media, especially within fashion circles, regularly document a largely apolitical fascination with non-binary bodies and “gender neutral” clothing (Sears, 2014; Moore, 2018). However, Kelly describes the contemporary options for gender play via clothing as inaccessible, demonstrating the severe limitations in choice, personal expression and fashion engagement they must navigate as an infinifat. Kelly states:

I don't even know what gender neutral looks like a lot of times. I don't have the option to play with gender expression as much as I want to and I also don't feel like I have the safety or the option to explore my gender identity and gender advocacy because I'm having to deal with this other stuff first.

The “other stuff” that Kelly is referring to includes advocacy for larger sizes in clothing in general, with most of that clothing existing within the traditional binary of “men's” and “women's” garment categorization. Lamenting the lack of non-gender specific clothing in infinifat sizes, Kelly goes on:

It's all extremely basic stuff that is included [in size 32+]. One of the things that is included is the gendered item of dress, you can have a dress that's a 7x or a 6x. You can buy gendered fashion that is appropriate for your body shape and your body proportions as a physiological woman... So I can buy a 6x man's coat but the sleeves are going to be past my fingertips. If I buy [men's] pants, the crotch is going to be down [by] my knees. The length is going to be wrong. Men's clothes are tailored differently and so basically, it doesn't feel like there are very many options for expressing gender identity or even just playing with gender identity. The main gender identity thing I actually feel like I can play with every once in a while, is if I wear a plain white t-shirt that's coded, in my mind, as masculine. So I can wear a plain white t-shirt and I'm like, “oh, look at me, I'm so handsome.” But that's it. And there aren't other gender signifiers that you can play with from the male side, typically. Like, make-up is heavily all coded as feminine.

Even for those participants who identify as normatively female in terms of gender expression, expressing gender through clothing as an infinitat feels like an impossible undertaking. Amanda is a cis-gender woman and when asked if she felt her clothes help her to identify as female, she answers:

I mean I guess in some of the colour choices, if you're going to go with gender norms, it helps identify me as female but other than that, like... I just. As far as clothing wise... if I just look at my outfit I'm like, "oh that's a frump." Like that's just a human dressed in clothes. I don't know that they're all that female presenting. Because I choose to present female and that's how I identify I do have necklaces and a little bit of make-up and I try to choose feminine-ish glasses, things like that. That's how I try to make the distinction but as far as just clothes I don't know that I can [express gender] based on what's available to me.

**Calla:** So maybe turning more towards accessories or things that are less size dependent when you want to feel more feminine or dressing up a little bit more girly?

**Amanda:** Yeah, yeah. I have a lovely string of pearls my husband got me one year. I have a few little necklaces and bits and bobs but yeah, if I'm not wearing any of that it's just utilitarian frump walks about the earth. (laughs)

Non-size specific items, such as make-up and some jewellery, were also mentioned by Jossie as key to her gender expression through clothing. According to Entwistle, "So significant are clothes to our readings of the body that they can come to stand for sexual difference in the *absence* of a body" (2015, p. 136, emphasis in original). Clothing is crucial to identity performance in general and is especially salient for those who are at the margins of mainstream gender performance.

## LIMITED EXPRESSIONS OF INFINIFAT SEXUALITIES

All of the participants in my project described their day-to-day wear as a combination of leggings and knit wear, generally purchased from the same two or three retailers. The lack of options in terms of formal or fitted wear was lamented by all participants as a limiting factor in their ability to access and feel comfortable in social spaces that are traditionally linked to expressions of sexuality. For Jossie, the key to feeling comfortable in environments that have a specific dress code is having the ability to sew and access to someone in her life who can tailor garments as she wishes. When speaking about attending a BBW Bash<sup>4</sup> in Las Vegas and not finding anything appropriate to wear in her size, she states:

So I told my mom, she was like, "Okay, so what do you want to do?" And I'm like, "Let's go to a fabric store." We went to the fabric store and we got this beautiful purple, shiny, glossy, organza kind of thing. Like flowy. And then we got the inside silk to go in the inside and some silk to go on the outside. She made this grey and purple dress with a train on it and I'm like, "Yup, this is what I wanted." I wanted a dress with a train and she did and I got it. So to me having the option is great. Maybe it's cheating but you know...

This echoes Amanda's experience with the only garment she addressed when asked what clothing brought her joy, her wedding dress:

**FIGURE 4**

From participant  
Amanda.



Well with my wedding dress I ordered it from eShakti [a customizable online clothing retailer] so it was custom but even then, when I got it, I had to take it to a tailor. Thankfully I know a great tailor but she actually ended up having to take it basically apart and re sew it to my measurements but because it was made for me I felt amazing in it. It fit me great, it looked great... And we saved up for that and I had a specific budget for that but that's certainly not my everyday life.

<sup>4</sup> A social gathering for fat and superfat women and their admirers. See: <https://ravishly.com/take-the-cake-my-first-bbw-bash>.

These two experiences with formal dress wear are in contrast to Kristen's experience with her wedding dress. Without the economic means to have a garment custom constructed or extensively tailored, Kristen included this image of her wedding dress and described the experience as such:

I felt like... disgusting. Because at that time, I was like, "Oh my stomach, my stomach." ... And so it, I mean it was a beautiful day and everybody came together and my family was there. I just remember feeling so... (ugh). Because I felt like the dress caught me in all the wrong places.

When asked about specific social situations where she has difficulty finding appropriate clothing, Ash brings up weddings as well:

I got married on New Year's Eve and part of the reason I didn't want a wedding was because I was like, "there not a beautiful wedding dress that exists out there for me." Like, I would have to have something made. And, so it's like there are all of these experiences that infinifat people just can't have because there aren't the clothes that they need for them, you know, for those things.

It's like, it's hard to make people realize or hard to — I think most people don't even think about it. I think even regular plus-size, standard plus-size people don't often think about all of the things that their access to clothes allows them to do and how people that don't have access to those clothes then can't do those things.

Across cultures, weddings have specific social codes and norms. In "The Dressed Body," Entwistle (2011) refers to the wedding scene to

reinforce how cultural knowledge is reinscribed through the garments worn by both the bride and guests. According to Entwistle, "Formal events, such as weddings, funerals and job interviews, impose themselves more forcefully on the body" (2011, p. 143) and make greater demands on the body towards following established, universal "clothing codes." In Western wedding culture, only the bride is expected to wear white and the opulence of her bridal attire is the focus of much attention from guests. The universality of the wedding event provided the participants with the knowledge that I would most likely understand why this event, in particular, mattered in terms of accessible and appropriate fashion. The universality of the wedding event also meant that the majority of my participants, if they were or had been married, would have pictures of themselves from such an experience. These pictures served as "jumping off" points for conversations directed towards the impact of a lack of clothing in everyday situations and specific garments that the participants struggle to find.



**FIGURE 5**  
From participant  
Kristen.

Winter coats and undergarments, such as bras and underwear, were also mentioned by almost all of the interview participants as being areas of particular concern.

## **As with most research at the boundaries of fatness and fat identity, this work is both political and personal.**

These findings also illuminate the gap between the findings of existing plus-size dressing research and my own on the infinifat experience. For example, in Downing Peters' (2014) study of plus-size dressers, all of her participants describe a sense of "overcoming" limitations in identity expression through clothing by eschewing established rules around what plus-size bodies should and shouldn't wear. However, none of her participants express limitations in terms of access to social spaces due to an inability to acquire appropriate clothing. While Downing Peters' (2014) participants may, presumably, face challenges in finding winter coats that adequately express their sartorial perspective, their existence at the smaller end of the fat spectrum ensures that they will, indeed, find a coat that fits around their body, something that both Ash and Amanda expressed is impossible for them at this time. The cataloging of specific garments that infinifat people find impossible to acquire underscores the degree to which a lack of access to clothing limits infinifat people in the subjectivities they can perform.

## INFINIFAT IN THE WORKPLACE

When asked about situations where they feel they don't have access to appropriate clothing almost all of my research participants mention workplaces, both traditional office environments and non-traditional work spaces. As Ash outlines, the concern around work appropriate clothing starts at the initial job interview stage:

And so, when things like the job interview comes up it's something that really makes me anxious. Because if I can't dress like everyone else dresses at this place of business then I can't go to that job interview. My best friend [who is infinifat], she doesn't work. She is super anxious about even attempting to get a job. So she's married and it's fine that she doesn't have a job but she is super anxious about it, she just can't wrap her mind around having to go to a job interview dressing the way she has to dress.

Every time something like that comes up I just think about her. She is really — it really affects her feeling of self-worth because she feels like she can't contribute to her marriage or her household because she can't work because she — like how's she going to go to work every day? Like, having one outfit for a job interview is one thing but having seven outfits to get you through a week... like,

how do you even fathom going that far and finding clothes? It's a huge problem.

The inaccessibility of traditional office spaces due to a lack of appropriate work-wear is repeated by Amanda and Kristen. Amanda explains that while she is working as a homemaker currently, “were I back in the workforce, were I in a professional environment, I don't know where I'd go! There's nowhere someone like me can get a blazer or separates, things like that. There's no where I can go to get things like that.” Kristen expresses a similar “I don't know where to go” sentiment when speaking to the challenges of finding work appropriate clothing in infinifat sizes.

Size discrimination in the workplace is a well-documented concern for fat people (Powroznik, 2016; Stoll, 2019). Having access to garments that are appropriate for a traditional workplace is one of the ways that fat bodies are able to overcome or distract from the dominant narrative that fat people are less worthy within the dominant neoliberal framing of productivity equating worth. Superfat bodies and disabled fat bodies face additional barriers to physical access within office spaces, with concerns directed towards accessible seating and office layouts that don't allow for larger bodies or bodies in wheelchairs to navigate between desks or in boardrooms (Owen, 2012). Transgender and gender non-conforming individuals face similar concerns around fashioning an appearance that is deemed acceptable in traditional workspaces, as do people of colour.

Kristen speaks at length to the ways in which her intersecting identity markers contribute to an increased concern around workplace discrimination. Here she speaks to feeling unprepared for discrimination around her weight as opposed to her race:

And so at that time they were paying \$14 an hour and that was huge for me at that time. This was like maybe 12 years ago. I get to the place and the lady's like, "Oh, come on in." It's like a front desk receptionist type job. And I get there and all the managers are these white men, right? These khaki pants. I reached my hand out to shake one of their hands and they just looked at it like, "I'm not touching you."

So... And the job was cush, like easy! Like I could do this in my sleep, it was nothing. So the next day I went to work. The lady trained me some more. I get back to my hotel and they're like, "You don't have to come back tomorrow." Immediately I was like, "it's because I'm a black woman," because of the way they reacted to me, you know? And it probably was because I was black. But he was like "No, it's your weight."

The economic realities of having limited professional clothing options available in your size and within your economic means are felt most acutely by those who already face barriers to entry and success in work spaces. Kristen goes on to state:

This is my life, you know what I'm saying. Like this is like everywhere I go. Even a job I had for like 13 years, I was writing — my major is mass communications with PR. I'm a PR major. I write. I'm a writer. I'm writing a newsletter for our state publication. This guy is like "Did you write this? You?" This has been like the pattern. They used to hate that I wore my afro at work, I

didn't care. I'd have a big huge afro I wore to work. I mean I just, I don't know, I guess I was defiant, but at the same time it hurt, you know?

And that, and being fat, and trying to fight my way and trying to do double of what everybody else was doing just to prove that I belonged? That's been my whole life. My whole entire life. Just surviving. Fighting all the time. Fighting, fighting, fighting. All the time. To be accepted, to feel like I belonged, and never really feeling put together. Never really having money to take care of myself the way I needed to. Never really knowing what that even meant, to take care of myself.

Kristen's description of "doing double" the work of her non-racialized, economically advantaged thin peers in an effort to establish her value and belonging illuminates how weight-based discrimination is felt more deeply by those who embody traditionally marginalized identity markers. Her description draws particular attention to how the discrimination she faces limits opportunities for economic advancement and the compounding nature of those limitations. Kristen underlines this connection by stating:

So clothes haven't been a huge priority. But what I had was kind of just thrown together. And I never felt like I really belonged anywhere. I do feel like, had I had a better sense of what it meant to care for myself, and to put things together and to feel confident when I left the house — just basically confident- would have helped a lot... And I think that that was what I suppressed for so long, was that expression of myself through my clothes. Because I wasn't thinking about that. I was just trying to find something to put on.



Kristen's compelling description of the struggles she faces as someone who has been poor, racialized, and superfat may seem beyond the scope of this section on the workplace limitations faced by infinifat folks due to lack of clothing options. However, in the above quote we can see the connection she draws between clothing, confidence, and a sense of belonging. Greater access to work-appropriate clothing for infinifat people can begin to dismantle, or at least challenge, some of the barriers of entry they face in fully participating in traditional workplaces and the gains, economic and societal, associated with this participation.

Continuing with Kristen's experience, we can see that traditional workplaces are not the only work environments where infinifat and superfat people face challenges with finding situationally appropriate clothing. Kristen has transitioned to a career as a singer, performing in entertainment venues and private homes. She included the picture below and describes the impact that limited fashion options have on this aspect of her life here:

I was actually singing at a restaurant, and that dress [pictured above] was on its last leg. And that jacket was too, and I was just in my mind thinking "What am I going to do when I can't wear this anymore?" Because it's so difficult for me to find things that are comfortable that I will wear in front of people. And feel good in. And be able to sing in... I just don't have enough to pull from so that I can feel comfortable doing things that I want to do. It's affected everything.

Now that I talk about it with you, I hadn't really thought about it. I mean there were other reasons, you know, just things I was dealing with, but a lot of it did have to do with the fact that I just felt like — I just look at my closet, and there was nothing I felt comfortable in.



**FIGURE 6**  
From participant  
Kristen.

Again we see Kristen drawing a connection between clothing, confidence, and her sense of belonging in a specific space.

## Social spaces, including workspaces, have implied “dress codes” and these codes not only establish who belongs in a space, they also establish who will succeed.

In their 2017 article, “Dressing ‘in code’: Clothing rules, propriety, and perceptions,” Gurning et al. demonstrate the impact appropriate clothing choices have on a woman’s assumed competency and professionalization. Women who dressed appropriately were more likely to be perceived as intelligent and powerful (Gurning et al., 2017). This positive perception can lead to raises, promotions and other workplace gains. However, even making it to the initial job interview stage can seem impossible with no work appropriate clothing available in your size. This furthers the economic marginalization of superfat and infinifat people and perpetuates fat discrimination and stigma.

### CONCLUSION

As Deborah A. Christel states in her 2014 article, “It’s your fault you’re fat: Judgements of responsibility and social conduct in the fashion industry”:

It is clear that the gatekeepers of the fashion industry continue to comply with the socially accepted stigma that *fat is bad*. Fashion students do not have positive beliefs about [fat]<sup>5</sup> people and therefore may not want to design for them (p. 312, emphasis in the original).

From the findings explored within this paper, we can continue Christel’s line of thinking; the gatekeepers of the fashion industry comply with the accepted stigma that being *really fat* is *really bad*. It is difficult to interpret the extreme lack of clothing options for superfat and infinifat people as anything other than a moral judgment against those who are often constructed as “too far gone” and unable to participate in a socially meaningful life. This lack of attention from the mainstream fashion industry is felt most acutely by those who exist at the intersection of additional axes of marginalization, such as those who do not conform to normative gender roles, those who are racialized and those who are poor or disabled.

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<sup>5</sup> Christel uses the word obese. I have replaced it with the word fat to reflect the rejection of terms such as obese and obesity by fat studies scholars in reaction to the pathologization of fatness through such language.

## It is from this point where I look towards a fashion future that accommodates, even embraces, infinifat and superfat people and all of their intersecting identity markers.

My work focuses mainly on the ways in which infinifat people are limited by the dearth of clothing options available in their size. This is reflective of the experiences expressed by the majority of research participants. When asked what fashioning their identities could look like, initial responses ranged from fantastic disbelief to reluctant refusal of the mere concept of a meaningful engagement with fashion. However, when I returned to the question, an imagined infinifat future emerges. Amanda described her imagined wardrobe as a capsule type wardrobe<sup>6</sup>, Ash spoke of her desire for fitted button down shirts and Kristen sent “inspiration” images of outfits she desired in her size and waxed poetically about the capes and gowns she would like to own.

My purpose with this work is two-fold. Firstly, I hope that the knowledge expressed by the participants of this project, including the imagined infinifatshion future touched on above, inspires emerging fashion designers to take up the call. In the same way that Cooper (2010) calls on academics to consider fat as a type of interdisciplinary lens, I call on fashion students to apply the critical lens of superfatness and infinifatness to their clothing designs.

I hope that research such as my own supports efforts, such as Ash’s #infinifatshion activism, to dismantle the fat bias held by the mainstream fashion industry.

Secondly, I hope that the knowledge expressed by the participants of this project encourages a deeper engagement with the entire spectrum of fatness and fat lived experience by those who situate themselves within the fields of Fat Studies and Fashion Studies. This work represents but a sliver of what could constitute a comprehensive examination of the superfat or infinifat lived experience. More work needs to be done to address the intersecting axes of marginalization and discrimination that face infinifat people. My work also speaks directly to the need of fashion studies scholars to engage with those who are unable to access mainstream fashion and clothing. I hope that my work serves as a building block towards future research that actively redirects scholarly attention to the voices we hear from least often. I have strived to be reflexive towards the ways in which my research could be improved and built upon. I hope that this is not the last time I see the term “infinifat” in an academic context.

<sup>6</sup> Hsiao and Grauman define a capsule wardrobe as: “a set of garments that can be assembled into many visually compatible outfits” (2018, p. 1).

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