

## **Discovering Whether Identifying as Fat Feels Good To Me Through Fashion**

I decided to disrupt my current identity and find out whether the fat identity feels good to me by going to the plus-size store Torrid. Growing up in Asia, I have always been unable to find clothing that fit me as I outgrew straight sizes quickly and was always the biggest girl at the store. Clothing is connected to and representative of my identity; hence being unable to get clothes that I like due to a lack of sizing options diminished my identity and agency in choosing clothing. Clothing is also political, and by wearing clothes made for fat folks, I wanted to see whether that could be my way of engaging in micro-activism as well as embracing my identity. By going to a plus-size store, as well as getting rid of my ill-fitting clothes, I want to see if identifying as fat will feel good. Thus, I will explore if discovering fatness feels good by trying to see if I ‘fit in’ with Torrid.

First, I want to examine fat identity formation through fashion. Peters (2014) argues that fat bodies are historically not viewed as fashionable and are excluded from fashion media. Even though plus-sized women have high buying power, there is still a “demand for slimming-tucking-trimming- hiding-camouflaging clothing,” which is higher than “wear-whatever-we-want clothing” (Baker, 2015, p. 184). Plus-size women often shop in the men’s section to “find pants with longer inseam” or other clothing that wasn’t available in the straight-size section (Peters, 2014, p. 53). Relating this to my experience, when most clothes in the kid’s or adult’s sections did not fit me, I experienced shame regarding my fat identity even as a child (Peters, 2014). Not finding clothes that are fashionable or representative of my identity became the norm. Fat folks had to start making their clothes, and some stated that “if it covers me up, I’ll take it” (Cooper, 1998, p. 20). I always tried to prioritize clothes that I liked and that also fit me; otherwise, I would not wear them. Currently, I have outgrown some of my clothing

pieces, which puts me in the in-between space of plus-size and straight-size. Thus, with this essay, I hope to find where I fit in and whether it would feel good to ‘try on’ fat identity.

Furthermore, I want to discuss my experiences at Torrid. At the store entrance, I saw a wheelchair-accessible sign I hadn’t seen anywhere else. However, upon entering the store, I was disappointed to see that the shelves were very close together, making them inaccessible and not fat-friendly. Hence, I thought that Torrid would have been designed differently after having this sign and designing a store that caters to fat people. This could be due to capitalism, where the more products displayed on the floor, the more folks can buy. Moreover, fatness and disability are interrelated and socially constructed (Schalk, 2013). Fat bodies and disabled bodies are “pathologized” and are unwelcome in public spaces; thus, there are few spaces that cater to their needs (Schalk, 2013, para. 28). These bodies are invisible and hypervisible at the same time. Thus, making clothing with them in mind will encourage the normalization of fatness and disability in society, thereby going against the ideal ‘white, hetero, cis, abled bodies’ that are privileged. Further, the only thing that stood out to me that was fat-friendly and accessible was their fitting rooms. They featured rooms with a lot of space, places to sit outside, and a catwalk-like space. However, I noticed there were fans in the fitting rooms. On the one hand, it would be an excellent addition to control the temperature; on the other hand, it perpetuates fatphobic stereotypes of fat people always being hot and sweaty. Therefore, although Torrid tries to be fat-friendly in its clothing, shoes, accessories, and fitting rooms, it still fails fat and disabled folks by not meeting their most basic needs.

Another way Torrid fails to be accessible is that their clothing is expensive. Fat and disabled folks experience barriers to accessing higher-income jobs or financial support, and they often can be of lower income. Hence, making inclusive clothing inaccessible to some folks

contributes to discrimination. Although the clothes felt nice and high quality, I felt the high price was unjustified. This is common with plus-size clothing as retailers often charge more due to the hypothetical ‘lack of its mass-market appeal’ or ‘more materials used’ or the ‘fat tax,’ thereby becoming a form of discrimination. However, particular clothing challenges some stereotypes of fat and disabled folks being “nonsexual” or “incapable of having satisfying sexual relationships” since the store offers sheer clothes, lingerie, and so on (Schalk, 2013, para. 31). This showcases that fat folks are ‘allowed’ to feel and be sexy as many other lingerie stores do not carry big sizes.

Some clothing in Torrid challenges ‘plus-size fashion rules’ by having stripes, see-through elements, bright colors, no sleeves, etc. (Baker, 2015) These rules can be seen as biopedagogies used to discipline, police, and cover up the fat body as it is not representative of a model citizen. Women are often socialized into these rules, rather than actively seeking them out (Peters, 2014). By breaking these rules, Torrid is allowing more freedom of expression for fat folks. However, most of its clothing is still feminine featuring lace, feminine cuts, and “tunics” reinforcing the stereotypes of hyper feminine clothing for fat women (Baker, 2015, p. 176). It was tough for me to find a gender-neutral outfit at the store, thereby limiting what kind of folks could shop there and use the clothes to construct their gender identity. Barry et al. (2022) showcase the pleasures and dangers of dressing fat bodies by using the concept of “fabulousness,” which is an “embodied practice” performed by “Black and brown queer and trans people” who utilize fashion to transform gender norms (p. 303). This allows folks to experience pleasure in wearing ‘fabulous’ clothing (Barry et al., 2022). However, I think that perhaps ‘fabulousness’ or pleasure may be hard to achieve while shopping in Torrid as queer folks or folks who want to dress in a gender-neutral way may not have many options.

However, fashion functions as a form of identity construction, and it can also be used to make folks feel good. Although Torrid's lack of gender-neutral clothing hinders it from helping fat folks in their identity construction, some still find joy and pleasure in finding clothes there. For instance, Cooper (1998) argues that “being with other fat women...is profoundly liberating” (p. 64). Fat women were working in the store, and being there felt good since, for a long time, clothes shopping felt dreadful to me due to the lack of sizing options. Cooper (1998) states that “being in touch with the way our bodies look and feel helps us feel good,” hence bringing embodied pleasure to the wearer, which historically for fat folks and me was hard to achieve (p. 64). When I looked at clothes in the store, it was very liberating to see that I could size up as much as I wanted, and I did not have to reach to get the back piece on the rack. Because Torrid uses its own sizing, it also felt good to pick up what was size 0 or 1. While I acknowledge this thinking is problematic as smaller clothing sizes should not be connected to feelings, due to smaller people being privileged in society, they still are. I think that having their own sizing scale that mirrors straight sizes furthers fat stigma. Feeling good about picking up smaller sizes due to my internalized fatphobia perpetuates the privilege of smaller sizes even in the plus-size store, which should not be the case. Hence, perhaps sticking to ‘2X’, ‘3X’, etc., might have been better since they do not mirror straight sizes and do not confuse the person shopping.

Fashioning a non-normative body can also be political. Baker (2015) argues that “fatshion” or fat fashion is political and that dressing up your fat body in whatever you like and what scares you “is revolutionary” (pp. 170-171). Having a non-normative body take up space and become visible through fashion can be seen as a political act (Baker, 2015). Cooper (2016) argues that “micro fat activism” is usually performed by one person, and it happens in “everyday spaces” (p. 78). Hence, dressing in clothing that fits fat bodies, wearing what scares you, or

breaking 'plus-size fashion rules' can be ways of engaging in such micro activism. Going to Torrid and being in an inclusive space made it feel like I was doing something political. Outside the store, I observed many people looking in, walking by, and possibly intimidated by the plus-size mannequins or the store's name. Therefore, by going in, it felt like I was crossing a threshold into my fatness as well as committing a political act of activism, which felt pleasurable and liberating.

I edited my wardrobe as part of this project as well. Woodward (2007) argues that one's wardrobe is a collection of "memories and former selves" that we constantly add to or edit (p. 52). I kept my clothes as a reminder of who I once was and in hopes that I would fit into it someday. By removing all ill-fitting items like jeans and workout shirts from my closet, I removed my old identities and made room for new ones, which felt liberating. At the same time, I understand that removing ill-fitting clothes does not work for everyone. Since some folks may have deep emotional connections to their clothing, their memories with it, and their former selves, this can be the last step towards the acceptance of their fat identity. Talking about experiences with fat identity can be a step toward acceptance. This can allow some to see that identifying as fat can be liberating. Then, the next step would be to go to a 'straight-size' store and "just try it on" since, due to inconsistency in sizing, you may be able to find something that fits without having to go into a plus-size store (Peters, 2014, p. 56). Going to a plus-size store can be done when the person feels comfortable with their new size. Some stores will have online options for plus sizes, allowing them to avoid the possible retraumatizing shopping experience.

My research has highlighted a binary between plus-size and straight-size, accounting for the slight variation of in-between sizes (Peters, 2014). Torrid offered various in-between sizes, making it easier for me to fit in and feel good. It allowed me to feel 'fat enough' compared to my

experience of sizing in other stores. Although I was disappointed by Torrid's disregard for accessibility, both physically and financially, as well as gender diversity in clothing, I think it offers more options for fat folks. The fact that my size was not the last on the rack, and the option of sizing up as many times as I wanted, was liberating. It also allowed me to engage in fat activism, which I was not able to do anywhere else in Kelowna, as there is a lack of fat-positive spaces. Overall, I would go back to Torrid, and it did change my feelings towards accepting that fatness can and does feel good to me. However, the store still has many flaws to consider to avoid further discrimination.

## References

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