

**“Skinny is magic”:  
TV show *Insatiable* negotiating (fat)  
female bodies**

by

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## Abstract

The tv-show *Insatiable* is highly contested for its fatphobic and fat-shaming content by both fat activists as well as various media outlets. Producers and actors of the series have denounced these accusations claiming they challenge fat-shaming and critique fatphobia adopting the genre dark comedy, satire, and parody. However, parody invites critical engagement as it often naturalizes cultural hegemony, in this particular case, bodily hierarchies of the binary fat/thin. The purpose of this thesis is to answer how discursive practices, which draw on the binary fat/thin, reproduce demeaning bodily conceptions about the (“fat”) female body in *Insatiable*. This thesis investigates the binary fat/thin adopting the theory of embodiment whilst contemplating the relationship between the series and Fat Studies. Answering the research question, three overarching themes persist throughout Season 1 of the series. First, “fat” bodies are stigmatized by its many negative connotations and through the regime of visibility which polices and monitors bodies which render them in/visible. Second, throughout the episodes “thinness” converges with beauty, success and sexual attractiveness catering for the male gaze. Third, as the show depicts unattainable beauty standards it encourages (binge) eating disorders through the neoliberal health discourse. Ultimately, this thesis posits that acknowledging weight and body size as an axis which (re)produces inequalities, helps disrupt dominant beliefs about bodies and can help create a safe environment where all sizes, shapes, ethnicities, and abilities can be celebrated. These findings open a chasm of reading bodies and renegotiating body knowings about (“fat”) female bodies.

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## Introduction

Various media have condemned the Netflix series *Insatiable* with headlines such as “‘Insatiable’ Is a Perfect Example of How to Get Body Positivity Totally Wrong” (Ross, 2018), “‘Insatiable: The Opposite Of Body Positivity’” (Oldfield, 2018), “‘Netflix’s *Insatiable* looks like it does more, and worse, than fat-shame” (Nedd, 2018), “‘Why Netflix’s New Fat-Phobic Show *Insatiable* Is So Dangerous” (Mackenzie, 2018), “‘Why I Started A Petition To Stop The Release Of Netflix’s Series *Insatiable*’” (Given, 2018), “‘Critics Slam Netflix’s ‘Tone-Deaf’ *Insatiable*: ‘Teenagers Deserve Better’” (Carras, 2018). And the list goes on.

Before the tv-show *Insatiable* went on air the 10 August 2018, there was already a petition on change.org requesting its cancellation. The petition, started by Florence Given (2018) a feminist social activist, stating that the Netflix-tv show “perpetuates not only the toxicity of diet culture but the objectification of women’s bodies”. Given’s invective of *Insatiable* continues arguing that it will cause eating disorders and perpetuate the male gaze that makes women believe their worth is inextricably linked to their bodies (Change.org, 2018). Megan Jayne Crabbe (2018), known as [@bodyposipanda](#) and a fat activist on Instagram, denounces the show in one of her posts:

We do not need anymore weight loss fairytales where the sad fat girl transforms into an entirely new person and lives her wildest fantasies. We do not need to give girls anymore of an idea that their summers should be spent shrinking themselves for the big reveal when they go back to school.

Different blogs within the fat activist communities have also contested *Insatiable*. Ragen Chastain (2012), on her blog *Dances with Fat*, condemns the use of fat suits explaining “if it requires a fat suit, it’s fat-shaming” and “if a fat person has to become thin to find acceptance, it’s fat-shaming” as well. On the Tumblr blog *This Is Thin Privilege*, many threads denounce the show for its fat-shaming. In one of the threads, a reader goes on warning what the repercussions might be on young children: “Have you ever wondered how it feels to be a fat teen subject to these pervasive ideas? Teens are social sponges, they’re programmed to pick up the tiniest subtleties of how other people think of them” (Arte to Life, 2021).

In response to the criticism, Alyssa Milano (2018), who plays Coralee in the tv-show, defends the premises of the show on Twitter: “We are not shaming Patty. We are addressing (through comedy) the damage that occurs from fat-shaming. I hope that clears it up.” Chastain (2012)

problematizes Milano's statement, noting that Milano doesn't seem to recognize she has been *thinsplaining* fatphobia to fat people. Furthermore, Chastain (2012) postulates how "Milano completely ignores the fact that actual, real live fat people (not thin actresses in suits) are telling her loud and clear that if someone has to get thin to get revenge, that is absolutely fat-shaming" (Chastain, 2012). In addition, Debby Ryan (2018), who plays Patty the "fat" main character, released a statement on Instagram saying the show "addresses and confronts these ideas through satire. Satire is a way to poke fun at the hardest things, bring darkness into the light, and enter difficult conversations". Similarly, the TV show's creator and producer, Lauren Gussis, who struggled with body image and binge-eating herself, defends the show saying it is quite the opposite of what critics have been saying of the show: *Insatiable* was supposed to criticise fatphobia. With *Insatiable*, Gussis wanted to debunk myths about belonging especially among impressionable youngsters. Gussis argues that the character Patty is "the demon of my inner bullied teenager". For Gussis, creating the show healed and released her as she realized that "being skinny and pretty" didn't turn out to be great in high school either (Miller, 2018).

The aforementioned paragraphs and statements of media and fat activists demonstrate how the tv-show *Insatiable* is heavily (and rightfully so) disputed. In the past few decades, individuals have experienced increasing social pressure to maintain or achieve "thin" bodies (Campos, 2004; Saguy, 2012). This pressure to lose weight is reinforced by a culture of fat hatred which sustains and encourages weight bias and discrimination (Bacon, O'Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). Previte & Gurrieri (2015) assert how important it is to recognize the stigmatizing part media plays in anti-fatness. Media saturates our day-to-day life and has an impact on our everyday understandings and beliefs which in turn shape our everyday lives (Previte & Gurrieri, 2015). Media are integral to how we read bodies, through moral, aesthetic and health arguments people are pressured to conform to a "slender" beauty myth and, in turn, the negative connotations of "fatness" are reinforced.

The purpose of this thesis is then to find overarching themes in *Insatiable* Season 1 which reproduce the binary fat/thin. The research question is the following: how do discursive practices, which draw on the binary fat/thin, reproduce demeaning bodily conceptions about the (fat) female body in *Insatiable*? To answer the main question two sub-questions arise: how is the "fat" body stigmatised? How is the female body sexualised? And what is the relationship between the two? To deconstruct the binary fat/thin is to call into question the dominant framings of the ("fat") female body. In so doing, revealing how the binary functions opens up

possibilities to resist dominant discursive practices, allowing for bodies to be read alternatively and negative discourses on “fatness” can be overturned. As van Amsterdam (2013, p. 166) underpins:

Recognizing body size as an axis of signification which (co-) produces inequalities can help disrupt dominant discourses about the body and hopefully create a truly ‘healthy’ environment in which bodies of all sizes, shapes, colours, and abilities can be celebrated.

In a sense, it is the latter statement of Gussis on belonging which serves as an impetus to this contemporary thesis. The show is a depiction of how the notions of belonging and desirability are inextricably linked to body weight and the binary fat/thin. That is, *Insatiable* feeds into that narrative of how desires of any kind -food, sex, validation, recognition- is in itself “insatiable” within a neoliberal capitalist society.

In the first chapter, I discuss the research methodology, whereby I articulate how the social context beckons a consideration of the show alongside the theory of embodiment as well as the concepts found during my literature search. The second chapter elaborates on the regime of visibility which considers hyper(in)visibility, thin privilege, and body policing. The third chapter explains the two dominant Western discourses which shape society’s understanding of how bodies are being read and lived, determined, and produced by culture and history (Murray, 2008; Previte & Gurrieri, 2015; van Amsterdam, 2013). First, the neoliberal health discourse pathologizes “fat” bodies (Murray, 2008; Tischner, 2013; Previte & Gurrieri, 2015). Second, the discourse on feminine beauty conflates “beauty” with “thinness” (Wolf, 2008; Murray, 2008; Tischner, 2013; van Amsterdam, 2013). In addition, based on concepts reviewed in literature and the theory of embodiment I found three overarching themes: “an unruly body”, “thinness as the pinnacle of beauty and worth” and “capitalizing on bodily insecurities. The first two titles of the themes are inspired by the book *Hunger* of Roxane Gay. Given the above, this thesis critically engages with the results found in the analysis in search of overturning dominant beliefs about female bodies.

# 1. Methodology

This chapter shortly discusses the social context of *Insatiable* as a white small town and its international reach. The question of whiteness is important because as Leitner (2012, p. 830) extrapolates: “whiteness is integral to American national identity”. Whiteness is a social construction that is a vehicle for white privilege and social benefits, and Others different racialized identities (Leitner, 2012). Therefore, *Insatiable* as an American production, reflects the norms and values of the social class, educational background and political beliefs of white Americans. Therein, I address how as a researcher interested in the hegemony of corporeity, I will investigate the binary fat/thin adopting the theory of embodiment whilst thinking through the relationship between the series and Fat Studies. Lastly, I will briefly discuss my positionality in relation to “fatness”. To clarify, I will use a mix of “this thesis” and the first-person narrative voice “I” because even though I’m trained to use the third-person, the feminist practice of politics of location requires me to use the first-person.

## 1.1 Contextualizing *Insatiable*: white small-town

*Insatiable* is an American tv-show about a teenager who has been bullied at school relentlessly because she is “overweight”. It was produced in August 2018 by Lauren Gussis, an American woman. The narrative follows Patty whose jaw was wired shut after being punched by a homeless man who has insulted her. Consequently, she must go on a liquid diet during her spring break which results in her body being marked as “thin”. With her “new” “thin” body she is consistently looking to take revenge on the people who have hurt her in the past. Leading up to the trial regarding the assault/injury she suffered at the hands of the homeless man, she encounters the disgraced Bob, a lawyer as well as a pageant coach, who sees potential in Patty as well as his own redemption from his mediocre career and less than satisfying home life. Bob turns Patty into a beauty queen. *Insatiable* is inspired by the real-life of “The Pageant King of Alabama” and a lawyer based in Andalusia, Alabama: Bill Alverson. It is said that Dallas Roberts who plays Bob, is as flamboyant and straightforward as real-life pageant coach Bill. Similar to Andalusia, the tv-show *Insatiable* also situates itself in a small-town, fictionally named Masonville near Atlanta. Like much popular media, which depicts small-towns, *Insatiable* creates its own little bubble unaware of the outside world. Even though the outside world has an impact on small towns, the political and economic interconnection remains unacknowledged. In fact, it is mainly social and cultural ties that have been neglected in representations of small-town movies and tv-shows (Muzzio, 2011).

Also notable, *Insatiable* reproduces US-American white norms and values that reflect the social class, educational background and political beliefs of white Americans. Even though *Insatiable* is entertainment, it is less innocent than it seems. Mainstream entertainment for American screen consumers often represents “small-town life with specifically white social and moral values: a symbolic association of small towns and rurality with whiteness” (Leitner, 2012, p. 829). In the case of *Insatiable*, the entertainment pivots around fat-shaming of adolescents, indicating a clear preference for “slenderness” as related to a “white” version of success. Notably two of the African-American characters are depicted as perhaps the most successful of the show’s characters: one, the mother of Magnolia Barnard, Etta Mae Barnard, as the object of jealousy of the white socialites of Masonville; and Dee Marshall, Nonnie’s girlfriend, who is herself overweight, yet whose weight is never questioned as socially problematic. The latter character seems to offer a version of “success” outside of a white normative standard. This, in itself, is problematic as Dee Marshall is stereotyped as the Strong Black Woman which exceptionalizes Black women as capable of withstanding societal crucifixes (West, 2018; Collins, 2000). Through the portrayal of these two characters the show puts into play the racial dynamics of small-town US Americans however it does not offer (many) explicit moments to analyze them. For example, Robert Barnard and Etta Mae Barnard are an interracial couple. However, the black mother is never around as she is a successful doctor. As a result, the show is a mostly inaccurate representation or at least an inexplicit representation of the diversity of these small-towns and of the complexity that such historical diversity entails (Leitner, 2012). Correspondingly, *Insatiable* consists of a predominantly white cast with limited supporting and main roles assigned to marginalized groups such as the trans community, the black community and the fat community. Thus, the show is very much about “fatness” as seen from white normative values. Both West (2018) and hooks (2015) postulate how beauty, desirability and slenderness are historically linked to whiteness. hooks (2015) presents the example of Saartje Baartman, most known for being Othered in 1820, is depicted with voluptuous buttocks and breasts, frizzy hair and a dark complexion. Saartje Baartman’s features were used to contrast the preferred European beauty ideal of straight hair, a slim body and a lighter complexion (West, 2018).

However, despite the series' limited and homogenous representations, the show had an enormous reach. Both CBS, a national American broadcaster, as well as Netflix, an international streaming platform, broadcasted *Insatiable*. Additionally, despite the tv-show

being widely contested, as discussed in the introduction, it is seen as one of the top-rated programs on Netflix and the show has been continued for a second season (Flynn, 2018). In the United States of America, the “dark” comedy<sup>1</sup> show is 2.1 times the demand of the average TV series. In the Netherlands *Insatiable* is 0.3 times the demand of the average TV series which is an average score (Parrot Analytics, 2021). Previously, Netflix has been called out for targeting teenagers with problematic content such as *13 Reasons Why*. In an article of *The Guardian* Ganatra (2018) argues *Insatiable* is yet another example of the damage a show can have on impressionable young minds and their bodies.

## 1.2 Research: hungry for more

The research question is “how discursive practices, using the binary fat/thin, reproduce bodily knowledges about the female body in *Insatiable*?” In order to answer the research question, two sub-questions need to be answered: first, how is the fat body stigmatised?; and second, how is the female body sexualized? To answer these questions, I mainly focus on (fat) feminist interventions into the dominant discourses on female bodies by authors such as Naomi Wolf, Judith Butler, Charlotte Cooper and Samantha Murray. Tapping into the theory of embodiment, the research tries to unravel the stigmatizing and sexualizing discourses on female bodies used in *Insatiable*. Within feminist theory “bodies” have received much attention on recognizing how bodies are not just a given by “nature”, but that “bodies” differentiate in a way where subjectivity and identity are inextricably linked to our embodiment (Bordo 1993; Ahmed, 2013). Braidotti (as cited in Ponterotto 2016, p. 144) emanates “it is more adequate to speak of our body in terms of embodiment, that is to say of multiple bodies or sets of embodied positions. Embodiment means that we are situated subjects, capable of performing sets of (inter)actions which are discontinuous in space and time”. Further, Ahmed (2013, p. 44) grapples with how bodies do not differentiate “*from each other but between others*”: “the body becomes imagined through being related to, and separated from, particular bodily others. The difference is not simply found in the body but is established as a relation between bodies: *this suggests that the particular body carries traces of the differences that are registered in the bodies of others*”.

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<sup>1</sup> Dark comedy is a thin/blurred line between tragedy and comedy: “bitter laughter”. As Schuttler elaborates: “the genre of dark comedy” became “a vehicle for depicting and commenting on American life and culture in the late twentieth century” (Schuttler, 2004, p. 2).

Accordingly, understanding that “bodies” are as much objects of social practices as agents that resist the hegemony of corporeity, a feminist intervention can then defy the patriarchal construction of female bodies on the one hand and open up a chasm to reformulate “bodies” within feminist theory, on the other (Ponterotto, 2016). Based on concepts from the literature story, combined with the theory of embodiment and an analysis, I was able to offer a critique of *Insatiable* that reveals how the binary fat/thin stigmatizes fat female bodies and within bodily hierarchies promotes slender body ideals. The research is done by one person, namely myself. For that reason, only several episodes were chosen to analyze. From those episodes, several scenes were chosen which were the most unambiguous material to analyze based on the concepts found in the literature. The purpose of this research is to find overarching themes within the binary fat/thin. As the series is a recent production and so highly contested it is important to research *Insatiable* in order to overturn dominant discursive practices about (fat) female bodies which allows for the possibility to redefine how value is assigned to bodies.

Furthermore, the main focus of the research is directed at female bodies as the physical aspects of women have been scrutinized for centuries by various forms of patriarchy (Ponterotto, 2016). Going forward in this thesis, I operate the notion of patriarchy within a “Western”, that is European-informed context, such as that theorized by Michel Foucault in *History of Sexuality* (1990). As Tischner (2013) underpins, (fat) female and male bodies are read differently by society and ascribed contrasting connotations (Tischner, 2013). Both Orbach (2006) and Bordo (1993) assert how women have historically and culturally been more pressured to conform to gendered beauty ideals of slenderness. However, this does not imply that men aren’t pressured to accommodate bodily ideals of being lean and strong at the same time (Tischner, 2013). In short, men’s bodies are scrutinized less.

Second, due to the scope, this research is limited to investigating how (“fat”) female bodies are stigmatised and are being sexualized in *Insatiable* by a predominantly white. For this reason, it is important to note that defining “fatness”, “slenderness” and explaining “fat stigma” intersects with race. *Fearing The Black Body: The Racial Origins of Fat Phobia* of Sabrina Strings (2019) stipulates how historic and scientific developments of fatphobia are intertwined with white supremacy, slavery, colonialism, and patriarchy which leads to bodily hierarchies. Strings (2019) discusses how the slender body type became a symbol of national identity, morally right with which white women were to identify. Conversely, “fatness” became a signifier for immorality and “Blackness”. In other words, history ascribed values onto bodies

deciding which are aesthetically valued more. Ultimately, “the fear of the imagined “fat black woman” was created by racial and religious ideologies that have been used to both degrade black women and discipline white women” (Strings, 2019, p. 10).

### 1.3 Positionality: allyship

Specifically in relation to “fatness”, I feel there is a need to elaborate on my own positionality. According to society’s bodily hierarchies I pass through rather seamlessly, I have never been asked to lose weight nor has anyone ever questioned my health. I have moved through my young life very unaware of my own thin privilege. Only when my own body matured, I was explicitly confronted with my own unkind, fatphobic thoughts. However, I don’t want this chapter dedicated to how I suddenly came to realize my own internalized fatphobia, or how my own bodily insecurities to be desirable were amplified watching *Insatiable*. It is with clear understanding that with a socially acceptable body I am to take on a supportive role to the liberation of “fat”. Feeling “fat” and being “fat” are not experienced the same. This chapter is dedicated to me being an ally to all female bodies but specifically “fat” female bodies. Throughout this thesis, I have critically engaged with the binary fat/thin to recognize my own oppressive thoughts and thin privilege so as to remind myself to be kind to all bodies out there as much as being kind to my own.

## 2. Regime of visibility

### 2.1 Hyper in/visibility

To understand the ways in which bodies are read is also to understand the discursive regime of in/visibility. The way we read bodies is also known as body knowingness. A concept which will be discussed in chapter three in relation to different discourses such as the beauty discourse and the neoliberal health discourse. This chapter discusses how the regime of visibility renders (fat) female bodies simultaneously visible, invisible and hypervisible.

The regime of visibility is a social process of which being seen and the seeing of are socially and culturally constructed (Tischner, 2013). The way we see and how we are being seen defines our social identity based on gender, ethnicity, sexuality etc. In the same way, Murray (2005, p. 274) explains we come to “know the other based on the bodily markers that have discursively come to signify certain ‘truths’”. As Hesse-Biber (1997, p. 59) consolidates: “unlike personality, tastes, and social values, our physical appearance is always visible to others”. These bodily markers or physical characteristics are clearly demarcated and value one bodily marker or characteristic more than the other. This clear visual demarcation suggests a troublesome relationship between visibility and power (Tischner, 2013).

The hierarchy in in/visibility of bodies is expressed in society through the normalizing and regulating gaze. Laura Mulvey (1989) operated the notion of “the male gaze” in her essay *Visual pleasure and the narrative cinema*. She refers to the binarity of men as active and women as passive. Women are objectified bodies and men are viewers and active agents. She puts forth the idea that women are passive objects, to be looked at, and that men are active subjects, the viewers. Women as social objects have been rendered invisible, in contrast to the physical aspects of the female body which have been scrutinized for centuries (Tischner, 2013). Dolezal (2010) delineates “how women’s bodies, as objectified entities, have been prominently visible within this patriarchal framework”. Women’s oppression is constituted through beauty and femininity. It just has become a more subtle oppressive tool as Donahague (as cited in Tischner, 2013, p. 53) elaborates “women can embrace their liberated social status as long as it is not at the “expense” of their femininity”. Femininity is inextricably linked to beauty. It is the importance of beauty that is needed to attract men is also connected to the romantic (heterosexual) discourses. To be beautiful and sexually attractive is conflated with “thinness”

(van Amsterdam, 2013; Wolf, 2008; Murray, 2008; Tischner, 2013). Ironically, the visibility of the female body renders the female subject invisible. While trying to accommodate to the male gaze and patriarchal standards of beauty, in fear of being scrutinized, she becomes a socially accepted subject and hence a normalized subject (Dolezal, 2010).

The power of visibility operates invisibly: ironic though it may seem bodies are evident and noticeable, however its bodily hierarchies are less conspicuous (Tischner, 2013). The *male gaze* has categorized the “fat” body as marked and the “thin” body as unmarked. Therefore, the marked position of the “fat” body is disadvantageous and the unmarked position of the “thin” body is privileged. The “slender” body is recognized as “normal” which reaps many social benefits in contemporary society. Although it is portrayed as the norm, a “thin” body requires a lot of self-discipline to maintain that body (van Amsterdam, 2013). Because the “fat” female body transgresses the bodily restrictions of femininity they become visible. Not only does the marked group become visible but also the assumptions about personal information such as health, education, finances suddenly become public knowledge (Tischner, 2013). For example, in our neoliberal healthist society the good citizen is a healthy citizen. Therefore body size becomes a way of reading someone’s health. When someone is recognized as “thin” or “slender” the unquestioned assumption is that they are healthy. Conversely, the notion of being “fat” is associated with being “unhealthy”. These have become unchallenged truths that no longer require scientific evidence or academic knowledge to support the claims. In contrast to smokers or alcoholics, fat people can’t pass as “normal”. Smoking and drinking can be hidden but other stigmatised signifiers of the identity, like skin colour or body weight can’t be (Tischner, 2013). The cultural notions that something is wrong with being “fat” and that a “fat” body signifies a defect is deeply ingrained into the very fabric of society. These ideas fester in our psyche and make most people, “fat” and “thin”, believe these oppressive knowledges to be reality (Bacon, O’Reilly & Aphramor, 2016).

Paradoxically, the “fat” body becomes as much hypervisible as it is invisible (Murray, 2008; Murray, 2005). Due to the negative assumptions being made with “fatness” in Western society, most people don’t want to see “fat” people, there is an urge for “fatness” to be hidden, invisible (Murray, 2005). The fat body doesn’t fit in the dominant aesthetic ideals of Western society (Murray, 2008). And yet Murray (2005, p. 273; 2008, p. 145) postulates that fat bodies are hypervisible because “it is irrevocably “seen,” and the cultural meanings of its fat “bodily markers” are always known” “due to its size and the negative knowledges that are inscribed on

one's flesh". "By this, Alcoff suggests the ways we attribute meanings to bodily differences are ingrained in the way we read bodies. Via the regime of visibility, we believe we have access to the subjectivity of others, that we "know" the other based on the bodily markers that have discursively come to signify certain "truths" (Murray, 2005, p. 273). However, Tischner (2013) critically argues that "visibility is a double edged-sword". Being visible is not always bad and unwanted. It is not always a synonym for oppression and surveillance. Tischner (2013) continues postulating that being invisible can be as disempowering and marginalizing.

## 2.2 Body policing: shame

According to Tischner (2013) the regime of visibility became a means for surveillance and policing of large women's bodies (Gailey, 2014). Based on Foucauldian notions Ahmed (2013) delineates two ways of being monitored. First, the subject is being watched by someone unknown and a partially detected Other (Dolezal, 2015). For example, a "fat" person experiences this as being seen, to be restrained and to be judged. More specifically, this surveillance is experienced when eating food (Tischner, 2013; van Amsterdam, 2013). Second, policing also includes self-monitoring where "*the subject adopts the gaze of the other*" (Ahmed, 2013, p. 30; Dolezal, 2015). Dolezal (2015) suggests that in fear of being punished by society or others, people incorporate self-policing and self-discipline. The notion that someone or society monitors your body, assures that people turn that *gaze* onto themselves (Tischner, 2013; van Amsterdam, 2013). Thus, to avoid interference from society individuals regulate themselves (Dolezal, 2015). Correspondingly, Murray (2008, p. 4) elaborates:

Knowing that fat is offensive to the society I live in, I have practiced elaborate daily rituals, from shoving down a salad sandwich in a toilet cubicle to avoid being seen eating by others, to squeezing myself into control top underpants to try and 'pass-as-thin', and through this careful ongoing self-policing, I constantly resist my own flesh.

These socially defined rules for bodies exclude non-normative bodies and make sure bodies accommodate patriarchal bodily standards. Out of fear to be excluded, and thus stigmatized, women conform to the patriarchal norms of slenderness (Tischner, 2013; van Amsterdam, 2013). Internalizing is central to the mechanism of self-policing. It's a process where norms, rules, and morals are defined by an external authority. Once they are internalized, "these norms are integrated as part of one's 'normal' or 'natural' viewpoint and are taken to be the correct or right mode of being" (Dolezal, 2010, p.60). Ultimately, visibility, surveillance and policing

establish inequalities and become an instrument to sanction non-normative bodies (Gailey, 2014).

Gailey (2014) underpins how the relationship between power and visibility is complex. For instance, Rosa (as cited in Cooper, 2016, p. 148) extrapolates the nexus of visibility, power and shame: “It can be exhilarating, but when you factor in that we have bodies that society wants us to be ashamed of, wants us to hide under tent dresses, and teaches us that we should not have any pride and should not expect someone else to look at it as a thing of beauty, or even just to look at it, that adds a whole other level of power to it”. Being fat is often associated with certain feelings where shame takes a central place (Cooper, 2016). Even though shame is often recognized as an emotion that manifests through the body, some experience shame as a result of their bodies. Body shame is a specific form of shame: it is intensely personal and an individual experience. “Body shame only finds its full articulation in the presence (actual or imagined) of others within a rule and norm governed socio-cultural and political milieu. As such, it bridges our personal, individual, and embodied experience with the social and political world which contains us” (Dolezal, 2015, p. 159). Thus, the (imagined) shame experienced by others becomes internalized. The *gaze* is turned onto one’s own body (Dolezal, 2015).

### 2.3 Thin privilege

Thin privilege according to the blog *This is Thin Privilege*<sup>2</sup> is the systematic reduction of people to their clothing size, hip measurement and waist size only to grant favours and opportunities to those who conform to the slender body type (Arte to Life, 2021). Some examples of thin privilege are that “thin” people can easily make more friends, secure jobs and find clothes fitted to their bodies (van Amsterdam, 2013; Bacon, O'Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). The concept of bodily privileges finds its origins in white privilege and male privilege (van Amsterdam, 2013). Peggy McIntosh (2020) describes these privileges as “an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions”, they are “unearned assets” to which people with privilege are “meant to remain oblivious” it. As McIntosh (2020) remarks, white and male privilege are assigned and unquestioned which works at the expense of women and people of colour. Similarly, fat

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<sup>2</sup> The purpose of the blog is to illustrate the privileges (in this case defined as special rights, advantages, or immunities granted to or available only to one person or group of people) that “thin” people are granted in modern society and the discrimination against fat people that results in those privileges. Secondly, it’s the hope that “thin” people become aware of and acknowledge these privileges, the hope that this will slowly assist in a change of the social hive-mind perceptions of fat people, and finally to provide a place where “fat” people can discover that they are not alone in the discrimination they experience (Arte to Life, 2021).

activists have challenged and condoned “thin” women who fail to recognize their privilege. Therefore, they are also unaware of in what ways they contribute to the oppression of “fat” women (Nash & Warin, 2017). Chastain (2012) underpins that thin privilege isn’t necessarily something “thin” people ask for, it is assigned. She continues saying that it is not because people have thin privilege that they can’t be hurt by the beauty myth which is unattainable. Further Bacon, O’Reilly & Aphramor (2016) delineate that “thin people often also struggle with bodily discomfort and a fear of becoming fat; we can be simultaneously oppressor and oppressed”. Furthermore, it’s not because some have thin privilege that they don’t have the right to express their feelings. The concept of thin privilege is for people to acknowledge how it oppresses fat people and how these oppressions are institutionalized. For example, “thin” people don’t have to worry about seats in restaurants, planes, movie theatres that do not accommodate “fat” people, or they don’t have to worry about a limited sizing in clothes. The government has waged an obesity war which invades the public and private interests of “fat” people (Bacon, O’Reilly & Aphramor, 2016).

Thus, there are two underlying arguments that further the systemic oppression of “fat” people in Western societies. First, van Amsterdam (2013) explains why thin privilege continues to exist: fatness is being stigmatized by negative connotations. Because of essentialist notions of the slender body as “natural” and “healthy”, people believe “fat” people must be doing something wrong, as they are failing to reach the normative status of being “thin”. People with thin privilege dictate the social, cultural and medical norms concerning the body. Accordingly, there is more attention on how to “cure” them of their “fatness”, with the argument that “fat” people could avoid stigma if they only lost the “extra” weight (Bacon, O’Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). The blog *This is Thin Privilege* postulates that fat stigma is omnipresent and persuasive. Fat stigma is in amusement, science, news coverage, advertising, sports, business, family matters, education, romantic relationships, fiction, travels, academic world etc. However, the blog also critically notes that it doesn’t mean that every “fat” person experiences stigmas as intense as someone else. Some “fat” people have a supportive home and environment and have rarely been confronted with fat stigma and fat-shaming in comparison to others (Arte to Life, 2021).

Second, the normalisation of “thin” renders its privileges and the oppression of “fat” people invisible. In Western society “thinness” is being recognized as “normal”, whereas “fatness” is being seen as aberrant. “Thin” becomes a synonym for morally superior, having a strong

personality and being smart; being fat is stereotyped as inferior and a depiction of personal moral failures (Bacon, O'Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). As mentioned previously, being “thin” is the unmarked position and being “fat” is the marked position. People who occupy the unmarked position, namely being “thin”, are unaware of their privileged position and the benefits they gain from it (van Amsterdam, 2013). This binary thinking of fat/thin is internalised and creates a hegemony where “thin” people have power over “fat” people. As a result of “thinness” being normalized, there is limited awareness about thin privilege. The ignorance maintains the unchallenged ideology and its dominant group status (Bacon, O'Reilly & Aphramor, 2016).

Fat activists have challenged and condoned “thin” women who fail to recognize their privilege. It follows that being unaware of their privilege they consistently contribute to the oppression of “fat” women (Nash & Warin, 2017). Based on the notions of Bacon, O'Reilly & Aphramor (2016) they posit that “thin” people need to take responsibility for their privilege and this encompasses reflecting on one’s privilege and becoming aware of how weight bias harms both “fat” and “thin” people alike (Nash & Warin, 2017). However, Chastain (2012), critically remarks on her blog *Dances With Fat* that recognizing one’s privilege is not enough. As Nash & Warin (2017) explain “addressing one’s thin privilege ... does not alter the social structures of privilege, nor does it necessarily align a ‘thin’ person with a less privileged ‘fat’ person, but may merely reaffirm their status as privileged” (Nash & Warin, 2017). Accordingly, Bacon O'Reilly & Aphramor (2016) underpin the importance of society being educated about the moral assumptions we inherently ascribe to fatness (Nash & Warin, 2017). To cancel out fatphobia we need to critically engage with the binary. To dismantle fatphobia is to dismantle the system of oppression which appears in different ways to maintain oppression (Bacon, O'Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). Chastain (2012) continues saying that if the oppression of “fat” people is dismantled it will dismantle thin privilege as well even when people don’t recognize their privilege. It is as important to recognize your privilege as it is to contribute and support size acceptance (Chastain, 2012).

Nash & Warin (2017) argue “that ‘thin’ people need to take responsibility for their privilege and this encompasses reflecting on one’s privilege and becoming aware of how weight bias harms both ‘fat’ and ‘thin’ people alike”. Further, the writers Bacon, O'Reilly & Aphramor (2016) introduce three strategies to educate ourselves and defy internalised size oppression, and thus dismantle thin privilege. These strategies help “thin” people to take responsibility and accountability when it comes to their privilege. First, it is important to educate yourself by

learning about the lived experiences of “fat” people. Listen to what fat people have to say about their lives. Read about the myths about weight; that “fat” people are lazy, greedy and the notions that weight can be controlled by dieting or exercise. Defy the idea that people get sick or die early because of being “fat”. These repressive values are deeply ingrained in our subconscious. Second, undo the internalised oppression. We need to evaluate our own feelings we have about our bodies, in what ways we control them: the cultural ideas and manifestations that a “fat” body is lacking are so deeply rooted in our psyche that most people, “fat” and “thin”, believe them and act accordingly. Focus on embodied experiences: attest to the power of the connection between mind and body. Third, another political tool to disrupt the hierarchy of bodies is to reassign different meanings to the body. No longer acknowledge slenderness as normal and preferable, but see weight as morally neutral.

Ultimately, the reason thin privilege persists is because fatness is stigmatized and thin privilege operates invisibly. The first step to subvert this privilege is to recognize it. However, it’s not enough to just acknowledge one’s privilege, as societies we need to dismantle it by educating ourselves, undoing internalised oppression and assigning different meanings to the body. It is clear that *Insatiable* sustains thin privilege perpetuating the idea that being “skinny” will grant you opportunities you would not receive when being “fat”. Predominantly, the cast is “slender” and in many episodes Patty’s transformation to being “thin” meant, in Patty’s own words, she was “for the first time in *her* life pure potential”. This refers to the fact that when she was “fat” there were less opportunities for making friends, being successful and having a partner. However, the show also counters it when Patty comes to realize “that skinny isn’t magic” and that she “might be skinny on the outside but on the inside I’m still Fatty Patty”. In that sense, Gussis’s, the Netflix producer, point of view could be followed where the intent of the show was to critique fatphobia. Although at times Patty questions her new identity and body and this might be a way for the show’s producers to critique fatphobia, *Insatiable* is still a depiction of how society values “slenderness” over “fatness” and grants benefits to those who conform to the “thin” beauty ideal.

### 3. Unraveling “fat” bodies: how do we read (fat) female bodies?

Mark Graham (2005, p. 178) coined the term *lipoliteracy*. It refers to how we read different body shapes and body sizes in contemporary society. The reading of bodies informs us about

the person in question. It shapes the reader's ideas on the person's health as well as their moral character (Graham, 2005). All the assumptions made about particular bodies by our society are being internalized and lived. These ideas, or discourses, inform the ways in which we understand each other and govern our experience of, and relations with, the other (Murray, 2008). In particular, dominant cultural ideas shape knowledge about "fatness" and "thinness". While the "fat" body is more often than not inscribed with negative connotations, reading the "thin" body mostly evokes positive connotations. Thus, in order to decipher the "fat" body, making it visible instead of invisible, dominant discourses which have determined "fat" bodies and "thin" bodies need to be unravelled (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001; van Amsterdam, 2013). Namely, two Western discourses shape society's understanding of how bodies are being read and lived, determined and produced by culture and history (Murray, 2008; Previte & Gurrieri, 2015; van Amsterdam, 2013). First, the neoliberal health discourse pathologizes "fat" bodies (Murray, 2005; Previte & Gurrieri, 2015; Tischner, 2013). Second, the discourse on feminine beauty conflates "beauty" with "thinness" only to equate "fatness" with being sexually unattractive (Wolf, 2008; Murray, 2008; Tischner, 2013; van Amsterdam, 2013).

Accordingly, to analyze these discourses, it is fundamental to draw on the theory of embodiment and the interpretative analysis of corpulence and corpulent bodies (Braziel & LeBesco, 2001). Shildrick & Prick (1999, p. 337) explain the theory of embodiment as followed: "the lived experience, in which body and world are mutually constitutive". The body is a concept, often hard to grapple with unless it is read in relation to its environment (Riley, 1999). It is continuously organized and structured by history and culture. Thus, this body knowingness is not neutral and not fixed (Riley, 1999; Butler, 1999, p. 417; Murray, 2008;). While the body is not fixed, discourses about bodies, however, are naturalized and displayed as normative (Murray, 2008). These discursive regulations imposed on bodies "have the power to produce, divide, circulate and differentiate the bodies it controls" (Butler, 1999).

In the following chapters I will discuss the neoliberal health discourse which pathologizes "fat" and the discourse on beauty which frames "thinness as the pinnacle of beauty and worth" (Gay, 2017). These presumptuous notions about "fat" are operative in medical/public health discourses, discourses of feminine beauty and moral narratives (Murray, 2008).

### 3.1 The neoliberal health discourse: pathologizing “fat” bodies

BMI, or the Body Mass Index, is a medical model using height and weight to measure “health”. It categorizes the population into “normal”, “overweight” and “obese” groups (Campos, 2004). Within the neoliberal health discourse, the terms “overweight” and “obesity” are used to signify “fat” bodies. These bodies are labelled unhealthy by medical models such as BMI (van Amsterdam, 2013). However, Cooper (2016) repudiates the use of BMI to measure “fat”: BMI medicalizes, morally stratifies and commercially profits of “fat” bodies. Although the medical terms claim neutrality, these descriptive words, “overweight” and “obese”, are often alienating and dehumanizing to “fat” people (Murray, 2008). Cooper (2016, p. 29) explains that it “disregards the diversity of how people embody fatness, or are socially positioned as fat” and “like all bodies, fat bodies are not static, they age, they get fatter and thinner over time, they may become increasingly or less disabled, they may be changed by disease, decoration, or the life course, and they are socially constructed”. Even though the labels “overweight”, “obese” and “fat” are being used interchangeably, the socially constructed category “fat” is used in a much broader sense. It is attributed to any body that doesn’t visibly comply to the “slender” or “thin” body ideal (van Amsterdam, 2013). Roxane Gay (2017, p. 12) speaks of a “cultural measure of obesity” which seems to be everyone who is “larger than a size 6”, or anybody who doesn’t conform to the male gaze, or “anyone with cellulite on their thighs”.

Despite BMI being a contested measurement of “fatness” (Campos, 2004), it has become a means to instigate the relentless “obesity epidemic”. A modification of the Body Mass Index in the 90’s led to a sudden rise in obesity (Orbach, 2006; Gay, 2017). The threshold for “normal” bodies of the BMI score was being lowered to 25 which multiplied the amount of obese Americans (Gay, 2017). Overnight, “obesity” became the number one health problem in the West (Orbach, 1998). The epidemic, mobilized by medical and public health authorities, continuously try to define obesity as a deadly disease, alleging one's weight to be a hazard to one's health (Murray, 2008; Previte & Gurrieri, 2015). As Cooper (2016) elucidates “obesity is a word to describe the idea that fatness is a problem in need of a solution”. These medical knowledges pathologize “obesity”, characterizing someone or something as medically or psychologically deviant (Murray, 2008; Previte & Gurrieri, 2015). “Obese” bodies are labelled as non-normative, burdensome and “unwilling to fit”. Similarly, homosexuality has been pathologized in order for their “aberrant” bodies and practices to be “cured” and normalised. It follows that the pathologization of “obese” and deviant bodies is necessary to justify the

relentless research trying to explain and eradicate “the disease” (Murray, 2008). “Fatness” became a pathology to be treated with surgery, dieting or medication. Targeted at reducing and adjusting “fat” bodies, the pathologization of and discourse on “obesity” has funded a billion-dollar diet and weight loss industry (van Amsterdam, 2013). The irony is that many weight loss products (which have been pulled from the American market) and surgeries endanger life and often result in complications such as abdominal distress, nausea, diarrhoea, constipation, nutrient malabsorption and deficiencies, cardiac arrest and even death (Murray, 2008).

In fact, medical discourses about “obese” bodies are dominantly a collective of negative understandings (Murray, 2008). “Fatness” has become a synonym for “unhealthy, unattractive, irresponsible, and in need of reduction” (Previte & Gurrieri, 2015). These medical understandings have shaped not only Western institutions but also the public’s perception of “fat” and “obesity” as well (Murray, 2008; Previte & Gurrieri, 2015). As Murray (2005, p. 265) demonstrates “every time society reads my fat body, it lets me know that I am defective. Society “knows” my body, as a site of undisciplined flesh and unmanaged desires”. Therefore, the “obesity epidemic” not only endangers general health but also endangers the very fabric of society (Murray, 2008). Although “obesity” is not contagious, it materialized in a social infection, ensuing in a moral panic. Murray (2008) posits “‘obesity’ then, is less a biological infection of tissue and cells, than one of the moral standards of Western bodily aesthetics”. Likewise, Campos (2004) contests the idea that “obesity” is solely a medical issue because it is as much a cultural and a political issue.

Murray (2008) underpins that because these medical discourses are reproduced in wider social understandings of the “fat” woman, they start to spread and produce “truths” about “obesity” and “fatness”. These “truths” equate “fat” with sluggish, weak-willed, fickle, unhygienic, unhealthy, deviant and insolent (Murray, 2005). Roxane Gay (2017, p. 120) in *Hunger* demonstrates “when you’re overweight, your body becomes a matter of public record - your body is the subject of public discourse with family, friends and strangers alike”. Contemporary society reads “fat” bodies as a “physical and moral failure” (Murray, 2008). Moreover, “obesity” is an individual failure and self-inflicted. If one would follow the health guidelines, eat more healthy and work out, aiming for a socially acceptable BMI, “obesity” would no longer exist (Murray, 2008). The notions that “fat” is “unhealthy” and being “slim”, and therefore losing weight is good have become commonsensical truths (Tischner, 2013). These assumptions are so ingrained in how society understands “fat” bodies that they are inherently

assigned to “fat” people and often remain unchallenged and unquestioned (Murray, 2005). Via the regime of visibility, we assume the subjectivity of others, we assume we “know” the other based on bodily markers. These “truths” about “fat” bodies gain naturalization through discursive and normative reiteration (Butler, 1999; Murray, 2008). Every day our society reiterates statements about “fatness” reinforcing a “knowingness” of who the “fat” female subject is. The subject is being identified with and stereotyped as lazy, unwilling to conform to society’s healthy lifestyle standards, a compulsive eater and hyper-emotional (Murray, 2008).

This bodily literacy is often implicit and habitual which makes them arduous to investigate. Yet, a discussion of body knowingness is critical precisely because they influence and shape our daily interactions, and allow us to gain insights as to how we marginalize one group and normalize another (Murray, 2008). Further, elucidating these negative discursive constructs open up new ways of reading bodies and renegotiating the system of “knowingness” about “fat” bodies (Murray, 2005). As Murray (2005, p. 266) underpins “I wanted to overturn negative responses to my fat flesh, to reinscribe my fatness with positive and enabling counter-discourses”. Accordingly, Butler (1999, p. 235) also argues that the need for continuous reiteration shows that bodies never fully comply with the norms these discourses impose on bodies. These rearticulations create instabilities, calling into question the hegemonic force of the governed body. A chasm opens up because of the unstable construction, and possibilities unfold to escape the norm/hegemonic force. It follows that there is room for “reinscribing fatness with positive and counter-discourses”.

### 3.2 The beauty discourse: “sois belle et tais-toi”

Multiple generations after women have achieved voting rights, challenged gender roles, gained reproductive rights and pursued higher education another political weapon emerged to limit women’s liberation and growth: beauty (Wolf, 2008). The purpose of this chapter is to discuss how discourse on beauty represents and restricts female corporeity in Western culture. Even though men have struggled as well with body size and body image, historically and culturally women’s bodies have been significantly more scrutinized and subjugated to social control than male bodies (Bordo, 1993; Tischner, 2013). The female body became a public text, an object to be dominated and managed by patriarchy (Ponterotto, 2016). Bordo (1993) describes the female body as a “symbolic form”, a canvas on which patriarchal rules and hierarchies are inscribed. These rules imposed and instilled on the body seem almost inherent and “natural”

and therefore operate more often than not unconsciously. For that reason, it remains important to deconstruct the political discourse on the female body and its social control (Bordo, 1993).

More specifically, it is the aesthetic ideal of a “slender” body which became a means to control women’s bodies (Bordo, 1993; Ponterotto, 2016). Within Western society, “thinness” proclaims moral superiority, willfulness and intelligence. On the contrary, “fatness” is considered inferior and a reflection of personal moral failings. The system of thought which creates morally laden categories based on physical characteristics is known as binary thinking (Bacon, O’Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). Gilman (as cited in Dolezal, 2015, p. 94) explains how the binarity of groups are historically and culturally defined by various physical characteristics: hairy/bald, large nose/small nose, male/female, white/black and lastly, fat/thin. Physical features become signifiers for which group we belong to (Dolezal, 2015). The binary creates a “deficiency” in one of the antithetical descriptors. For example, fat/thin has its normative condition, which is thinness, and its deficit condition is non-thinness. Within this binary “thin” is being socially constructed as more “worth” than its counter descriptor “fat” (Ponterotto, 2016). For example, “fat” characterizes someone as “uncontrollable” and “lazy” and being “slender” as “frivolous” and “successful” have become unchallenged truths (Tischner, 2013). Nevertheless, this moral superiority of physical characteristics is socially constructed. Historically, the “fat” body was recognized as healthy and affluent before the industrial revolution (Bacon, O’Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). These binary categories are “all socially defined so as to make belonging to the positive category more advantageous than belonging to the negative category” (Gilman, 1999, as cited in Dolezal, 2015, p. 94; Ponterotto, 2016).

With society’s focus on women’s weight, the binary of fat/thin becomes internalized attributing power to one group over another (Bordo, 1993; Bacon, O’Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). As Dolezal (2015) postulates in search of belonging, recognition and social inclusion, there is the constant pursuit to have the physical body which allows one to “pass” as “normal” or to be part of a more powerful social group. Hence, “thinness” is construed as “normal”; whereas, “fatness” is “othered” and depicted as “abnormal”. The constructions of the “thin” body as “natural” and healthy, make people believe that “fat” individuals are doing something wrong when they’re not attaining the normative body ideal. The fat stigma continues because it’s recognized as an individual failure and people could avoid the stigma if only they lost weight (Bacon, O’Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). Tischner (2013) continues arguing that the “fat” female body becomes a symbol of lack of self-control, self-containment and a threat to the patriarchal

order. The only way to contain these “unruly bodies” is to make women believe they are in need of improvement using self-scrutiny, self-discipline and a lifelong battle with bodyweight (Tischner, 2013).

Conversely, the “slender” body turned into a key signifier for beauty, femininity and sexual attractiveness (Bordo, 1993; Tischner, 2013; Ponterotto, 2016). In contemporary society, the canonical female is middle class, white, young, has delicate facial features and is toned as well as slender (Ponterotto, 2016). The “thin” body is celebrated as attractive and successful (van Amsterdam, 2013). Correspondingly, in mainstream Western culture, the “right” body, characterized as “thin” and fit, has converged with the “beautiful” body. To be beautiful is to be “thin” and fit (Ponterotto, 2016). Wolf (2008) postulates that “beauty is a currency system like the gold standard” determined by patriarchal politics and conditions. It is beneficial to patriarchy if women are sexually available and sexually insecure (Wolf, 2008). Beauty influences intimate and economic relationships. This norm will determine women’s success in dating and marrying, and therefore will satisfy the basic needs of female existence: love, family and procreation (Ponterotto, 2016). It is an imposed and controlling “ideal” of the female body (Ponterotto, 2016). Not only is beauty conflated with “thinness”, but with sexuality as well. Beauty’s economical value is expressed in female sexual attractiveness which becomes a prerequisite and a necessity for being successful and socially accepted (Wolf, 2008; Ponterotto, 2016). Conversely, the “fat” body is being distanced from success and sexual appeal.

## 4. (Un)fashioning (“fat”) female bodies: an analysis of *Insatiable*

As per the previous chapters, this thesis has questioned hegemonic notions of beauty and slenderness which allowed me to gain insights into the Netflix series *Insatiable*. In the first chapter, this thesis addresses the theme of how non-normative bodies experience “fat” stigma, how these bodies are policed and how they are rendered hypervisible. The second chapter addresses how “thinness” is being equated to worthiness and caters to the male gaze. In this last chapter, this thesis now examines how the show reflects a society which capitalizes on female insecurities. After having analyzed twelve episodes of Season One, this thesis can speak more specifically to recurring and overarching themes in the show, which offer insight into why the show has met with so much critique, but also remains one of the most popular Netflix series worldwide (see chapter 1.1). From a “Western” perspective (see chapter 1.2), three overarching themes have come to the forefront. There is a duality in the title *Insatiable* which refers to the ravenous hunger which shapes “fat” bodies but it is also a reference to a craving to be desirable and to be accepted by our patriarchal society.

### 4.1 “An unruly body”

The title of this chapter comes from the book *Hunger* written by Roxane Gay. It’s a reference to how “fat” bodies are being stigmatized, shamed and made as much invisible as visible. Similarly, Patty’s body, the main character of *Insatiable*, has been labeled “unruly”. First, this chapter will discuss in what way her character is being stigmatized because of the negative connotations society, institutions and science ascribe “fatness”. Next, this thesis addresses in what way the body is being shamed, in such a way that body policing is required on the part of most characters in the show, but specifically Patty who “used to be “fat”. Lastly, this chapter thinks through how Patty’s “fat” body is being rendered visible as much as it is rendered invisible. Within this chapter, the main focus is on Patty’s body as she is the only protagonist labelled as “fat” in this show. This exceptionality is in itself stigmatizing: the idea that everybody’s body is “normal” but Patty’s.

### “Fatty Patty”

As Gay (2017) underpins an “overweight” body becomes a public site up for discussion by family, friends and strangers. In different scenes in *Insatiable* strangers, family and friends have made hurtful and descriptive remarks about Patty’s body. Patty is bullied and stigmatized for her weight by her mother, friends and strangers alike. For example, in Episode 2 a flashback shows how Patty is being bullied when she passes by a group of fellow students who hit her with a ball asking “do you know what rhymes with patty? Fatty”. In Episode 1 Angie Bladell, Patty’s mom, says “see it can’t be easy, looking like *that*. And then have a mother, looking like me”. Angie Bladell refers to Patty’s weight and therefore compares her slender body to Patty’s “fat” body. Later on in that same episode girls in the hallway yelling at Patty that she “smells like bacon” referencing that Patty is a “pig”. By telling Patty she smells like bacon there is an underlying connotation that she is both unhygienic and lazy referring to the smell and activity of pigs.

Given the above, the show stigmatizes “fatness” by its many negative connotations (van Amsterdam, 2013). Some of these negative connotations inscribed on “fat” bodies are that they are uncontrollable, lazy, unhygienic, weak-willed, compulsive eaters and hyper-emotional (Murray, 2005; Murray 2008; Tischner, 2013). *Insatiable* reiterates these stereotypes. The idea that Patty is uncontrollable is a reference to her eating habits as well as her emotions. In Episode 1, Episode 10 and 11 Patty refers several times to how she wants to be in control but feels imprisoned by food as it is a “higher power” which leads to Patty “binging her brains out”. When fellow students try to steal her food, Patty gets upset or angry. For example, when the homeless guy tries to steal her food and insults her she punches him in the face. After Patty lost weight she often still feels like she “wants to eat all the time”. In Episode 3 Bob and Stella used Patty to get vengeance on one another. When Patty finds out she desperately is looking for a “safe place”, somewhere she “felt comfortable”: eating. She joins the “eating crawfish competition” and starts to eat. In the TV show, the main character is depicted as much a compulsive eater as hyper-emotional and totally out of control. Lastly, because of essentialist notions of the “thin” body as “natural” and “healthy”, people believe “fat” people must be doing something wrong, as they are failing to reach the normative status of being “thin” (van Amsterdam, 2013). Therefore, Patty being “fat” is portrayed as her own individual failure. In search of countering that failure, which society imposed, Patty goes on a cleanse and counts her steps, only to faint a few days later because of malnutrition.

Not only does everybody around Patty remind her of how she is not worthy, lazy and uncontrollable, Patty herself believes these assumptions. Bacon, O'Reilly & Aphramor (2016) stipulate how these cultural assumptions and stereotypes become congenial and fester in the consciousness of "thin" and "fat" people alike. The reiteration of these negative statements and the notion of "fatness" being one's own failure have become unchallenged and commonsensical truths (Murray, 2008). The fact that friends and family alike bully Patty point out how they assume weight can be controlled by dieting or exercise. Therefore, Patty is a failure, unwilling to conform as the only "fat" person in her environment. Accordingly, there is more attention on how to "cure" "fat people of their fatness, with the argument that "fat" people could avoid stigma if they only lost the "extra" weight (Bacon, O'Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). Similarly, Patty and those in her environment believe that if only Patty were to exercise or diet she might become slender. And yet, what is most striking, is that there is no role model in the entire community, except for perhaps Dee, or the Jewish rabbi who visits from out of town to heal Patty from thinking she has an evil spirit in her. That these two mentally and physically healthy characters are themselves marginal to notions of typical Americana is itself telling of the show's commentary on how unhealthy mainstream US-American life is (for more on a discussion of race and marginalized groups see chapter 1.1 and 1.2). For example, when Patty went on a cleanse or on her liquid diet. However, as the blog *This is Thin Privilege* clearly presupposes, it doesn't mean that every "fat" person experiences stigmas as intense as someone else. Some "fat" people have a supportive home and environment and have rarely been confronted with fat stigma and fat-shaming whereas others have (Arte to Life, 2021). Therefore, the stigma imposed on Patty is not necessarily a stigma other "fat" people experience as strong.

### **Surveillance**

As Dolezal (2015) postulates there are two ways through which people experience surveillance and body policing. First, the subject is being watched by someone unknown and a partially detected Other (Dolezal, 2015). In Patty's case, she is being watched by her family and people at school. Several flashbacks indicate how Patty is being seen, restrained and judged. First, in episode two Patty has a flashback to school where she passes a group of people who throw a ball at her and follow up saying "you know what rhymes with patty? Fatty patty". Second, another flashback in episode two shows Patty in the cafeteria when a girl randomly grabs Patty's doughnut out of her hand, restraining Patty from eating. Throughout season 1, Patty's body, "thin" or "fat", is continuously judged either through pageantry or by her near surroundings. Similarly, other characters in the show such as Magnolia are policed as well by

others. Magnolia is pressured immensely by her dad to have the best body in order to win pageants. Second, Dixie has called Magnolia “fat” as well as means to make her feel bad and therefore police her body even more. Although “fat” people are much more directly impacted by fat phobia through the policing of other characters, it is noticeable how characters such as Magnolia feel pressure to continuously fit the “slender” mould, to conform to the male gaze.

In fear of being bullied once more, Patty self-monitors. As Ahmed (2013, p. 30) underpins “*the subject adopts the gaze of the other*”. At the beginning of the season, Patty needs to control herself to assure she doesn’t throw herself at food. For example, when she enters Bob’s office with doughnuts, she needs to restrain herself from eating them. Similarly, when she is in the room with the homeless guy and gets really angry, she deters from eating chocolate. However, there are many times where she does binge eat and “loses control” because she has been under emotional duress. Nevertheless, Patty often “bounces back” and tries to lose the pounds she has gained. For example, at the end of season one, in episode 10, Patty binged a sheet cake after Patty exposed Barnard’s and Bob’s affair. In episode 11, she gets Brick's help to lose the extra ten pounds she gained so she can participate in pageants again.

### **Can you see me (now)?**

Murray (2005) argues that the “fat” body is as much hypervisible as it is -invisible. The same paradox can be found in the show. The bullying as described in the chapter “Fatty Patty” is the urge of Patty’s environment for her “fatness” to be invisible. As the girl viciously remarks whilst stealing Patty’s doughnut “maybe your body will start eating itself” (E2). In the same episode Patty walks into the school cafeteria whilst thinking “I used to be invisible”. However, Patty was never invisible as her body always carried bodily markers which made her known to her environment. The negative stereotypes discussed in the chapter “Fatty Patty” such as her being uncontrollable and hyper-emotional rendered her visible. However, I can understand why Patty might think she is now visible when it comes to men. After Patty’s liquid diet she finally gets seen by her Prince charming, Brick, who failed to notice who she was when Patty was “fat”. Moreover, this attention is shared by all the other male students at her school. However, it is as Dolezal (2010) critically contests when Patty turns skinny, she becomes socially accepted according to the *male gaze* and patriarchy to avoid being further scrutinized. As a result, it can be argued that Patty is no longer visible as she blends in with her newfound slenderness.

## 4.2 “Thinness as the pinnacle of beauty and worth”

The general assumption about a “fat” body is that something is wrong (Bacon, O’Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). In fact, any body which doesn’t conform to the standard becomes socially stigmatized as unworthy, unacceptable and in need of improvement (Ponterotto, 2016). In fear of losing these social advantages and thus being stigmatized, women conform their appearance to patriarchal standards of slenderness (Tischner, 2013; van Amsterdam, 2013). This chapter will discuss how beauty and “thinness” conflate to accommodate the *male gaze*. In other words, to be “thin” is to be beautiful as well as sexually attractive. The next chapter will address how conforming to a slender beauty ideal as a woman grants you benefits.

### **Am I thin, aka attractive yet?**

The male gaze objectifies female bodies (Mulvey, 1989; Tischner, 2013). They are objects for men to look at. The show’s whole premise is built on the male gaze and thus, female bodies being objectified. First, pageants are a way of reducing women to their bodies as they parade in their bikinis. More specifically, the bikini dog wash is a controversial idea as it is once more selling female bodies to raise money. Another example is when Patty is getting baptized, she is in a red bikini. This is in contrast to Bob who is wearing his clothes for the ceremony. Second, throughout the series, Patty values her worth based on the recognition she gets from her male characters. Third, when Patty reveals, whilst prepping for the trial, she still wants to eat all the time, Bob asks her why she no longer eats. The reason she is no longer eating is that she is afraid Bob will no longer think she is beautiful. Patty was in seventh heaven when Bob called her beautiful as she clarifies “no one has ever said that before” (Episode 1). However, as Nonny states herself, she has called Patty beautiful before but it is clear Patty values the words of a man more. Later on in episode 2, Patty arrives at school when the camera picks up on every man drooling all over her, checking her from top to bottom when she passes by. According to Patty she never received this much attention before. When the storyline evolves throughout the season, she values what Brick thinks of her and later on she values what Christian thinks of her. Because Patty gets more attention from men, she comes to believe her worth is inextricably linked to her “slender” body.

This show caters to the male gaze which values slenderness and equates it to beauty. Clearly, patriarchal society doesn’t recognize “fat” women as sexually attractive (Tischner, 2013) and therefore conflates “thinness” with being beautiful and sexually attractive (van Amsterdam,

2013; Wolf, 2008; Murray, 2008; Tischner, 2013). When Patty was “fat” no one would hit on her. The moment she becomes slender her charming prince, Brick, notices her for the first time after he rejected her the first time when Patty was “fat” (E1, E2). For Patty dating Brick, was her school fantasy coming true. Another example, for Patty receiving male attention is when Christian spontaneously approaches her calling her “hot”. All the boys want to go on a date with her. Arriving at school, fully “transformed”, every guy checks her from top to bottom. This entire scene only shows men’s expressions, there is no female facial expression. This shows how her body is catered for the male gaze. This indicates as well that you need to be slender aka beautiful to successfully establish a romantic life as a woman (Tischner, 2013). This is further echoed by the homeless character who, in episode one, says “nobody wants a fatty”.

If beauty’s economical value is expressed in female sexual attractiveness which becomes a prerequisite and a necessity for being successful and socially accepted (Wolf, 2008; Ponterotto, 2016), then *Insatiable* performs the economics of value notably through the relationship between Bob Armstrong and Patty, or Bob Barnard and his daughter, Magnolia Barnard (there are two Bob’s in the show who rival one another). Bob Armstrong teaches Patty to seduce Choi now that she’s beautiful in preparation for their suit against the homeless guy. As Bob Elaborates “appearances are everything”. Further, in Episode 1 he urges Patty to read up on Catherine the Great or any woman who has “used their beauty for power” (E1). Within this narrative, for Patty to be successful she must be attractive in her pageant competition. For example, now that she is slender, she can finally participate in pageants as she is slender which equates to beauty. She also tries to seduce Choi to delete the footage which shows she hit the homeless guy. Interestingly enough, in episode 6 there is a counter-discourse where Dixie fat shames a “fat” black woman, Dee. To which Dee replies “I like the way I look that's why I do pageants. To show people that beauty comes in all shapes and sizes. Even short little mofos like you”. Dee’s character seems to offer a version of “success” untarnished by societal pressures to be “thin”. This in itself is problematic as Dee Marshall is stereotyped as the Strong Black Woman which exceptionalizes Black women as capable of withstanding societal pressures (West, 2018; Collins, 2000). In the same episode, Patty discusses how she “wants to take out her new body and see what it could do”. Referencing that her previous body couldn’t fulfil her needs of having a boyfriend, friends or winning pageants. It benefits especially white patriarchy if women are sexually available and sexually insecure (Wolf, 2008). For example, how Patty in different scenes pokes at her body, still dissatisfied, serves Bob as she is dependent

on him to feel valued and recognized. It is notable that in the show, there are no depictions of Black men at all, which only further emphasizes how pervasive white heteromascularity is in defining US-American mainstream values.

### 4.3 Capitalizing on bodily insecurities: the repercussions of unattainable beauty standards

As Cooper (2016) elucidates “obesity is a word to describe the idea that “fatness” is a problem in need of a solution”. The neoliberal health discourse continuously tries to define “obesity” as a deadly disease, alleging one's weight to be a hazard to one's health (Murray, 2008; Previte & Gurrieri, 2015). Consequently, “fatness” becomes a synonym for “unhealthy” and “slenderness” for “healthy”. To cure “fatness” or “obesity” means surgery, dieting or medication (Murray, 2008). In different episodes Patty, Magnolia and Dixie either diet or exercise to remain “slender”. One could even argue that having your jaw wired shut only to conform to “thinness” is surgery. Based on similar premises of health equaling “slenderness”, eating disorders arise in the show. In a strong pursuit to remain slender, Patty refrains from eating “unhealthy” and strictly indulges in salads. However, the pressure is often too much and inundated by emotional duress, Patty binge eats. Binge Eating Disorder is a mental illness as serious as anorexia and bulimia. Nonetheless, it is never recognized in the series as an eating disorder but rather Patty is labeled as “compulsive” and “out of control”. Ironically, in episode 5 Patty and Magnolia organize a ‘bikini dog wash’ to raise money for an eating disorder recovery clinic. The absurdity of selling bodies to help girls recover from eating disorders. The pathologizing of “obesity” and ascribing unhealthiness to “fat” bodies funds a billion-dollar diet and weight loss industry (van Amsterdam, 2013). Similarly, shaming is a central affect to neoliberalism which stimulates “the machinery of the insecurity-consumption cycle” (Gailey, 2014). Even when most women in the show conform to the “slender” body they still shame one another. For example, when Magnolia is in front of the mirror Dixie says “you look fat in that bikini” or when Magnolia says to Patty “you just think you’re hot shit because you’re skinny”.

## Discussion and conclusion

The tv-show *Insatiable* is highly refuted for its fatphobic and fat-shaming content by both fat activists (Crabbe, 2018; Chastain, 2012) as well as various media outlets (Oldfield, 2018; Nedd, 2018). Producers and actors of the series have denied these accusations claiming they challenge fat-shaming and critique fatphobia adopting the genre dark comedy, satire and parody (Miller, 2018). The genre is supposed to “poke fun at the hardest things” and “bring darkness into the light” (Miller, 2018). Furthermore, dark comedy illustrates and denounces the American way of life and culture (Schuttler, 2004). Thus, the show is according to the producers and authors a parody, and as such invites critical engagement. Butler (1999) stipulates how parody is not subversive by itself, therefore, it is necessary to understand and question different kinds of parodic repetitions that are either disruptive, troubling or naturalized and recirculated as an apparatus of cultural hegemony. Therefore, this thesis analyzed recurring representations in *Insatiable* to recognize the stigmatizing part media, and in particular, parody plays in anti-fatness (Previte & Gurrieri, 2015). The purpose of this thesis is to answer how discursive practices, which draw on the binary fat/thin, reproduce demeaning bodily conceptions about the (fat) female body in *Insatiable*. Answering that question, three overarching themes persist throughout the show: “an unruly body”, “thinness as the pinnacle of beauty and worth” and “capitalizing on bodily insecurities”.

The chapter “an unruly body” shows how “fat” bodies are being stigmatized, shamed and rendered as much visible as invisible in *Insatiable*. Although, there are times when Patty states she still feels like “Fatty Patty” on the inside or recognizes that being skinny doesn’t make her life easier, the show continuously perpetuates fat stigma and she continues to feel the societal pressure to uphold a “thin” body. As Gay (2017) underpins an “overweight” body becomes a public site up for discussion by family, friends, and strangers. Patty gets bullied for not conforming to the “slender” beauty ideal by classmates, homeless people, and family alike. It follows that when bodies are up for public discussion, they are ascribed negative connotations such as the main character, Patty, who is depicted as a compulsive eater, hyper-emotional and totally out of control.

Although Patty believes herself to be invisible, these negative stereotypes, either explicitly or implicitly expressed, show how “fat” bodies are clearly visible to others as it is openly critiqued. This suggests that Patty felt mainly invisible in her “fat” body, not receiving male attention because it didn’t cater to the male gaze which prefers “slender” bodies. Lauren

Gussis might think the show's premise is built on critiquing fatphobia; it actually bolsters fatphobia. Patty does exactly what is expected of her in a fatphobic society: lose weight and be insecure, no matter her body weight. These cultural assumptions and stereotypes become congenital and fester in the consciousness of “thin” and “fat” people alike (Bacon, O’Reilly & Aphramor, 2016). These commonsensical truths reiterated in the show make Patty, and her friends, family and strangers believe that she could reap social benefits and avoid fat stigma if only she lost more “fat”.

Further, a system of surveillance and body-policing enforces these stereotypes as commonsensical truths. Both in daily life and in pageants Patty’s body is being monitored by others by either expression of disgust and/or insults. Moreover, she internalized these fatphobic truths. Thus, she self-monitors, trying to refrain from eating “unhealthy” aka doughnuts and wanting to lose weight the moment she gains weight in order to be “her best self”.

Conversely, in fear of being stigmatized and, thus losing social advantages, women conform their appearance to patriarchal standards of slenderness (Tischner, 2013; van Amsterdam, 2013). The show perpetuates the male gaze which inextricably links weight to beauty and sexual attractiveness. Examples of the show include bodies being objectified in bikini dog washes and pageants which equates “slenderness” to sexual attractiveness to having male attention or a boyfriend. Hence, Patty was never viewed as sexually attractive with her “fat” body for either dating guys or winning pageants. When female friends reaffirm Patty is beautiful, “fat” or “thin”, Patty only values male opinions. Thus, beauty’s economical value is expressed in female sexual attractiveness which becomes a prerequisite for being successful and socially accepted. The series storyline associates successfulness with Patty being able to “finally” participate in pageant competitions as she is no longer “fat”.

Lastly, via the neoliberal health discourse and the war on obesity “fatness” is being pathologized and is a synonym for “unhealthiness” (Murray, 2008; Cooper, 2016). Therefore, there is societal pressure for “fat” bodies to be reduced by society. It follows that “slenderness” equals “health”. However, these pressures to conform to neoliberal and patriarchal ideals in the show translate in both unhealthy dieting and eating disorders. Not only does the pathologization stimulate “the machinery of the insecurity-consumption cycle”, but also shaming as to remind women to remain “slender” through dieting, surgery, or medication. Ultimately, in contemporary society, the pathologization of “obesity” and ascribing unhealthiness to “fat” bodies funds a billion-dollar diet and weight loss industry (van Amsterdam, 2013)

In deconstructing negative assumptions and stereotypes in *Insatiable*, it allows to reinscribe and renegotiate body knowingness about (fat) female bodies (Murray, 2005). Most importantly, acknowledging weight and body size as an axis which produces inequalities, helps disrupt dominant beliefs about bodies and can help create a safe environment where all sizes, shapes, ethnicities and abilities can be celebrated (van Amsterdam, 2013).

However, I critically want to remark that the findings of this research can't be taken out of context and that I claim no authorship and ownership of fat experience, nor do I want to generalize the findings of fat stigma in the show to the experiences of "all" "fat" people. As the blog *This is Thin Privilege* clearly stipulates: not every "fat" person experiences stigma as much depending on their individual environment. Nevertheless, through these research findings an opening presents itself which allows to "reinscribe fatness with positive and counter-discourses" (Butler, 1999, p. 235). What the world is more in need of is clearly consolidated in Megan Jayne Crabbe's (2018) Instagram post "give us more shows about fat girls who stay fat and are shown in all their multi-dimensional glory. Give us fat girls getting revenge. Give us fat girls falling in love. Give us fat girls whose storylines have nothing to do with them being fat. And if we could get more fat characters who also aren't young, white, able-bodied, cisgender, hetero and conventionally attractive anyway, that'd be fucking fantastic."

This thesis's main focus was on how *Insatiable* stigmatizes "fat" and on how "thinness" is conflated with "beauty" and "worth". Although deconstructing the binary fat/thin exposes interesting insights, it remains important to consider different oppressive axes which converge with the binary fat/thin. Consequently, further research is advised. An intersectional point of view would reveal different power differentials, normativities and formations of embodiment. Moreover, a comparative analysis of how "fatness" is constructed in different cultures in comparison to American culture would reveal discrepancies or similarities. Lastly, analyzing another TV show, for example *Shrill*, could reveal contrasting ascriptions of "fatness" and "beauty" to onscreen characters in comparison to *Insatiable*.

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# Appendix

## A. Cast overview

Real life	Character
Dallas Roberts	Robert “Bob” Armstrong Jr.
Debby Ryan	Patricia “Patty” Bladell
Christopher Gorham	Robert “Bob” Barnard
Sarah Colonna	Angie Bladell
Erinn Westbrook	Magnolia Barnard
Kimmy Shields	Nonnie Thompson
Michael Provost	Brick Armstrong
Irene Choi	Dixie Sinclair
Alyssa Milano	Coralee Huggins-Armstrong
Arden Myrin	Regina Sinclair
Carly Hughes	Etta Mae Barnard
Ashley D. Kelley	Dee Marshall

## B. Season 1 Episodes Netflix-overview

1 Pilot	Patty Bladell, a highschool student, is being bullied because she is “overweight”, being nicknamed “Fatty Patty”. She has to go to court where defense attorney Bob sees a chance to redeem himself as a pageant coach by helping, now slender, patty.
2 Skinny is Magic	Patty, who intends to use her newfound beauty to get revenge, wonders whether she started the fire in the motel, almost killing the homeless guy, John. When Patty confronts John he mocks

	her once again who then dies of a heart attack when Patty wishes John was dead.
3 Miss Bareback Buckaroo	Bob takes Patty to a pageant in Alabama to meet his former mentor, Stella Rose. However, Stella Rose is using Patty to get revenge on Bob. Coralee gets an unwanted visit from her sister.
4 WMBS	Patty schemes to break up Bob Armstrong and Coralee using Stella Rose's necklace.
5 Bikinis and Bitches	Patty is disqualified from Miss Magic Jesus after nude pictures of Dixie are leaked from her phone. Magnolia suggests a bikini dog wash to help rebuild her reputation. Patty and Brick kiss.
6 Dunk 'N' Donut	Patty is getting baptized dreaming of donuts as her drink is spiked by Magnolia who wants to sabotage her application to Miss Magic Jesus. Patty is choosing who she wants to be with: Brick or Christian.
7 Miss magic jesus	Patty participates in Miss Magic Jesus despite Bob Barnard's attempt to blackmail Bob with a sex tape of Patty and Christian. Bob wonders if Roxy is his child.
8 Wieners and Losers	After Patty lost her virginity, she thinks she's pregnant. However, it turns out to be a teratoma: a tumor that was once her twin in utero. This makes the pastor believe she has a demon in her stomach.
9 Bad Kitty	Patty preps for an exorcism. After pushing Dixie off the Wiener Taco truck Patty is convinced Dixie is faking her injury. Bob and Bob fall in love. Coralee has a business idea.
10 Banana heart banana	Bob and Bob have a relationship. After putting Dixie in a wheelchair, Patty organizes a charity to raise money. Patty catches them and in shock binge-eats.

11 Wieners Win. Period.	Patty deals with the aftermath of her birthday party by isolating herself and binge eating for a week, until a visit by Drew Barrymore to Atlanta inspires her to make amends. The Bobs struggle with their relationship.
12 Why bad things happen	Patty awakens after being kidnapped by Stella Rose and Roxy, who are plotting to take down Bob Armstrong. Nonnie and Brick go looking for her.