

# Trabajo Fin de Grado

Fatphobia and the Misrepresentation of Eating Disorders in  
Hollywood and Streaming Platforms

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## 1. ABSTRACT

This final dissertation offers an analysis of the representation (or better to be called misrepresentation) of eating disorders and fatphobia in twenty first century films and tv series, relating it to the concept of fatphobia. The texts to be taken as an example in the analysis are: the Netflix series *Insatiable* (2018) and film *To the Bone* (2017) and the *Pitch Perfect* saga, particularly *Pitch Perfect I* (2013). The purpose of this dissertation is to analyze the portrayal of fat characters and how their development as such is shaped by fatphobia, and illustrate how current audiovisual texts offer an unreal representation of eating disorders, centering the analysis on female characters.

## 2. INTRODUCTION.

Throughout human history, canons of female beauty have existed, its standards changing depending on the cultural, historical and political context at the time of their spreading. When media culture was not a thing, said canons, according to Drs. Derenne and Beresin, were subject to factors such as the need of having a larger family, slavery, Second World War, and the several feminist waves. Nowadays, with the arrival of the mass media, women all throughout the world have been exposed to unrealistic body ideals which are constantly being represented in TV series and films. Said ideals, prevailing in western cultures, favor thinness and criticize fat bodies, leading to fatphobia and the spread of eating disorders. As a result, there comes discrimination to those women who do not fit the “thin” category, and, consequently the engagement in eating disorders to try and enter the “thin group.”

Those canons, and the result of their spreading throughout female population, have already shaped the audiovisual world, and more and more films and TV series are including characters suffering from eating disorders, often as a consequence of body shaming or fatphobic comments towards their appearance. That is the case with Netflix’s *Insatiable*, which tells the story of Patty Bladell (Debby Ryan), an overweight girl who loses weight and tries to get revenge from her bullies by entering a beauty pageant and who, at the same time, ends up developing an eating disorder.

Another film in which fatphobia plays an important role is Jason Moore’s *Pitch Perfect 1*. The plot of the film is not based on body image nor eating disorders, it revolves around a group of college students that sing in an acapella group. Despite that fact, one of the main characters, Fat Amy (Rebel Wilson), fulfills the role of the “fat friend,” which in Hollywood tends to be represented as comical and funny. The portrayal of said

characters as an object of audience's laugh is the result of the spread of fatphobia all around the world.

As a consequence of fatphobia and the spread of an unrealistic body image through the mass media, eating disorders have consequently risen in the last years. According to an article written by Barakat et al. and published by the *Journal of Eating Disorders*, “exposure to the thin ideal via either traditional media or social media is associated with greater risk of an ED, with evidence suggesting that both males and females are equally impacted by this content” (19). That exposure has led to the portrayal of the life of young adolescents suffering from eating disorders (ED) in recent films and TV series. That is the case with Netflix's *To the Bone*, which tells the story of Ellen (Lily Collins), an anorexic who has not been able to recover despite having been immersed in several treatment facilities. The spread of such content does not mean that eating disorders are represented accurately, in fact, *To the Bone* recurrently fails to do so.

All of the mentioned audiovisual texts have been shaped by the impact of fatphobia on society due to its spread on the mass media, the discrimination towards fat females and its subsequent consequences which often involve the appearance of EDs (Eating Disorders). In this final dissertation, I will explore the role of fatphobia in female characters both in *Pitch Perfect 1* and *Insatiable*, with the purpose of studying how its popularization has led to include certain character archetype in the Hollywood industry. Another area to be explored is the effects of the unrealistic body image that has been spread through the media: eating disorders. The filmmaking industry tends to depict them in an unlikable view, and to illustrate it, I have chosen *To the Bone*. The analysis of this audiovisual texts is divided into two sections: one focusing on fatphobia and its impact on Hollywood and streaming platforms, and the other one concentrating on the misrepresentation of eating disorders in the industry.

### 3. FATPHOBIA IN HOLLYWOOD AND STREAMING PLATFORMS.

According to the definition provided by the Butterfly Organization, fatphobia “or weight stigma, describes the negative attitudes and stereotypes surrounding and attached to larger bodies” (2021). Said stigma often leads to the abasement of people who do not conform to societal views of a healthy and thin image, and, at the same time, shapes most aspects of everyday life, including Hollywood and streaming platforms, whose popularity has drastically increased. Instead of trying to bring about the downfall of those stereotypes or fighting against societal conceptions of fat bodies, characters found both in Hollywood productions and TV series are shaped by weight stigma. As a result, fatphobia spreads even more among spectators, thus having a negative impact as:

“Stigma leads to suffering only when the person takes up a subject position where the messages about ugliness, failure, irresponsibility and blame become incorporated in self.”

(Maltreud and Ulriksen, 51)

Films and TV series always have a meaning attached to them, it is not just the plot, but what the whole audiovisual text reflects about the social, political and economic context in which it is set. There are certain values and conceptions that shape audiovisual texts and which are unconsciously absorbed by the spectators who, at the same time, construct a meaning out of it. Said meaning is shaped by their own values and social perceptions both about the world that surrounds them and their own personal experiences. In spite of the meaning that an audiovisual text is supposed to convey, it is the audiences, their social background and their day-to-day experiences who end up negotiating the meaning of the text (Elinwa, 2020).

Due to the constant influence of mass and social media and the beauty canon being extreme thinness, people tend to despise what they regard as fat bodies, meaning every body type that departs from what they consider as normative, and resulting in fatphobia, which not only affects people’s daily lives, but also has an impact on the cinematographic

industry, as body image and beauty canons play a very important role in filmmaking. Due to that fact, spectators not only receive said input from social and mass media, but also from the image portrayed by Hollywood and the characterization of “fat” characters, not only physically but also in the construction of their personalities. The film industry is shaped by the bias towards fat bodies and, adding that up to the social background enhanced by mass media, it leads to the further spread of the already existent prejudice.

Fatphobia takes many forms within Hollywood’s films and TV series, highly accentuating those conceptions that live with us in today’s society. People often feel free to comment on what is healthy and unhealthy, cataloguing food into two categories: fat people food and thin people food. As Barbara Plotz puts it, “fatness – or rather ‘obesity’ – is constantly constructed, firstly, as being a health risk and secondly, as being the result of an intake of too many – unhealthy – high-calorie foods combined with too little exercise” (179) As a consequence, the cinematographic industry often makes humor according the already explained food cataloguing.

There are also concerns about the representation of fat characters as being mentally ill:

“Common notions of fatness as a symptom of a lack of control and/or pathological eating behavior are perpetuated in representations of the fat overeater.”

(Plotz, 207)

It is not just the fact that films overtly show binge eating disorder with such a facility, it is also the fact that they link it to the lack of emotional control or not being able to cope with certain situations. Female characters, who will be the object of analysis in this essay, are more likely to be shown as suffering from the disorder and its consequent lack of control due to the social conceptions regarding gender. Gender bias shape the development of female characters, as stated by Annandale and Clark: “we artificially, and

inappropriately, divide people into two camps...we build a series of other characteristics on top of gender i.e. women are unhealthy, men are healthy; women are irrational, men are rational and so on” (22).

Another of the issues to be analyzed in regards of fatphobia in Hollywood and streaming platforms is the use of thin actors and actresses to interpret a fat character. The effect that is added is somehow comical, mocking certain body types and adding up to the already existing weight bias. As a consequence, characters are somehow dehumanized in such a way that further perpetuates fatphobia; the audience is not only laughing at the jokes present in an audiovisual composition, but also at the body image portrayed by fat characters represented by thin actresses. This accentuates weightism, which is defined as the “bias, judgment, stigma, prejudice, and discrimination toward individuals based on their size, shape, or weight” (Arroyo & Andersen)

The cinematographic industry is also subject to the creation of certain character archetypes which can be found in several films and TV series in which weight and body image are an object of laughter. As Babel notes, “plus-sized women tend to fall into certain stereotypes. They’re usually the fat funny best friend. She never has a boyfriend, is never the focus of a story, but is kind of endearing” (6). Those stereotypes do not come out of the blue, fatphobia and its consequences do not only shape society, but also the filmmaking industry, which represents fat characters based on the misconceptions that are ingrained in our day to day lives.

### 3.1. The analysis of fatphobia in *Insatiable*.

The relationship between the cinematographic industry and body image has always been subject to study, especially since the popularization of the binge-watching culture brought up by the appearance and rapid spread of streaming platforms. More films are being released at a higher rate, and those that aired years ago are now available for



whenever the consumers want. Due to the influence of fatphobia in filmmaking and the fact that the industry further accentuates certain social conceptions about body image, it is a matter of fact that the fat characters included in TV series and films are shaped by common patterns. In this specific section, the presence of fatphobia in Netflix's series *Insatiable* is going to be analyzed taking its main character, Patty Bladell, as an example.

Patty is a seventeen-year old teenage girl who has always been struggling with obesity and binge eating disorder. At the start of the show her story is told: due to a punch in the jaw she was forced to follow a liquid diet and lost seventy pounds. When analyzing the series, it is highly noticeable the role fatphobia plays. As Emily Fox-Kales states in her book *Body Shots*, "all visual media productions 'teach' viewers [...] through their circulation of images that literally embody popular cultural meanings and values. [...] We may soon forget the dialogue we hear in the screenplay of a film but we take away indelible visual memories of how the characters dressed, moved, and revealed their bodies both to the camera and our own gaze" (3). If that theory is applied to Patty's character, we see how they portrayed her when she did not fit bodily standards as compared to when she did fit into those standards.

The central plot of the series itself is shaped by fatphobia, as it is based on Patty's transformation, which is represented as the birth of a new and more successful life. The meaning this plot conveys is that, when she was fat, she was doomed to have a miserable life full of disgrace but, when she loses weight, a new world of confidence and potential opens for her. This suggests that thinness implies being attractive, being able to explore your sexuality, being successful and socially worth it, thus reinforcing fatphobia. The fact that thinness is associated with success and fatness with failure, sends the world the wrong message and perpetuates weight bias. The results of a study conducted in Christoffersen's thesis on the cultural representations and implications of overweight and obesity can also

be applied to *Insatiable*, as the shows he analyzed also show “a tendency to assume that obesity is a product of failed agency, where thinness and weight loss is a glorification of making the right choices, having self-control and being strong” (60). In fact, when she is fat, Patty Bladell is stereotyped as the bullied teenager who does not deserve inclusion due to her weight.

When she is shown as an obese girl, the clothes she wears are always loose and plain, highlighting the fact that she is fat and implying that, due to the fact that Patty does not fit inside of the beauty canon, she cannot wear fashionable or revealing clothes. Once the series shows its spectators Patty’s new image, she no longer wears plain and loose clothes, she instead uses colorful and tight pieces of clothing. As a result, viewers often make associations: fat people have to dress in order to hide the fact that they are fat, while thin people have to dress in order to enhance the fact that they are thin, as fat people are:

“Faced with limited options in garments colloquially known as ‘plus-size’ or ‘outsize’ that are typically relegated to dark corners of clothing stores and are excluded from the pages of high fashion periodicals, the plus-size consumer lacks options in fashioning her self-identity.”

(Downing Peters, 45)

Fatphobia plays an important role in setting the limitations of fat people, and, the fashion industry further enhances their lack of options accentuating weight bias by not designing the same clothes for every existing size. Hollywood and the fashion industry go hand in hand, and, as a consequence, they perpetuate the stigma towards those who do not fit the standards. Patty Bladell clearly exemplifies the two sides of the story: she has lots of options when being thin but she is limited when shown as a fat girl.

Another instance of fatphobia in the film is the way in which they show Patty overeating as, in most audiovisual compositions, it is:

Constantly being presented as the main cause of obesity, it is not surprising that this is reflected in the representation of fatness, with films showing fat characters not just eating, but overeating.

What goes hand in hand with these assumptions about fatness is the notion of a lack of will, of self-discipline, of self-control being the root cause of overeating habits.

(Plotz, 200-201)

Patty is constantly shown overeating, she is portrayed as not having control over her emotions nor eating habits. There is an instance in the series in which she is even shown eating a full tray of cookies after having covered them with soap just to avoid eating them, and thus highlighting the fact that she has a problem with food and not being able to control its intake, even if the food is not able for consumption. Her overeating is attributed to be a consequence of her “previous life” as a fat teenage girl, she was not able to manage her feelings and so she ate them, and, when she loses weight, she cannot get rid of the fat girl she was before. In spite of having reached the success and life she wanted after losing weight, she is still not able to control her emotions and so she is hunted by her past as a fat girl.

Binge eating disorder (BED) is defined by the American Psychological Association as being “a disorder marked by recurring discrete periods of uncontrolled consumption of abnormally large quantities of food and by distress associated with this behavior. There is an absence of inappropriate compensatory behaviors” (2018). This disorder is, according to a study about the representation of eating disorders in film and television conducted by Kacey Martin in 2021, stereotypically represented as only affecting obese people, at the same time, it is depicted as if its sufferers were unhealthy, unattractive, suffering from a lack of control, and socially excluded. This depiction is embodied in Patty’s character, when she suffered from BED and was fat, she was a victim of exclusion in high school: when she asks Brick (Michael Provost) for a date he declines, but, when she loses weight, he asks her out, thus representing the results found within Martin’s study.

*Insatiable* is catalogued as a dark comedy and drama series, thus including humoristic instances among its episodes, being Patty's body the main source of laughs. As stated by the psychologists Burmeister and A Carels, "the stigmatization of weight – especially through humor– is prevalent in many forms of entertainment media" (225). The following lines to be analyzed were found while watching the series reinforce fatphobia and often build a negative portrayal of non-normative body image. Patty Bladell, in the second episode of the first season called "Skinny is Magic," says the following: "Skinny is magic. I could be a pageant queen. Now I just needed a coach." This line implies that when you are thin you can do and be whatever you want, but if you are fat, you cannot. Being skinny is not only mystified in the line, but also in the title of the chapter itself: if you fit in the beauty cannon you will find success, but, if you do not fit in you will find hopelessness and a lack of opportunities. Patty is also subject to discrimination based on her weight, and several insults that make reference to her appearance are constantly being mentioned throughout the two seasons, here are three examples: "Fatty Patty," "Whale" and "Fat-ass." These insults incorporate fatphobic attitudes towards Patty, perpetuating like that the stereotypes that derive from the weight stigma and that are present in today's society.

The series also lacks a realistic representation of the different existing body types, the majority of characters who play an important role fit into the beauty canon and are added more depth than those who do not. The latter are given minor roles, as is the case of Dee Marshall (Asley D. Kelley), an obese girl whose character could have changed the fatphobic label that is attached to *Insatiable*. Instead of focusing on her character and adding depth to a story that could have served as a challenge to societal misconceptions, the series chooses to give her a secondary role and focus on Patty's transformation. It does not matter that Dee and Patty both suffer from BED and could have helped each other,

what matters is that Patty, despite still struggling with the disorder, fits now the beauty standards. Hollywood representation of female fatness is associated to the fact that

Slimness is at the centre of contemporary ideals of feminine beauty, thereby making the fat female body the epitome of non-normative femininity.

(Plotz, 68)

In fact, Dee does not fit the so-called normative femininity, she is a black, obese and lesbian character who often challenges the expected roles from females. Although her character could have had a more important role that could have provided *Insatiable* of a counter narrative not shaped by fatphobia, there is no depth in her story and, although she is the only character that really accepts herself, weight bias makes fat characters' appearance onscreen more limited and less deep than that of slim characters that do fit normative femininity. As stated by Byers and Williams, "although media representations of fat women have made progress, more representation, especially intersectional portrayals of diverse fat experiences, are necessary to dismantle fat oppression" (273).

The last relevant instance to analyze in regards of the fatphobia that marks *Insatiable*, would be the inclusion of a fat-suit, which is defined by the Cambridge Dictionary as "a set of clothes worn by an actor to make him look fatter." Said garments are often included in audiovisual compositions to further perpetuate the stereotypes surrounding fat people. That is the case of Patty, Debbie Ryan wears a fat suit to interpret those instances in which her character overate or suffered from bullying as a consequence of her obesity. The fat-suit is just another comic element that is there to make audience laugh, but, while doing so, it enhances the existing weight bias and justifies the intimidation Patty is subject to as a consequence of being fat. According to the thesis written by Selk (2002), in the movies she analyzed, fat-suits were mostly used in those scenes in which characters were shown overeating, or in films that implied a transformation, and *Insatiable* fits into the two categories she mentioned. It is not just

the fact that the use of fat-suits perpetuates certain stereotypes and discrimination towards fat people, it is also the fact that they are using a slim actor or actress to interpret a fat character, when they could have just casted a fat character per se, as dressing a slim actor or actress with a fat suit only adds up to the problem of weight bias and stigmatization. In a study conducted by Greenberg et al., five episodes of each of the prime-time fictional programs belonging to the top ten were analyzed. The result was that of 1018 major characters, only the 14% of females could be catalogued as overweight or obese (2003). Fatphobia is so present in the cinematographic industry that even actors and actresses are being discriminated according to statistics.

### 3.2. The analysis of fatphobia in *Pitch Perfect 1*.

Fatphobia also plays an important role in the *Pitch Perfect* saga, but, for this specific analysis, the focus is going to be placed in the first film: *Pitch Perfect 1*. In spite of the film not being focused on image and change (as *Insatiable* is), weight bias is still present in our musical comedy. The plot follows a group of college girls who join an all-girl acapella group, spectators accompany them on their journey to the nationals. What makes the film fatphobic is not the plot itself, but the depiction of one of the main characters: Fat Amy (Rebel Wilson). The purpose of this section of the dissertation is to analyze her construction as a fat character and how it contributes to the current social bias towards fat people.

Taking into account the name of the character to be analyzed, Fat Amy, it advances much about the film. The fact that she introduces herself as fat just with the purpose of labelling herself so that the rest cannot use fat as an insult against her can seem empowering and a sign of self-acceptance, but, in reality, Fat Amy expects the rest of the world to judge her due to her size. Her character is comically constructed, she is a very humorous girl who is not afraid to be herself, but that is it, her only purpose in the film is

to make everybody laugh with her jokes about her own body, and thus perpetuating fatphobia with some of them. In a scene in which the girls are being sincere with one another, the audience gets to know that Fat Amy's real name is not even Amy but Patricia. This reinforces the fatphobic undertone that is behind the character naming herself as Fat Amy. It can seem empowering to label yourself in advance so that others do not do it, but in reality, there is a constant reference to her physical appearance, perpetuating the stereotype that overweight people are only reduced to their size and appearance. The name of Fat Amy further maintains fatphobic humor all throughout the movie, as it is what mostly gives the film its comical aspect.

According to Plotz's analysis of fatphobia on American cinema, since 2011, new films that feature fat characters breaking with the previous stigma regarding their sexuality, but that fact does not mean that they are not fatphobic (2020). As she states, all of the films follow certain pattern: they present female fat characters as an object of sexual desire, all of the films are comedies and, lastly, they all include into their cast fat female stars as is the case with Rebel Wilson. Although they try to mask fatphobia by portraying fat females as sexually active, they often do the opposite. Fat Amy's sexualization serves as a means of introducing slapstick comedy, which is defined by the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* as "a type of physical comedy characterized by broad humor, absurd situations, and vigorous, usually violent action" (2023). It is through Fat Amy's body that *Pitch Perfect 1* introduces humor, the target of laughs are her movements when dancing as well as the treatment of her body at the hands of other characters. There is an instance of the film in which Bumper Allen (Adam DeVine) throws a burrito at her, her body movements are exaggerated, and, to wrap it up, another of the girls from the acapella group gets on top of her, further sexualizing the scene. In one of the first scenes, when she presents herself as Fat Amy to the organizers of the acapella group, she gets on the

floor to perform, as she puts it, “mermaid dancing.” This scene also uses physical comedy: although she is supposed to be imitating a mermaid, her body size makes her look like a whale. The just mentioned scene was not included without a purpose, the fatphobic joke is quite evident when watching it. In another instance of the film, when Fat Amy auditions for the Bardem Bellas (the acapella group), she hits her tummy while singing, which is another attempt of the film to highlight that she is fat and the audience has to laugh at it. Quoting Fox-Kales: “we may soon forget the dialogue we hear in the screenplay of a film but we take away indelible visual memories of how the characters dressed, moved, and revealed their bodies both to the camera and our own gaze” (3).

As it has been previously stated, in *Pitch Perfect 1* Fat Amy is constantly being the target of fatphobic jokes. She is not only the only character to make that kind of jokes, but also the rest of the characters, who also use her physical appearance to make humoristic remarks that often rely on stereotypes. A few paragraphs ago it was analyzed how the name Fat Amy is a constant reminder of her body and weight, that joke is played all along the movie and facilitates for fatphobic comments against her. In the same scene that has been analyzed in the above paragraph (her audition for the Bardem Bellas), Fat Amy ends the song with the following expression: “Crushed it.” Although it may seem innocent, it is not, she is fat and the joke relies on the stereotype that fat people often crush things due to their weight. When the film advances, all of the Bellas engage in a cardio class and Fat Amy’s reaction is the following: “yeah no, don’t put me down for cardio.” In this case, the stereotype that is being reinforced is that of fat people being lazy and not wanting to exercise, which is a very common assumption in today’s society. That stereotype is accentuated when she is shown lying in some chairs instead of making exercise and says the following: “I’m doing horizontal running.” All throughout the movie, the Troublemakers (the competing all-male acapella group) keep on insulting Fat



Amy, not directly but by indirect remarks, whenever the Bellas perform, or whenever she passes by. She is subject to constant mocking at the hands of their rivals, which adds up to the building of her character an object of laughs due to her body size. According to Himes and Thompson's analysis of fat stigmatization in television shows and movies, "fat stigmatization commentary and fat humor were often verbal, directed toward another person, and often presented directly in the presence of the overweight target" (712). This is the case of *Pitch Perfect 1*, as Fat Amy is not only the target of humoristic remarks at the hands of other characters, but is also the target of self-infringed fatphobic comments.

#### 4. EATING DISORDERS IN THE FILMMAKING INDUSTRY.

As has been previously mentioned, today's society is ruled by beauty cannons, them being extremely thinness. If we add fatphobia to the equation the result is even catastrophic, the pursue of the "perfect body" —it being an unrealistic image of extreme thinness— can often lead to the development of eating disorders (EDs), which, according to the definition provided by the American Psychological Association (2018), refer to "any disorder characterized primarily by a pathological disturbance of attitudes and behaviors related to food, including anorexia nervosa, bulimia nervosa, and binge eating disorder."

In compliance with a study conducted by Galmiche et al. in 2019 about the prevalence of EDs from the year 2000 to the year 2018, eating disorders' (which mostly affect females) prevalence has more than doubled from a 3.5% in the 2000-2006 period to a 7.8% in the 2013-2018 period. In section number three, it was mentioned how beauty standards have shaped the filmmaking industry and how the industry's representation of bodies and its attitude to those who do not fit into what is conceived as normative, have fueled the already existing conceptions about body image and perception due to the fact that cinema:

“Has the capacity to elicit processes of screen identification within the spectator that contribute to the body dissatisfaction and appearance anxiety found by clinical research to be a highly potent risk factor for developing eating disorders.”

(Fox Kales, 11)

As a consequence of the rise of eating disorders fueled both by mass media and the filmmaking industry, more and more films and television series are incorporating them into their plots.

In spite of the industry giving visibility to such an issue, it is easy to fall into the misrepresentation of EDs due to the complexity of the illness. It is not only about the physical symptoms—which are easier to portray—it is also about the psychological effects in the sufferers and their closest circle, which are harder to portray. As it is put in an article written by Basset and Ewart in the *Journal of Eating Disorders* (2023), “misrepresentation could fuel existing stigmas that inhibit individuals with eating disorders from seeking and receiving treatment. It could also perpetuate stereotypes that fuel misperceptions of the disease by medical providers, families, and policymakers” (1). Said lack of accurateness in the representation of EDs can be fueled by the stigma surrounding the illness, for example: people tend to assume that they only affect females from the ages fifteen to nineteen, and although it is true that the illness is most common among said group, they also affect older people, including males who represent almost the 10% of the cases (O’Hara & Clegg Smith, 2007). Due to the existing misconceptions surrounding EDs, it is easy for movie makers to fall into their misrepresentation, as is the case with the movie about to analyze: Netflix’s *To the Bone*.

#### 4.1. The misrepresentation of eating disorders in *To the Bone*.

*To the Bone* is an original Netflix film which follows the life of Ellen (Lilly Collins), a twenty-year old who has been suffering from anorexia for years and who has

been in and out of treatment facilities, not recovering but worsening instead. In order to put an end to Ellen's situation, her family decides to send her to a group home for young sufferers of eating disorders led by a non-conventional doctor. Although the film opens up a necessary discussion about EDs and could be said to raise some awareness, it has also been subject to critics due to its depiction of the EDs per se. Again, in Basset & Ewart's article (2023), it is stated that "US media depictions of eating disorders overrepresented characters who were heterosexual (75.56%), White (84.85%). Women (89.39%), and under age 30 (84.85%). This does not accurately reflect the populations experiencing eating disorders in the US" (1). *To the Bone's* representation of EDs fits accurately into all of the percentages included above, there are only one male character and one black character in the film suffering from the illness, the rest are all heterosexual females. In this section, the misrepresentation of eating disorders in Netflix's *To the Bone* is going to be analyzed.

As has been previously mentioned, the film falls into certain percentages regarding the stereotyping of eating disorders in films dealing with the topic and, in fact, those are not the only stereotypes present in the audiovisual text. Despite the film taking action in a group home in which several people are suffering from different eating disorders, the main focus of the film is on anorexia, leaving out the rest of the disorders such as bulimia and binge eating. As a result, viewers may get the image that anorexia is the most common ED among young people. In reality, according to the statistics included in Martin's thesis about the misrepresentation of eating disorders in film and television, "representations of anorexia nervosa and bulimia nervosa made up 74.3% (n=55) of the sample. Binge eating disorder, on the other hand had only three cases (4.1%). [...] When the existing epidemiological research is consolidated, binge eating disorder was found to be the most prevalent of the three disorders, while anorexia nervosa was typically the

rarest” (30). In spite of that fact, instead of giving visibility to all of the present EDs in the film’s plot, emphasis is put in the least common of them: anorexia.

Focusing on its main character, Ellen, who is suffering from anorexia, the film also depicts some misconceptions surrounding this specific disorder. Anorexia is defined by Moore & Bokor’s as “the restriction of nutrient intake relative to requirements, which leads to significantly low body weight. Patients with this eating disorder will have a fear of gaining weight along and a distorted body image with the inability to comprehend the seriousness of their condition” (2023). Ellen not only embodies all of the percentages included above —she is a white female age twenty suffering from anorexia— she also embodies some of the stereotypes surrounding the misconceptions about the illness. The cause of her ED in the film is said to be her dis-functional family, no other factor is directly mentioned regarding Ellen’s anorexia. Although it is true that having a dis-functional family can contribute to the development of an ED, it is not the most common factor. The studies of anorexia’s aetiology (causes) have led to the creation of six main theories which are labelled by Hsu as:

1. Social-Cultural Theory: It is more common among upper class females in first world countries.
2. Family Pathology Theory: Families which reflected into their sons and daughters their own preoccupation with appearances.
3. Individual Psychodynamic Theory: Detachment from parental authority, and its consequent need for control, and struggle for identity.
4. The Developmental Psychobiological Theory: Fear of growing up and facing adult responsibility.
5. Primary Hypothalamic Dysfunction Theory: Lack of capacity of maintaining a healthy weight due to a dysfunction affecting feeding patterns and satiety.

6. Affective Disorder: Importance of body image found in teenagers, although this theory cannot be completely attributed as a cause of anorexia (1983).

Among the six theories explained by Hsu about the aetiology of anorexia, none of them regard family dis-functionality as a cause of the ED, so in conclusion, *To the Bone* does not make an accurate representation of the factors that help into the development of anorexia.

In Netflix's film, the group home in which patients are being treated depicts a highly misrepresentation of what treatment really is. All of the characters are somehow engaged in a competition to see who recovers first. EDs are highly competitive, so this leads to a constant battle among the interns which makes them support each other, not for the purpose of recovering together, but to gain points (as the film calls it) in order to receive prizes such as going out to the cinema. Support groups are often used as a treatment of eating disorders, they involve companionship and listening to one another without any type of reward or competition involved, in fact, according to Waller et al. "professionally-led support groups can be a significant adjunct in supporting people with eating disorders in their recovery journey. Participants reported the support group was effective in reducing social isolation and in fostering hope and motivation in their recovery journey" (226). In the film we can see how the characters, instead of supporting each other, are often judging the actions of their colleagues (even in a scene in which we see a group therapy), thus creating a toxic environment. *To the Bone* not only portrays the stereotype of eating disorder sufferers as being competitive, it also gives a wrong view of what group support therapy really is. Throughout Ellen's recovery process in the film, in no moment do we see a patient – therapist session, the only insight of psychological treatment we get is a family therapy that is far from working. In fact, the therapist who is in charge of the group home is not there the majority of time, as a consequence individual

therapy—which essential in patients suffering from a disorder—is not even mentioned in the film. For a successful treatment, “therapists are urged to understand the patient’s personal experience of the disorder, acknowledging the distress of gaining weight and the difficulty of changing” (Túry et al., 1446).

The last relevant aspect to analyze regarding the misrepresentation of eating disorders in *To the Bone* (or rather lack of representation in this case) is recovery. The film shows how the main character, Ellen, goes through a traumatizing and even epiphanic experience that leads her to choose the recovery path, but they do not show her journey. The film’s main focus is not on how to get out of the ED world, but on the course of the disorder per se. One of the hardest aspects about an ED is recovery, and if an example would have been included in the film, spectators suffering with one could have felt the courage to follow Ellen’s path and seek for treatment. Instead of doing so, the film focuses on the symptomatology of the illness, a more realistic representation of EDs would have been achieved by the inclusion of recovery in *To the Bone*’s plot, as it is central to the illness. In a study published by Wasil et al. (2019) about thirteen recovered women, eleven out of the thirteen participants mentioned hearing from others’ seeking for treatment as an inspiration to also do it. They mention the importance of recovery-self discourses, which motivated the eleven participants due to the visualization of its benefits. To sum up, the inclusion of the ED recovery process would have given *To the Bone* a more realistic representation of the illness, and at the same time, it would have helped patients who do not have the courage to do so.

## 5. CONCLUSION

This final dissertation has explored the representation and role of fatphobia in Hollywood films and streaming platforms, taking into consideration Netflix’s television series *Insatiable*, and Universal Pictures’ *Pitch Perfect 1*. At the same time, it has analyzed

the misrepresentation of eating disorders in the filmmaking industry, using Netflix's *To the Bone* as an example.

As has been discussed, the way in which *Insatiable* and *Pitch Perfect 1* deal with fatphobia perpetuates its presence in society as well as promotes weight bias: in both audiovisual texts, fatphobia was a means of making humor out of people who did not fit modern western beauty standards. In addition, discrimination inside of academic institutions affected the two characters analyzed (Patty and Fat Amy), according to Nutter et al, "weight bias is prevalent in educational settings, among peers at school as well as pre-service and in-service teachers" (185). Another of the common factors was the self-inflected fatphobic comments of both characters as a consequence of the constant exposure to remarks about their weight, "through discursive constraint, society controls a person or group of people, such as overweight women, by establishing and perpetuating negative stereotypes that affect their behavior and how they think of themselves" (Sobal, 31). In spite of the plots of the audiovisual texts being so different, the influence of fatphobia in society and its consequent representation in the filmmaking industry is highly present both in *Insatiable* and *Pitch Perfect 1*.

As a consequence of fatphobia and weight bias, eating disorders rate has increased in the past few years. They have become such an issue that films and television series are incorporating them into their plots, and due to their complexity, falling into their misrepresentation, as is the case with Netflix's *To the Bone*. Aspects like therapy, the causes of eating disorders and recovery are not accurately depicted in the film, which at the same time prompts certain stereotypes which are present in society, leading to their stigmatization, whose presence "toward individuals with anorexia nervosa may act as a barrier to treatment seeking" (Stewart et al. 311-312). Although their research is conducted among patients of anorexia, it can thus be applied to every existing eating

disorder. This shows how, in spite of the filmmaking industry trying to bring to the light tabu topics like mental health and eating disorders, it often fails trying to give an accurate representation about them.

This opens the debate whether it can be possible or not to exclude fatphobia from the filmmaking industry and its productions, and on whether or not an accurate representation of eating disorders will soon be achieved. It is undeniable that fatphobia plays an important role in the industry (as can be seen on the analysis of *Insatiable* and *Pitch Perfect 1*, films in which fatphobia is used as a source of humor) due to it being ingrained in our present-day society, but more and more studies and literature against it are being published. At the same time, it opens up the debate on future representations about eating disorders, which are often a result of fatphobia. In spite of EDs prevalence increasing to 7.8% in the 2013-2018 period (Galmiche et al., 2019) and the publication of more and more studies about them, audiovisual texts still give a wrongful representation of the illness. The chosen female characters of both *Insatiable* and *Pitch Perfect 1* are shaped by weight bias, as supported by the evidence previously provided. At the same time, the representation of eating disorders in the filmmaking industry needs working to be done, as it has been stated, it often fails to meet statistics and follows certain stereotypes which were present in *To the Bone* and judged according to existing studies about the issue. In closing, *Insatiable* and *Pitch Perfect 1* reflect the social stigma present towards fat people and how films use fatphobia as a means of creating humor. At the same time, although *To the Bone* gives visibility to eating disorders, its representation of them is not entirely accurate.



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