



In *Insatiable*, Patty (Debbie Ryan) seeks revenge on the people who caused her misery. IMDB

Three things Netflix's controversial 'fat-shaming' series *Insatiable* gets right

Published: September 10, 2018 6.04am AEST

Andrea Waling

Research fellow, La Trobe University

Netflix's controversial *Insatiable* (2018) is the story of a teen who loses weight and competes in beauty pageants. Some people have said the show promotes fat-shaming and disordered eating. Thousands of viewers have called for it to be pulled from Netflix. However, despite the show's problems, it does shed light on other issues facing young women.

Insatiable tells the story of Patty (Debbie Ryan), an overweight teen who has spent her life being relentlessly bullied. After an altercation that causes Patty to have her jaw wired shut for three months, Patty loses the weight, becomes beautiful and vows to seek revenge on those who have hurt her, with the help of Bob Armstrong (Dallas Roberts), her lawyer and beauty pageant coach.

As a plus-size, queer cis-woman living with binge-eating disorder and body dysmorphic disorder (BDD), I felt the show provides a clever commentary on issues of disordered eating and body image, gender and sexuality, and representing female pleasure.

Netflix's *Insatiable* trailer.

Disordered eating

Insatiable explores aspects of compulsive overeating, binge-eating, bulimia nervosa and BDD. These disorders can go undiagnosed and/or untreated due to sufferers' feelings of shame and stigma in seeking treatment, and the misconception that individuals must be dangerously thin to have an eating disorder.

Read more: When people don't take your eating disorder seriously, it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy

What *Insatiable* captures is the everydayness of binge-eating and compulsive overeating, which hides the severity of these disorders. Patty is in many ways out of control, but seems otherwise. She is often seen eating or about to eat, with other characters both encouraging and reprimanding her. Patty's binge-eating scene where she eats an entire slab of sheet cake is haunting and, for sufferers like myself, uncomfortably familiar.

Patty's offhand attitude towards using laxatives and fasting to counteract her binge-eating weight gain may seem glamourised. However, this attitude is common and can become an everyday, routine part of someone with bulimia as they go through binge cycles.

Patty eating outside her local convenience store before she is physically assaulted. Season 1, Episode 1. IMDB

Patty's anxiety about wearing a bathing suit, and the sheer panic, shame and distress she feels in the change room when confronted with the image of herself, is also common among people with BDD. It is something I have repeatedly experienced.

These scenes are confronting and hit too close to home. They are also realistic for some with lived experiences of binge-eating or compulsive overeating and BDD. They illustrate a need to represent high-functioning experiences of eating disorders rather than just extreme examples of obsession, weight loss, thinness and purging.

Questioning gender and sexuality

Insatiable's handling of sexuality and gender expression is certainly not as developed as in acclaimed shows like *Sense8*. However, it engages with the ever-changing nature of how we might understand and practise our gender, sexuality and relationships. A number of the characters are in a state of questioning, and this is not necessarily resolved.

Nonnie (Kimmy Shields), Patty's childhood best friend, does not necessarily identify as gay and is frustrated by other characters who are quick to label her based on her androgynous gender expression and her attraction to Patty and Dee.

Nonnie with Donald (Daniel Kang) at the local coffee house, where she confesses that she's not sure if she's gay, but does have feelings for Patty. Season 1, Episode 6. IMDB

Bob Armstrong encounters this same frustration when attempting to negotiate polyamory with his wife (Alyssa Milano) and boyfriend (Christopher Gorham). He is repeatedly told he is gay and his previous heterosexual existence is a lie, despite his insistence that he might be bisexual. Bob's attempt to open a marriage is also refreshingly presented as difficult and clumsy, rather than being perfect from the onset.

Both incidents reflect the social tendency to assume a person's sexuality, and how both heterosexual and queer people may do this. Representation of that questioning and relationship renegotiation is important. It reminds us that our gender expression, sexuality and relationship style can change, even in adulthood.

Female pleasure

The series' title *Insatiable* is not only a reference to Patty's binge-eating and need for revenge, but also to her emerging sexuality. Patty's sexual engagements with her high-school crush and first boyfriend, Brick (Michael Provost), and later second boyfriend, resident bad-boy Christian (James Lastovic), have been criticised for promoting the idea that people with fat bodies do not have sexual drives, or can't have a fulfilling sexual life. This criticism is based on Patty's statement that she "finally deserves this" after having lost weight.

Patty with Christian before he performs oral sex on her. Season 1, Episode 6. IMDB

However, Patty is representative of those who are perceived to “lack” sexual desirability. In contemporary culture, women with smaller bodies are deemed more worthy of experiencing pleasure.

This message is amplified by Dee (Ashley D. Kelley), a queer, black, plus-size woman who, unlike Patty, is comfortable in her body and her sexuality, and seeks pleasure despite those social expectations. Patty’s “realisation” of her sexual hunger, while attributed to her changed body, is reflective of her own problematic social beliefs around beauty and sexuality.

Insatiable is certainly not perfect. It’s depiction of blatant fat-shaming is quite triggering for some, myself included. We do need more fat-positive characters on TV that don’t rely on revenge weight-loss narratives, bullying, fat-shaming and comedy.

Nevertheless, I urge people and critics to watch the show in its entirety, and pay attention to how the series cleverly comments on what appear to be brazen examples of fat-phobia. While for some the show may feel damaging, for others like myself Insatiable reflects our lived experiences, and this should not be discounted.

Anyone seeking support or information about issues discussed above can contact The Eating Disorders Helpline on 1300 550 236 or (03) 9417 6598; The Butterfly Foundation national helpline on 1800 33 4673 or online chat; SANE helpline on 1800 187 263; QLife on 1800 184 527 or online chat; Lifeline on 13 11 14 or crisis support chat; or Suicide Helpline on 1300 651 251.