

# Bystanders' victim blaming and minimizing consequences of weight-based cyberhate attacks

The roles of anti-fat attitudes, body-positive online content, and gender

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Form of **cyberaggression**, hateful and **bias-based expressions**

Attacking **group characteristics** or **group membership**

(e.g., Cohen-Almagor, 2011; Hawdon et al., 2017)

Motivated by an **intergroup bias**

(Mondal et al., 2017)

Physical appearance and **weight**

(e.g., Jeon et al., 2018; Puhl et al., 2013)



# CYBERHATE

**(Cyber)victimisation** due to weight  
(e.g., Lumeng et al., 2010; Puhl et al., 2011, 2015)

**Thin-ideal** (e.g., Levine & Murnen, 2009; Mingoia et al., 2017)

**'Ideology of blame'** (Crandall, 1994)



# WEIGHT-BASED CYBERHATE

# BYSTANDERS

Cyberhate exposure: **21-59%** youth (11-17 yo),  
7 EU countries (Machackova et al., 2020)

Behavioural reaction: defending the victim,  
staying passive, joining the aggressor  
(e.g., DeSmet et al., 2019)

**Reaction is dependent upon assessment**  
of the incident (Anderson & Eushman, 2022)



# MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

Selective **deactivation** of the self-regulatory system and self-sanctions for **immoral behaviour**

(Bandura 1983; 2002)

Eight mechanisms



# MORAL DISENGAGEMENT

## Victim blaming

Rationalising the aggression as being **provoked by the victim** or as justified due to the **victim's behavior** or **characteristics**



# MORAL DISENGAGEMENT



## Minimising consequences

Reframing of the **harmful effects** that aggression can have on its victims by **ignoring** them or **minimising** them

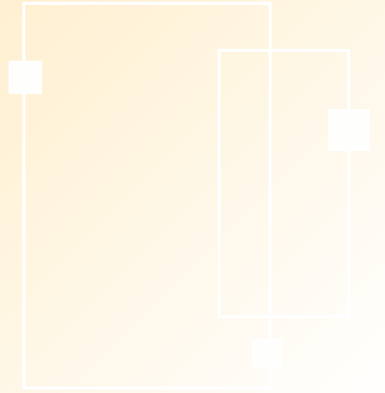
# PRESENT STUDY

## Bystanders of aggressive comments on Instagram

The role of **biased attitudes** toward people who are plus-size?

Exposure to **body-positive online content**?

**Gender** differences?





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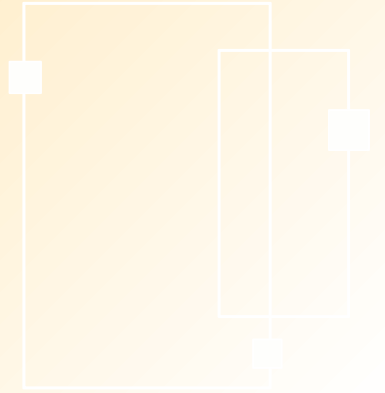
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The role of **biased attitudes** toward people who are plus-size?

Exposure to **body-positive online content**?

**Gender** differences?

**Research question:** Which factors affect bystanders' cognitive assessments in the form of moral disengagement from cyberhate incidents related to weight?



# STUDY DESIGN

Between-subject experimental design, 2 conditions



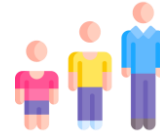
online survey  
2020



Czech  
Republic



adolescents  
 $N = 658$



13-18 yo  
 $M_{\text{age}} = 15.50$   
 $SD = 1.72$



51.5% girls

# STIMULI



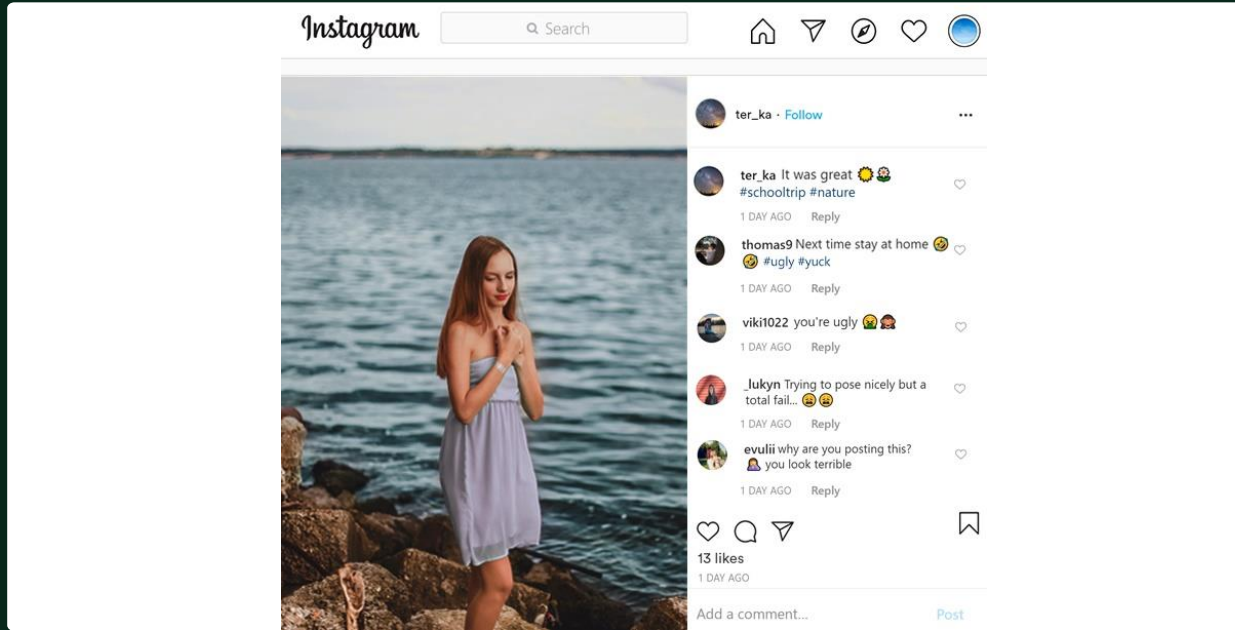
Instagram post from  
Therese:

**A) Girl who is plus-size**

B) Girl who is thinner

Identical negative  
comments about the girl

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## Dependent variables



### **Victim blaming**

(Weber et al. 2013)

4 items, 7-point scale

$\Omega = .868$

E.g., *These caused it by posting a photo that was calling for it*



### **Minimising consequences**

(Garland et al., 2017)

5 items, 7-point scale

$\Omega = .776$

E.g., *Negative comments on social media do not have any long-lasting effects*

# MEASURES

## Dependent variables



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### Anti-fat attitudes

(Lewis et al., 1997)

5 items, 7-point scale

$\Omega = .865$

E.g., *Most overweight people are lazy*

## Moderators



### Gender

0 = boys, 1 = girls



### Exposure to body-positive online content

(based on Cohen et al., 2019)

6 items, 7-point scale

$\Omega = .932$

E.g., *Online contents that ... encourage people to value the unique characteristics of their bodies*

# MEASURES

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## Control variables



Time spent on Instagram



Age



Body mass index

# MEASURES

Experimental condition:  
Girl who is plus-size /  
who is thinner



Victim blaming

Minimising consequences



**MODEL**



Experimental condition:  
Girl who is plus-size /  
who is thinner



Anti-fat  
attitudes



Victim blaming

Minimising consequences



**MODEL**

Experimental condition:  
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Anti-fat  
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Gender



Victim blaming

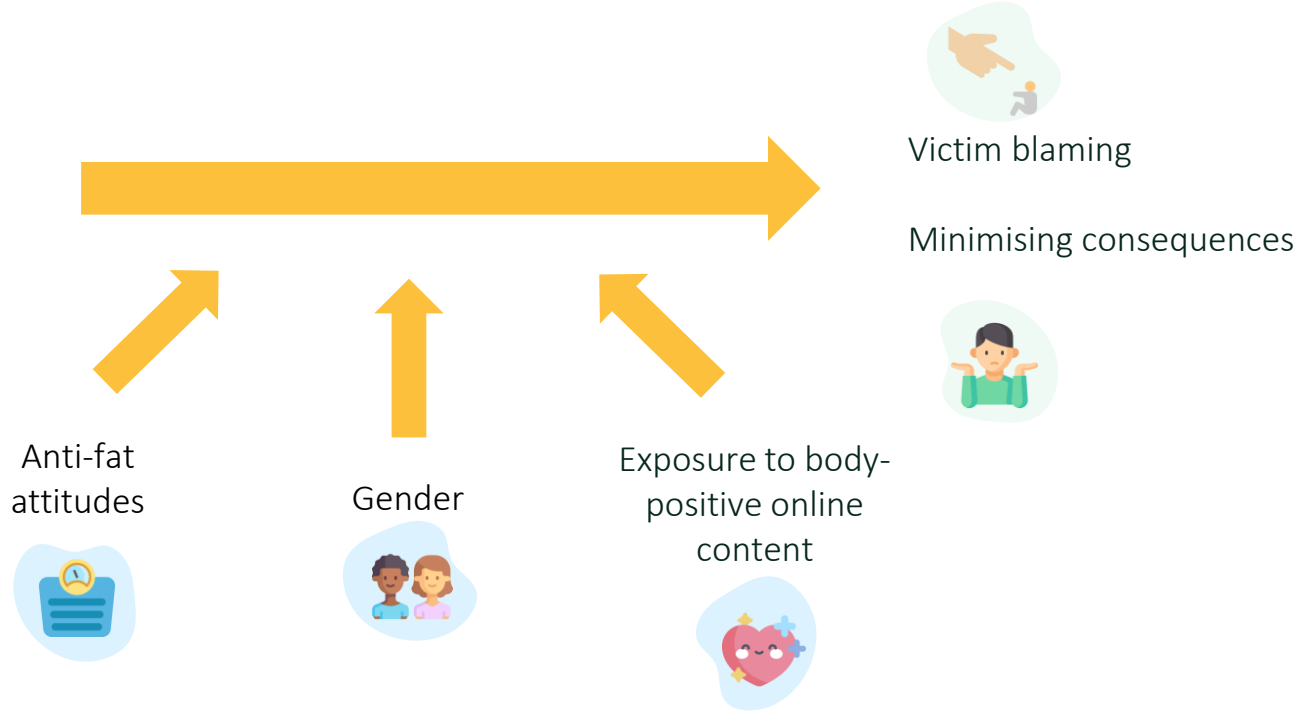


Minimising consequences



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**MODEL**

# RESULTS

	Victim blaming		Minimizing consequences	
	$\beta$	$p$	$\beta$	$p$
Experimental condition <sup>a</sup>	.23	< .001	-.03	.447
Age	-.07	.064	-.13	.003
Instagram time	-.15	< .001	-.07	.101
BMI	-.02	.581	.01	.862

<sup>a</sup> 1 = girl who is thinner, 2 = girl who is plus-size

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**Victim blaming**

Minimising consequences



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# RESULTS

Experimental condition:  
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**Victim blaming**

Minimising consequences

**Anti-fat attitudes**

**Gender**

Exposure to body-positive online content

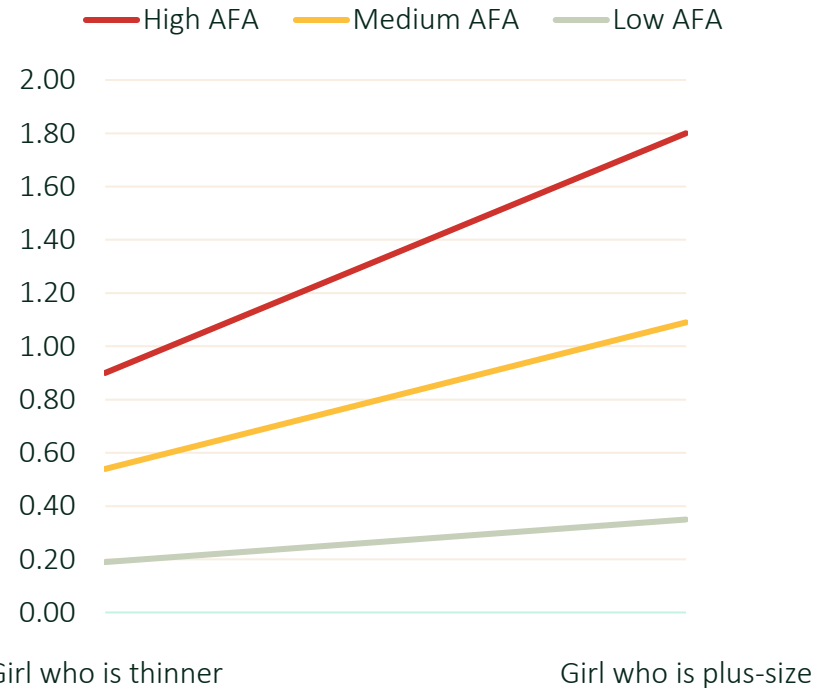


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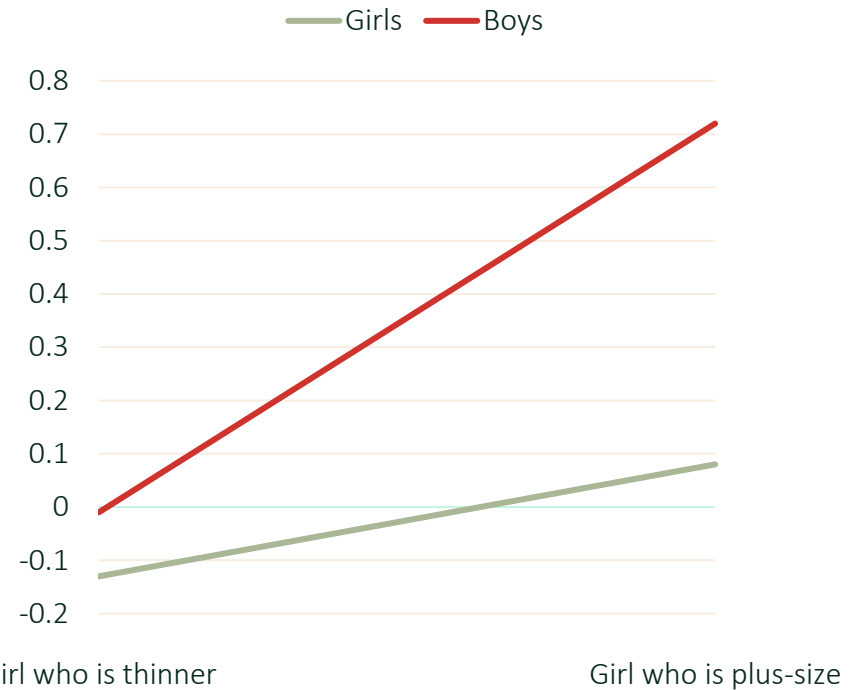
## Victim blaming



Moderator: <b>anti-fat attitudes</b>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Low AFA	0.17	0.10	.086
<b>Medium AFA</b>	<b>0.54</b>	<b>0.09</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>
<b>High AFA</b>	<b>0.90</b>	<b>0.16</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>

# RESULTS

## Victim blaming



Moderator: <b>gender</b>	<i>b</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>p</i>
Girls	0.24	0.12	.051
<b>Boys</b>	<b>0.73</b>	<b>0.12</b>	<b>&lt; .001</b>

# CONCLUSIONS

## Difference between moral disengagement mechanisms

Educational programs and discussions about consequences

Bias enters the cognitive **evaluation of the victim** – at fault for the appearance/cyberhate



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## Difference between moral disengagement mechanisms

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Bias enters the cognitive **evaluation of the victim** – at fault for the appearance/cyberhate

## Gender differences – boys blamed the plus-size victim more

Gendered victim blaming discourse (Lumsden & Morgan, 2017; Stubbs-Richardson et al., 2018)

Different body ideals (Brumberg, 1997; Grogan, 2016; Strandbu & Kvalem, 2014)

Empathy (Eisenberg & Fabes, 1998; Porath, 2003) or female in-group solidarity (Pulido et al., 2014)



# CONCLUSIONS

## The absent effect of body-positive online content

Contradictory messages of body-positive content?

Less than half BP Instagram posts portray people who are-plus-size; some promoting weight loss (Lazuka et al., 2020)

Body-related attitudes also toward others?



# RESEARCH RECOMMENDATIONS



BP content promoting positive body-related attitudes to oneself and to others?

Difference in moral disengagement mechanisms – other domains?

Assessment → behaviour?

Other types of victims

Broadening cyberhate research

# THANK YOU

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**MUNI** Interdisciplinary Research Team  
on Internet and Society

**Modeling the future: Understanding the impact of  
technology on adolescent's well-being (FUTURE)**

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**Victim blaming**

(1 = Strongly disagree;  
7 = Strongly agree)

**Minimizing consequences**

(1 = Strongly disagree;  
7 = Strongly agree)

**Anti-fat attitudes**

(1 = Strongly disagree;  
7 = Strongly agree)

**Exposure to body-positive online content**

(1 = Never; 6 = Several times a day)

*Therese had the negative comments coming*

Negative comments on social media . . .

*The idea that genetics causes people to be fat is just an excuse<sup>b</sup>*

*Encourage people to value the unique characteristics of their bodies (e.g., that they are healthy and functional)*

*Therese caused it by posting a photo that was calling for it*

. . . just a part of growing up<sup>a</sup>

*Most overweight people are lazy*

*Encourage people to accept their bodies as they are, even though they do not necessarily conform to the ideal of beauty*

*It is Therese's fault that people wrote her negative comments*

. . . do not have any long-lasting effects

*If overweight people really wanted to lose weight, they could*

*Show that people with different appearance, body shape, or weight are all beautiful*

*If Therese had not posted the photo, she could have avoided the incident*

. . . do not cause any real harm

*Overweight people have no willpower*

*Encourage people to respect their bodies and care about them*

. . . are not as serious as, for example, beating somebody up

*When overweight people say they "were born this way" it is just an excuse*

*Encourage people to feel good about themselves and their bodies*

. . . never killed anybody

*If overweight people knew how bad they looked, they would lose weight*

*Show that pictures of women and men with ideal appearance and figure do not correspond to reality*

. . . there is nothing wrong with posting them

<sup>a</sup> The item was not included in the scale because of the low factor loading (.447).

<sup>b</sup> The item was not included because of comprehension problems.