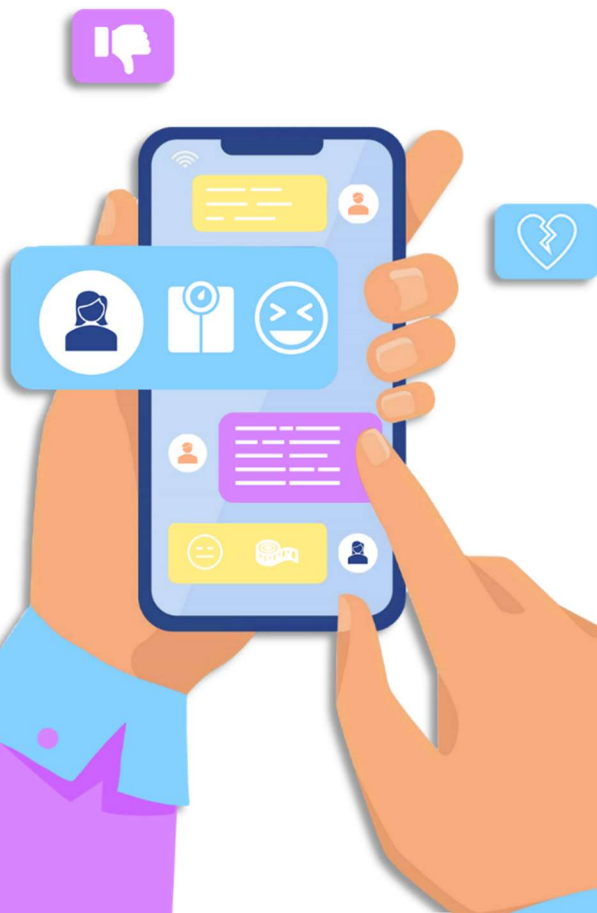# CYBERHATE TARGETING THE BODY

Young Czech people's perceptions of cyberhate that targets weight and physical disability

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CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

This report presents findings from a survey conducted within the project *Cyberhate that targets people who are plus-size in the news: The role of bystanders in mitigating social pathologies (CYBERPLUS)*. The data was collected **from 1,030 Czech people aged 16-25** in **July 2024**.

Cyberhate is a broad concept that includes different manifestations of online hate speech. It is prejudiced and stereotypical online content and bias-motivated cyberaggression that **targets people due to their perceived group membership or group characteristics** (Council of Europe, 2022; Machackova et al., 2020). This includes ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, and gender. Cyberhate can also attack people because of their **disabilities** or **physical appearance**. It can take the form of private messages but also posts on social media or comments in online discussions.

The focus of this report is on **cyberhate in the news and in discussions on social media** which targets three groups:

- people who are **overweight** or plus-size;
- people who are **underweight** or very thin; and
- people with **physical disabilities** or handicaps that significantly limit their mobility.

Throughout the report, two types of encounters with cyberhate will be differentiated:

- **Cyberhate exposure**, which refers to situations in which people encounter cyberhate as bystanders or witnesses. They can read or listen to cyberhate which targets someone else, not them or their group.
- **Cyberhate victimisation**, which refers to situations in which people or their group are directly targeted, and they feel victimised.

The report has the following structure:

- The first part focuses on young people's perceptions of the three targeted groups in terms of their **entitativity** and **group qualification**. Perceived entitativity is the degree to which the members of the group are seen as having the same characteristics, behaviours, and goals, and being part of the same group 'entity'. Group qualification is the degree to which people with similar weight or people with a physical disability form a 'group'.
- The second part focuses on young people's **outgroup attitudes** toward members of these groups: how they generally evaluate people who are overweight, underweight, or have a physical disability.

- The third part focuses on **hate speech perception**. Specifically, this deals with whether young people themselves classify online attacks on someone's weight or physical disability as 'hate speech'.
- The fourth part focuses on personal experience with **cyberhate victimisation**, as in whether young people have been targeted online because of their weight or physical disability.

KEY FINDINGS

Group perceptions:

- Young people's perceptions of group entitativity and group qualification was, on average, the highest for people with physical disabilities. The perceptions of people who are overweight or underweight were similar.
- There were only small differences in positive outgroup attitudes toward the three groups. Positive attitudes were high for all groups. People with physical disabilities were rated highest.

Hate speech perceptions:

- Young people were the most sensitive to cyberhate targeting people with physical disabilities, recognising it as 'hate speech' to a higher extent than attacks on people who are overweight or underweight.
- Women showed greater sensitivity to classifying the attacks on all three groups as 'hate speech'.

Victimisation experiences:

- Young people more frequently reported personal cyberhate victimisation due to weight (i.e., overweight or underweight) and less frequently due to having physical disabilities.
- Regular or daily cyberhate victimisation during the preceding six months was reported by 5.7% (physical disability), 6.7% (overweight), and 9.0% (underweight) of the participants.

METHODOLOGY

This report is based on survey data collected within the project *Cyberhate that targets people who are plus-size in the news: The role of bystanders in mitigating social pathologies (CYBERPLUS)*. The data was collected with an online questionnaire in **July 2024**. Specifically, the computer-assisted web interviewing method (CAWI) enabled participants to use both computer and mobile devices to fill out the survey. The data collection was done by the CINT™ agency. The targeted sample (evenly distributed across gender and age groups) was randomly generated within multiple online panels used by the agency.

The agency complies with the ethical standards of ESOMAR, MRS, ARF, MRIA, AMA, AMSRO, Insights Association, ISO 20252, and ISO 26362. Our data collection was reviewed and approved by the Ethical Committee of Masaryk University (n. EKV-2023-121). Informed consent was obtained from each participant. Each question had the answer option *I don't know* or *I prefer not to say*. The participants could leave the survey at any time.

The final sample consisted of **1,030 participants**, out of which 1,000 filled out the whole survey. Participants were young people **aged 16-25** (M_{age} = 20.4, *SD* = 2.8) from the **Czech Republic**; 51.5 % of them were women, 48.2 % male, 0.3% nonbinary, and 0.4% did not disclose their gender. Participants who did not disclose their gender were excluded from the analyses (*n* = 4). Due to the low number of non-binary participants (*n* = 3), these respondents are not included in the results where gender groups are compared but they are included in the overall results (i.e., those where gender differences are not compared).

The questionnaire included both closed and open-ended questions. For their wording and full information about the data collection and survey development, see the technical report: https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13305588.

PERCEIVED GROUP ENTITATIVITY AND GROUP QUALIFICATION

Perceived group entitativity refers to **the degree to which people see a collection of individuals as a single, unified group**—**'an entity'**—rather than a set of separate individuals (Campbell, 1958; Lickel et al., 2000). In other words, high entitativity perception means that all group members are seen as having similar goals, behaviours, and characteristics.

This concept can help us understand how we perceive and interact with groups in society. When people think about a group of people as more entitative, they might also be inclined to see all individuals within the group stereotypically or evaluate them with prejudice (Agadullina & Lovakov, 2018). In contrast, loosely connected groups, perceived as lower in entitativity, can be seen with fewer expectations of shared behaviour and characteristics.

We asked our participants how strongly they perceived three different groups—people who are overweight, people who are underweight, and people with physical disabilities—as entitative. To measure this, we used a scale with six specific items (see the note under Figure 1 for the exact wording of each item). Participants rated each of the three groups separately with this scale. We then calculated the mean value of these six items for each group.
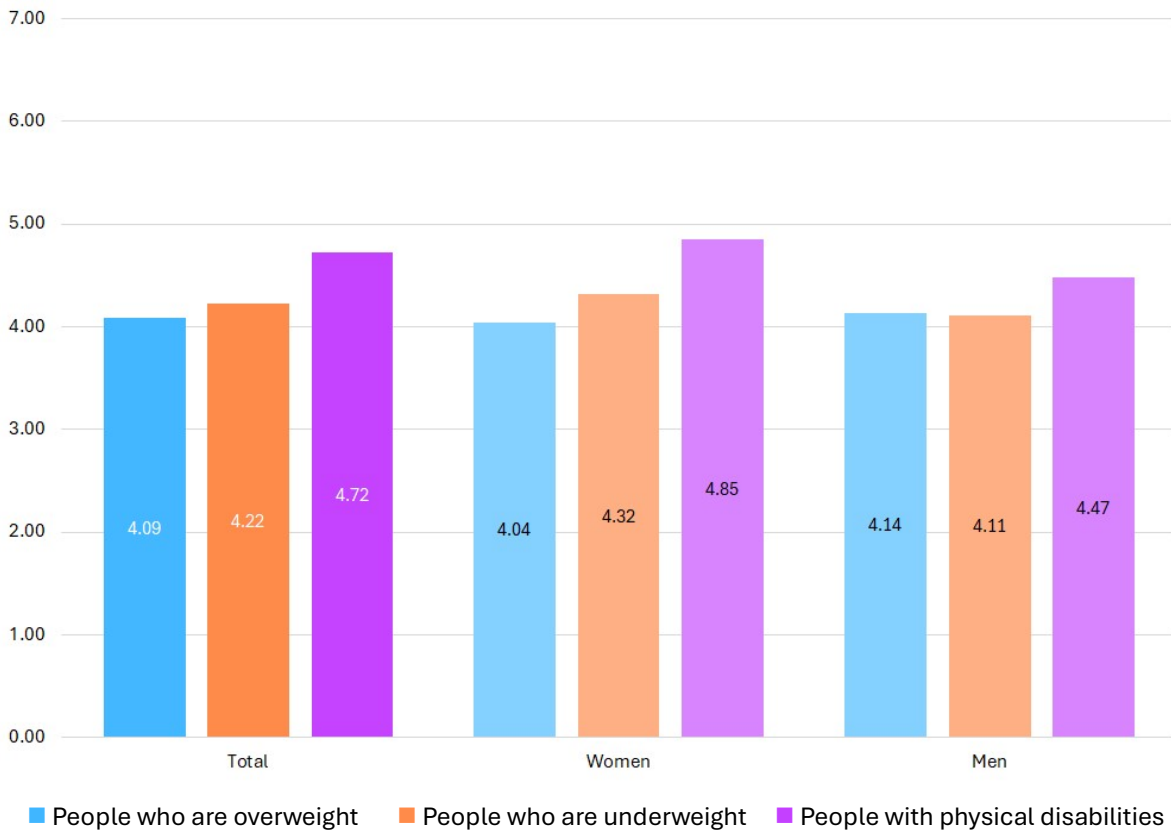
The results (Figure 1) show that the average entitativity perception of people with physical disabilities was the highest among our participants. There were not many differences in the entitativity perception of people who are overweight and people who are underweight.

But when we look at gender differences and compare entitativity perceptions between women and men, some slight differences show. Specifically, **women tended to perceive people who are underweight** ($M_{underweight}$ = 4.32)[1] **and people with physical disabilities** ($M_{disabilities}$ = 4.85)[2] **as higher in entitativity** than men did ($M_{underweight}$ = 4.11, $M_{disabilities}$ = 4.47). There were no significant gender differences in the entitativity perceptions of people who are overweight.

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[1] Results of independent samples t-test: $t(967)$ = 2.76, $p < .01$, Cohen's d = 0.18.
[2] Results of independent samples t-test: $t(934)$ = 3.38, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = 0.22.

Figure 1. Perceived entitativity of people who are overweight, underweight, or have physical disabilities (*mean*).

We also asked our participants about **perceived group qualification**: the degree to which, according to them, people with similar weight or people with a physical disability form a 'group'. On a scale from 1 to 7, they rated how much they agree that people who are overweight, underweight, or have physical disabilities are a group (Lickel et al., 2000).

As shown in Figure 2, there were no differences in our participants' ratings of people who are underweight or overweight ($M_{underweight}$ = 4.04, $M_{overweight}$ = 4.04). **People with physical disabilities were rated highest** ($M_{disabilities}$ = 4.89). There were also only small or no gender differences in these ratings.

Figure 2. Perceived group qualification of people who are overweight, underweight, or have physical disabilities (*mean*).
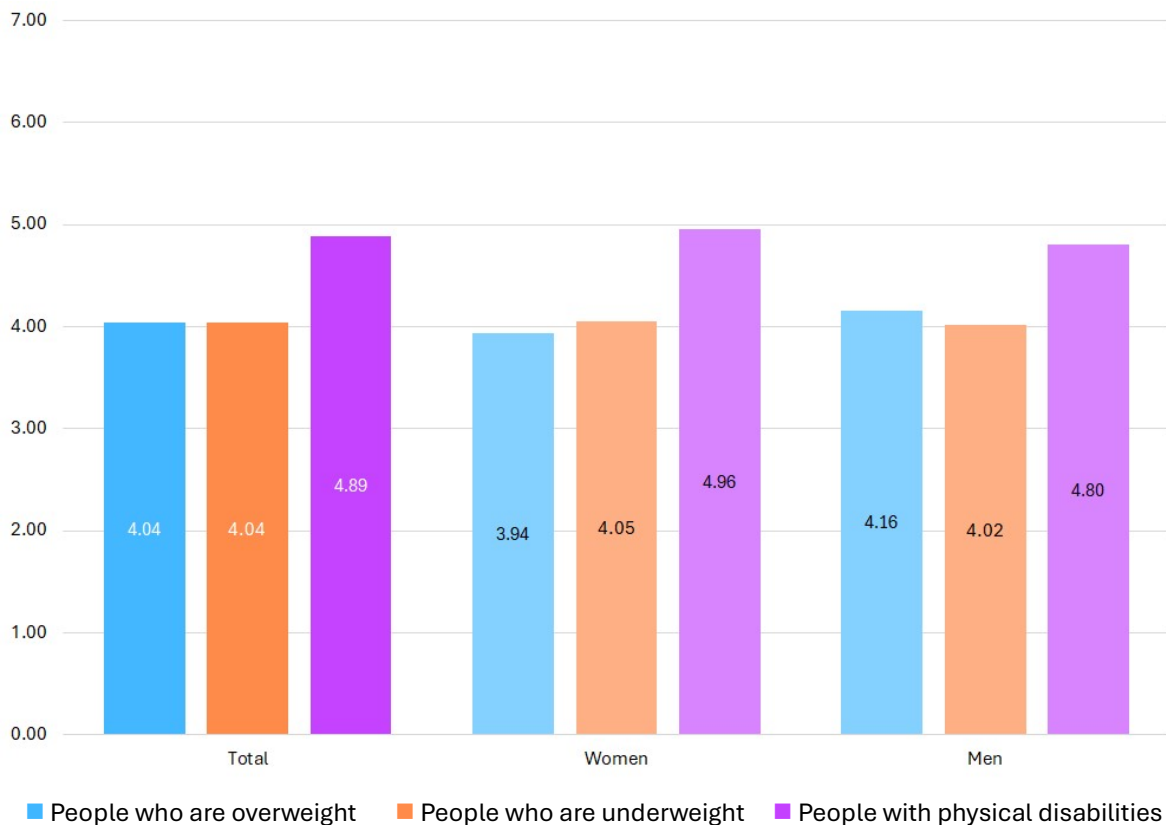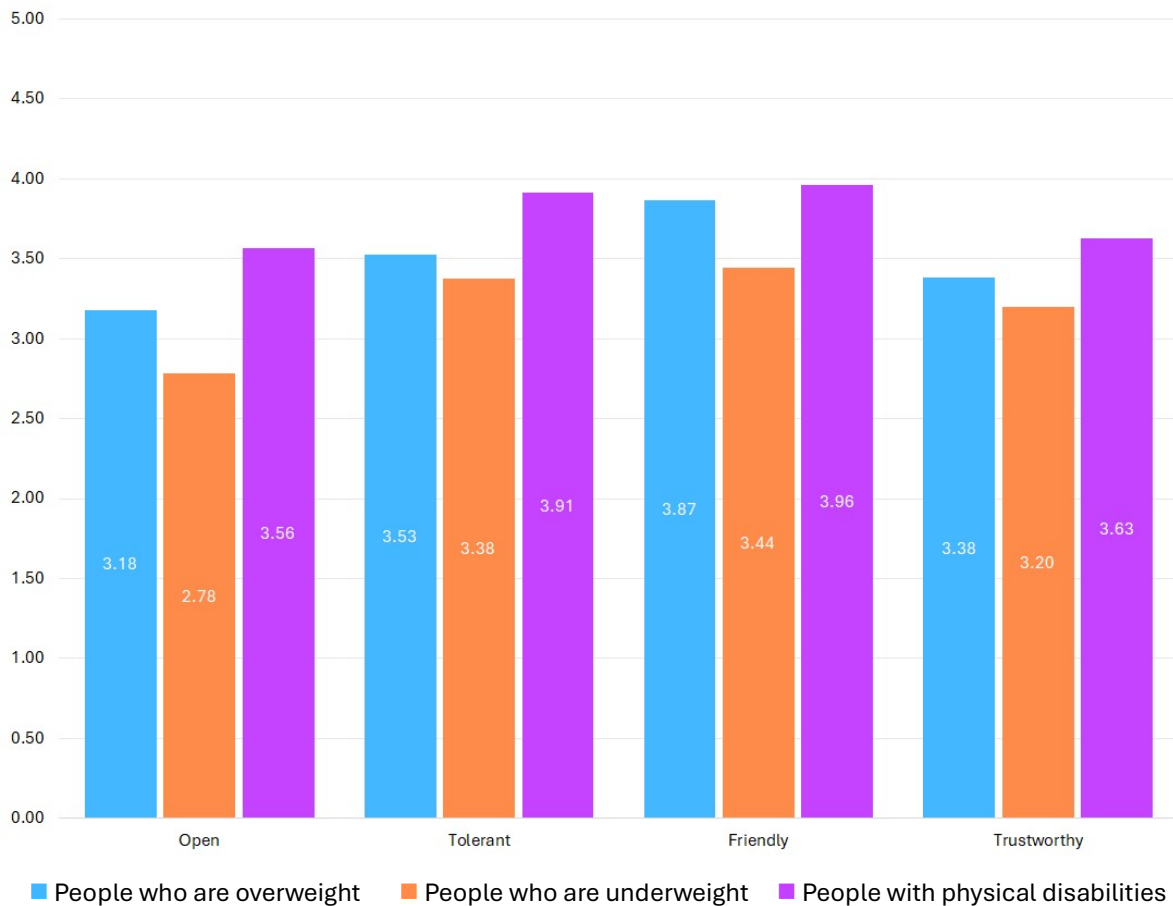
Notes: The results for the total sample include non-binary people (*N* = 1,026). Results with gender differences include only women and men (*n* = 1,023). The perceived group qualification measurement is a mean computed from the following items: *To what extent do you agree or disagree that overweight people/underweight people/people with physical disabilities are a group?* Response options ranged from (1) *strongly disagree* to (7) *strongly agree*.

OUTGROUP ATTITUDES

Outgroup attitudes refer to the beliefs, feelings, and evaluations that individuals hold toward groups to which they do not belong (i.e., outgroups). These attitudes can range from positive to negative and they are influenced by factors like cultural background, personal experiences, and societal norms. Outgroup attitudes shape how people perceive and interact with members of different groups. They can also influence the evaluations of negative behaviours toward these groups, such as cyberhate. In our questionnaire, we asked participants to what extent they think people from the three groups are *open*, *tolerant*, *friendly*, and *trustworthy* (Van Houten et al., 2024).

The results (Figure 3) show that there were not many differences in outgroup attitudes toward the three groups. Generally, **attitudes toward people with physical disabilities were the most positive** and **attitudes toward people who are underweight were the least positive**, but still high.

Figure 3. Outgroup attitudes toward people who are overweight, underweight, or have physical disabilities (*mean*).

Notes: Results for the total sample include non-binary people (*N* = 1,026). Means for four outgroup attitudes are computed from the following items: *When you think about overweight people/underweight people/people with physical disabilities, to what extent is it true that they have the following characteristics? In general, they are: open, tolerant, friendly, trustworthy.* Response options ranged from (1) *definitely not* to (5) *definitely yes*. The measurement is based on the outgroup attitudes measurement used in Van Houten et al. (2024).

There were a few significant **gender differences**. Men ($M_{underweight}$ = 2.97) evaluated people who are underweight as more open than women ($M_{underweight}$ = 2.67).[3] On the other hand, women ($M_{disabilities}$ = 4.03) evaluated people with physical disabilities as more friendly than men ($M_{disabilities}$ = 3.81).[4] The rest of the gender differences were small or negligible.

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[3] Results of independent samples *t*-test: $t(934)$ = -4.04, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = -0.26.
[4] Results of independent samples *t*-test: $t(831)$ = 3.49, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = 0.23.

ONLINE HATE SPEECH PERCEPTION

Cyberhate refers to a broad range of bias-based online content and behaviours that target people because of their group membership or characteristics. It can have less severe and more severe forms. Some of its manifestations can be classified as 'hate speech'. Existing legal hate speech definitions often connect it to attacks on ethnicity, religion, gender, or sexual orientation (George, 2014; Hietanen & Eddebo, 2023; Sellars, 2016). The way individuals perceive hate speech plays a crucial role in social interactions, because it affects how they interpret intentions, regulate their online behaviour, and form opinions about un/acceptable forms of communication.

Our aim was to see how our participants rated online attacks on people due to their weight or physical disability. We asked them to what extent they consider posts or articles on social media that say something negative (e.g., mocking, insulting) about people from the three groups as hate speech.

Figure 4. Perception of hate speech in attacks on people who are overweight, underweight, or have physical disabilities (*z-score*).
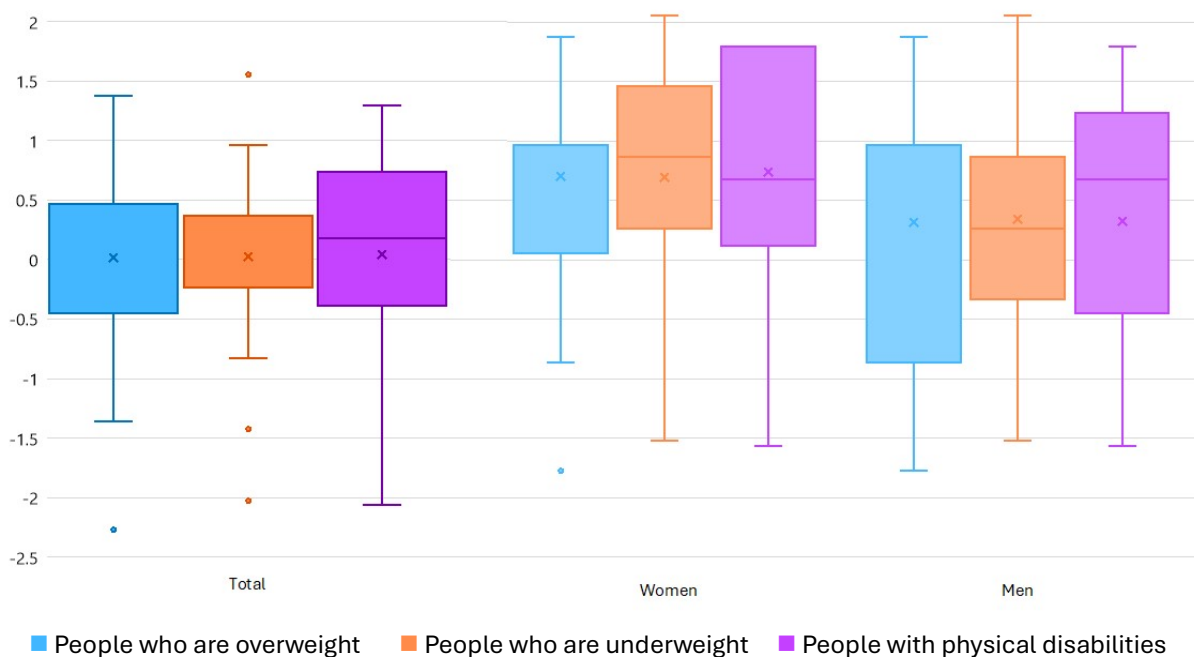
■ People who are overweight   ■ People who are underweight   ■ People with physical disabilities

Notes: Results for the total sample include non-binary people (*N* = 1,026). Results with gender differences include only women and men (*n* = 1,023). *To what extent would you generally consider posts or articles on social media that say something negative (e.g., mocking, insulting) about overweight people/underweight people/people with physical disabilities to be hate speech? By hate speech, we mean attacks on specific groups (e.g., religious, sexual minorities).* Due to a mistake, response options for the item about overweight people ranged from (1) *definitely not* to (5) *definitely yes*, while response options for the items about underweight people and people with physical disabilities ranged from (1) *definitely not* to (7) *definitely yes*. Therefore, a standardized z-score was computed and is presented in the form of box plots.

Results are shown in box plots with standardized values in Figure 4. The box plots show that our participants were **most sensitive toward hate that targets people with physical disabilities**. Overall, they perceived attacks on people who are overweight and underweight similarly. There were significant gender differences.[5] As shown in Figure 4, **women tended to rate attacks on all three groups as hate speech to a higher extent than men**.

CYBERHATE VICTIMISATION EXPERIENCES

To this point, the results have focused on young people's evaluations of groups and online attacks to which they might be exposed and not personally targeted by. However, it is important to consider victimisation experiences. Personal experience with cyberhate plays a significant role in shaping attitudes and responses to cyberhate. Individuals who have been targets of cyberhate are often more sensitive to hate speech and may perceive it as more harmful or threatening (Cáceres-Zapater et al., 2023). Past victimisation can influence behaviour, prompting individuals to engage in digital spaces with more caution or to advocate against hate speech.

Therefore, we asked our participants whether they have been targets of cyberhate on social media due to their weight or physical disability. As shown in Figure 5 and Figure 6, **most of our participants reported that they had not been victimised due to these reasons during the preceding six months**. However, 35.9% of participants stated they were victimised at least once during this period because of being overweight, 38.4% because of being underweight, and 25.0% because of having a physical disability. However, these experiences were not very frequent and mostly happened only once or a few times. **A small group of our participants reported this happened to them daily or several times each day** – 6.7% because of being overweight, 9.0% because of being underweight, and 5.7% because of having a physical disability.

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[5] Results of independent samples *t*-tests.
Perception of attacks on overweight people: z-score$_{women}$ = 0.20, z-score$_{men}$ = -0.19, $t(853)$ = 6.00, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = 0.40.
Perception of attacks on underweight people: z-score$_{women}$ = 0.19, z-score$_{men}$ = -0.16, $t(894)$ = 5.22, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = 0.35.
Perception of attacks on people with physical disabilities: z-score$_{women}$ = 0.23, z-score$_{men}$ = -0.17, $t(878)$ = 6.09, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = 0.41.

Even though there were significant **gender differences,** with men reporting more frequent victimisation because of all three reasons,[6] the differences **were only small**. The highest difference was in the case of victimisation due to having a physical disability.
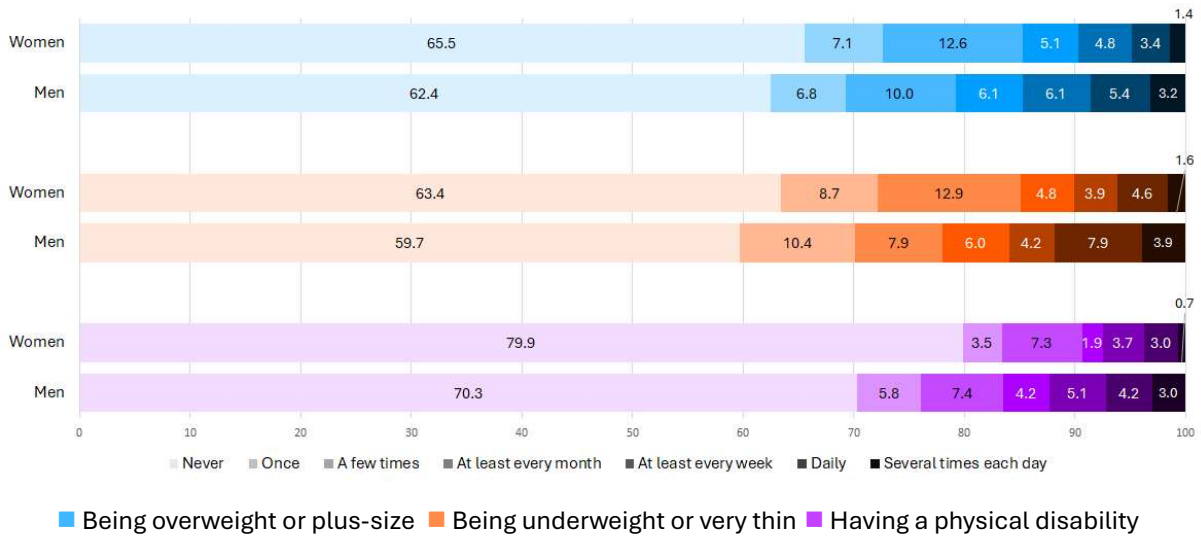
Figure 5. Frequency of cyberhate victimisation experiences due to being overweight, being underweight, or having a physical disability (%).

Being overweight or plus-size ■ **Being underweight or very thin** ■ **Having a physical disability**
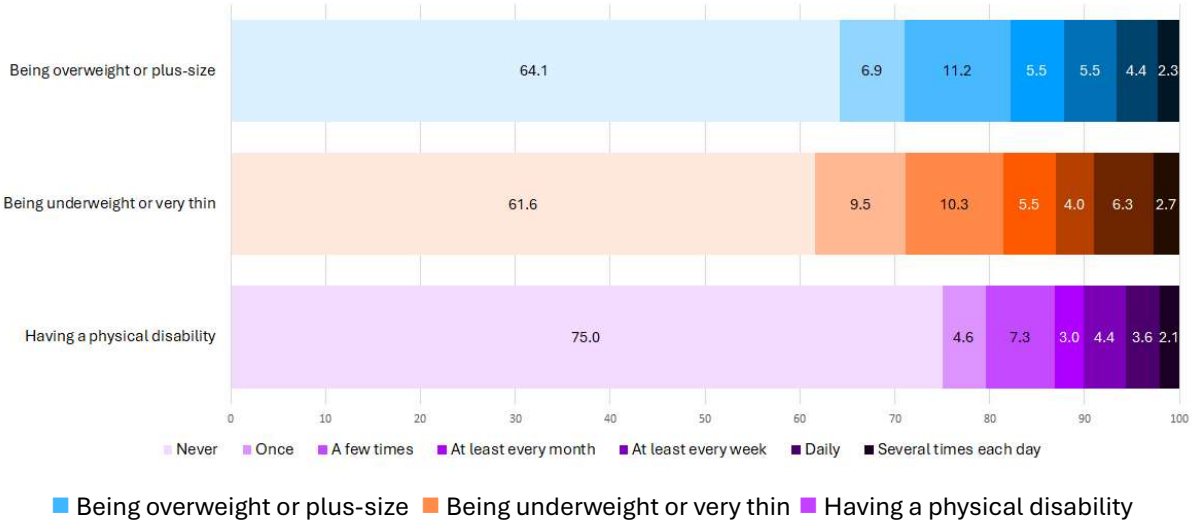
Notes: Results for the total sample include non-binary people (N = 1,026). How often in the last 6 months have you seen content like this on social media that ATTACKED YOU for being overweight or plus-size/being underweight or very thin/having a physical disability? Response options ranged from (1) *never* to (5) *several times each* day.

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[6] Results of independent samples *t*-tests.
Cyberhate victimisation due to being overweight: M_{women} = 1.92, M_{men} = 2.16, $t(858)$ = -2.08, $p < .05$, Cohen's d = -0.14.
Cyberhate victimisation due to being underweight: M_{women} = 1.97, M_{men} = 2.24, $t(838)$ = -2.27, $p < .05$, Cohen's d = -0.15.
Cyberhate victimisation due to having a physical disability: M_{women} = 1.58, M_{men} = 1.93, $t(817)$ = -3.33, $p < .001$, Cohen's d = -0.23.

Figure 6. Frequency of cyberhate victimisation experiences due to being overweight, being underweight, or having a physical disability (%) – by gender.

Notes: Results with gender differences include only women and men (*n* = 1,023). How often in the last 6 months have you seen content like this on social media that ATTACKED YOU for being overweight or plus-size/being underweight or very thin/having a physical disability? Response options ranged from (1) *never* (5) *several times each* day.

CONCLUSIONS

This report provided valuable insights into the attitudes of young Czech people about three groups—**people who are overweight, people who are underweight, and people with physical disabilities**—and into their perceptions of cyberhate targeting these groups.

Our findings indicate that **people with physical disabilities are perceived as the most cohesive group**, as indicated by higher entitativity and group qualification ratings. In our study, we focused on the agency-based dimension of entitativity (i.e., related to shared goals, behaviours, and mutual relationships) rather than shared personality traits or abilities among group members. Therefore, our results suggest a societal tendency to view people with physical disabilities through a lens of shared identity and agency. This perception was **connected to higher positive attitudes toward people with physical disabilities**. Conversely, people who are overweight or underweight were perceived with lower entitativity, and they were less likely to be qualified as a group by our participants. Attitudes toward these groups, while generally positive, were also less favourable than those toward people with physical disabilities.

When it came to hate speech perception, **young people were also the most sensitive to attacks that targeted people with physical disabilities**, rating them as hate speech more frequently than similar attacks against people who are overweight or underweight. Gender differences were evident, **with women generally demonstrating greater sensitivity toward recognising hate speech**.

We also asked our participants about their own cyberhate victimisation experiences. They **most often reported being victimised due to their weight** (both being overweight or underweight) and less often due to having a physical disability. Although these incidents were **typically infrequent**, **a small group of participants reported regular and daily victimisation**: 5.7% due to having a physical disability, 6.7% due to being overweight, and 9.0% due to being underweight.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICAL APPLICATION

Our findings illustrate the **critical role of societal intergroup attitudes in shaping the recognition of cyberhate**. Higher entitativity perceptions of people with physical disabilities may contribute to heightened awareness and sensitivity toward attacks on this group. However, the **lower recognition of attacks on weight as hate speech** indicates a gap in the societal acknowledgement of weight-based hate and the understanding of the potential harm it can have for the victims. Furthermore, weight-based cybervictimisation was a daily experience for a non-negligible group of young people. To address this gap and mitigate the negative impacts of cyberhate, efforts should focus on **increasing awareness and education about all forms of cyberhate, including attacks on physical appearance and weight**. Interventions could include training about digital literacy and bystander intervention strategies, and the fostering of an online culture of respect and inclusivity. As our findings also showed a significant gender difference and **a lower sensitivity toward hate speech for men**, we recommend that some of these interventions be tailored and targeted specifically toward addressing gender-based differences in group and hate speech perceptions.

Platforms are also encouraged to adopt **clearer policies for identifying and removing weight- and disability-related cyberhate**, with mechanisms that are easily accessible to users. This can include revising their reporting mechanisms and moderation policies to ensure better protection for victims of weight- and disability-related hate.

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Illustration

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