PLUS-SIZE HATE

Exploring young Czech people's reactions to cyberhate targeting overweight people

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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 encompasses various forms of online hate speech, prejudiced content, and bias-driven cyberaggression that **targets people based on their perceived group membership or characteristics**, such as ethnicity, religion, or sexual orientation (Council of Europe, 2022; Machackova et al., 2020). Cyberhate can also attack people because of their **weight** or **physical appearance**. It can appear in private messages, social media posts, or comments in online discussions.

The focus of this report is on **cyberhate in the form of social media news** posts (i.e., news articles posted on social media) **and comments that target people who are overweight or plus-size**. We asked young people about their reactions to seeing several examples of such hateful or negative news posts and comments. When asking about their reactions, we differentiated passivity, helpful reactions, and harmful reactions.

KEY FINDINGS

How do young people react to being exposed to cyberhate that targets overweight people?

- ■ **The most common reaction among young people was passivity** (i.e., staying out of it and not reacting in any way), followed by **helpful reactions** (i.e., reporting hateful posts, blocking the authors, writing positive comments, messages, or posts about overweight people). **Harmful reactions** (i.e., liking hateful posts, writing negative comments, messages, or posts about overweight people) were the least likely.
- ■ **Men were more likely to report harmful reactions**, while **women tended to show more helpful reactions**, such as reporting hateful posts or blocking the authors. There was no gender difference in passivity.

How do they explain their reactions?

- ■ Participants expressed a strong belief that **body weight and appearance are personal freedoms**, emphasising **empathy** toward overweight people and **disapproving of cyberhate**.
- ■ However, a minority justified harmful reactions, citing **concerns about health and freedom of speech**.
- ■ Passivity was justified by **avoiding conflict** or **the fear of escalating the situation**. Some participants also expressed concerns that reacting could lead to more exposure to hateful content due to **social media algorithms**, or it could **increase the reach** of the original hateful content.

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.

RESULTS

Bystanders' reactions and gender differences

Bystanders are **people who witness cyberhate attacks or encounter cyberhate content without being directly targeted**. The hate they observe is not directed at them or their group. **Their response** to the hate is crucial, however, because it **can influence the whole situation**. Bystanders might adopt hateful attitudes and participate in the harassment, defend the victims, or engage in counter-speech to challenge the hate. Alternatively, they may choose to remain passive and silently observe, though this inaction can be perceived by others, including the victims, as silent agreement and approval of the hate.

We asked young Czech people how they would react after seeing negative social media news posts that contained hateful, insulting, or mocking content about overweight people. We distinguished three categories of potential reactions: **passivity** (i.e., not reacting at all), **helpful reactions** (e.g., writing something positive about overweight people or reporting hateful posts), and **harmful reactions** (e.g., writing something negative about overweight people or liking hateful posts).
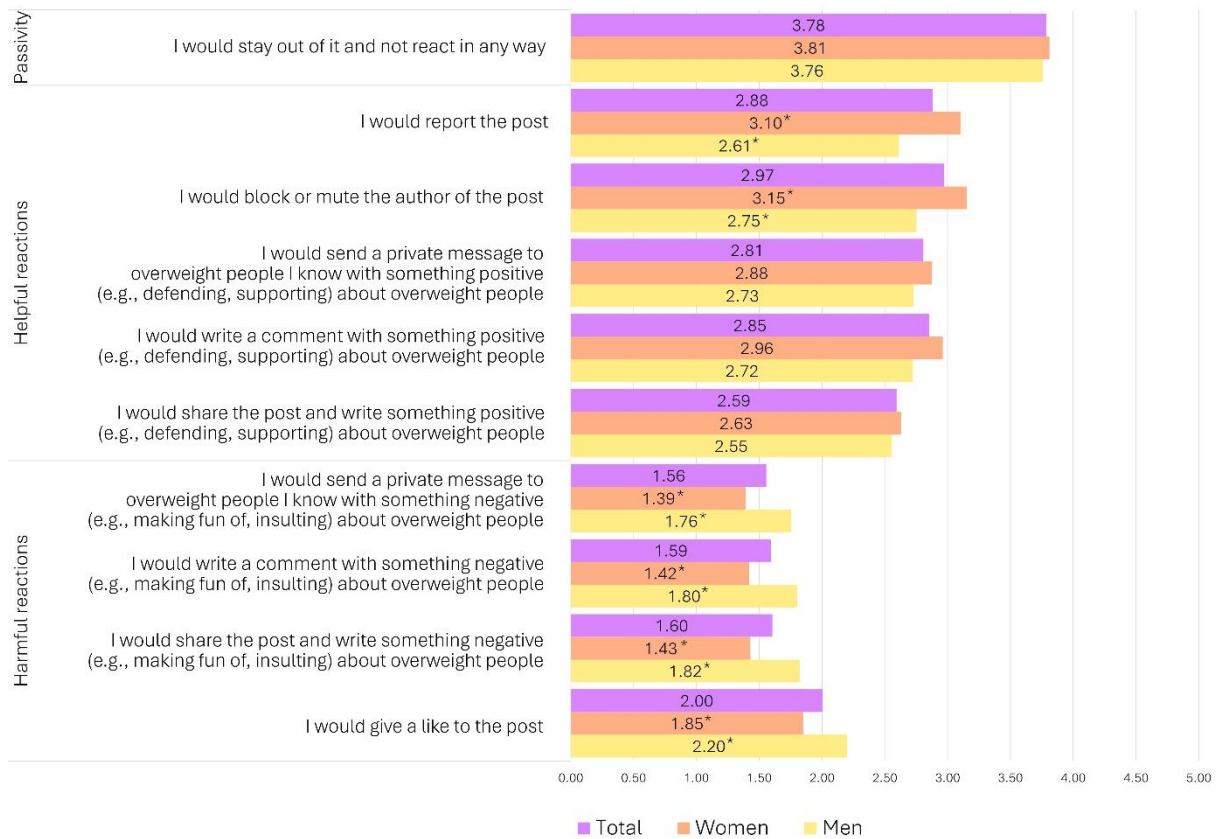
As shown in Figure 1, **young people were, on average, most likely to remain passive and not react in any way**. Helpful reactions were the second most common. Harmful reactions were the least likely.

We also looked at how men's and women's responses differed. We found that **men were more likely to engage in harmful reactions**, like sending private messages with something negative about overweight people, writing negative comments about them, or sharing hateful posts.

Women, on the other hand, **were slightly more likely to show helpful reactions**, like reporting hateful posts or blocking/muting the person who posted them. However, there was no difference in the rest of the helpful reactions (e.g., writing helpful comments and messages, or sharing the posts with something positive about overweight people)

There was **no gender difference in the passivity** category. Men and women stayed passive to a similar extent.

Figure 1. Young people's reactions to negative social media news posts and comments about overweight people (*mean*).

Figure data (Total / Women / Men):

Passivity
- I would stay out of it and not react in any way: 3.78 / 3.81 / 3.76

Helpful reactions
- I would report the post: 2.88 / 3.10* / 2.61*
- I would block or mute the author of the post: 2.97 / 3.15* / 2.75*
- I would send a private message to overweight people I know with something positive (e.g., defending, supporting) about overweight people: 2.81 / 2.88 / 2.73
- I would write a comment with something positive (e.g., defending, supporting) about overweight people: 2.85 / 2.96 / 2.72
- I would share the post and write something positive (e.g., defending, supporting) about overweight people: 2.59 / 2.63 / 2.55

Harmful reactions
- I would send a private message to overweight people I know with something negative (e.g., making fun of, insulting) about overweight people: 1.56 / 1.39* / 1.76*
- I would write a comment with something negative (e.g., making fun of, insulting) about overweight people: 1.59 / 1.42* / 1.80*
- I would share the post and write something negative (e.g., making fun of, insulting) about overweight people: 1.60 / 1.43* / 1.82*
- I would give a like to the post: 2.00 / 1.85* / 2.20*

Legend: Total, Women, Men

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). Participants saw a series of social media news posts that wrote something negative (e.g., mocking, insulting) about overweight people. Question: *People who see such posts on social media may behave differently. Below you can see a list of some possible reactions to them. How likely would you react in these ways?* Response options for each reaction ranged from (1) *definitely not* to (5) *definitely yes*.

* Indicates significant gender differences. The results of independent samples t-tests are in the Appendix.

To better understand how young people react, **we asked open-ended questions to provide the opportunity to elaborate on and contextualise their reasons for choosing a particular response**. Their answers revealed several interesting topics. We selected a few examples to illustrate the reasoning behind each of the three categories of reactions.

Passivity

Many participants explained that **they prefer not to react to any social media content**, regardless of whether they agree or disagree with it. They choose to remain passive observers.

> Overall, I do not like to express myself on social media.
> Man, 21 yo

> I don't use social media very often, and when I do, I only read, but never comment, repost, etc.
>
> Woman, 18 yo

> Getting involved in discussions and the comments is pointless, no matter the topic; it doesn't make sense. I don't participate in discussions, not even with positive comments.
>
> Woman, 25 yo

> I mostly just observe and stay out of it.
>
> Man, 16 yo

A few respondents reflected on **the role of social media algorithms** (i.e., automated systems that determine the content people see based on what they had previously liked, shared, or spent time viewing). They believed that reacting to cyberhate or negative posts about overweight people might cause similar content to appear more frequently in their feeds, which they wanted to avoid.

> I'm not going to react to the post - that's exactly the goal of the people who write it, to make everyone more aware of the nonsense they write. I'm not going to support the algorithm in this - I'm not going to respond.
>
> Woman, 20 yo

> Responses to any posts with similar "catchy" and lame headlines would unnecessarily overwhelm my social networks in the future.
>
> Woman, 22 yo

Relatedly, some participants felt that **negative and hateful posts are often designed to get people to react** and to provoke responses, which can increase the reach of the original content and further amplify the negativity online. They preferred to not be provoked into reacting.

> I definitely don't think it's okay to write such offensive things against overweight people. But I believe it's important not to give them any attention. That's what the authors are waiting for.
>
> Woman, 24 yo

> I have no intention of getting angry while reading a post and reacting to it – that's exactly the goal of the people who write it. By reacting, I'd only raise awareness of the nonsense they're posting. I won't support the algorithm in this – I won't react.
>
> Woman, 20 yo

Similarly, some participants' choice to remain passive was often tied to **a fear of conflict**. They were hesitant to engage because they worried that reacting—especially in a public or confrontational way—could provoke arguments, escalate tensions, or make them the target of hostility.

> I don't want to write anything under such posts, and I don't want to have anything to do with them at all. They are not right, but I don't want to get into a conflict.
>
> Woman, 17 yo

> I would be afraid of public positive reactions, as others might respond with even worse words than those in the original post, making the situation worse.
>
> Woman, 21 yo

Helpful Reactions

Many of our participants expressed that weight and physical appearance are matters of individual freedom and that **no one should be judged or criticised for their body**. This was not always connected to specific helpful reactions. Rather, it created the **rejection of harmful reactions** or, more generally, the rejection of any form of online hate or insults.

> I don't think it's okay to target people like that because of their weight.
>
> Man, 21 yo

> Such posts and articles are derogatory and hurtful to people; everyone has their own life, and it's none of anyone's business how they look or how they live it.
>
> Woman, 19 yo

A very common reason for choosing helpful reactions was **empathy toward overweight people**, both from those who had personally experienced weight criticism and those who had not.

> I have a close family member who struggles with being overweight, and it's not pleasant to read these insulting posts.
>
> Woman, 19 yo

> I have friends who are overweight, and their weight doesn't affect what they deserve or who they are on the inside. No one deserves to be bullied for their body.
>
> Woman, 20 yo

> I've struggled with being overweight myself, so I know what it's like. It's not pleasant to hear comments about your body; sometimes it's not something you can control.
>
> Woman, 20 yo

Our participants often mentioned the potential **negative consequences for overweight people** seeing such negative and hateful posts on social media.

> It seems unfair to me; some people might feel really bad because of these posts and end up hurting themselves.
>
> Man, 23 yo

> Negative comments and social media in general can hurt people. Those who are capable of hurting others through social media aren't really people. Obesity isn't just about overeating; people can be ill as well. I would never dare to insult anyone in this way, because the consequences can be deadly, not only for those who take it to heart but also for us, living with the feeling that someone might have taken their life because of our comment.
>
> Woman, 19 yo

Harmful Reactions

Although harmful reactions were the least likely to be reported by our participants, some still chose them. A few of the explanations were linked to concerns about the potential **negative health outcomes** of obesity. Some participants also viewed negative posts about overweight people as a necessary **form of harsh criticism** that could help prevent health issues.

> Fat people are a burden to health care. Obesity should not be encouraged.
>
> Man, 21 yo

> I was able to change my weight only thanks to these "reminders".
>
> Man, 18 yo

> I wouldn't want to hurt anyone [...] But the post might motivate some people to change their lifestyle.
>
> Man, 21 yo

Some participants justified negative posts by seeing it as **freedom of speech on the internet**.

> There is freedom and freedom of speech on the internet. Let everyone write what they want.
>
> Man, 21 yo

> I believe in freedom of speech, so everyone can say what they want, although it's true that one person's freedom ends where another's begins. For me, being overweight is a choice, just like being fit. Both are challenging, just in different ways.
>
> Man, 18 yo

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS

These findings highlight the importance of fostering empathy toward overweight people and educating young people on the impact that cyberhate has on its victims. Both could be part of educational discussions about online respect, civility, and freedom of speech. Tailored interventions for young men, who were more likely to report harmful reactions than women, could also be effective.

Promoting positive online engagement can be achieved by encouraging bystanders to take proactive steps, such as reporting, blocking, or muting hateful accounts and content. Furthermore, platforms should consider raising awareness about the impact of algorithms, a concern expressed by our participants. This could help users understand how their interactions shape the content they encounter, fostering a more informed approach to online engagement.

Finally, educational efforts should focus on reducing weight stigma and challenging negative stereotypes about overweight people. Encouraging open dialogue about body diversity is essential to fostering understanding and acceptance in order to help to create a more inclusive and supportive online environment.

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The illustrations of people on the title page are based on illustrations by macrovector on Freepik.

APPENDIX

Gender differences in bystanders' reactions. Results of independent samples *t*-tests.

Significant differences:

- I would give a like to the post: $t(938) = -5.18$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -0.33$.
- I would share the post and write something negative (e.g., making fun of, insulting) about overweight people: $t(867) = -7.76$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -0.33$.
- I would write a comment with something negative (e.g., making fun of, insulting) about overweight people: $t(872) = -7.44$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = -0.50$.
- I would send a private message to overweight people I know with something negative (e.g., making fun of, insulting) about overweight people: $t(856) = -6.93$, $p = .658$, Cohen's $d = -0.48$.
- I would block or mute the author of the post: $t(935) = 3.14$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.21$.
- I would report the post: $t(922) = 3.93$, $p = .751$, Cohen's $d = 0.26$.

Non-significant differences:

- I would share the post and write something positive (e.g., defending, supporting) about overweight people: $t(955) = -0.44$, $p = .067$, Cohen's $d = -0.03$.
- I would write a comment with something positive (e.g., defending, supporting) about overweight people: $t(951) = 1.84$, $p = .571$, Cohen's $d = 0.12$.
- I would send a private message to overweight people I know with something positive (e.g., defending, supporting) about overweight people: $t(952) = 0.57$, $p < .01$, Cohen's $d = 0.04$.
- I would stay out of it and not react in any way: $t(920) = 0.32$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.02$.

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