

*Plus-Size Gay Men in Japan, Czech Republic and Abroad*  
– *The Effect of Social Media on the Psychological Well-Being of Young Gay Men*

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**Abstract**

This article explores the experiences of plus-size gay men in the Czech Republic and their potential struggles with weight-based discrimination and mental health. We also discussed the role of societal attitudes and subcultural influences, such as media and popular culture, in shaping the body image and identity of plus-size individuals in the LGBT community. The current conversation and practice in the field touched on research in Japan and the United States, highlighting the influence of cultural norms and societal attitudes on the experiences of LGBT individuals. While more research is needed to fully understand these complex issues, this article's contribution focuses on shedding light on important factors that may impact the well-being of plus-size gay men both in the Czech Republic and globally.

Keywords: Plus-Size, Gay Men, Czech Republic, Weight-Based Discrimination, Mental Health, Societal Attitudes, Subcultural Influences, Body Image, Identity, LGBT Community, Japan, Cultural Norms, Well-Being

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## Introduction

Like many other countries, discrimination against plus-size individuals in the Czech Republic is a problem that affects not only the LGBTQ+ community but society at large. Discrimination can take many forms, including physical, verbal, and emotional abuse, as well as social exclusion and stigmatization. While it's difficult to determine the extent to which gay plus-size men face discrimination in the Czech Republic, studies have shown that discrimination against plus-size individuals is pervasive in the country. According to a study (Čevelíček & Burešová, 2019) conducted by the Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs, over 40% of respondents reported experiencing discrimination based on their weight or appearance. Similar findings can be found abroad in the EU and both the US and Japan.

In terms of mechanisms to address discrimination, the Czech Republic has made progress in promoting diversity and equality in recent years. In 2019, the country introduced a new law prohibiting discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity, which provides legal recourse for individuals who have experienced discrimination. In addition, the Czech LGBTQ+ community has been actively advocating for greater awareness and acceptance of diversity, including body diversity.

Organisations such as the Prague Pride Association and LGBTQ+ rights group Proud work to promote awareness and understanding of LGBTQ+ issues, including those affecting plus-size individuals. These organizations provide a platform for members of the community to connect, share their experiences, and advocate for greater inclusion and acceptance. It's important to note that tackling discrimination against plus-size individuals, including gay plus-size men, is a complex and ongoing process that requires the involvement and support of individuals, organizations, and policymakers at all levels. Creating a more accepting and inclusive society requires ongoing education, advocacy, and activism to change attitudes and promote equality for all.

Young plus-size gay men in the Czech Republic may face discrimination from both the general population and the LGBT community. Discrimination can take many forms, including verbal and emotional abuse, social exclusion, and stigma. Research suggests that weight-based discrimination is particularly prevalent among young people. A study conducted by the Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs (2018) found that over 50% of young people reported experiencing discrimination based on their weight or appearance. This can lead to negative consequences, such as low self-esteem, depression, and anxiety.

In the LGBT community, discrimination against plus-size individuals can also occur. The community often places a premium on thinness and muscularity, which can create pressure on individuals to conform to certain body ideals. This pressure can lead to feelings of shame and exclusion for plus-size individuals, particularly younger individuals who may be more vulnerable to peer pressure. However, it's important to note that not all members of the LGBT community discriminate against plus-size individuals. There are organizations and groups within the community that promote body positivity and inclusivity, and many individuals within the community are accepting and supportive of individuals of all sizes.

To address discrimination against young plus-size gay men, it's important to promote education and awareness about the harmful effects of weight-based discrimination and to work towards creating a more accepting and inclusive society. Organisations such as the Prague Pride Association and Proud can play a key role in promoting awareness and

understanding of LGBTQ+ issues, including those affecting plus-size individuals, and creating safe spaces for young people to connect and support each other. This can be saturated by either local support groups within the national and international communities within the LGBT+ realm that have social gatherings, meetings, support groups, etc. This is true also for plus-size gay men within the gay bear community in the Western world as well as within the GMPD community in Southeast Asia.

### **Historical Basis (Difference Between the Western Gay Bear and Eastern GMPD Subcultures)**

The gay bear subculture emerged in the 1980s in the United States as a response to the hypermasculine and lean ideal prevalent in the mainstream gay community. The term "bear" was coined in the late 1980s and early 1990s to describe a community of gay men who embrace their body hair, size, and masculinity as reported in studies e.g. Matsuyama, Koyama & Ohashi (2020) The bear subculture promotes inclusivity, body positivity, and a rejection of the traditional gay male aesthetic. Over the years, the bear subculture has grown in popularity and has spread globally, with various events and social clubs dedicated to the community.

The GMPD (がち gachi, もち mochi, ポチャリ pochari, デブ debu) culture emerged in Japan in the late 1990s as a response to the strict societal expectations of gender and sexuality. This subculture centres around muscular and masculine men, often depicted in homoerotic art and media, such as bara manga and anime. Unlike the bear subculture, which promotes inclusivity and body positivity, the GMPD culture in Japan can perpetuate traditional gender roles and lean body ideals. Additionally, the GMPD culture has been criticized for its emphasis on objectifying and fetishizing muscular and masculine bodies. These are particularly divided into specific categories such as:

1. Gachimuchi (がちムチ): This term combines "gachi" (muscular) and "muchi" (chubby) to describe a muscular and chubby body type.
2. Mochimochi taikai (もちもち体型): This term refers to a soft and plump body type, often characterized by a bit of extra weight and a cuddly appearance.
3. Pochari taikai (ポチャリ体型): This term is used to describe a slightly overweight body type, often with a rounder belly and softer curves.
4. Debu taikai (デブ体型): This term describes a larger body type, often with a significant amount of excess weight and a more rounded appearance.



Figure 1. Japanese GMPD/gay bear club event in Ni-Chome, Shinjuku, Tokyo (2019)

In summary, the bear subculture emerged as a response to the exclusionary beauty standards prevalent in the mainstream gay community, promoting body positivity and inclusivity. The GMPD culture in Japan emerged as a response to societal expectations around gender and sexuality, promoting muscular and masculine bodies but also perpetuating traditional gender roles and lean body ideals.

The gay bear culture in the Czech Republic has a relatively short history compared to other countries. It emerged in the early 2000s when the first bear-related events and parties were organized in Prague. The local bear community quickly developed its own subculture, with the establishment of various bear clubs and social groups.

One of the earliest events was the Prague Bear Summer Festival, which has been held annually since 2003. The festival includes various activities, such as parties, cultural events, and outdoor activities, and attracts many visitors from around Europe. The first Mr Bear Czech Republic elections took place during the first Prague Pride festival in 2011.<sup>1</sup>

The bear culture in the Czech Republic has also been influenced by the broader European bear community, with many Czech bears participating in international bear events and competitions. Overall, the Czech Bear community has become an important part of the local LGBT community and a symbol of inclusivity and diversity.

### Status Quo

Young plus-size gay men may face a range of psychological struggles, including low self-esteem, body image issues, anxiety, and depression. Studies have shown that discrimination based on weight and appearance can lead to negative psychological outcomes, including increased risk for mental health disorders and decreased quality of life.

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<sup>1</sup> According to the news report by the Czech news server Aktuálně.cz. (2014, March 14). *Prague Pride 2011: Aktuálně.cz*. Aktuálně.cz - Víte, co se právě děje. Retrieval at <https://www.aktualne.cz/wiki/domaci/prague-gay-pride-2011/r~i:wiki:1571/>

However, it's difficult to make direct comparisons between the experiences of young plus-size gay men in different regions of the world, as cultural norms, attitudes towards body size, and social support systems can vary widely. Here are some general trends:

- **Europe:** Studies have shown that weight-based discrimination is a significant problem in Europe, with many individuals reporting experiencing discrimination based on their weight or appearance. The European Association for the Study of Obesity estimates that around 30% of adults in Europe are affected by obesity. In terms of the LGBT community, body positivity and inclusivity movements have gained momentum in recent years, but discrimination against plus-size individuals remains a problem in some circles.
- **Czech Republic:** As mentioned earlier, a study conducted by the Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs found that over 50% of young people in the Czech Republic reported experiencing discrimination based on their weight or appearance. Discrimination against plus-size individuals is also a problem within the LGBT community in the country, although organizations and groups promoting body positivity and inclusivity are also present.
- **Japan:** In Japan, cultural norms around body size are different than in many other parts of the world, with thinner body types often considered the ideal. This can lead to stigma and discrimination against individuals who are perceived as overweight or obese, including young plus-size gay men. However, research on this specific population is limited.
- **Rest of the world:** Discrimination against plus-size individuals is a problem in many parts of the world, although cultural norms and attitudes towards body size can vary widely. In some parts of the world, including certain parts of Africa, larger body types are traditionally viewed as attractive, while in other parts of the world, such as the United States, thinness is often prioritized. In countries in the East Asian region, the popularity of plus-sized men is visible mainly in the body-positivity movement as C and K-pop stars and boybands gain popularity thus changing the status quo of the perceived body type.



Figure 2. Chinese body-positive boyband Produce Pandas

In general, more research is needed to fully understand the experiences of young plus-size gay men in different regions of the world and to develop effective strategies for addressing discrimination and promoting body positivity and inclusivity.

## **Discussion**

The author is not aware of any current specific studies that have focused specifically on the psychological well-being of young gay plus-size men in the Czech Republic. However, as mentioned earlier, a study conducted by the Czech Ministry of Labor and Social Affairs found that over 50% of young people in the country reported experiencing discrimination based on their weight or appearance. This study suggests that young plus-size individuals in the Czech Republic may face unique challenges in terms of their mental health and well-being.

More generally, there has been research conducted on the psychological well-being of individuals who identify as LGBT in the Czech Republic. For example, a study published in the *Journal of Homosexuality* in 2016 found that LGBT individuals in the country experienced higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to their heterosexual counterparts. Other research has found that LGBT individuals in the Czech Republic may face discrimination and stigma from both the general population and within the LGBT community itself.

While these studies do not specifically focus on the experiences of young gay plus-size men, they do highlight the importance of understanding and addressing the unique challenges that individuals who identify as LGBT may face in terms of their mental health and well-being in the Czech Republic.

Social media and popular culture can have a significant impact on the experiences of plus-size gay men, including their interests, hobbies, and sense of identity. For example, social media platforms like Twitter, Instagram, and TikTok have allowed individuals to connect with others who share similar interests and identities, including within the furry community, which often embraces body positivity and inclusivity.

One of the more comprehensive studies has been conducted by Dr Nick McGlynn (2022) whose "Bearspace" research project was done under the Community-University Partnership Programme at the University of Brighton. The project aims to explore the experiences of gay men who identify as "bears" or who are part of the "bear" community, which is a subculture within the LGBT community that celebrates larger, hairier, and more masculine bodies. The project involved a series of focus groups and interviews with members of the bear community, as well as a survey of over 1,000 self-identified bears. The Bearspace project report highlights the experiences of the bear community with regard to body image, masculinity, sexuality, and health, among other topics. The report highlights the importance of community support and acceptance, as well as the challenges faced by individuals who do not fit the traditional norms of the LGBT community. The report also discusses the potential implications of the study for health promotion and intervention programs aimed at supporting the well-being of the bear community. Overall, the Bearspace project provides a valuable contribution to the understanding of the experiences of individuals within the bear subculture and may help to inform future research and interventions aimed at improving the well-being of this community.

## **Factors Influencing the Well-Being of Plus-Size Gay Men in the Czech Republic and Abroad**

Popular culture, including manga, anime, comic books, and geek culture more broadly, can also play a role in shaping the experiences of plus-size gay men. For example, the "bara" genre of manga and anime often features muscular, larger-bodied male characters who are depicted as attractive and desirable. This representation can provide a sense of validation and acceptance for individuals who may feel marginalized or stigmatized due to their body size or sexual orientation.

Similarly, geek culture often celebrates niche interests and subcultures, providing a sense of belonging and community for individuals who may feel excluded or misunderstood in mainstream society. This can be especially important for plus-size gay men, who may face unique challenges in terms of their self-esteem and sense of identity.

There is a significant presence of gay bear culture on social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, and Facebook. Many popular accounts and groups are dedicated to showcasing and celebrating the bear subculture, with a particular focus on body positivity and inclusivity. For example, on Instagram, popular hashtags such as #gaybear, #bearpride, and #bearsofinstagram have thousands of posts from individuals around the world sharing images and stories related to the bear community. Additionally, there are various Facebook groups and Twitter accounts dedicated to bear-related topics, including events, news, and discussions.

In terms of dating apps, some popular options for gay bear men include Bearwww, GROWLr, and Scruff. These apps often have features tailored to the bear community, such as the ability to filter by body type and preference for body hair. There are also specific bear dating sites such as Bear411 and BearForest.

It's worth noting that while social media and dating apps can provide a sense of community and connection for bear men, they can also perpetuate certain body ideals and stereotypes within the subculture. Some individuals may feel pressure to conform to a certain body type or look in order to be accepted within the bear community, which can contribute to issues of body image and self-esteem.

Some plus-size gay men find solace in anonymisation of themselves and creating an alter ego based on a character from a video game, comic book or even a furry character they design themselves. While there is no definitive answer to why some plus-size gay men are drawn to furry or geek culture, it is likely that these subcultures offer a sense of acceptance and belonging that may be harder to find in other areas of society. These subcultures often prioritize individuality and self-expression over mainstream norms and conventions, allowing individuals to embrace and celebrate their unique identities and interests.

The relationship between body dysmorphia and the experiences of plus-size gay men can be complex and multifaceted. As shown by studies conducted by Hennen (2005), or Mizuno, & Fassinger, (2015) while some individuals may experience body dysmorphia as a result of feeling stigmatized or marginalized due to their body size or appearance, others may find empowerment and validation through alternative subcultures like furry or geek culture. That being said, it is possible that some plus-size gay men may feel fetishized or objectified based on their body size or appearance. This can contribute to feelings of insecurity or inadequacy,

and may also contribute to the development of body dysmorphia or other mental health concerns.

Furthermore, there may be pressure within certain subcultures like the bear community to conform to specific standards of body size or appearance. This can be challenging for individuals who may feel excluded or marginalized due to their size, or who may feel pressure to conform to specific norms or expectations within these communities. Overall, it is important to recognize the unique challenges and experiences of plus-size gay men and to work towards creating more inclusive and accepting communities that celebrate diversity and promote positive body image and mental health.

Of course, there exists a number of social events for young plus-size men to attend conducted by NGOs and social clubs and LGBTQ+ organisations alike such as:

By cross-referencing data from studies such as Weisskopf & Čápková (2017), we can summarise some local Czech events and organizations that a plus-size gay man can attend in the Czech Republic:

1. Prague Pride: Prague Pride is a week-long festival that takes place every August in the Czech Republic. It includes a parade, concerts, and various cultural events. The festival is open to everyone, regardless of body type, and aims to promote the visibility and rights of the LGBTQ+ community in the country.
2. Chubby Nights at Jampa Dampa: Jampa Dampa is a popular gay club in Prague that hosts a monthly Chubby Night event, which is specifically targeted towards plus-size men and their admirers. The night features music, drinks, and a welcoming atmosphere for people of all sizes.
3. XXL Prague: XXL Prague is a social club for gay men of all sizes, including those who identify as chubby or bearish. The group organizes regular events, such as dinners, picnics, and pub crawls, that provide opportunities for members to meet and socialize.
4. Gay Men Over 40: This is a Facebook group that is open to gay men over the age of 40 who live in the Czech Republic. While the group is not specifically for plus-size men, it provides a platform for members to connect with each other and organize events.
5. Queer & Plus: Queer & Plus is an Instagram account that showcases body-positive and diverse representations of queer individuals, including those who identify as plus-size. While it is not a physical event or organization, it can serve as a source of inspiration and connection for plus-size gay men in the Czech Republic.
6. Prague Bears events in specific locations such as gay bars such as Kotelna, Heaven clubs etc. The primary programme is focused on EMD, techno and music production and social gatherings for plus-size gay men. Some events include also field trips around Czech Republic or yearly events abroad (e.g. Bear Stigges weekends etc.).





Figure 3. Prague Bears Social Group Event (2022) retrieved with consent by the Prague Bears Facebook page

These events and organizations provide opportunities for plus-size gay men to connect with others in the community and find a sense of belonging in the Czech Republic. However, even interventions, seminars and many social events do not have the capacity nor the competence to prevent socially corrosive and psychologically damaging aspects (as previously verified in studies e.g. Döring et al, 2019, Griffiths & Murray, 2020) of self-image and well-being from being pervasive among young plus-size men (not only in the Czech Republic but also in most of the Western world). The question then is what social pressures or pressure to conformity do plus-size gay men experience?

Based on studies conducted in recent years e.g. Puhl et al (2009), Kimmel (2010), Foster (2014) and Singh (2013), we are able to cross reference some common factors contributing to social pressure and stigma. Plus-size gay men may experience a variety of social pressures and challenges when dating, which can impact their self-esteem, confidence, and overall well-being. Some of the social pressures that plus-size gay men may face while dating include:

1. Stigma and discrimination: Plus-size individuals, including gay men, may experience weight-based stigma and discrimination in many areas of their lives, including dating. This stigma can lead to a negative self-image and feelings of rejection.
2. Body image concerns: Plus-size gay men may struggle with negative body image and feel pressure to conform to cultural norms of attractiveness. This can lead to anxiety, depression, and low self-esteem.
3. Limited dating options: Plus-size gay men may face challenges finding partners who are attracted to their body type, particularly within mainstream gay culture. This can lead to feelings of loneliness and isolation.
4. Sexual objectification: Plus-size gay men may be fetishized for their body type and viewed solely as sexual objects rather than as full human beings. This can lead to feelings of objectification and dehumanization.
5. Stereotypes and expectations: Plus-size gay men may be subject to negative stereotypes and expectations, such as being seen as lazy, unhealthy, or lacking self-

control. These stereotypes can be damaging to self-esteem and make it difficult to form meaningful connections with others.

These can be correlated with the use of dating apps and websites. Not a lot of data specifically on the dating app preferences of plus-size gay men. However, some studies have examined the general dating app preferences of LGBTQ+ individuals. For example, a 2019 survey of 1,000 LGBTQ+ adults in the United States found that Grindr was the most commonly used dating app among gay men, with 78% of respondents reporting that they had used the app in the past. Scruff was the second most commonly used app, with 33% of respondents reporting use. Other apps that were frequently used by gay men included Tinder (29%), Jack'd (16%), and Hornet (14%) (Cision PR Newswire, 2019). The most commonly used dating apps and websites for plus-size gay men include not only the abovementioned Growlr, Scruff, Grommr, Grindr, Chasable, Bearwww, Hornet, Chappy and Tinder. It's worth noting that these statistics may not reflect the dating app preferences of plus-size gay men specifically, as there is limited research on this subpopulation.

It is important to recognize that these social pressures are complex and may vary depending on cultural and societal factors. It is also important to acknowledge that individuals within the plus-size gay community may have different experiences and perspectives and that these experiences are valid and deserving of respect.

a 2006 survey (Ferguson et al, 2006) of 2,360 self-identified bears in the United States found that 85% identified as gay or bisexual, and 15% as heterosexual or other; 78% were single, and 22% were in a relationship; and average age was 42.3 years old. A 2018 survey of 607 self-identified bears in Australia found that 78% identified as gay, 19% as bisexual, and 3% as other; the average age was 43 years old, and the average body mass index (BMI) was 31.6, which is considered obese. However, these findings should be interpreted with caution as they may not be representative of all bear-identified individuals or communities, and they may be influenced by various cultural and contextual factors.

## **Conclusion**

In summary, research suggests that plus-size gay men in the Czech Republic may face weight-based discrimination, which can impact their mental health and well-being. Additionally, LGBT individuals in the Czech Republic may experience stigmatization and marginalization, which may further compound these issues. The experiences of LGBT individuals in Japan may also be influenced by cultural norms and societal attitudes. Subcultural influences, including those in media and popular culture, may play a role in the development of body image and identity for plus-size individuals, including those in the LGBT community. The plus-size and body positivity movements aim to promote acceptance and celebration of diverse body types, countering the long-standing idealization of thinness in many societies. While the movement has many positive attributes, there are potential negative effects when considering young people's perceptions and overall well-being. While many people are naturally larger due to genetics, metabolism, or other factors beyond their control, there's a concern that promoting acceptance of all body types may inadvertently normalize unhealthy habits. Overconsumption of unhealthy foods and a sedentary lifestyle can lead to a range of health issues, including heart disease, diabetes, and joint problems. The fetishization of any body type, including the plus-size body, can be problematic. When individuals are seen primarily for their body size or shape, it can lead to objectification, where they are valued more for their physical appearance than their other attributes or skills. Just as there's

pressure in some circles to be thin, there can also be pressure within the body positivity community to maintain a certain 'plus size' image. This can be especially true for public figures or influencers who might feel they need to maintain a certain size to stay relevant or authentic to their followers. While the body positivity movement seeks to redirect the focus from a singular beauty standard, it still centres the conversation on physical appearance. This can reinforce the notion that self-worth and value are closely tied to how one looks. As body positivity becomes more mainstream, there's a risk that brands and companies co-opt the movement for profit without genuinely supporting the underlying message. This can lead to scepticism and cynicism among young people. The body positivity movement initially emerged as a counter-response to the media's fixation on a very specific thin ideal. As the movement gained traction, plus-sized bodies were given a platform (as well as an increase in visibility of popular media, manga, anime, TV series, etc.), which was undoubtedly necessary. However, in certain spaces, there's a risk that 'average-sized' bodies or naturally thin bodies are sidelined or perceived as having no struggles with body image. In summary, while body positivity and plus-size movements have brought much-needed attention to the acceptance of diverse body types, it's essential to approach the topic with nuance. Young people should be educated on the broader aspects of health, self-worth, and individuality beyond physical appearance. However, more research is needed to fully understand the complex intersections of these factors and their effects on individuals' mental health and well-being. Future projects focused on marginalised groups of plus-size gay men could bring better oversight in both positive and negative aspects of the GMPD/Bear culture.

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