The Digital Crowd: Social media, mob psychology and mental health impacts

Upasana Regmi
Consultant Psychiatrist, Sushma Koirala Memorial Hospital
Email: upas.regmi90@gmail.com

The world is witnessing an unprecedented wave of digitalization that is reshaping communication, social interaction and even mental health and the digital tools have become central to everyday life. Among these, social media stands out as the most transformative force, turning what were once local conversations into global debates. In South Asia, for instance, the rise of platforms such as Facebook, TikTok, Twitter has profoundly altered communication patterns. In Nepal alone, 13.40 million people, 43.5% of the population - are active social media users as of January 2024.[1] While these platforms connect people and give voice to communities, they have also created a new environment for crowd behavior where emotions spread rapidly, anonymity lowers accountability, and collective actions can escalate in unpredictable ways. In this context, this article is not only trying to trace the historical roots of mob psychology but also to highlight how these dynamics have been reshaped by technology, and what this means for our mental health and society at large.

The concept of mob psychology has long been studied by social scientists, and the digital age has given these classical theories a renewed relevance. Gustave Le Bon, in his influential 1895 essay The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind, argued that crowds act on impulse and imitation, often abandoning rational thought in favor of emotional contagion.[2] William McDougall (1920) similarly described crowds as excessively emotional, inconsistent, and lacking responsibility, likening their actions to unruly children or wild animals.[3] Freud (1959) later observed that in a crowd, the individual's superego—our moral conscience—weakens, and instinct-driven impulses dominate.[4] These ideas remain strikingly visible in digital spaces today, where collective emotions online often override logic and civility. Over time, different scholars have expanded on these theories. Allport (1924) emphasized the role of individuals in shaping mob behavior rather than only their emotional response[5], while Turner (2021) highlighted how even hostile crowds can develop norms and social bonds.[6] Sighele (2018) noted that while some people join crowds to seek influence, many are swept along by the energy of the moment, experiencing a transformation in mental state.[7] Adler's theory of inferiority further suggested that individuals may feel a sense of empowerment in crowds, compensating for personal insecurities.[8] In the context of social media, these perspectives help explain why people who may remain passive in real life become highly active - and sometimes aggressive - participants online.

What makes digital crowds distinct from traditional mobs is their scale, speed, and reach. Compared to street mobs, online collectives are larger, more pervasive, and capable of global coordination. Social media algorithms accelerate emotional contagion by rewarding provocative content with higher visibility.[9] This dynamic has fueled phenomena such as cancel culture, disinformation campaigns, and online harassment. Confirmation bias plays a crucial role here, as users seek out information that reinforces their existing views, forming echo chambers that harden identities and reduce exposure to diverse perspectives.[2] In some cases, these online behaviors have even been linked to real-world violence, showing how digital mobs can blur the boundary between virtual and physical actions.[8]

The mental health implications of such dynamics are significant. Research shows that individuals exposed to online mob aggression may experience anxiety, trauma, shame, guilt, or post-traumatic stress.[10] Prolonged exposure to hostile content contributes to sleep problems, emotional instability, and heightened fear. For younger generations,

who spend much of their social lives online, risks include cyberbullying, FOMO (fear of missing out), and harmful social comparisons.[11] The anonymity and permanence of online content make recovery more difficult than in traditional settings, where crowd behavior was often temporary. Yet it is also true that social media has enabled positive forms of collective behavior. Digital platforms have given marginalized groups a voice, mobilized relief during crises, and created mental health support communities, showing that the digital crowd is not inherently destructive but deeply ambivalent.

Given this dual nature, the challenge lies in channeling digital crowds constructively while reducing their harmful consequences. Several steps are critical. First, digital literacy must become a priority. Just as road safety is taught to protect individuals in traffic, digital safety should be taught to protect individuals navigating online spaces—helping them to critically evaluate viral content, resist herd mentality, and safeguard mental well-being. Second, platform accountability is essential. Technology companies must recognize how their algorithms amplify negativity and consider redesigning them to prioritize healthier forms of engagement. Third, policy interventions are needed to address online hate speech and harassment without undermining freedom of expression. Finally, expanding mental health resources - both online and offline is vital for supporting those affected by cyberbullying, disinformation, or digital mob aggression.

In conclusion; the psychology of crowds may not have changed since Le Bon, McDougall, and Freud first wrote about it, but the environment in which it plays out has. What once unfolded in physical spaces now happens in digital ones, magnified by global connectivity. The digital crowd is powerful: it can unite communities, raise awareness, and amplify positive causes, but it can just as easily deepen divisions and inflict lasting psychological harm. Our responsibility is not to dismantle this new public sphere but to learn to navigate it wisely. With awareness, responsibility, and resilience, the digital crowd can be guided toward being not just a force of disruption, but one of collective growth and social transformation.

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