

**Passage 1: A writer explores the harms of crowds.**

- 1 In our world today, people have at times allowed themselves to get swept up into the violent storm of groupthink, leading to collective emotions of hatred and anger, the loss of autonomy and the erasure of personal responsibility. This easily occurs at the behest of manipulative activists and politicians who seek not to unite and elevate us in love, but to control us through shared hostility. Our best defence against falling prey to destructive groupthink is to understand it. 1  
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- 2 Research over many years has shown that people can “catch” feelings by being in proximity to others who are experiencing those feelings intensely. This syndrome explains the sensation of being rapturously transported that people typically report when they participate in a mass exercise of praise and feel their inhibitions falling away. The result is an emotional positive sum, by which feelings of love and unity multiply through the group. 10
- 3 There can be a cost, however. Although this mind-melding is an emotionally rich experience, it may involve the crowd sacrificing its effective intelligence and wisdom. Scholars have demonstrated that crowds can become less discerning about factual accuracy than their individual members are. When social influence - the perception of whatever everyone else believes - is present, a crowd can become obstinately wrong. Any of us can be susceptible to the subtle social influence that induces groupthink: It is perfectly possible that things you have come to accept unquestioningly as true might have been learned in this way. 15
- 4 Moreover, the emotional contagion of crowds is not necessarily positive; negative emotions are contagious too. Scholars have written about moments when people in a mob barrel through the usual social restraints and erupt into disproportionate violence. This explains events such as soccer-crowd disorders, in which violence breaks out among sports fans when such contagious mass emotions meet a clear adversary among the other team’s supporters. 20
- 5 All of this brings us to the polarised moment in which we find ourselves, when a zero-sum, us-versus-them mentality has taken hold across the political spectrum in the United States, with the almost daily spectacle of crowds yelling angry slogans, trading insults, and resorting to naked aggression. This outcome was predictable, as both political parties in the United States have become more extreme in their partisanship, policies, and rhetoric, by most Americans’ reckoning. Even prestigious Ivy League college campuses are seeing more hate-filled protest activity than they have in the recent past. The coronavirus pandemic only accelerated the process, perhaps as a response to pent-up anguish, which has then been exploited by ideological leaders. 25  
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- 6 If you have ever found yourself in a crowd shouting hostile slogans in unison about another person or group at the encouragement of a populist leader, you have experienced this phenomenon firsthand. And modern technology has made life easier for social media users to drum up a cyber mob. Online crowds can be as unthinking as in-person ones, and can be whipped up in much the same way. All that has changed is that the soapbox orator of old has been superseded by an internet troll. 35

**Passage 2: A psychologist writes about the benefits of crowds.**

- 1 When we identify with the group and feel part of a shared experience, the benefits of being in a crowd are astounding. A huge number of studies shows improved mood, reduced loneliness, greater self-esteem and feelings of belonging when we are in a crowd. Feeling part of something that is bigger than yourself is a major source of well-being. 1
- 2 Using the internet and social media for engaging in group activity — particularly with a shared interest or ‘cause’ such as political or environmental activism, for example — leads to greater feelings of social support and life satisfaction. This kind of online activity can also lead to greater offline civic engagement as we tend to act on life-affirming intentions expressed by a group online. 5
- 3 When we are in a group, we allocate greater cognitive resources—focused attention and thought—to an activity because there is a social component to it. Emotions, when experienced in a crowd, take on an intensity that individuals would be hard-pressed to summon on their own. Furthermore, when we are in a group, we often start to move in time with others. Physiological measurements show our levels of arousal (gauged by indicators such as heart rate) tend to match others in the same group, even when we might only be observing rather than directly participating in the same event. This explains why being in a crowd helps with the cultivation of empathy: when we are in a state of cognitive and emotional synchronicity with others, we can easily identify with them, and imagine what they are feeling. The actions of a crowd can therefore reflect the compassion of the collective. 10  
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- 4 People are also increasingly turning to crowds to test the waters for opinions on products and services. Think TripAdvisor, Rotten Tomatoes and Pinterest. We trust the judgement of many and the validation it offers because we can identify with the reviewer who is a member of the public just like us. In recognition of this, more and more companies are using ‘crowd marketing’ techniques to reach their audience, and to boost their profitability. 20
- 5 The bottom line is that groups are usually beneficial. Crowds provide a positive kind of human experience not accessible alone or even in small gatherings. Some of their benefits can be found in online crowds — but the best experiences of all are to be found out there, in the ‘real’ world, face to face. 25

**Passage 3: A writer expresses his thoughts about crowds.**

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| <b>1</b> | Joining crowds can rob us of our agency, our capacity for rational thought and our sense of self and propriety. Violence and moral turpitude spread like a contagion, overpowering every crowd member. In short, we become bestial. Our politics, media and pop culture are replete with people in power decrying unthinking masses and stampeding hordes.  | 1           |
| <b>2</b> | Fortunately, a new generation of crowd psychologists are developing fresh ideas. Detailed case studies have proved what many of us know instinctively: that joining a crowd of like-minded souls brings us kinship, confidence, and joy – and that every crowd contains a multitude of behaviours and psychological responses. Far from erasing our sense of self, coming together with fellow football fans, music fans, or people with the same political or religious affiliations can bring life-affirming moments of collective joy. | 5<br><br>10 |
| <b>3</b> | This does not mean all crowds are forces for good, of course. While my reporting has taken me to inspiring political protests, hedonistic global carnivals and other festivals in the name of journalism, I have also borne witness to sinister crowds which bear testament to the inhumane violence of the mob.  |             |
| <b>4</b> | If we want to refresh our democracy, our culture and our civil society, the best place to start would be by paying some overdue respect to the complex powers of the crowd.   | 15          |

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