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The Influence of the French Revolution and the Depiction of Herd Mentality in Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*

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ABSTRACT

Throughout history, literary figures have played a role similar to historians because they have reflected, both explicitly and implicitly, the political, psychological, and social struggles of their time. Charles Dickens created a masterpiece that has remained influential for generations, *A Tale of Two Cities*. The novel provides a vivid depiction of one of the most violent and chaotic periods in human history: the French Revolution and the Reign of Terror. Dickens presents powerful scenes in which crowds lose all sense of humanity and mercilessly destroy the lives of those they consider enemies. This research examines the phenomenon of mob mentality depicted in the novel through the theoretical framework of crowd psychology, particularly the concept of contagion theory introduced by Gustave Le Bon. The study employs a qualitative mode of inquiry through textual analysis of selected passages from the novel. By examining these scenes closely, the study highlights how individuals, when absorbed into a collective crowd, lose their sense of identity and personal accountability. The research concludes that the dissolution of individual responsibility within a crowd allows individuals to commit acts of brutality that they would otherwise find morally unacceptable. Dickens' representation of mob violence therefore not only illustrates the historical realities of the French Revolution but also provides profound insight into the darker aspects of human psychology.

Keywords: Mob Mentality; Gustave Le Bon; Crowd Psychology; French Revolution; *A Tale of Two Cities*; Collective Violence; Emotional Contagion; Herd Behavior; Social Identity

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Introduction

The French Revolution stands as one of the most transformative and violent events in world history. While it began as a movement demanding equality, justice, and political reform, it soon descended into chaos and mass violence. The period known as the Reign of Terror witnessed thousands of executions, social unrest, and widespread fear. Even those who initially supported the revolution later questioned whether the cost of change had become too great.

The moral complexities of such historical upheavals have long fascinated philosophers, sociologists, and writers. Charles Dickens is one of the few novelists who successfully captured both the political and psychological consequences of the revolution in literary form. His historical novel *A Tale of Two Cities* vividly portrays the social inequality of pre-revolutionary France and the violent upheaval that followed.

Dickens' narrative moves between London and Paris, presenting a dramatic contrast between relative stability and revolutionary chaos. One of the most remarkable aspects of the novel is its portrayal of crowds. Rather than focusing solely on individual characters, Dickens frequently depicts large groups of people acting collectively, often in violent and irrational ways. These crowd scenes reveal how individuals, once absorbed into a mob, begin to behave differently than they would as independent agents.

George Orwell notes that Dickens was unusual among Victorian novelists because he paid significant attention to the lives of ordinary people. While many writers ignored the working classes or portrayed them merely as background characters, Dickens placed them at the center of his narratives. In *A Tale of Two Cities*, the suffering of the French peasantry and the brutality of aristocratic oppression are shown as the social forces that ultimately lead to revolution.

Another critic, John Gross, observes that the crowd scenes in the novel are among the most memorable and powerful elements of Dickens' writing. He suggests that the storming of the Bastille and other revolutionary episodes are depicted with remarkable intensity, giving readers a vivid sense of the emotional energy of the crowd.

The concept of herd or mob mentality has been widely discussed in social

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psychology. Raafat describes herding as a form of collective social behavior in which individuals imitate the actions and emotions of others within a group. Such behavior is often spontaneous and lacks centralized coordination, yet it can produce powerful social movements.

The most influential early theorist of crowd psychology was Gustave Le Bon. In his work *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind* (1895), Le Bon argues that individuals within crowds experience a psychological transformation. According to him, when people become part of a crowd, they lose their individual identity and sense of personal responsibility. This anonymity allows primitive instincts to surface, leading individuals to act in ways that would normally be restrained by social norms and moral judgment.

Le Bon also introduced the concept of **contagion**, suggesting that emotions spread rapidly within crowds, much like infectious diseases. Once a powerful emotion such as anger or fear emerges, it can quickly dominate the entire group. This process explains why crowds often engage in irrational or violent actions.

Dickens' portrayal of revolutionary mobs in *A Tale of Two Cities* strongly reflects these ideas. Although the novel was written decades before Le Bon formulated his theory, Dickens demonstrates remarkable insight into the psychological dynamics of crowds. His narrative repeatedly shows how individuals become absorbed into collective violence and lose their moral compass.

This research therefore aims to analyze how Dickens represents mob mentality in *A Tale of Two Cities*, particularly through his depiction of revolutionary crowds. By examining key scenes in the novel, this study highlights the ways in which Dickens illustrates the psychological transformation of individuals within a crowd.

Literature Review

The concept of mob mentality has attracted considerable attention across disciplines such as sociology, psychology, and literary studies. Scholars have long attempted to understand how individuals behave differently when they become part of a crowd, often engaging in actions that contradict their personal morals. In the context of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities*, this phenomenon becomes particularly relevant, as the novel vividly portrays the collective violence and psychological

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transformation associated with the French Revolution.

One of the earliest and most influential contributions to the study of crowd behavior is Gustave Le Bon's *The Crowd: A Study of the Popular Mind*. Le Bon argues that individuals within a crowd undergo a psychological transformation that results in the loss of personal identity and rationality. According to his theory, anonymity, suggestibility, and emotional contagion are the key forces that drive crowd behavior. Individuals in a crowd become highly susceptible to shared emotions, which spread rapidly and lead to collective action (Le Bon, 1895/1977). This theoretical framework is particularly useful in analyzing Dickens' depiction of revolutionary mobs, as it explains how ordinary individuals become capable of extreme violence when influenced by group dynamics.

Building upon Le Bon's ideas, Sigmund Freud offers a psychoanalytic perspective on group behavior in *Group Psychology and the Analysis of the Ego*. Freud suggests that individuals in a group are bound together through emotional ties and identification with a leader or shared ideal. He argues that the suppression of the individual ego allows unconscious desires and instincts to emerge, leading to irrational and often extreme behavior (Freud, 1921/1959). This perspective complements Dickens' portrayal of mob violence, where characters appear to act under the influence of collective emotion rather than individual reasoning. Freud's emphasis on unconscious motivation helps explain the intensity and irrationality of the revolutionary crowd.

Elias Canetti, in *Crowds and Power*, provides another important theoretical framework for understanding mass behavior. Canetti views crowds as entities driven by a desire for growth and equality. He introduces the concept of the "discharge," a moment in which individuals within a crowd experience a sense of unity and release from social hierarchies (Canetti, 1960/1984). This idea is particularly relevant to the revolutionary scenes in Dickens' novel, where the destruction of aristocratic power creates a temporary sense of equality among the masses. However, Canetti also highlights the dangers of this collective energy, as it can easily turn destructive.

Modern scholars have expanded on these foundational theories by examining crowd behavior through empirical and interdisciplinary approaches. Raafat, Chater, and Frith (2009) analyze herding behavior as a form of social influence in which

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individuals imitate the actions of others, often without rational evaluation. Their research suggests that herding is not limited to physical crowds but also occurs in economic and social contexts (Raafat et al., 2009). This perspective reinforces Dickens' portrayal of imitation within the mob, where individuals follow the actions of others without question.

In literary criticism, George Orwell provides valuable insight into Dickens' social vision. Orwell argues that Dickens was deeply concerned with social injustice and the moral consequences of inequality. While Dickens sympathizes with the suffering of the poor, he remains critical of violent revolution, viewing it as a force that can reproduce injustice rather than eliminate it (Orwell, 1940/2012). This ambivalence is evident in *A Tale of Two Cities*, where the revolutionary mob is portrayed both as a response to oppression and as a destructive force.

Similarly, John Gross emphasizes the dramatic power of Dickens' crowd scenes, describing them as some of the most memorable elements of the novel. Gross argues that Dickens uses vivid imagery and emotionally charged language to convey the overwhelming force of collective action (Gross, 1968). His analysis highlights the literary techniques through which Dickens represents mob mentality, including metaphor, symbolism, and repetition.

Other scholars have focused on the historical context of Dickens' work. Hobsbawm (1962), in *The Age of Revolution*, provides a detailed account of the social and economic conditions that led to the French Revolution. His analysis demonstrates how widespread inequality, poverty, and oppression created the conditions for mass uprising. This historical perspective helps contextualize Dickens' narrative, showing that the behavior of the revolutionary crowd is rooted in real social and economic grievances.

Recent interdisciplinary research has also explored the ethical implications of mob behavior. Scholars argue that Dickens presents a cautionary portrayal of collective violence, emphasizing how movements rooted in legitimate grievances can devolve into cycles of revenge and brutality. The revolution, while initially driven by demands for justice, ultimately reproduces the same forms of oppression it seeks to overthrow. This interpretation aligns with modern discussions of mass movements, where the boundary between justice and violence often becomes blurred.

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Overall, the existing literature provides a comprehensive framework for analyzing mob mentality in *A Tale of Two Cities*. Theories of crowd psychology, combined with historical and literary analysis, reveal the complexity of Dickens' portrayal. His work not only reflects the realities of the French Revolution but also offers enduring insights into human behavior. By engaging with these scholarly perspectives, this study deepens the understanding of how collective identity, emotional contagion, and social conditions contribute to the formation of mob mentality.

Discussion

One of the most striking aspects of Dickens' portrayal of mob mentality is the loss of individual identity within the revolutionary crowd. Throughout the novel, Dickens frequently describes crowds not as collections of individuals but as overwhelming natural forces.

During the storming of the Bastille, Dickens writes:

"Deep ditches, double drawbridge, massive stone walls, eight great towers, cannon, muskets, fire and smoke… yet the crowd poured in like a sea."

In this passage, Dickens uses the metaphor of the sea to describe the revolutionary mob. The comparison emphasizes the immense power and unpredictability of the crowd. Just as waves crash uncontrollably against the shore, the revolutionaries surge forward with unstoppable force. Individual identities disappear within the mass movement of the crowd.

This imagery strongly reflects Le Bon's theory that individuals in crowds lose their personal identity and become part of a collective entity. The people involved in the storming of the Bastille are no longer acting as separate individuals; instead, they function as parts of a single destructive force driven by shared anger.

Another powerful depiction of mob psychology occurs during the famous **grindstone scene**. Dickens writes:

"The grindstone had a double handle, and turning at it madly were two men, whose faces, as their long hair flapped back when the whirling's of the grindstone brought their faces up, were more horrible and cruel than the visages of the wildest savages."

This passage describes revolutionaries sharpening their weapons in preparation for violence. Dickens' language emphasizes the terrifying transformation that has taken

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place. The men's faces are described as distorted by rage and bloodlust, suggesting that they have abandoned civilized behavior.

The grindstone itself becomes a powerful symbol of collective violence. People gather around it, eagerly preparing weapons that will soon be used for executions. The atmosphere is filled with shouting, excitement, and anticipation. Dickens portrays this moment as both chaotic and ritualistic, illustrating how violence becomes normalized within the revolutionary crowd.

The psychological transformation depicted in this scene aligns closely with Le Bon's idea that crowds encourage primitive instincts. When individuals feel anonymous and protected by the collective, they become more willing to engage in brutal acts.

Another scene that vividly illustrates mob mentality is the revolutionary dance known as the **Carmagnole**. Dickens describes it as follows:

"There were more than five hundred people dancing like five thousand demons… the air was thick with dust and the stamping of feet."

Here Dickens presents the revolutionary crowd as almost supernatural in its intensity. The comparison of the dancers to demons suggests that the participants have been overtaken by uncontrollable energy and emotion. What should be a celebration of freedom becomes instead a disturbing display of collective frenzy.

The Carmagnole scene demonstrates how individuals within a crowd often imitate each other's actions without reflection. The dancers move together in mechanical repetition, as if they are parts of a single organism. This imitation reinforces the emotional contagion described by crowd psychology theories.

Dickens also portrays mob mentality through the characters who actively encourage revolutionary violence. One such figure is Madame Defarge, who symbolizes the relentless desire for revenge that fuels the revolution.

Madame Defarge is frequently shown knitting while observing the events around her. At first glance, this activity appears harmless, but it carries a darker meaning. She is secretly recording the names of individuals who are destined to be executed. Her knitting therefore becomes a symbol of organized vengeance.

Through Madame Defarge, Dickens demonstrates that mob mentality is not always spontaneous. Sometimes it is deliberately nurtured and directed by individuals who

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manipulate the emotions of the crowd. Madame Defarge constantly reminds the people of their suffering under aristocratic oppression, encouraging them to pursue revenge without mercy.

Another chilling example of mob psychology occurs in the scenes surrounding the guillotine. Dickens describes the crowd that gathers to witness executions:

"The women knitted, the men shouted, and the guillotine worked steadily."

This brief yet powerful description highlights the disturbing normalization of violence during the Reign of Terror. Executions have become a public spectacle, and the crowd watches them with enthusiasm rather than horror. The women who knit during these events, often referred to as the "Vengeance," represent the complete desensitization of society to brutality.

From a psychological perspective, this scene illustrates the way crowds can reshape moral standards. Actions that would normally be considered horrifying become acceptable when reinforced by collective approval.

Another significant feature of the revolutionary mob is its anonymity. Many of the revolutionaries are referred to by the shared name "Jacques." This naming convention eliminates individual identity and reinforces the idea that the mob operates as a single entity.

The anonymity of the crowd plays a crucial role in enabling violence. When individuals feel that their actions cannot be traced back to them personally, they become more willing to participate in extreme acts. Dickens repeatedly emphasizes this loss of identity to highlight the psychological dangers of mass movements.

The experiences of victims within the novel further reveal the terrifying nature of mob mentality. Characters who encounter the revolutionary crowd often describe it as an overwhelming and incomprehensible force. They are unable to identify specific individuals responsible for the violence, which makes the threat even more frightening.

This sense of helplessness reflects the broader theme of chaos during the French Revolution. The crowd does not follow consistent rules or moral principles; instead, it is driven by rapidly shifting emotions.

Dickens' depiction of mob mentality also invites readers to reflect on the complex

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relationship between justice and revenge. While the suffering of the French peasants is undeniable, the violence of the revolution ultimately reproduces the same cruelty that it seeks to overthrow.

In this way, the novel suggests that collective anger, when left unchecked, can transform victims into perpetrators. The revolutionaries who once fought against oppression eventually become agents of terror themselves.

Dickens therefore presents a deeply ambivalent portrayal of the French Revolution. On one hand, he acknowledges the social injustices that made revolution inevitable. On the other hand, he warns that uncontrolled collective violence can destroy the very ideals of justice and freedom that inspired the uprising.

Another significant episode that illustrates mob mentality in *A Tale of Two Cities* is the scene of the wine cask breaking in the streets of Saint Antoine. Dickens writes:

"The wine was red wine, and had stained the ground of the narrow street… those who had been greedy with the staves of the cask had acquired a tigerish smear about the mouth."

This moment, though seemingly minor compared to the violence of the Revolution, serves as a symbolic foreshadowing of the bloodshed to come. The frantic manner in which the peasants rush to drink the spilled wine reflects a collective desperation shaped by poverty and deprivation. Dickens' description of the people as having a "tigerish smear" is particularly significant. The animal imagery suggests that the crowd is already beginning to lose its human restraint, behaving instead according to primal instincts.

From the perspective of crowd psychology, this scene demonstrates the early stages of what Gustave Le Bon describes as the regression of individuals within a crowd. The peasants do not act as rational individuals but as a unified group driven by shared hunger and excitement. The lack of order or restraint foreshadows the later transformation of this same crowd into a violent revolutionary mob.

Furthermore, the communal participation in this act reinforces the concept of emotional contagion. As individuals observe others rushing to collect the wine, they are compelled to imitate the behavior. The result is a collective frenzy that overrides individual judgment. Dickens uses this scene to subtly suggest that the seeds of mob

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violence are rooted in shared suffering and collective emotion.

Another powerful illustration of mob mentality is found in the trial of Charles Darnay. Although the tribunal presents itself as a system of justice, it is heavily influenced by the emotions of the crowd. Dickens describes how easily the public opinion shifts:

"A numerous crowd… became impatient, and soon began to express their impatience in murmurs and cries."

The courtroom, ideally a place of rational deliberation, becomes instead an extension of the mob. The crowd's reactions influence the proceedings, demonstrating how collective emotion can override legal principles. The revolutionary tribunal does not function as an impartial institution but as a mechanism that reflects the desires of the masses.

This scene highlights the dangers of what modern theorists might call "collective bias." The crowd is not interested in justice but in reaffirming its own beliefs and emotions. Once again, anonymity plays a crucial role. Individuals within the crowd feel empowered to express extreme views because they are shielded by the collective identity.

The instability of the crowd's emotions is also evident in the rapid shifts between sympathy and hostility. At times, the same crowd that cheers for one individual will demand the execution of another. This unpredictability reinforces Dickens' portrayal of the mob as irrational and volatile.

Sydney Carton's final journey to the guillotine provides another perspective on mob mentality, particularly in contrast to individual moral agency. As Carton moves through the streets, he observes the same crowd that has been depicted throughout the novel:

"The tumbrils jolted heavily… the crowd pressed on, eager and excited."

Here, Dickens emphasizes the mechanical and repetitive nature of the executions. The crowd's excitement suggests that the act of witnessing death has become a form of entertainment. This normalization of violence reflects a complete moral desensitization.

However, Carton's calm and purposeful demeanor stands in stark contrast to the chaos of the crowd. While the mob is driven by uncontrollable emotion, Carton acts

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with deliberate intention and self-sacrifice. This juxtaposition reinforces Dickens' critique of collective behavior. The individual, when guided by moral conviction, is capable of noble action, whereas the crowd often succumbs to cruelty.

From a psychological perspective, this contrast highlights the importance of individual consciousness. While the crowd suppresses personal responsibility, Carton's actions demonstrate the potential for moral clarity even in the midst of chaos. Dickens thus suggests that redemption and humanity are possible, but only when individuals resist the influence of the mob.

The Role of Memory and Collective Trauma in Mob Formation

In addition to immediate emotional contagion, Dickens also explores the role of historical memory in shaping mob mentality. The suffering of the French peasantry is not a temporary condition but a deeply ingrained collective experience. This shared history of oppression fuels the revolutionary fervor.

Dr. Manette's imprisonment serves as a symbolic representation of this trauma. His long years in the Bastille reflect the injustice endured by countless individuals under the aristocratic regime. When the revolutionaries storm the Bastille, they are not merely attacking a physical structure but expressing accumulated anger and resentment.

The mob's actions can therefore be understood as a response to collective trauma. However, Dickens also demonstrates how this trauma, when left unresolved, transforms into violence. The revolutionaries are unable to distinguish between justice and revenge, leading to the repetition of the same injustice they once suffered.

This cycle of violence aligns with psychological theories that emphasize the impact of unresolved emotional experiences. When individuals share a common grievance, it can create a powerful sense of unity. However, this unity is often based on negative emotions such as anger and hatred, which can easily escalate into destructive behavior.

Mob Mentality and the Dehumanization of the "Other"

Another critical aspect of mob psychology in the novel is the process of dehumanization. The revolutionary crowd frequently perceives its victims not as individuals but as symbols of oppression. Aristocrats are reduced to a single category, stripped of their personal identities and moral complexity.

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This dehumanization is essential for enabling violence. When people are viewed as less than human, it becomes easier to justify cruelty against them. Dickens illustrates this through the repetitive use of labels such as "aristocrat" or "enemy of the people." These labels replace individual identity with collective categorization.

Madame Defarge plays a crucial role in reinforcing this mindset. Her knitting serves as a literal record of those marked for death, reducing human lives to entries in a list. This act symbolizes the complete objectification of individuals within the revolutionary system.

From a theoretical perspective, dehumanization is a key component of mob behavior. It allows individuals to detach themselves from the moral implications of their actions. Within the crowd, responsibility is diffused, and violence becomes a shared activity rather than an individual choice.

Comparative Insight: Dickens and Modern Crowd Psychology

Although Dickens wrote *A Tale of Two Cities* in the 19th century, his insights closely align with modern theories of crowd behavior. Contemporary psychologists have expanded upon Le Bon's ideas, emphasizing factors such as social identity and group dynamics.

Dickens' portrayal anticipates these developments by showing how individuals adopt a collective identity within the crowd. The repeated use of the name "Jacques" is particularly significant in this regard. It represents the loss of individuality and the adoption of a shared revolutionary identity.

Modern theories also emphasize the role of leadership in shaping crowd behavior. While crowds may appear spontaneous, they are often influenced by key figures who guide their actions. In the novel, characters like Madame Defarge fulfill this role, directing the anger of the masses toward specific targets.

Furthermore, Dickens highlights the role of environment in intensifying crowd behavior. The narrow streets of Saint Antoine, the public squares, and the execution sites all serve as spaces where collective emotion is amplified. These settings contribute to the formation of a shared psychological experience.

Conclusion

In conclusion, *A Tale of Two Cities* offers a deeply nuanced exploration of mob mentality, illustrating both its psychological mechanisms and its devastating

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consequences. Through vivid imagery and powerful narrative techniques, Dickens reveals how individuals, when absorbed into a crowd, lose their sense of identity, moral responsibility, and rational judgment. The novel's depiction of revolutionary France demonstrates that mob behavior is not merely the result of spontaneous violence but is shaped by a complex interplay of social, psychological, and historical factors. Emotional contagion, anonymity, collective trauma, and dehumanization all contribute to the transformation of ordinary individuals into participants in extreme acts of brutality. By incorporating scenes such as the wine cask incident, the storming of the Bastille, the grindstone episode, the Carmagnole dance, and the guillotine executions, Dickens provides a comprehensive portrayal of crowd dynamics. Each of these moments highlights a different aspect of mob psychology, from the loss of individuality to the normalization of violence.

At the same time, Dickens does not present a one-dimensional critique of the Revolution. He acknowledges the ظلمand suffering that gave rise to the uprising, emphasizing the inequalities that made change inevitable. However, he ultimately warns that violence driven by revenge can undermine the very ideals of justice and freedom.

The contrast between the mob and individuals such as Sydney Carton further reinforces this message. While the crowd embodies chaos and, Carton represents the possibility of redemption through sacrifice and moral clarity.

Thus, Dickens' work remains highly relevant in the modern world, where instances of collective behavior continue to shape political and social movements. His portrayal of mob mentality serves as a cautionary reminder of the dangers that arise when individuals surrender their judgment to the influence of the crowd.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* offers a profound exploration of mob mentality and collective violence during the French Revolution. Through vivid descriptions of crowds, Dickens demonstrates how individuals lose their sense of identity and moral responsibility when absorbed into a collective movement.

The novel's depiction of revolutionary mobs reflects many of the ideas later developed in crowd psychology, particularly the theories of Gustave Le Bon. Dickens illustrates how anonymity, emotional contagion, and shared resentment can

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transform ordinary people into participants in extreme violence.

Scenes such as the storming of the Bastille, the grindstone episode, the Carmagnole dance, and the executions at the guillotine reveal the frightening power of collective emotion. In these moments, the crowd functions as a single destructive force rather than a group of rational individuals.

At the same time, Dickens does not ignore the social injustices that led to the revolution. The suffering of the French peasants is portrayed with sympathy and compassion. However, the novel ultimately suggests that violence driven by revenge can easily spiral out of control and produce new forms of oppression.

By examining these themes, *A Tale of Two Cities* remains a powerful commentary on human psychology and political upheaval. Dickens' portrayal of mob mentality continues to resonate with modern readers, reminding us of the dangers that arise when individuals surrender their moral judgment to the influence of the crowd.

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