

Are You Following the Herd?

It's so hard to stand out from the crowd right now—but understanding why will help you be your own boss (promise).

By: Holly Corbett

Adapted by Fishtank Staff

Just 5% of a crowd can affect how the other 95% of it behaves.

Source: 2008 University of Leeds Study

- 1 Raise your hand if you've ever showed up at school wearing the same sneakers as your friends. Now think about your usual table in the cafeteria: Are there traits or behaviors—a hairstyle, some slang, a go-to snack—that connect you all, like an IRL tribe of the twinning emoji?
- 2 "If one person brings a certain food for lunch, it catches on, and suddenly everyone is bringing it," says Sarah DeSanto, 14, an eighth-grader in West Hartford, Connecticut. "Last year, it was dried seaweed; this year it's fruit snacks. It sounds dumb, but it's so true."
- 3 Psychologists have long studied how being part of a group—whether that's your closest crew or a crowd of strangers—influences your behavior. They call this "herd mentality," and while the way it guides your preferences for shoes and snacks may be harmless, understanding its role in bigger decisions can be a lifesaving skill. That's because a body of research shows that teens take more dangerous risks—driving recklessly, trying drugs—when they're part of a group.
- 4 "You've been conditioned to think of peer pressure as taunting, like 'Do it!' or 'You're a loser if you don't,'" says Oscar Bukstein, professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. "But the most dangerous kind of peer pressure is the influence you don't really notice."

ON AUTO-PILOT

- 5 Maci Smith, 17, found out the dark side of herd mentality the hard way. As she followed her friends off her Florida high school's campus one breezy afternoon last fall, her mind was focused more on the lunch waiting for her at a nearby fast-food restaurant than on the serious rules she was breaking. "All my friends were going," Maci says. "I thought, 'It must not be a big deal.'"
- 6 But Maci was wrong. A teacher spotted her and reported her for violating the school's strict closed-campus rule—an offense that landed the teen an in-school suspension, which will stay on her permanent record. "Looking back, it was so dumb," she says.

- 7 So why would Maci decide to cut school rather than cut rank? Two words: Primal instincts. Humans are social animals, and much like the sheep on the previous pages, you are naturally driven to travel in packs. In ancient times, being part of the group gave you an evolutionary advantage—if you were a straggler, you might not survive an enemy attack. Substitute a clique of mean upperclassmen in the cafeteria for giant cave lions in the wild, and you get the idea. It's still safer—even in our present-day, civilized society—to surround yourself with serious backup.

MOB MADNESS!

Why do huge crowds (IRL and online) turn mean and violent fast?

Last October, thousands of Penn State University students celebrated their football team's victory by rioting in the streets—ripping down street signs and setting chairs on fire as police patrolled with pepper spray. From the outside, the scene was slightly apocalyptic: an originally triumphant crowd of people easily tipping over into violence.

But what's even crazier is that—if you were to have plucked one random rioter from the crowd—you'd likely have found that he or she was a solid student and normally polite. "When you're a part of the crowd, you get caught up in the energy, and you think your actions can't be tracked back to you," explains Bukstein, the Harvard psychiatrist.

This is called "diffusion of responsibility," and while you may not get sucked into a sports riot anytime soon, it's important to understand its implications online, where it's easier than ever to let bad behavior blend in. So next time you consider adding to a mob of snarky comments under a stranger's photo, think about how terrible you'd feel doing it all alone, face-to-face. Chances are, you'll scroll right by.

- 8 But that's not all: As a teen, you're especially susceptible to herd mentality, says psychologist Laurence Steinberg, author of *Age of Opportunity*. The section of your brain involved in decision-making is still developing, while the part linked to social activity is super-active. That means you're wired to pay more attention to the rewards of belonging to the group—even if the group is doing something like shoplifting or cutting class—than to the risks of getting caught.
- 9 That was definitely true for Maci: "Half of the school must have been leaving campus—I really thought no one would miss me."

TIME TO #UNFOLLOW?

- 10 So what can you do to truly own your decisions without letting the group influence creep in? The first step is recognizing that herd mentality happens, even to you. Eli, a high school sophomore in New York City, says he has slowly recognized the subtle forces of his school's social scene at work after attending a few parties—and they weren't what he thought they would be. "I started to realize that no one's ever directly pressuring anyone else to drink— I've never even seen that happen once," he explains. "Everyone's just doing it because everyone else is. I have no doubt that if the majority of people weren't drinking, that would catch on too."
- 11 Which brings us to an important self-test: If you're feeling a strong drive to copy the crowd at a party, pause for five seconds—step outside, run to the bathroom, whatever—and get in touch with your inner instincts. Would you still be doing this if no one else was? Are you OK with the worst-case scenario consequences?
- 12 Even better, have a plan before you even put yourself in that scenario. Eli says he'll say things like, "I've got a big track meet tomorrow," when friends are passing around drinks. "You'd think it would be a big deal, but nobody calls me out on it. And some people even start copying me and saying it too."
- 13 That's the secret power of the pack: It works both ways. When you stand up and do the right thing—whether that's calling out a mob of mean commenters online or launching a fund-raising campaign—people will start to follow you.

3 Ways to Harness the Herd

USE THE POWER OF THE PACK . . . FOR GOOD!

1. Improve Your Grades

Teens who study in groups do better, according to one study. Plus, it's a lot more fun to learn chemistry when you're with friends than it is when you're solo.

2. Spread #GoodVibes.

Social contagion is the idea that moods can spread through a group. So whether you're cheering on your team or joining in on a chorus of compliments on Instagram, being part of a positive crowd can feel amazing.

3. Make a Difference.

The "social cure" theory says the force of group dynamics can be wielded to change lives—and the world. Have a cause you care about? Try organizing an info session at your school.