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Fact Check-No evidence of pandemic 'mass formation psychosis', say experts speaking to Reuters

By Reuters Fact Check

8 MIN READ



“Mass formation psychosis” is not an academic term recognized in the field of psychology, nor is there evidence of any such phenomenon occurring during the COVID-19 pandemic, multiple experts in crowd psychology have told Reuters.

Online searches for the phrase have spiked this month, as seen in worldwide Google trends data here: bit.ly/3JPW685, after it was used in a popular podcast as the reason why people comply with public health measures.

Dr Robert Malone, previously fact-checked by Reuters [here](#) and [here](#), told The Joe Rogan Experience that “mass formation psychosis” is a phenomenon that occurred in 1920s and 30s Germany when a highly educated population “went barking mad”.

“And that is what’s happened here,” he said, referring to the COVID-19 pandemic ([here](#)).

According to Malone, the condition occurs when a society “becomes decoupled from each other and has a free-floating anxiety in a sense that things don’t make sense... And then their attention gets focused by a leader or series of events on one small point, just like hypnosis.”

He added: “They literally become hypnotized and can be led anywhere... They will follow that person – it doesn’t matter whether they lie to them or whatever, the data are irrelevant.”

As of Jan. 3, the term has gathered more than 100,000 interactions (likes, comments and shares) on public Facebook pages, groups and verified profiles, according to social media monitoring tool CrowdTangle.

Users on Twitter have also shared the term, applying it as if it were a legitimate condition to describe those receiving COVID-19 vaccines, tests and following other health measures ([here](#) and [here](#)).

The phrase does not appear in the American Psychological Association (APA) Dictionary of Psychology (dictionary.apa.org/), (dictionary.apa.org/browse/m) nor does it appear in the PsycNet database of published research articles ([here](#)), ([here](#)).

Numerous psychologists have also told Reuters that such a condition is not officially recognized.

“I have never heard of this concept,” John Drury, Professor of Social Psychology and Director of Research and Knowledge Exchange at the University of Sussex, wrote in an email to Reuters.

Jay Van Bavel, Associate Professor of Psychology and Neural Science at New York University, said the term “doesn’t exist as a real academic concept”, adding: “I’ve been studying group identity and collective behaviour for nearly two decades and just published a book on the topic (www.powerofus.online/) and not once have I come across this term.

“It seems to have been made up recently. There are similar-sounding concepts, like ‘mass psychogenic illness,’ ([here](#)) but the scope of these is relatively narrow compared to what is being proposed here.”

Reuters also spoke to Steven Reicher, Professor of Social Psychology at the University of St Andrews, who has studied crowd psychology for more than 40 years. He described the concept of a “mass psychosis” as “more metaphor than science, more ideology than fact”.

“It arises out of mass society theories and crowd psychology theories which developed in the 19th century, and which reflected a fear of the masses,” he said. “The claim was that people in the mass lose their sense of identity and their ability to reason, they regress to an inferior mental state where they are manipulable by unscrupulous leaders.

“It has been totally discredited by contemporary work on groups and crowds.”

Van Bavel, who said he found the idea of mass formation psychosis “reductionist”, highlighted a different account of the role of psychology, groups and leadership in the rise of Naziism ([here](#)).

He also pointed to a study he co-authored and released in November 2020 analysing the movement of approximately 15 million Americans during the early stages of the pandemic, finding that one of the “single biggest predictors of following social distance guidelines was political partisanship” ([here](#)).

“What is true, of course, is that people do have to make sense of a confusing and complicated world with different accounts coming from different sources,” said Reicher.

“We are not vaccinologists so when people tell us contradictory things about vaccines, who do we listen to. That is a matter of trust and of our social relationship to the source of information. So, the politicisation of the

pandemic, the creation of a sense of an establishment enemy who wants to control us is certainly important. It makes the establishment of trust an absolutely critical aspect of the pandemic and hence such things as transparency, respect, clarity etc. become critical.”

He added: “But telling people who disagree with you that they are deluded and in a state of psychosis is essentially a device to silence them and a form of disrespect. It alienates and hence undermines an attempt at dialogue. It isn’t an explanation of the problem; it is part of the problem.”

Chris Cocking, Principal Lecturer at the School of Humanities and Applied Social Sciences at the University of Brighton, told Reuters that a preferred way to explain crowd action was in terms of “shared identities, relations between different groups and leadership influence”.

He said: “We have all spent our careers trying to undo irrationalist approaches that pathologise crowd behaviour.”

Recent studies on urban disorder, including the 2011 riots in England ([here](#)) and the 2005 London bombing ([here](#)), have shown that “crowds behave in

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Missing context. There is no evidence to suggest a “mass formation psychosis” has occurred during the pandemic, experts told Reuters. The term itself is not recognised among academics, and modern research into crowd psychology has shown that crowds do not behave in mindless or non-individualistic ways.

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