Everyday Delusions

Photomanipulation is something we've become completely accustomed to over the years – and although we know the truth amongst the images, whether it be a snapchat filter or a manipulated body on a magazine cover, it's still difficult to keep these perceptions separated from reality. As we edge closer into a digitalised world, we're beginning to lose control on what we see daily, leaving us vulnerable to deception. We all know models are photoshopped, most of us know that food industry posters don't really contain any real food at all – but what about photos we manipulate for ourselves?

Now, I'm not talking about you 'tech-savvy genius's' out there that are able to create entirely new worlds using photoshop. I'm talking about every day manipulation. The photo you posted of your dog's OOTT on Instagram this morning, the coffee cup photos you posted alongside the caption 'Mondays' on your Facebook feed. What impacts are **they** having?

To start with, I'd like to revisit a classic example that puts into perspective the power of photo manipulation.

Back in 1917, two cousins set off down to the beck placed at the bottom of their garden with the intent to produce two photographs - little did they know, that these would completely change their world as they knew it. For reasons still disputed to this day, Frances (10) and Elsie (16) had produced a plan to capture 'fairies' using Elsie's fathers `Midg' camera, some hair pins and a hand-illustrated paper cut outs. And thus, the story of The Cottingley Fairies began.

The two original photographs were taken simply as a prank by their family and were put to one side. Remaining unnoticed within the household for two years before they would eventually come to surface. During these years, Polly, Elsie's mother had began becoming more evolved with the idea of Spiritualism and it wasn't until she attended one of the Theosophical Society meetings that she had thought to present the girls photographs to the public. Around this time, the movement of Spiritualism had risen as people had become somewhat reliant on it to make sense of a generation that had been lost during the First World War. It was a belief and to some, a lifestyle that still presented people with hope and sanity as it provided them with a way to connect with their lost loved ones.

The leading member of the society and a prominent advocate of the super natural, Edward Gardner took interest in the photographs and began to explore the possibilities of their authenticity. He carried the photographs with him to meetings and held them up as a topic for discussion. He later presented them to Harold Snelling, a photographic expert, who after checking for signs of manipulation within the dark room, stated that the photographs were authentic. It was from here, that the concept of fairy existence began to rapidly escalate, presumably fuelled by the already growing movement of spiritualism.

Arthur Conan Doyle, author of the Sherlock Holmes books, had recently lost his son during the last weeks of the war coming to an end. It was since then that the author had

become involved in attempting prove that there was in fact a connection to be had with the dead - and so began his journey with Spiritualism.

The photographs had caught his eye and after a few meetings with Dr Gardiner, he decided that the most logical way to settle the dispute whether they were authentic was to ask for the girls to produce more photographs. They provided the girls with their own quarter-plate 'Cameo' camera which had marked plates within them to detect and kind of manipulation. The girls promptly did as they were asked and produced 3 more photographs with the 'fairies' – as the actual manipulation was all done using cut outs as before, the photographs were once again proven to be authentic.

Arthur Conan Doyle enthusiastically wrote up an article for The Strand magazine speaking of the existence of fairies using the 5 photographs as proof. Although he did his best to conceal the identities of Frances and Elsie, once the article was published it quickly got traced back to them. Leading the girls to go into hiding to escape the floods of members of public that made their way to their home to try and witness the fairies first hand.

It's never been clear as to why, perhaps from embarrassment, sympathy or even delusion, but the girls managed to keep the secret of manipulation from the world for around 65 years – before eventually owning up to the fact that it was a hoax all along.

It just goes to show that photo manipulation is nothing new, and it doesn't take a genius to be able to take advantage of it's uses. In this case, two young girls, with little to no experience using a camera, wanted to create some photographs to play on the idea of fairies' existence – and through photo manipulation they managed to successful share this vision with the world.

How is this relevant in today's world, I hear you ask? Let's talk about social media.

Most of us either use or have had experience with social media in todays world. Since the beginnings of Facebook back in 2004, social media channels have slowly but surely made a strong status for themselves within our day to day lives. Although most are quick to tell the tale that social media was originally created to bring people together and establish close, meaningful relationships - however, its origins are somewhat astray from this path. In 2003, whilst still studying at Harvard, Mark Zuckerberg amongst other students created an online programme called "Facemash". This allowed users to objectify fellow students by comparing photos of their faces and selecting who they deemed as "hotter". Understandably, this idea was quickly put to a halt when Harvard's Administration team disapproved of this and demanded that it was to be shut down.

With this in mind, it's difficult to understand Zuckerberg's agender when he later went on to produce Facebook, seeing as his first social media channel was simply put in place as a means to judge people from afar and normalise the process of putting people into a hierarchy based on appearances.

Since then, social media has continuously evolved and snowballed, picking up more users along the way. In 2010, Instagram was developed and was one of the first social medias to use photographs alone as a means of communication. Instagram's launch proved to be a roaring success as the app managed to accumulate 100,000 users within its first week. Although smart phone photography was becoming more popular, the

quality of the cameras within the phone weren't that good, and it was for this reason that Instagram allegedly incorporated it's built in filters and editing tools. As the app became more popular, so did the process of editing photos. Photographs became more staged, from regular selfie updates to photographs of what you last ate, everything was carefully set up and edited to produce a more 'visually appealing' image to post online. It's now gotten to the point where you can quite easily find 100's of articles and guidelines that will provide you with a step by step process on how to edit your photo's 'like a pro', so you can rest assured, your followers will see a perfectly put together image on your social media that day.

A year later, Snapchat (previously known as Picaboo) was launched. This was yet another social media channel that focused on the idea of communication through photographs, but instead of it being a place to post and keep your images online, it was a messaging app that allowed its users to send photo, video, and text messages that would disappear after several seconds. The apps 'disappearance act' feature certainly commissioned a few brows raises, and although the creators stated that the reasoning for this was simply to create a new way to share awkward selfies and funny photos with their friends – it's hard to ignore the possibility that 'private matters', such as sexting, were highly considered during the creation process. The apps success sky rocketed after it's release of filters in January 2015 – these filters allowed for users to completely change and/or edit their faces to photograph and share online.

Although these filters started reasonably light hearted and fun, for example; having a filter that created huge eyes and a rainbow coming out of your mouth, over time they have begun to lean towards creating filters that focus on editing the users faces in attempts to 'beautify' them. Each of these 'beauty' filters primarily consist of the same effects; bigger eyes, paler skin along with a thinner nose and jawline. As these filters are all automatic, it removes the opportunity for their users to customise which parts of the filters they'd like to take or leave, enforcing the idea that whoever is using them must accept all these changes to become their visualisation of what is 'beautiful'.

As the filters work almost instantaneously, it's hard for users to see just how much the app has edited their faces. They can switch between a wide variation of different versions of themselves within seconds, making it hard to establish what they actually look like and what is being digitally created. This, as sad as it sounds, has been known to lead to feelings of disappointment and a lower self-esteem when they eventually remove the filters to see their actual face.

It's unfortunate to see that these feelings have then progressed and begun to manifest within most selfies that you'll see today – manipulated selfies and group photographs are becoming the norm to the point where people are hardly recognisable in real life due to their online appearance being so heavily edited. That being said, there are still people have decided to take this a step even further.

Cosmetic surgeons have created the term *'Snapchat dysmorphia'* due to a steady increase of customers that have approached them and outright stated that they wanted to adjust themselves to look like their manipulated photos. The numbers aren't the only things that have changed either – the types of requests are evolving too. According to the Independent, a survey of plastic surgeons found 55% last year reported seeing patients who wanted to improve their appearance in **selfies**. Although this is an obvious case for concern as it sheds a spotlight on the new lows of our society's self-esteem, but it also

raises the question of whether we've completely begun to lose touch with reality. As Snapchat filters have no real bounds or limits, their filters can completely bend the rules of reality to create an aesthetic based on fictional desires – creating new, unobtainable beauty standards. With this being the case, surely this means that those choosing to undergo surgery in attempts to achieve this look will be led down a continuous path of disappointment and low self-esteem?

Whether it be photos of ourselves or of our surroundings, we seem to be consistently striving for something more than the reality of it. And as we dive headfirst down this rabbit hole to chase these unrealistic goals and or expectations, we in turn leave ourselves vulnerable to developing mental illnesses such as anxiety and body dysmorphic disorders. *RSPH and the Young Health Movement (YHM)* published a report in 2017 studying the effects that social media has been having on young people's health. As an introduction they stated *"Rates of anxiety and depression in young people have risen 70% in the past 25 years. Our own research has shown that young people themselves say four of the five most used social media platforms actually make their feelings of anxiety worse".* And after studying the top five social media's (Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram & Snapchat), they found YouTube to be the only social media that showed to be having positive impact, whilst the image centralised apps, Instagram and Snapchat, came out as the most detrimental to young people's mental health and wellbeing.

So, it's not surprising to discover that having such constant exposure to photo manipulation is having a negative impact on us. What is surprising, however, is how successful it continuous to be. We're all aware that it's not real and by now we're beginning to come to terms with the negative impacts it can have on our general wellbeing – so we do we continue to let it lead us, so seemingly, blind?

Back in 1920's we saw a rise in the movement of Spiritualism as it was developed as a coping mechanism by many as they grieved their loved ones that were lost to the war. It left them with hope and closure as it 'allowed' them to communicate with their lost sons, husbands or brothers – in certain cases even the most amateur of mediums would be believed and/or followed purely because their actions were fuelled by the strong desire for them to be true. When you have a person that is so desperate for a 'better' world, a 'better' mind or even a 'better' version of themselves, you'll usually find that they're easily influenced and will choose to believe whatever is presented to them if it fits their desires. Whether that be a photograph of fairies, a better version of their selfies, or in this case, a method to communicate with the dead.

Choosing to put so much faith into a religion or a belief doesn't always have a ripple effect and is completely safe to be followed as far as you so wish – however there have been cases where this desperate belief has been known to push people into a state of delusional which wreaks havoc and in unfortunate cases harm, to those and others around them. 60 years after the Cottingley Fairies photographs came to light – Joe Cooper resurfaced and began investigating them, thoroughly. He spent years dedicating his time to searching every inch of information he could find on fairies with an undeniable desire to uncover something that would prove their existence. Joe was an intelligent man who lectured in sociology within Bradford College, a small college local to where he lived with his loving wife Shirley and two children, Jane and David. It wasn't long before his interest in fairies quickly spiralled into an obsession which began to form cracks within his relationship with reality - his daughter, Jane stated in *The Telegraph and*

Argus that she believed her father's near-death experiences during the war had influenced his ideas *"He was 19, he was shot at nightly and believed something was looking after him. It wasn't unusual for airmen to have a talisman… …Dad suffered post-traumatic stress and cultivated a larger-than-life personality to deal with that".*

From a chance encounter, he was provided with the details to confront the girls, Francis & Elsie, from the photographs himself. Although he had managed to get to the girls who contained primary source of knowledge, the information gained remained slightly diluted as the girls were no longer in touch, leading to contradicting stories from each of them. Yet still, he persisted and spent 7 years of his life trying to pry as much information from the girls as he possibly could to quench his need for fairy existence – and they let him.

It was during his research that Francis finally admitted to him that the photographs were fake. This news came with a sudden blow that smashed everything that Joe had spent so long piecing together apart. Joe suffered from a mental breakdown which led to him disappearing for 9 months – leaving his family and the rest of his life behind him. What he did during those 9 months is still unknown to this day, but one can only imagine the torture he would have put himself and his family through. It was during this time that his wife, Shirley had decided she could no longer deal with the emotional turmoil and made the choice to end to marriage. She had watched the man she loved, and the father of her children deteriorate through the lies crafted by two naïve girls in 1920 – and she could take no more.

But even then, Joe still didn't give up on the Cottingley Fairies. He used his findings to put together a book telling the tale from his perspective and later was asked to provide influence and advice on the creation of the 1977 film based on the story - *"A Fairy Tale".*

Joe Cooper had been entirely consumed and spat out by the fantasy that the photographs provoked leading him to become a different version of himself altogether, all whilst the rest of the world continued none the wiser. He later became prone to strokes and eventually passed away from heart failure – or heart break, perhaps?

You may be reading this, believing that such stories are only cases of the extremes. But just because you're not hearing them that doesn't mean they're not happening. Each time we post a manipulated photo of ourselves or our lives online, we are adding to the creation of a delusional, digital world - leading to the increase of mental health and ultimately, suicide rates.

Now I'm not by any means suggesting that we're to suddenly stop using social media, but I'd like to challenge you to try and change your perspective on it, just a little.

Next time you're preparing to share a photo with the world, I'd like you to stop and think – do I really need to put a filter on that?