



Storytelling & Social Media: Helping Year 8 Boys Manage Their Digital Footprints

Irene Basson
St John's College

Further Information
This poster and further information is available at <http://www.theibsc.org/>

Researcher's Email:
basson@stjohnscollege.co.za

Introduction

I have become increasingly aware of how difficult it is for middle school children to grasp the gravity of negative behaviour on social media. Teaching the facts and legal implications, have very little, or at best, short-lived effects.

How could we teach this in a better way?

Research shows how stories and particular compelling narratives cause the release of oxytocin in the brain, leading to changed attitudes, and empathic and generous behaviour (Zak, 2015). With this in mind, I wanted to try a different approach to the usual "factual" teaching of digital citizenship and teach this unit by incorporating stories into every aspect of the module.

The Research Question

How might incorporating storytelling into an Information Technology course encourage Year 8 boys to understand and manage their digital footprint?

Research Context and Participants

St John's College is an independent Anglican day and boarding school in Johannesburg, South Africa. I conducted my research with twenty-four boys in my Year 8 Information Technology class, which is a 10 week-rotational module with two 40-minute lessons per week.

The Research Action

Stories were introduced as a primary source for teaching digital citizenship. Boys used these stories as they completed the following scaffolded learning tasks:

Initial survey. A baseline assessment on social media attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours.

Introduction of stories. Powerful emotive stories of teens and their digital lives were introduced. Themes included curation of the online self, perceived popularity, tagging and commenting, privacy, identity theft, suicide, depression, & cyberbullying.

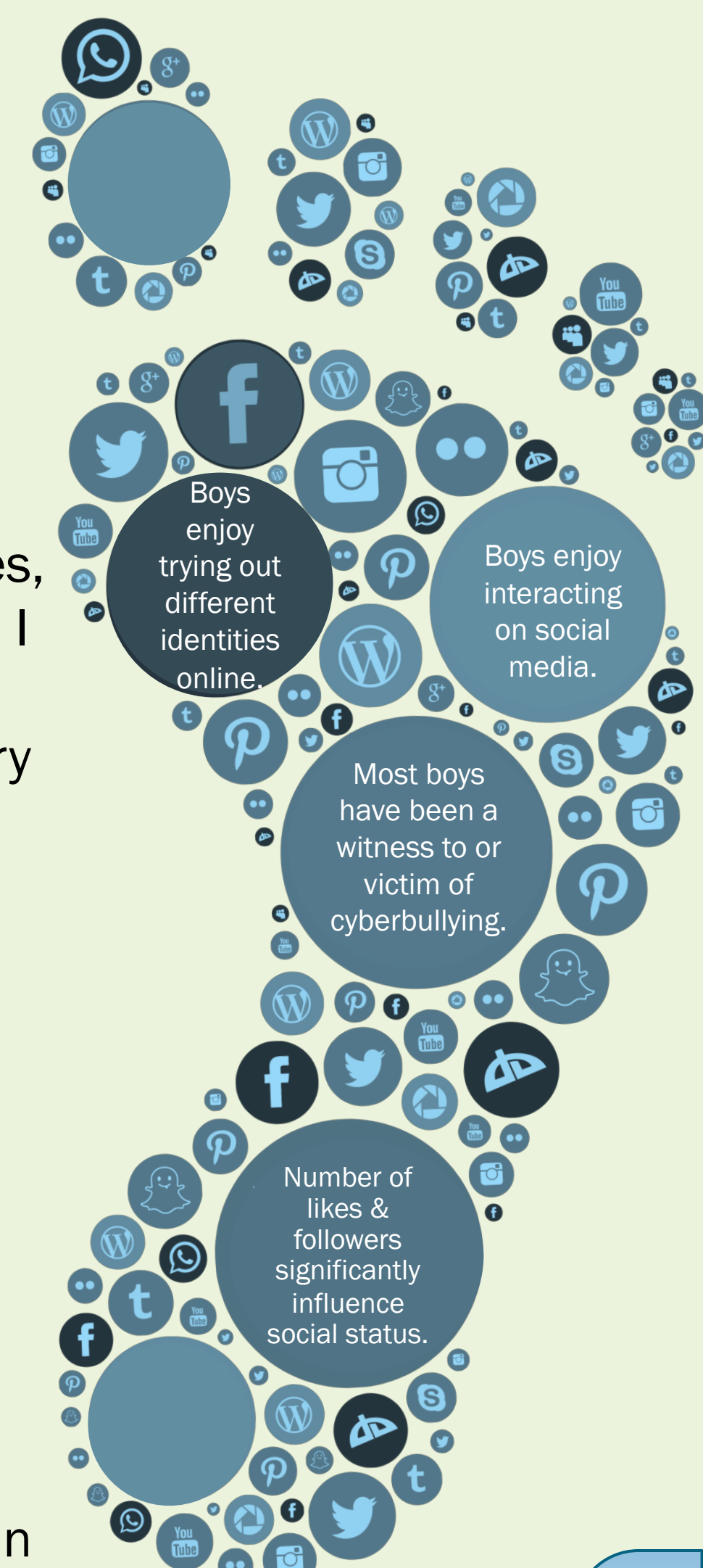
Curation of self. Boys photoshopped selfies, to make "better" versions of themselves, exploring how online profiles are curated versions of reality.

Video reflection tasks. Boys did video reflections on stories they heard and stories that inspired them in their app development.

Digital management tool creation. Reflecting on digital footprints, boys developed their own app prototype as a social media evaluation tool, designed to problem-solve for a specific audience.

Digital stories to promote the app prototype. Students created a short promotional video using digital storytelling elements to introduce their new social media self-management tool to the world.

Exit survey. Mirroring the initial survey questions, the survey assessed whether there were any changed attitudes, perceptions, and behaviours around social media.



Data Collection and Analysis

Quantitative data collected from the baseline and exit surveys were analysed, coded and categorised. **Qualitative data** collected from interviews, researcher field notes, observations, photos, video reflections, and samples of student work were coded and assigned to different categories. By finding commonalities, the following broad themes emerged:

Engagement through storytelling
Self-image and popularity
Self-awareness & reflective thinking

Curation and online honesty
Empathy
Self-management & shifts in behaviour

Key Findings and Discussion

Existing attitudes and behaviour on social media

From the surveys, it emerged that the majority of the boys:

- Enjoyed trying out different identities online.
- Were aware that posts were often enhanced and curated versions of a public social media persona.
- Enjoyed interacting with friends on social media platforms where they could meet people and gain social status.
- Agreed that the number of likes and followers significantly influenced social status.
- Had been a witness to or the victim of cyberbullying in one form or another.

The use of storytelling in teaching digital citizenship

- Storytelling promoted deeper levels of engagement.
- Empathy was developed through storytelling.
- Shared reactions to stories promoted feelings of trust and belonging.
- Storytelling caused shifts in attitudes and behavior.
- Storytelling aided the development of self-awareness and self-management strategies.

Conclusions

The incorporation of stories in our IT course had a very positive effect and it was rewarding to see the boys wholly engaged, producing work of a high standard which reflected critical thinking and an understanding of their digital footprints. It was key to give boys ample opportunity to reflect and to share experiences in a non-judgmental environment. In future I will also give boys more opportunities to think about and design solutions. We often are so focused on explaining what not to do, that they rarely visualise and craft solutions. The creative genius of some of the apps they designed is proof that they have in them the ability to think critically, design creatively, and solve problems collaboratively if given the opportunity to do so.

The use of stories fostered connection and contributed to a deeper understanding of the consequences of behaviour. I am hopeful that such awareness will make our boys better digital citizens who will act with kindness and integrity.

Key Readings

- Berkowicz, J., & Myers, A. (2014, August 31). Internet and empathy, compassion, and respect. Retrieved from <http://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/360/2014/08/>
- Buchanan, R., Southgate, E., Smith, S. P., Murray, T., & Noble, B. (2017). Post no photos, leave no trace: Children's digital footprint management strategies. *E-Learning and Digital Media*, 14(5), 275–290.
- Zak, P. J. (2015). Why inspiring stories make us react: The neuroscience of narrative. In *Cerebrum: The Dana Forum on Brain Science* (Vol. 2015). Dana Foundation.

