

Guidance for PGR students on the use of social media

1. Scope

This guidance applies to all PGR students registered on a higher degree by research at the University of Sheffield. It also applies to those who are on a leave of absence, as they remain affiliated with the University and are still subject to its regulations and policies. The guidance should be read in conjunction with other relevant University policies concerning conduct and behaviour towards others, such as those appended below.

Social media describes web-based applications that allow people to create and exchange content. In this guidance, the term includes blogs and microblogs (e.g. Twitter, TikTok and Weibo), internet forums (e.g. 4chan and reddit), content communities (e.g. YouTube, Instagram and Flickr), and social networking sites (e.g. Facebook and LinkedIn). As a general principle, this guidance should be considered when creating content or making posts that are intended to be shared, and/or shared with groups on social media platforms, and/or placed in the public domain. It should also be considered when exchanging or re-posting content originally created by other users.

2. Using social media responsibly

Social media has become a valuable tool for networking, career development and professional publicity. For academic researchers, social media enables the dissemination of research to a wider audience, presents opportunities to forge connections with cognate scholars across the world, and can provide pathways to real-world impact and knowledge exchange.

As a general principle, consideration should always be given to the potential vast reach and multiple audiences of any social media post that you make. Once information is published online it can be difficult to remove, especially as other users may distribute it further or comment on it. Therefore, always **think before you post**, as posts can potentially be viewed, commented on or distributed by anyone and for any length of time.

There are also specific issues to consider when using social media for research-related activities:

- A vital hallmark of academic freedom is the ability to express of critical or dissenting views that have been informed by rigorous research. However, it is important to recognise the distinction between the fair and valid criticism of people, institutions or practices on the one hand, and harmful, injurious or libellous content on the other.
- Researchers are expected to be aware of the limits of their own professional expertise. When involved in public discussions on social media and elsewhere, you are expected to communicate within areas of your professional expertise and, if necessary, to clarify when you are speaking as a professional from when you are speaking in a personal capacity as a private individual. **This expectation is set out in full in the University's Policy on Good Research and Innovation.**
- If your research involves information relating to human participants, it is your responsibility to ensure that any social media posts that you make about your research fully comply with the **University's policy and guidance on Research Integrity and Ethics.**
- If you are using social media for the purposes of conducting research (e.g. to identify potential participants or to undertake research activities online), you should ensure that you adhere to the **University's Research Ethics Policy Note on Research Involving Social**

Media Data. Please also note that in all cases where social media data is being used for research purposes, ethical approval must be gained prior to collecting and analysing data.

- If you are using instant messaging in your research, please be aware that the University has new **guidance on the use of instant messaging platforms in research**. Instant messaging platforms cannot be used to collect, generate or transfer research data, but can be used for activities such as communication or recruitment of research participants. The policy is available at: <https://students.sheffield.ac.uk/research-ethics/other-guidance/instant-messaging-research>
- Most social media data is defined as personally identifiable data under **the General Data Protection Regulation**.

3. Identity and privacy

Social media often blurs the boundaries between a public and private life.

If you identify yourself by your association with the University, then you should also identify yourself by your name. Therefore, in some instances, you may want to consider adding appropriate confidentiality clauses, disclosures, or disclaimers, given that sometimes what you write or share could be taken to represent the view of the University more widely.

Never forget that online information can be easily accessed by others. You should be aware of the limitations of privacy online and you should regularly review the privacy settings for each of your social media profiles.

However, as social media sites cannot guarantee confidentiality whatever privacy settings are in place, it is vital that you pay close attention to the content of any posts that you make. You should also be aware that information about your location may be embedded within photographs (including in the image itself) and other content and available for others to see.

Guidance for online safety: <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/security/online>

4. Respecting others

When using social media, it is important that you respect other people's views, identities, and beliefs.

Professional values such as respect, fairness, trust, and confidentiality apply to behaviours or actions including those on social media. Any potential misuse of social media may be subject to disciplinary procedures or, where applicable, fitness to practise investigations.

At all times, you should avoid making social media posts that are defaming, offensive, vulgar, harassing, or use threatening language, make personal attacks or accusations, or target individuals or groups with derogatory terms. Such posts are likely to be in violation of the **University's Student Code of Conduct and its Harassment and Discrimination policies**.

Likewise, if you experience any such posts, you should report them to the University via 'Report and Support'. You can access this here:

<https://students.sheffield.ac.uk/harassment>

With further details here:

<https://reportandsupport.sheffield.ac.uk/>

Social media is not the place to communicate concerns or complaints about fellow students or members of University staff. However, if you have a concern or complaint, the University wants to hear from you. One way to express your concern or complaint is through the established Student Complaints Procedure:

sheffield.ac.uk/study/policies/appeals-complaints-current-students

Alternatively, please consult members of administrative staff in your department, your supervisors, your personal tutor, your representatives or the Student Advice Centre (advice@sheffield.ac.uk), so that they can advise you and signpost you to the right person(s).

5. Supporting your effective use of social media

The Careers Service has produced guidance and a video on these issues on networking, social media and speculative approaches, which is available here:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/careers/new/student/act/networking>

The Library runs regular workshops to help you boost your digital presence as a researcher, which you can book here:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/library/research/students/training>

A range of relevant training events are hosted as part of the Doctoral Development Programme. You can browse these here:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/rpi/pgr/ddp/register>

The University Research Ethics Committee (UREC) provides a range of online support materials, including materials relating to conducting research on social media:

<https://students.sheffield.ac.uk/research-ethics/ethics/training-resources>

Some Faculty Knowledge Exchange teams also offer workshops on how best to disseminate your research via social media.

6. Relevant University policies

The University of Sheffield has clear expectations about appropriate behaviours and values. It is your responsibility to find out what these are and adhere to these in your general conduct, including in online settings.

The following policies and guidance are especially relevant in this context:

The University of Sheffield Student Code of Conduct:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/sss/student-code-of-conduct>

Policy on Good Research and Innovation Practices:

<https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/media/33287/download?attachment>

Research ethics guidance on conducting research with human participants:

<https://students.sheffield.ac.uk/research-ethics/ethics/notes/policy-note-1>

Research Ethics Policy Note on Research Involving Social Media Data:

<https://students.sheffield.ac.uk/research-ethics/ethics/notes/policy-note-14>

The University's Harassment and Discrimination policies, including 'report and support':

<https://reportandsupport.sheffield.ac.uk/>

Instant messaging in research policy:

<https://students.sheffield.ac.uk/research-ethics/other-guidance/instant-messaging-research>

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