Responsible use of social media and digital communications

Social media and digital communication tools such as WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Snapchat, X (Twitter) and Threads can add to your learning experience at university and help you develop skills that will increase your employability upon graduation. Communication tools can support networking, help you engage with communities with shared interests, and provide peer feedback. However, when used incorrectly they can cause lasting damage to you and others so it is important to understand your responsibilities, the impact of your digital footprint and the preventative and strategic actions you can take.

Your responsibility

By enrolling as a student at Sheffield Hallam University, you agreed to abide by the University's IT regulations and the Code of Conduct.

The IT regulations cover your use of any technology including:

- **any** use of personally used social media and digital communication tools on university property, and/or using university Wi-Fi
- **any** use of social media tools and digital communication tools that are provided, supported, or licensed by the university, and their use in a university support or learning context.

The Code of Conduct is part of the Conduct and Discipline regulations. The code sets out the standard of conduct expected of students, and this includes the use or misuse of social media and related digital communication tools. You should not use such tools to abuse or intimidate others; words and media can be easily mis-interpreted, captured, and shared. Be respectful of the dignity and rights of others, regardless of their background. When on placement or in employment, you must also act in accordance with your employer's codes and regulations.

What are the consequences of behaving irresponsibly online?

As well as damaging your own reputation and potentially harming others, you may be subject to formal disciplinary procedures and, in the worst-case scenarios, you could lose your place at the university. If you are behaving or communicating in a way that is hurtful, defamatory, libellous, or inappropriate in the physical world, it is just as unacceptable online too. Irresponsible behaviour includes:

- Making derogatory comments about individuals or organisations.
- Sharing confidential information about others.
- Sharing racist, homophobic, or inflammatory material.
- Sharing explicit images or video of others without their consent.
- Flaming or trolling, deliberately provoking arguments, or disruptive behaviour.
- Making, or repeating/reposting allegations about others.
- Filming people without their knowledge and using the media for the purposes of humiliating, bullying, or blackmailing someone.

All of this applies:

...**even if** you believe it to be a completely private communication (i.e. in encrypted chat messages such as WhatsApp or Messenger).

...**even if** you believe the other party are not identifiable in the communication.

...**even if** your intention is to joke or be ironic.

As our use of digital communication evolves, so do the laws surrounding misconduct, defamation, and online safety. For example, the Online Safety Bill has been set up to protect young people from harmful content on the internet, and it has determined that content that promotes self-harm is illegal.

Here are some useful guide rules for you consider:

If you wouldn't say it to someone's face in a public place, don't share it.

If you wouldn't want your employer or relatives to see it, don't share it.

Sharing online when under the influence of alcohol is unlikely to be a good idea.

If your content is visible, it can be copied or shared by anyone, even when it is part of a private communication.