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Responsible use of Generative Artificial Intelligence in social media and online communication: A participatory evaluation

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Abstract

The rapid integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) into social media and online communication has created new opportunities and risks. Drawing on perspectives from critical AI literacy, this study explores how guidance resources can support students in making informed, ethical and responsible decisions within AI-mediated social media environments. While higher education institutions increasingly provide guidance for AI use, there is limited evidence regarding the effectiveness of such guidance in helping students navigate responsible practices. A participatory evaluation of a guidance resource for responsible use of GenAI in social media and digital communication contexts was undertaken through a 50-minute interactive workshop conducted at the Social Media for Learning in Higher Education Conference in 2025. Twenty-one participants, comprising educators and research students, reviewed the guidance using a structured dialogue sheet approach. Systematic content analysis of 92 written statements generated 104 codes and revealed three overarching themes: barriers and enablers for engagement; ethics and responsibility; and relevance and scope. Participants regarded the topic and purpose of the guidance as important. However, concerns were raised about its length, complexity and accessibility, with participants emphasising the need for clearer language and more practical examples. Ethical issues relating to critical AI use, misinformation, academic integrity and authorship were viewed as particularly

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important. Participants, who were predominantly educators and educational research students, also highlighted uncertainty regarding the scope and purpose of the guidance and requested stronger links to assessment-related decision making and students' lived experiences. The findings suggest that effective institutional guidance should move beyond information provision towards the development of critical AI literacy. Participants suggested that future iterations of the guidance should be concise, practical, multimodal and accessible, while further developed with students to ensure relevance and engagement. These findings contribute to emerging research on critical AI literacy and offer practical recommendations for institutions seeking to support responsible AI use in rapidly evolving digital environments.

1. Introduction

Over the past decade, our work has charted the evolution of social media use in higher education, documenting both its pedagogic potential and the challenges it presents (Purvis & Beckingham, 2025). Our research has highlighted how the rapid uptake of social platforms from the early 2010s prompted the need for clearer institutional guidance, particularly to support student professionalism, online safety, and responsible engagement (Beckingham et al., 2014). In response, we developed a suite of open-access resources, including early tri-fold leaflets and later more interactive web-based materials, designed to help students and staff navigate digital footprints, communication norms, and emerging online behaviours. This work sat alongside wider sector activity, including the establishment of the *Social Media for Learning in Higher Education Conference* in 2015, which created a collaborative community to explore the opportunities and disruptions social media introduced to learning and teaching (Sheffield Hallam University, 2025).

Our subsequent research aimed to deepen these insights by examining academic experiences and perspectives on social media for learning (Purvis et al., 2016; Purvis et al., 2020). Findings underscored the importance of institutional clarity, professional identity development, and support structures that enable effective pedagogic use of social platforms. As social media ecosystems expanded introducing new tools, shifting ethical considerations, and global variations in access, we emphasised the ongoing need for refreshed, context-aware guidance (Purvis & Beckingham, 2025). The updated 2023 resources reflected a decade of iterative development shaped by changing digital practices, student needs, and the wider sociotechnical environment.

As social media becomes increasingly intertwined with algorithmic curation, automation, and now generative AI (Geber & Stahel, 2026), the earlier focus on safety, professionalism, and ethical use provides a valuable trajectory for developing the next strand of guidance. The original principles, responsibility, clarity, institutional support, and critical engagement, remain essential but now require reinterpretation considering the ability for anyone to use Generative AI (GenAI) in conjunction with posting on social media.

Generative AI (GenAI) presents new threats that go beyond traditional social media risks such as unprofessional behaviour and oversharing. Students now face far more complex challenges as recipients of information within social media spaces. AI generating tools can easily create deepfakes, disinformation or misinformation (Krönke, 2020), persuasive synthetic media (Whittaker et al., 2020), and machine-mediated interactions (Hancock et al., 2020) posing threats to privacy, reputation, and wellbeing (Shoaib et al., 2023). As educational developers there is a need to address this. Parra and Chatterjee (2024) highlight the importance of looking at the use of social media and artificial intelligence with the question "where do we go from here?". Institutions now require updated guidance to support students in navigating AI-mediated social platforms, ensuring safe, ethical, and informed engagement online. Recent research exploring student perspectives of GenAI highlight that students are seeking out appropriate support and guidance for how AI should or should not be used in their studies (Rook & Plumb, 2026).

It is proposed that new guidance to address these concerns needs to consider:

- The integration of GenAI into everyday social media practices;
- The pedagogical and ethical implications of AI-mediated content;
- The growing risks to authenticity, trust, and safety;
- The implications of AI algorithms, how to recognise disinformation and synthetic media.

This study focuses on social media and online communication as they intersect with GenAI within higher education contexts, including both learning-related activities and wider digital participation that may influence academic, professional and personal development.

The research questions that we sought to address in this work were developed using the IDEA-ARC approach to developing and refining research questions (Purvis et al., 2024). IDEA-ARC is a structured framework of research question development and communication which supports researchers in refining educational research questions through alignment of the problem, intended contribution, and target audience:

- **RQ1:** How do higher education staff and students perceive the clarity, usefulness and relevance of institutional guidance for responsible use of artificial intelligence-mediated social media and online communication?

- **RQ2:** In what ways can guidance for responsible use of generative artificial intelligence be improved to better support social media for learning in higher education?

2. Literature review

2.1 Understanding AI and GenAI

Artificial Intelligence (AI) broadly refers to computational systems capable of performing tasks that typically require human intelligence, such as pattern recognition, prediction, classification, or decision-making (Beckingham & Hartley, 2026). These systems rely on machine learning, natural language processing, and other algorithmic techniques to analyse data and generate useful outputs (Russell & Norvig, 2016). AI is the technology behind the systems now powering search engines, creating video recommendations on streaming content providers (Celik et al., 2022), or product recommendations with online retailers (Du & Xie, 2021).

AI has been used for some time to auto correct text spelling and grammar, and to predict text. More recently the option to engage with smart replies with options of auto completion of sentences or auto-responses to choose from. Hancock et al. (2020, p. 90) refer to Artificial Intelligence-Mediated Communication (AI-MC) which they define as "Interpersonal communication that is not simply *transmitted* by technology, but *modified*, *augmented*, or even *generated* by a computational agent to achieve communication goals". These communication goals are often with the purpose of generating some kind of profit or efficiency gain to improve business effectiveness. Typically relating to the automation of business processes, gaining insight through data analysis, and engaging with users (Davenport & Ronanki, 2018).

Generative AI (GenAI) represents a more recent and transformative branch of AI (Beckingham & Hartley, 2026). GenAI large language models (LLMs) like Microsoft CoPilot Chat, ChatGPT, Google Gemini and Claude create new content, including text, images, video, and audio. These models can produce content that is increasingly realistic and contextually relevant. This makes GenAI fundamentally different in its impact on social media ecosystems because it lowers barriers to content creation and enables both ordinary users and platforms to generate high-volume, human-like outputs. This lowered barriers and widened use of GenAI in educational contexts and has created anxiety for both staff and students in higher education (Atwell, 2025; Freeman, 2025).

2.2 AI and GenAI in social media contexts

In the context of social media, AI is often embedded in platform infrastructure, powering features such as recommendation systems, content moderation, advertising targeting, and automated filtering (Ahmmad et al., 2025). These systems shape what users see and how they interact, often invisibly, by curating feeds, detecting harmful content, or personalising user experiences. Many staff and students in higher education are not aware of how much GenAI or AI has been embedded into the platforms and tools that are used habitually for educational purposes (Sadiku et al., 2021).

AI can shape the structure and visibility of social media interactions, but GenAI can shape the substance and content of what circulates through these networks. As a result, users may simultaneously experience GenAI passively through auto-generated conversation starters or GenAI-crafted ads as well as actively through their own use of generative tools to create images or text. To illustrate how these systems interact and converge within social media environments (Saheb et al., 2024), we outline key examples of platform implemented AI and user-driven GenAI, and how each influences individual's experience (Table 1).

A key feature of artificial intelligence is the capacity to analyse huge amounts of data, and thus, in the context of social media, the ability to identify trends in content shared and interacted with (Benabdelouahed & Dakouan, 2020). This data can be used to personalise content aligned to individual's behaviours and preferences (Agha, 2025). A key motivation for social media providers to use AI and personalise content in this way is to increase advertising revenue (Krönke, 2020). Although many of these AI-enabled features originate outside educational contexts, students routinely encounter them within the social media platforms that also

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Table 1. Examples of AI and GenAI uses in social media

Type	Description	Examples in Social Media	Individual Experience
Traditional AI (platform-implemented)	AI that analyses, predicts, filters, or recommends content	• Algorithmic feed ranking and personalised recommendations • Automated moderation and detection of harmful content • Ad targeting and behavioural profiling	• Users see curated feeds shaped by algorithms • Exposure to filtered misinformation or echo chambers • Content may be removed or flagged automatically
Generative AI (platform-implemented)	GenAI features built into platforms that generate or assist content creation	• AI-generated conversation starters, comment suggestions, and chat assistance • Auto-generated images, avatars, and stylised media • AI-created ads or personalised marketing content	• Interactions influenced by machine-generated text or responses • Difficulty distinguishing human from synthetic content • Possible declines in perceived authenticity and conversational quality
Generative AI (user-driven)	GenAI features built into platforms that generate or assist content creation	• Users writing posts, captions, or comments using GenAI. • Creation of synthetic images. • Individuals using GenAI to summarise, personalise, or re-write others content	• Enhanced productivity and creative capacity • Potential for unintentional misinformation • New ethical and academic integrity considerations

support learning, professional networking, and academic communication.

2.3 Generative AI and the transformation of content creation

GenAI can be used to create text posts, artwork, or videos with minimal effort. While this can lower barriers to producing high-quality or realistic content it can undermine authenticity (Møller et a.l, 2026). Examples include:

- Users drafting captions or posts via GenAI text generators.
- AI-generated images or stylised avatars on Instagram or TikTok.
- Platforms offering built-in GenAI editing tools for creators.
- Generating synthesised media for blog posts or other types of content platforms.

Younger users, such as Gen Z (born 1997-2012) and millennials (born 1981-96) (Dimock, 2019), are adopting generative tools rapidly and increasingly use GenAI in content creation and self-expression (Chan & Lee, 2023; OFCOM, 2024; Attwell, 2025; Freeman, 2025). Such use intersects directly with higher-education contexts, where students may use GenAI for both academic and social media purposes. For example:

- Students using GenAI to rewrite posts for tone or professionalism.
- Creating AI-generated digital personas or profile images.
- Using AI to privately draft or rehearse replies in challenging online conversations.

As these tools become more accessible within social media apps, people increasingly engage with AI-mediated communication (Riva, 2025) and use GenAI to produce, enhance, or edit personal media as part of everyday self-expression (Abiri, 2025). While this democratises creativity,

it also blurs boundaries between human and machine authorship, raising questions about digital authenticity and originality, intellectual ownership, and responsible use (Doshi & Hauser, 2024; Enli, 2026; Wolfe & Cronin, 2026). Platforms themselves are accelerating this trend by integrating generative content creation tools to support advertising users' creativity and increase engagement (Hutchinson, 2025). However, these tools also risk saturating platforms with low-quality or derivative AI content, which can undermine the sense of human connection online, contributing to content fatigue (Møller et al., 2026) and raising issues about copyright and intellectual property issues (Appel et al., 2023).

2.4 Misrepresentation

The rapid integration of GenAI into mainstream social media platforms has reshaped how users create, share, and interpret content. Recent research shows that AI-assisted tools now lower barriers to content production (Møller et al., 2026) and influence the tone, volume, and authenticity of online discussions both positively and negatively (Mahajan, 2025). At the same time, GenAI enables the mass creation of highly realistic media, raising risks related to misinformation, covert influence, and synthetic interactions that are increasingly difficult for users to recognise (Kim, 2024; Pan et al., 2025). Synthetic media can be defined broadly as artificially or automatically created media including photos, audio and videos (Whittaker et al., 2020). These developments have amplified existing concerns around privacy, trust, and digital professionalism, particularly as younger generations adopt AI tools at a faster rate than other demographics and bring these practices into learning environments (Cheng & Lee, 2024).

GenAI makes it easy to create persuasive and covert use of synthetic media, deepfakes, or fabricated text at speed (Pan et al., 2025). Deepfake is a term combining "deep learning" and "fake" media and refers to "digital fabrications in which realistic likenesses of things are synthetically generated or entirely altered to say or do something that never occurred" (Shoaib et al., 2023, p. 1). This raises risks for privacy, reputation, and public trust (Sahebi & Formosa, 2025), especially when distinguishing human from synthetic actors becomes increasingly difficult. For example:

- Deepfake videos circulating during elections or crises.
- AI-generated misinformation in comment threads.
- Bot accounts producing human-like content at scale, creating "synthetic social media" environments.

This includes synthetic advertising which refers to "ads that are generated or edited through the artificial and automatic production and modification of data" (Campbell et al., 2022, p. 22)

As GenAI increases the volume and sophistication of content, concerns about misinformation, manipulated media, and malicious activity have risen sharply. Studies emphasise that GenAI makes it easier to create persuasive deepfakes, fabricate statements, or distribute disinformation at scale (Shoaib et al., 2023). This poses risks to personal reputation, digital wellbeing, and broader societal trust, particularly when platform governance struggles to keep pace with synthetic media detection. Moreover, the rise of AI-driven bots capable of producing human-like content introduces ambiguity into social interactions. Social bots within social networking sites are "autonomous actors driven by algorithms and software that post content on these platforms" (Hajli et al., 2022, p. 1238). AI-driven automation can accelerate the spread of harmful or misleading content and facilitate malicious social engineering on social platforms, where malicious actors deliberately implement bots and large-scale disinformation campaigns (Singh et al., 2025) with the intention to harm (Halji et al., 2022). It is becoming increasingly difficult to distinguish between AI-generated and authentic content. UNESCO (2025) describe this as a crisis of knowing, where individuals become less certain about what evidence they can trust online.

2.5 Implications for students

Researchers have highlighted the use of "synthetic social media" environments, in which users cannot reliably distinguish between human actors and AI systems (Shoaib et al., 2023). For students, this has implications for safety, identity management, and critical digital literacy, making new guidance essential. These technologies can be used for morally good or bad purposes (Du & Xie, 2021). Whilst there are many examples of using AI for social good, for example contribution to a variety of Sustainable Development Goals (Ghallab, 2019), the focus of this paper is to consider where it is not useful. AI and GenAI use can often lack transparency, be used irresponsibly or maliciously, perpetuate biases and discrimination when trained on biased data, and are not infallible, posing risks including violation of privacy, freedom of expression and non-discrimination (European Council, 2025).

Whilst there is a wide body of literature which looks at the use of AI generated content in social media in the

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context of marketing, with examples in higher education evaluating AI vs human generated content marketing strategies (Ruiz-Pozo et al., 2025), there is a research gap that focusses specifically on how students in higher education are using AI generated technology for their use of social media for learning. The OECD (2026) has raised the need for media and artificial intelligence literacy guidance and have recently published a preliminary draft version of the PISA 2029 Media & Artificial Intelligence Literacy (MAIL) Assessment Framework (OECD, 2026) which is a set of competences individuals need to engage with social media, AI systems and digital content.

Social media has long been recognised as more than a communication tool in higher education. It can function as a learning environment that supports knowledge sharing, peer interaction, professional networking, reflection, and participation in disciplinary communities (Purvis et al., 2016; Purvis et al., 2020). Students frequently engage in informal learning through social media by accessing resources, following experts, participating in discussions, and building networks that extend beyond formal curricula. These platforms can also contribute to professional identity formation, enabling students to develop an online presence, engage with practitioners, and navigate the expectations of professional communities (Beckingham, 2019). Social media therefore supports learning not only through direct educational activities but also through broader processes of social participation, professional engagement, and networked knowledge construction.

The growing integration of AI and GenAI within social media environments has begun to transform these learning spaces. Algorithmic curation increasingly influences the information students encounter, while GenAI enables the creation, modification, and dissemination of content at an unprecedented scale. As a result, students must not only evaluate information shared by peers and professional networks as part of their learning, but also critically assess AI-generated content, synthetic media, and AI-mediated interactions. These developments create new challenges for learning, participation, communication, and professional identity development within networked environments and strengthen the need for guidance that supports informed and responsible engagement.

2.6 Critical AI literacy as an analytical lens

This study is informed by critical AI literacy, which extends beyond technical competence in using AI tools and includes, but is not limited to, GenAI tools. Critical AI literacy includes the ability to evaluate AI-generated content, understand how algorithmic systems shape information environments, recognise issues of bias and power, make ethical judgements, and decide when any type of AI use is appropriate or inappropriate (Bali, 2023; Long & Magerko, 2020; Conrad & Kamperman, 2025; Rapanta et al., 2025). Within social media environments, critical AI literacy also encompasses the ability to identify misinformation, synthetic media, algorithmic influence, and the implications of AI-mediated communication. From this perspective, guidance is not simply a source of information, but a pedagogical intervention intended to support the development of these critical capacities.

3. Methods

3.1 Research design

A participatory evaluative approach (Austen & Donnelly, 2023; Coghlan, 2007) was undertaken through a 50-minute interactive workshop to explore the effectiveness of a new draft guidance information sheet. Our practical participatory evaluation approach broadens decision making through systematic enquiry with stakeholders (Cousins & Whitmore, 1998) and ensuring their active contribution to the improvement of the resource before implementation. The sheet was designed to support students in understanding responsible use of generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) in online environments, including social media and digital communication. The guidance also raised awareness of how AI and GenAI technology is being used by others and how this impact on the experience of social media for learning.

Ethical approval for this study was granted by the Sheffield Hallam University ethics review process. Participants were provided with information about the purpose of the study, data handling procedures, confidentiality, and their right to withdraw, and informed consent was obtained prior to participation. The session was structured as a research evaluation workshop, with participants provided with a participant information sheet which included information about the purpose of the research, how data was being stored, how anonymisation and confidentiality was assured, and how they could raise concerns, withdraw, or opt out of data collection. Once informed consent was obtained from participants, they were then invited to engage in a facilitated discussion using a dialogue sheet method. This approach encourages collaborative discussion and reflection, allowing participants to identify what they believe is most important for students to know about GenAI use in social media and digital communication contexts.

Given the rapid evolution of AI-enabled tools and GenAI platforms and the implications for student digital behaviours, it was important to gather insights from educators who routinely support students' engagement with emerging technologies. The workshop format was selected to facilitate collaborative exploration, encourage reflective dialogue, and generate rich qualitative feedback grounded in professional practice. Therefore, the participatory, practice-informed, and qualitative approach to evaluation enabled us to develop the new staff and student guidance leaflet as an approach to community co-production. The final version of the leaflet will be provided to the higher education community under a Creative Commons license to ensure that all participants will benefit from their engagement; a key ethical consideration of our approach to this research activity.

3.2 Participants

The workshop included 21 participants, comprising 15 educators and 6 educational research students from a range of UK higher education institutions, present at the conference. The participants were from a range of disciplinary backgrounds and institutions from across the United Kingdom. Their involvement was sought on the basis that they hold pedagogical, pastoral, and disciplinary perspectives relevant to student digital engagement. Attendance at the session was voluntary, and participants were offered an opt-out option where they would still be able to engage in the activity but without any data collection. All participants provided their written informed consent to engage in the activity and for their written contributions to be collected as data for our analysis. Participants represented roles including academic staff, learning developers, research students, and specialists in digital education. Four of the 21 participants were from a non-UK background. This diversity ensured that the resulting feedback captured a broad set of professional priorities and concerns.

The 21 participants were organised into six self-selected groups for the workshop activities. The self-selected groups would include differences in experience, role and status which may have influenced the power dynamics and subsequent discussions. The dialogue-sheet methodology was intended to mitigate these effects by explicitly enabling all participants to contribute written comments directly onto the sheet and stating that consensus is not required (see section 3.4 for more details). Each dialogue sheet was assigned an anonymised identifier (Group 1 to Group 6) to support analysis and reporting. Participant names were not recorded on the dialogue sheets. The only documents containing participant names were the informed consent forms, which were stored separately and were not linked to any dialogue sheet identifier or group number. This ensured that all workshop contributions remained anonymous during data analysis and reporting.

3.3 Measures

The workshop centred on a structured co-creation group activity using an A0 printed dialogue sheet (Figure 1). Dialogue sheets are a facilitative method designed to support equitable, collaborative discussion without requiring a single facilitator to lead each group. The sheet contained four leading questions designed to prompt reflection on different aspects of the draft guidance, including its clarity, relevance, tone, and perceived usefulness for students to better understand the risks and ethical responsibilities when using GenAI. A large blank space in the centre allowed participants to record ideas, questions, concerns, and improvement suggestions collaboratively.

Participants formed small groups of three to six individuals and worked through the dialogue prompts at their own pace. Alongside the dialogue sheets, each participant received a printed copy of the draft student guidance leaflet on AI and social media (Figures 2 and 3). The leaflet served as a shared reference point, enabling groups to assess the content in context and annotate their dialogue sheets with specific, actionable feedback. The workshop lasted approximately 45 minutes, enabling both structured discussion and unstructured conversation around the opportunities and challenges associated with introducing guidance on GenAI/AI-mediated social media practices.

3.4 Procedure

The dialogue sheets and workshop format were delivered as the closing session at the Social Media for Learning in Higher Education Conference in 2025. Instructions were provided verbally to the group and were also written in one corner of the sheet:

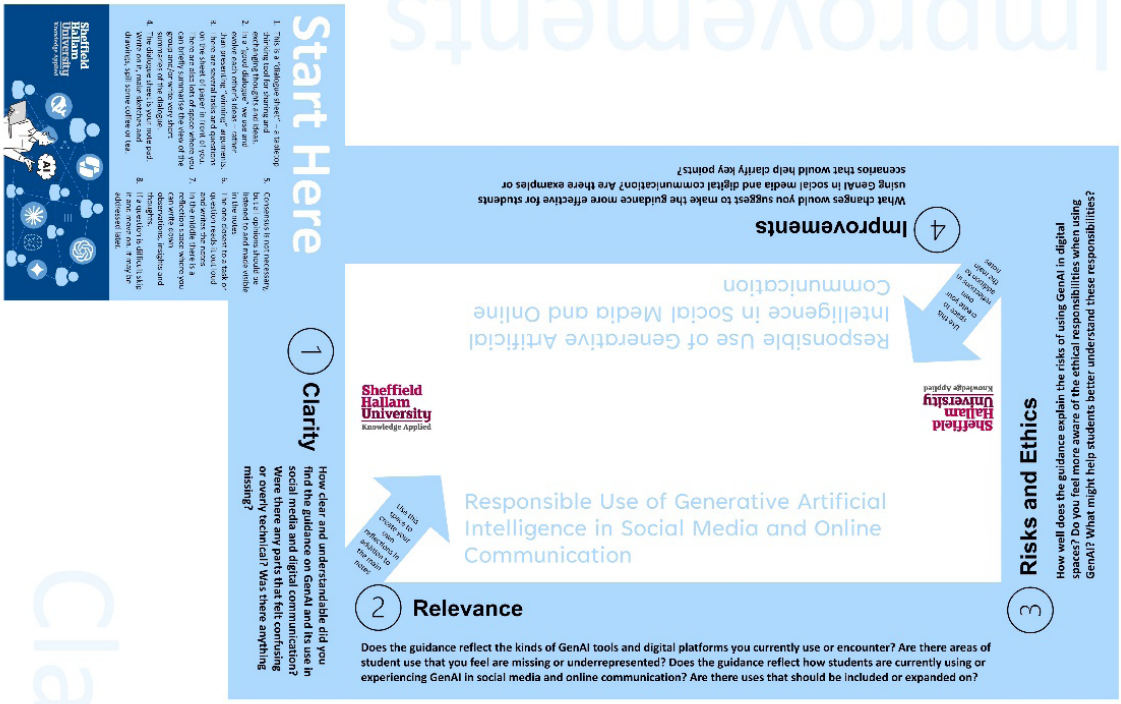
1. This is a "dialogue sheet" – a tabletop thinking tool for sharing and exchanging thoughts and ideas.

2. In a "good dialogue" we use and evolve each other's ideas – rather than presenting "winning" arguments.

3. There are several tasks and questions on the sheet of paper in front of you. There are also lots of space where you can briefly summarise the view of the group and/or write very short summaries of the dialogue.

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Figure 1. The dialogue sheet used in the workshop



4. The dialogue sheet is your note pad. Write on it, make sketches and drawings, spill some coffee or tea.

5. Consensus is not necessary, but all opinions should be listened to and made visible in the notes.

6. The one closest to a task or question reads it out loud and writes the notes.

7. In the middle there is a reflection space where you can write down observations, insights and thoughts.

8. If a question is difficult skip it and move on. It may be addressed later.

Several pens per table were provided and participants encouraged to write when thoughts came to them as well as take responsibility for writing notes for the question that was facing them. Each dialogue sheet then captured written comments and annotations from group and individually-generated responses to the four guiding questions. The use of written responses allowed participants to contribute equally and ensured that all feedback was captured directly in their own words.

The workshop was designed to fill 60 minutes, including time for an introduction and close. Four groups of questions were provided on the sheet:

1. *Clarity*. How clear and understandable did you find the guidance on GenAI and its use in social media and digital communication? Were there any parts that felt confusing or overly technical? Was there anything missing?

2. *Relevance*. Does the guidance reflect the kinds of GenAI tools and digital platforms you currently use or encounter? Are there areas of student use that you feel are missing or underrepresented? Does the guidance reflect how students are currently using or experiencing GenAI in social media and online communication? Are there uses that should be included or expanded on?

Figure 2. Page 1 of the guidance document



Responsible use of generative artificial intelligence

Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI) is a type of technology that uses a statistical model based on probability, creating responses from trained data taken from the open web. Entirely new text, images, video, audio, or code can be created by identifying patterns in existing data. GenAI is different to retrieval-based AI (i.e. search engines) which present information matching a query. While GenAI can be useful, it is important to be aware of two key risks: first, tools not supported by the university may be insecure and could misuse your data; second, they may provide biased or inaccurate information. Some tools are labelled as AI, but in reality they may be simple algorithms or data analysis tools. True GenAI uses input data to analyse, predict, evaluate, and generate new outputs.

Your Responsibility

By enrolling as a student at Sheffield Hallam University, you agreed to abide by the University's regulations for student conduct.

The IT regulations cover your use, personal or professional, of any technology including:

- **any** use of digital tools, including artificial intelligence tools, on university property, and/or using university WiFi
- **any** use of digital tools, including artificial intelligence tools, that are provided, supported, or licensed by the university, and their use in a university support or learning context.

GenAI can be a useful tool but it must be used with thought and consideration. Examples of inappropriate or inconsiderate uses of AI are:

- **Using GenAI tools to share personal information or copyrighted content,** which may result in data breaches or misuse.
- **Using third-party GenAI tools that are not supported by the University,** as data uploaded can be used for training or other unknown purposes.
- **Over-relying on GenAI during your studies,** which can limit your development of essential skills.
- **Using GenAI-generated content without proper acknowledgement or transparency,** may be considered academic misconduct.
- **Failing to apply critical thinking when using GenAI,** which can contribute to the spread of bias, discrimination, or misinformation.

What is AI in the context of Social Media?

AI and GenAI are now woven into nearly every social media platform you use, often in ways you might not notice. From what appears on your feed to the captions suggested for your posts, AI is constantly shaping your online experience. GenAI can be used to brainstorm post ideas and structure these. Keep your authentic voice by editing and adding your perspective. Whilst GenAI can help to ensure posts are clear and grammatically correct, always verify facts.

AI and GenAI can deliver features such as:

- Content recommendations and personalised feeds.
- Automated moderation and filtering of harmful content.
- Chatbots and virtual assistants.
- Image recognition and tagging.
- Sentiment analysis and trend prediction.

Understanding how AI works in these contexts helps you use social media more critically and ethically.

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Figure 3. Page 2 of the guidance document



Your responsibility when engaging with AI-powered tools

Just as with other digital tools, you are responsible for how you interact with AI systems. This includes:

- Being aware of how your data is used.
- Recognising when content is generated or curated.
- Avoiding the spread of misinformation.
- Respecting others' privacy when using AI tools (e.g. facial recognition, auto-tagging).

Refer to guidance on IT regulations and conduct.

How AI affects your digital footprint

AI systems track and analyse your behaviour to personalise your experience. This contributes to your digital footprint in ways that may not be immediately visible:

- Predictive analytics may infer traits or preferences based on your activity.
- AI-curated content can shape your online identity and influence how others perceive you.
- Automated tagging and facial recognition can associate you with content without your explicit consent.

Be proactive in managing these effects by reviewing privacy settings and understanding platform algorithms.

Learning to use AI Ethically

Learn how to interact with AI system and tools to:

- **Be aware** of how data is used to train algorithms.
- **Recognise** AI generated or curated content.
- **Avoid** the spread of misinformation amplified by algorithmic bias.
- **Respect** others' privacy when using AI tools (e.g. facial recognition, auto-tagging, photo manipulation).

Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike
Alison Purvis and Sue Beckingham, December 2025.

Points to Consider

Invisible Algorithms: AI decides what content appears in your feed and which voices are amplified

- You don't see a neutral view of the world.
- "Engagement" doesn't always mean "truth"
- Diversify your feed: follow a range of perspectives.

Privacy and Data: AI learns from your behaviour.

- Every interaction trains the algorithm.
- GenAI features may collect data for future models.
- Check privacy settings regularly and know what data is shared.

Authenticity and Misinformation: GenAI can create highly realistic fake text, images, and videos, spreading misinformation or "deepfakes."

- Not everything that looks real is real.
- Verify information using trusted sources.
- Think critically about posts.

Creativity and Ownership: GenAI tools can help you create content but raise questions about originality.

- Who owns the content you create with GenAI tools?
- Avoid using GenAI to copy others' creative styles or likenesses without permission.
- Use GenAI to enhance creativity, not replace.

Ethics and Bias: AI systems can reflect the biases of the data they're trained on.

- Algorithms reinforce stereotypes or unequal visibility.
- Which voices are being amplified or ignored?
- Report biased or harmful content.

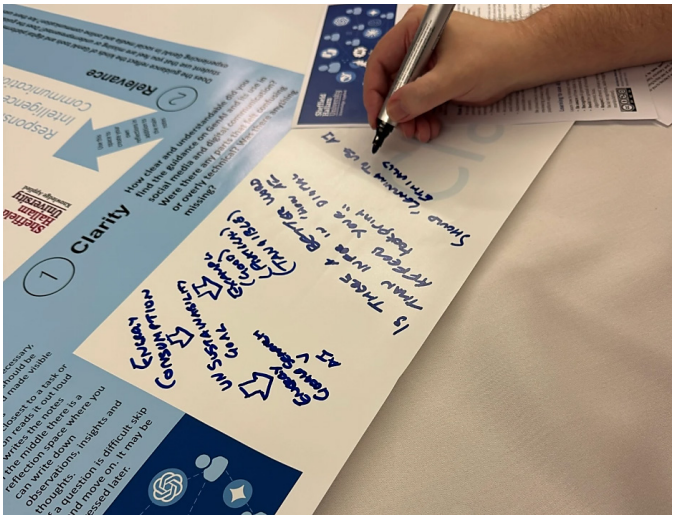
Mental Health and Wellbeing: AI optimizes for engagement, not wellbeing - to keep you scrolling.

- AI-curated content can affect your mood, self-esteem, or sense of belonging.
- Use screen-time and content filters to maintain healthy habits.

Transparency and Trust: Platforms may label GenAI generated content, but not always clearly.

- Look for "AI-generated" or "synthetic media".
- Be sceptical of content that feels too perfect or emotionally manipulative.
- Who created this - a person or a machine?

Figure 4. A dialogue sheet being used during the workshop



3. *Risks and Ethics*. How well does the guidance explain the risks of using GenAI in digital spaces? Do you feel more aware of the ethical responsibilities when using GenAI? What might help students better understand these responsibilities?

4. *Improvements*. What changes would you suggest to make the guidance more effective for students using GenAI in social media and digital communication? Are there examples or scenarios that would help clarify key points?

Questions 1 and 2 relating to clarity and relevance primarily addressed RQ1, while questions 3 and 4 concerning improvements and recommendations addressed RQ2.

3.5 Analysis

Completed dialogue sheets (Figure 1 and 4) were manually transcribed and organised for content coding and analysis using the methods of systematic content analysis outlined in Kleinheksel et al. (2020). Each individual statement from the dialogue sheets was identified as the units of meaning (Kleinheksel et al., 2020) and each statement was labelled with a code. Similar codes were then grouped into categories and finally categories described with a theme (Kleinheksel et al., 2020).

An initial round of coding, grouping and theming identified the recurring ideas and themes discussed in the groups. Two more further rounds of iterative coding and grouping was undertaken to achieve a final set of codes, categories, and themes. Initial coding was undertaken by the lead author. Codes, categories and themes were then reviewed by both authors. Where alternative interpretations were possible, comments were revisited and discussed until agreement was reached. Reproducibility of coding is not expected for this type of systematic content analysis, but the codes (Table 2) should retain their meaning throughout the research (Kleinheksel et al., 2020) and align to the research questions (Purvis et al., 2024). An example of raw statements and subsequent categories and themes are provided in Table 3. While coding was inductive and grounded in participant comments, interpretation was informed by the study's research questions and critical AI literacy literature.

3.6 Reflexivity

As researchers with over 13 years of experience using social media for learning, our professional backgrounds and longstanding engagement with this field shaped how we approached this study. We hold a generally positive view of the educational value of social media and computer mediated communication. This positive view may have increased our sensitivity to opportunities highlighted in the data and may have influenced how we framed and interpreted emerging themes. We were aware that this orientation could limit our attention to critical or negative perspectives. To support reflexivity, we revisited codes to check that they reflected the data rather than our expectations and remained attentive to divergent or problematic cases. This reflexive stance aimed to enhance the transparency and trustworthiness of the analysis and to acknowledge our positionality within the research context.

4. Results

The dialogue sheets generated a total of 92 statements. Of the 92 statements, 80 statements were coded with a single code and 12 statements received two codes to cover two different aspects included within a single statement. An example of the double coded statement was "Does a good job of outlining the risks… although there maybe needs more emphasis on the risk of academic misconduct. This is what they might be worried about.". This statement was coded as both coverage and misconduct as it included both recurrent themes relating to the scope of the content and the type of content that was expected. Therefore, across the 92 statements we generated 104 codes (Table 4).

Table 4 shows the content analysis thematic map and taxonomy according to Kleinheksel et al. (2020). The rounds of inductive coding identified recurring ideas related to the

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Table 2. Codebook

Code	Definition	Example of Included Comments
Assessment	References to assessment tasks, assignment requirements, declaration of GenAI use, feedback, academic integrity regulations, marking expectations, or assessed work.	It might help if it was signposted how to state your GenAI use in assessments.
Content	Comments relating to the substantive material included within the guidance, including suggestions for additional topics or information.	Could include more on algorithms and filter bubbles.
Coverage	Comments concerning the breadth, depth, completeness, or scope of topics addressed in the guidance resource.	Does a good job of outlining the risks but needs more emphasis on misconduct.
Criticality	References to critical thinking, critical evaluation, questioning AI outputs, informed judgement, or critical engagement with AI-generated content.	Students need to question the accuracy of AI outputs.
Format	Comments relating to the presentation, medium, visual design, length, layout, or preferred format of the resource.	Could be an infographic rather than a leaflet.
Inclusion	References to accessibility, equity, diversity, language inclusivity, or meeting the needs of different learner groups.	Needs versions suitable for neurodivergent students.
Language	Comments related to readability, terminology, clarity of wording, jargon, or complexity of language.	Too many technical terms for students.
Misconduct	References to academic misconduct, inappropriate AI use, cheating, plagiarism, undeclared use, or breaches of institutional expectations.	Students may be concerned about academic misconduct.
Practicality	Requests for examples, scenarios, case studies, demonstrations, decision-making aids, or applied guidance.	Provide more practical examples.
Purpose	Comments questioning or discussing the intended role, audience, aim, or function of the guidance.	Is this guidance, information, or a provocation?
Structure	Comments relating to organisation, sequencing, navigation, section order, or flow of information.	The order of ideas could be clearer.
Student-centred	References to student experiences, student perspectives, student needs, student voice, or relevance to everyday student practice.	Make it focused on student experience.
Sustainability	References to environmental impacts, energy consumption, sustainability implications, or responsible environmental use of AI technologies.	Include information about the environmental cost of AI.

Table 3. Example of coding of raw statements

Raw Statement	Code	Category	Theme
"Too wordy"	Language	Enabler for engagement	Barriers and Enablers
"More examples"	Practicality	Enabler for engagement	Barriers and Enablers
"Needs assessment advice"	Assessment	Criticality and Integrity	Ethics and Responsibilities
"There were some really useful points about social media content and what the algorithm chooses. A lot of people don't realise this."	Format	Content, format and approach	Barriers and Enablers

Table 4. Content analysis taxonomy including a frequency count of the 104 coded statements

Code	Frequency	Category	Theme
Assessment	5	Criticality and Integrity	Ethics and responsibilities
Criticality	9		
Misconduct	4		
Sustainability	6	Environmental awareness	
Content	13	Content, Format and Approach	Barriers and enablers for engagement
Format	20		
Structure	3		
Inclusion	2	Enabler for engagement	
Language	16		
Practicality	6		
Coverage	12	Scope	Relevance and scope
Purpose	1	Relevance	
Student-centred	5		
Total	104		

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clarity, structure, and tone of the draft guidance, as well as emergent concerns about student interpretation, digital risk, and ethical considerations surrounding AI-generated content.

Therefore, the dialogue sheet questions elicited 3 key themes. These themes were coded from comments that were distributed through the responses to the four questions on the dialogue sheet.

4.1 Barriers and enablers for engagement

The most frequently occurring comments related to the density, length and complexity of the guidance. Participants generally recognised the value and importance of the content but questioned whether students would engage fully with the resource in its current form. Concerns centred on accessibility, cognitive load and the use of specialist terminology. One sheet described, "Will a student read the whole document?" (group 2), and summarised a response more directly as "TOO WORDY" (group 2). Participants also highlighted potential barriers for particular student groups, noting that "Technical terms are too many for students, especially from non-English countries" (group 3) and suggesting a need for "Different versions of the instructions for neurodivergent students" (group 5). Collectively, these comments indicate that participants regarded the content as worthwhile but believed that its presentation and language could reduce accessibility and limit student engagement.

Participants also emphasised the need for more practical and applied guidance. Rather than providing information alone, they suggested that the resource should support student decision-making through authentic examples and scenarios. Recommendations included calls to "Provide illustrative examples" (group 3) and include "More practical suggestions/examples" (group 5). Participants in one group felt that practical demonstrations of ethical practice would be particularly valuable, arguing that the guidance "Should offer students more practical ways of using GenAI ethically" (group 5). These comments suggest that participants valued actionable, contextualised advice that would help students translate and apply principles of responsible AI use into authentic situations and everyday learning for meaningful online communication practices rather than receiving information alone.

4.2 Ethics and responsibility

Comments within this theme focused on the ethical responsibilities associated with GenAI use and the importance of developing critical and informed practices. Participants expressed concerns about academic integrity, with one sheet noting that "Fake references is a real issue" (group 1) and another group observing that "Students use AI uncritically 'copy and paste'" and concerns about "fake citations" (group 2). Questions of authorship and ownership were also evident, exemplified by the comment, "Who owns the content you create?" (group 6). Participants in the same group further highlighted the importance of individual choice and critical engagement, arguing that the guidance was "Missing: critical agency to opt out and how to take a personal stance" (group 6). There were also comments about environmental and sustainability considerations to be included within the ethical elements of the guidance with group 4 making several comments including "Environmental impact of GenAI -> sustainability goals" and "Energy goals search > AI". These responses suggest that participants viewed responsible use of GenAI as developing informed ethical decision-making, critical evaluation and personal responsibility when engaging with AI-generated content.

4.3 Relevance and scope

Participants frequently questioned the scope and purpose of the guidance, expressing uncertainty about whether the leaflet was intended primarily as a resource about generative artificial intelligence, social media use, or the intersection of both. One dialogue sheet noted that the "Scope of leaflet: confusing - is it AI or social media. It tries to be both, kind of" (group 6), and encouraged authors to "Decide on purpose of document: guidance, provocation, or information?" (group 6). These comments suggest that participants sought a clearer articulation of the resource's primary purpose, scope, and intended outcomes.

Participants also consistently interpreted the guidance through a student learning and assessment lens. Several comments suggested that greater attention should be given to assessment-related decision-making, academic expectations and the declaration of AI use. For example, one sheet included a comment that the guidance "Does not touch on assessment specifically enough" (group 1), while another sheet suggested that "It might help if it was sign posted how to state your GenAI use e.g. assessments, projects, etc. Make it focused on student experience" (group 5). Collectively, these responses indicate that participants viewed assessment contexts as a particularly relevant area for guidance to focus and expected stronger connections between responsible AI use, institutional expectations and students' everyday academic experiences.

5. Discussion

This study found that educators and educational research students generally perceived institutional GenAI guidance as valuable and relevant, but often too lengthy and insufficiently focused on assessment-related decision making. While participants recognised the importance of ethical guidance, they appeared to prioritise concerns about assessment, academic integrity and practical application. Participants anticipated that students would prioritise engagement with institutional guidance primarily through the lens of academic performance and risk management rather than broader digital citizenship. This finding aligns with previous research suggesting that students seek contextualised and practice-oriented AI guidance rather than abstract statements of principle (Attwell, 2025; Freeman, 2025). However, the present study extends this work by demonstrating that concerns about assessment remain central even when broader ethical issues are introduced. These findings suggest that perceptions of institutional GenAI guidance are shaped not only by its content but also by its perceived relevance to students' immediate learning and assessment contexts. To support our students to become critical digital citizens, it is also necessary to empower our students with the knowledge and skills to use both GenAI and social media responsibly and safely and 'critically resist use' (Estellés & Doyle, 2025) where appropriate.

5.1 Staff and student perceptions (RQ1)

Staff and students generally perceived the guidance as useful and relevant for raising awareness of ethical AI use and digital literacy, particularly around algorithms, misinformation, digital footprints and responsible engagement online (Long & Magerko, 2020). Participants recognised the importance of helping students understand how AI influences social media experiences and welcomed content that explained concepts such as algorithmic curation and ethical decision-making. Several comments specifically highlighted the value of information relating to "invisible algorithms" and how social media platforms shape online experiences, suggesting that the guidance addressed issues that many users may not routinely consider. Clearly algorithmic literacy and recognising how algorithmically curated environments shape information consumption is critical for students in higher education (Long & Magerko, 2020; Swart, 2021).

Perceptions of clarity were weakened by the guidance's length, dense presentation, technical language and lack of practical examples. Participants repeatedly described the resource as "too wordy", questioned whether students would read it in full, and highlighted potential barriers for non-native English speakers and neurodivergent learners. Technical terms such as "algorithm" and "trained data" were identified as potentially unfamiliar, suggesting that the language used did not always match the intended student audience. These findings indicate that clarity is influenced not only by the accuracy of information provided but also by the accessibility and usability of the resource itself. A shared and simplified language is therefore essential to reduce barriers to engagement (Purvis & Mooney, 2026). Participants' concerns regarding document length and technical language are consistent with cognitive load theory, which suggests that excessive informational complexity can reduce engagement with learning resources and limit effective processing of key concepts (Paas & van Merriënboer, 2020).

The findings also suggest that participants interpreted the guidance primarily through the lens of learning and assessment, thereby supporting students to navigate GenAI through curricula (Rook & Plumb, 2026). Although the guidance was developed to address responsible use of AI in social media and online communication, repeated requests for additional content relating to academic misconduct, assessment declarations, feedback and study practices indicate that participants viewed these issues as highly salient to students. Questions such as whether assessment was "out of scope" and suggestions that students would be particularly concerned about misconduct mirrors a growing literature suggesting that students' understanding of GenAI is often framed through questions of assessment, academic integrity and acceptable use rather than broader considerations of digital citizenship (Oc et al., 2025; Xia et al., 2024). This emphasis may reflect the characteristics of the conference audience. As educators and educational researchers, participants may have been particularly attuned to assessment implications of GenAI use. Consequently, these findings should not be interpreted as evidence that assessment concerns are necessarily dominant among students engaging with AI-mediated social media.

While ethical issues relating to misinformation, authorship, ownership of content and responsible use were regarded as important, participants appeared to place greater emphasis on practical and assessment-related concerns. This suggests that students and educators may engage most readily with AI guidance when ethical considerations are contextualised through authentic learning situations and decision-making processes rather than presented as abstract principles. The findings therefore support the view that effective AI guidance should balance broader digital citizenship concerns with concrete examples that connect directly

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to students' authentic educational experiences (Estellés & Doyle, 2025; Long & Magerko, 2020; OECD, 2026).

Viewed through a critical AI literacy lens, participants were not simply requesting additional information about GenAI. Rather, they were seeking support for evaluative judgement, ethical reasoning, and informed decision-making in AI-mediated environments. Requests for practical examples, authentic scenarios, and stronger connections to assessment contexts suggest that participants perceived responsible AI use as a contextual practice requiring judgement rather than compliance with a fixed set of rules. This interpretation aligns with conceptualisations of critical AI literacy that emphasise critical evaluation, ethical awareness, and responsible participation in digital environments (Long & Magerko, 2020; Conrad & Kamperman, 2025).

5.2 How can guidance be improved? (RQ2)

Participants advocated for guidance that is practical, multimodal, assessment-focused and co-created with students, indicating a preference for pedagogical resources that support decision-making rather than compliance alone (Long & Magerko, 2020). Across all dialogue sheets, the strongest recommendations related to the inclusion of practical examples, realistic scenarios and explicit demonstrations of how AI can be used responsibly in everyday learning contexts. Participants' preference for examples, scenarios and contextualised decision-making aligns with conceptualisations of AI literacy as a set of evaluative and ethical competencies rather than simply knowledge of AI systems (Conrad & Kamperman, 2025; Long & Magerko, 2020). The participants comments also highlighted that the guidance likely attempted to be too broad and it may have lost its focus on social media for learning. These findings suggest that learners may be better supported through situated examples that demonstrate judgement in context rather than through lists of rules or principles alone (OECD, 2026).

A second recurring recommendation was the development of guidance in multiple formats. Participants proposed infographics, videos, podcasts, chatbots, flowcharts and interactive resources, often questioning whether a written guidance document was the most effective medium for communicating complex ideas. This reflects a preference for multimodal approaches that allow students to access information in different ways and at different levels of depth. Such approaches may also improve accessibility and engagement by reducing cognitive load and providing opportunities for students to explore topics at their own pace. Participants' preference for visual and interactive formats suggests that learning resources should be designed to minimise unnecessary processing demands and support engagement with complex concepts (Paas & van Merriënboer, 2020).

Participants also consistently highlighted the need for greater accessibility and inclusivity. Suggestions included simplified language (i.e. Purvis & Mooney, 2026), translations, consideration of non-native English speakers, alternative formats for neurodivergent students and design approaches that reduce reliance on large amounts of text. These comments align with inclusive, compassionate and accessible approach to learning and advocate for multiple and creative ways of engagement, representation and participation for diverse learners (Purvis, 2025). Inclusion and accessibility should be a core design requirement if institutions are to ensure that all students can engage meaningfully with emerging technologies and associated risks.

Finally, participants frequently emphasised the importance of student-centred and co-created approaches. Recommendations included seeking student perspectives, using student case studies and developing resources that are more explicitly connected to students' lived experiences. Calls for student-centred and co-created approaches align with higher education partnership literature, which argues that students should be active contributors to educational resources and practices rather than passive recipients of them (Bovill et al., 2011; Bovill, 2020). Participants also questioned the scope and purpose of the guidance, suggesting that future iterations should more clearly articulate whether the primary aim is information sharing, guidance, critical reflection or behaviour change. Taken together, these findings indicate that effective AI guidance should be developed in partnership with students, grounded in authentic contexts, and designed to support the development of critical AI literacy rather than simply communicating institutional expectations.

5.3 Practical implications

The findings from this study echo many of the barriers and enablers identified in our earlier research into the use of social media for learning in higher education (Purvis et al., 2020). That work highlighted the importance of institutional clarity, guidance and support in enabling staff to engage confidently with emerging technologies. The present findings suggest that these same principles remain relevant in the era of generative artificial intelligence. Much as social media was viewed as an emerging and disruptive technology in 2013 (Purvis & Beckingham, 2025), GenAI is now reshaping learning, teaching, assessment and communication practices across higher education. However, unlike social media, there is often less opportunity for educators and students to avoid interaction with AI-enabled systems, many of which are

increasingly embedded within digital platforms and everyday workflows. Furthermore, the misuse of GenAI in social media spaces, can negatively impact the online presence and digital footprint students may create (Beckingham, 2019) and future graduate outcomes.

The findings suggest that institutions should reconsider the role and purpose of guidance documents. Participants did not question the need for guidance but frequently challenged whether long, text-heavy resources were likely to influence student behaviour. Repeated requests for practical examples, case studies, videos, infographics, flowcharts and interactive resources indicate a preference for guidance that supports decision-making and critical reflection rather than merely transmitting information (i.e. Beckingham & Harley, 2026; Purvis & Mooney, 2026). Participants also raised concerns regarding accessibility, technical language and the suitability of current formats for diverse student populations, including neurodivergent learners and students for whom English is an additional language. These findings suggest that guidance should be designed according to principles of inclusive and accessible communication from the outset rather than adapted retrospectively.

A notable finding was that the educators and educational research students perceived assessment and misconduct-related issues to be particularly relevant for this guidance. Although the resource focused on social media and digital communication, participants referred to academic misconduct, declaration of AI use, assessment expectations and feedback processes. The suggestion is therefore that students may engage most readily with AI guidance when it is linked to authentic learning activities and assessment contexts. Institutions should therefore ensure that guidance on AI use in social media aligns with wider institutional approaches to assessment, academic integrity and responsible technology use.

The findings also point towards the importance of partnership approaches. Participants advocated for greater involvement of students in the design and evaluation of guidance resources, arguing that student case studies, examples and lived experiences would increase relevance and engagement. This aligns with broader principles of student-staff partnership and co-creation in higher education, which argue that learners should be actively involved in shaping the educational resources, practices and curricula that affect their learning (Bovill et al, 2011; Bovill, 2020). Furthermore, participants highlighted the importance of helping learners recognise algorithmic influence, misinformation, content ownership, digital footprints and ethical decision-making, reinforcing the need for guidance that develops critical AI literacy rather than focusing solely on compliance or risk mitigation.

Based on these findings, we recommend that higher education institutions:

1. Develop clear institutional statements outlining expectations and support for GenAI use, including how AI manifests within social media for learning contexts.
2. Position GenAI guidance as a learning resource rather than a compliance document.
3. Prioritise assessment-related examples and decision-making scenarios.
4. Move from information-heavy guidance towards action-oriented guidance.
5. Create multimodal resources, including videos, infographics, flowcharts and interactive tools.
6. Apply accessibility and inclusive design principles throughout resource development.
7. Develop tiered guidance, including quick-reference guides, student guides and more detailed supporting resources.
8. Co-create guidance with students and incorporate authentic student case studies.
9. Support both staff and students in developing critical GenAI literacy and responsible use practices.
10. Encourage informed experimentation and appropriate risk-taking with emerging GenAI technologies.

These recommendations suggest that the future of institutional GenAI guidance lies not in producing more information, but in creating accessible, contextualised and participatory resources that support individuals in making informed judgements about responsible, ethical and epistemological considerations in the use of GenAI within learning, teaching and digital communication environments (Rapanta et al., 2025).

5.4 Future directions for the responsible use of GenAI in social media for learning

The emergence of deepfakes, synthetic media, and

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increasingly sophisticated algorithmic recommendation systems raises important questions about how learners engage with information and participation in social media environments during their learning activities. Interpreted through a critical GenAI literacy lens (Rapanta et al., 2025), these concerns extend beyond technical understandings of AI towards consideration of transparency, trust, ethical decision-making, and the broader societal implications of AI technologies (Long & Magerko, 2020). Participants recognised that AI-generated and manipulated content may complicate judgements of authenticity and credibility, whilst algorithmic curation can subtly influence which voices, perspectives, and forms of knowledge gain visibility.

The dynamics of AI-influenced spaces are particularly significant in social media for learning, where knowledge construction occurs through interaction, sharing, participation, and engagement within networked communities, and where bots may be voices within those communities (Hajli et al., 2022). Consequently, responsible engagement with AI in these contexts requires learners to critically interrogate not only the content they encounter but also the technological systems that mediate access to information and shape participation. Developing these capabilities may help learners participate more effectively in digital learning communities whilst remaining alert to the opportunities and risks associated with AI-enhanced social media environments, aligning with wider calls for ethical, critical, and responsible engagement with GenAI in educational settings (Long & Magerko, 2020; UNESCO, 2021).

5.5 Theoretical implications

Theoretical implications can be drawn at several levels. The data does more than identify preferred formats for guidance. It raises questions about how students can develop critical GenAI literacy, how institutional guidance functions pedagogically, and how responsible AI use can be conceptualised in higher education.

The findings suggest that responsible use of GenAI is understood by staff and students not as a rule-based compliance issue but as a contextual, developmental and socially negotiated literacy practice. Participants valued ethical awareness and critical engagement with AI systems, yet emphasised the need for contextualised examples, assessment-focused guidance, co-creation with students and accessible multimodal resources (Conrad & Kamperman, 2025). This indicates that institutional GenAI guidance may be most effective when conceptualised as a pedagogical tool that supports the development of critical AI literacy rather than as a static policy document designed primarily for compliance. Staff and students are at different stages of AI literacy development, highlighting the value of accessible language (Purvis & Mooney, 2026), support to navigate technical terminology, and opportunities to develop new digital capabilities. Therefore, rather than functioning solely as a compliance mechanism, institutional guidance should support the development of critical GenAI literacy and digital citizenship, enabling students to make informed and contextually appropriate decisions about any or all types of AI (Beckingham & Hartley, 2026) as the technologies evolve and change over time (Estellés & Doyle, 2025; Long & Magerko, 2020; Conrad & Kamperman, 2025).

5.6 Limitations

The dialogue sheet method proved effective in stimulating discussion, including amongst participants who were not previously known to one another. The position of a question on each side of the sheet encourages involvement from different participants as the responsibility for writing responses usually moves naturally from group member to group member as the discussion progresses. The dialogue sheet method can be implemented as a research tool with or without audio recording. In this study, audio recording was not used because groups were seated in close proximity and the workshop was conducted within a conference setting, creating a more challenging recording context. A limitation of this approach is that the brief written comments captured on the dialogue sheets can sometimes lack sufficient context, making interpretation and meaning-making more difficult during analysis. While audio recordings could provide additional contextual data and support interpretation, background noise and cross-group audio interference may compromise recording quality in busy workshop environments. Consequently, there is a trade-off between preserving rich conversational data and maintaining a practical and unobtrusive method of data collection. If the former was required, the recommendation would be to conduct multiple small group discussion to enable recording.

Several limitations regarding the participant sample should be considered when interpreting the findings. Participants were educators and educational research students rather than the student population for whom the guidance was primarily intended. In addition, participation was voluntary, which may have attracted individuals with stronger views or greater interest in AI and digital learning. Finally, the conference setting may have resulted in a sample that was more engaged with educational technology and innovation than the wider higher education community, potentially limiting the transferability of the findings to other contexts.

5.7 Future research

The findings suggest several directions for future research. Future research should extend the focus of responsible GenAI guidance beyond assessment and academic integrity to examine AI-mediated social media and online communication environments in learning more directly. There is a need to investigate how students interpret and respond to AI-generated content encountered through social media platforms, including the ways in which GenAI influences information consumption, content creation, and online interactions.

Further research could explore students' abilities to identify and critically evaluate deepfakes, synthetic media, and other forms of AI-generated content, as these capabilities are increasingly important within contemporary digital environments. Additional studies are also needed to examine how critical AI literacy develops in AI-mediated communication spaces and the extent to which students can apply ethical judgement and critical evaluation when engaging with AI-generated content and interactions. Finally, future work should evaluate guidance interventions designed specifically for social media contexts, including investigations of how different formats, examples, and pedagogical approaches support students' responsible and informed participation in increasingly AI-enabled and influenced online environments.

Further studies could evaluate the effectiveness of different guidance formats, including infographics, videos, chatbots and interactive resources, in supporting responsible GenAI use in social media for learning contexts. There is clearly space for the exploration of development of critical AI literacy in GenAI-mediated communication environments and the evaluation of guidance interventions specifically focused on social media platforms.

Given the assessment and misconduct-related concerns expressed by participants, research should also investigate how students interpret and apply institutional guidance when making decisions about GenAI use in assessed work. Further work is needed to explore co-created approaches to guidance development, discipline-specific requirements GenAI, inclusive and accessible GenAI literacy provision, and the development of critical GenAI literacy beyond compliance-focused models. Finally, longitudinal research could examine how perceptions and practices evolve alongside rapidly developing GenAI technologies and expectations, informing the ongoing refinement of institutional guidance and approaches to learning, teaching and assessment.

6. Conclusion

This study contributes to the emerging literature on AI literacy by providing one of the first participatory evaluations of guidance designed specifically for AI-mediated social media and online communication within higher education settings. Collectively, the findings suggest that effective GenAI guidance depends less on the provision of information and more on its accessibility, contextual relevance and pedagogical design. Participants valued ethical and critical perspectives on AI, yet consistently requested examples, assessment-specific advice and multimodal resources. These findings suggest that educators and educational research students perceive institutional guidance as likely to be more effective when conceived as a student-centred GenAI literacy intervention rather than a static policy document. The findings establish perceived usefulness and areas for refinement with future developments to seek evaluation of the impact of the guidance on student behaviour or decision-making once finalised and shared with the higher education community.

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