AN EVALUATION OF A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY'S CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGY DURING THE #FEESMUSTFALL MOVEMENT

by

ILSE ANTHEA JOYCE FREDERICKS

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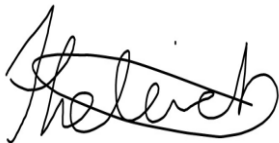
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Supervisor: Dr Adelina Mbinjama-Gamatham

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DECLARATION

I, Ilse Anthea Joyce Fredericks, declare that the contents of this dissertation/thesis represent my own unaided work, and that the dissertation/thesis has not previously been submitted for academic examination towards any qualification. Furthermore, it represents my own opinions and not necessarily those of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

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Signed

Date: 15 February 2021

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ABSTRACT

This research evaluated the crisis communication strategy of a higher education institution during one of the biggest crises to engulf universities in recent years – #FeesMustFall. Protests at higher education institutions have become a regular occurrence in South Africa and present a challenge for university communicators as they often dominate traditional and social media and could result in reputational damage. Effective crisis communication strategies are therefore needed to protect the reputations of these institutions.

The study was guided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory, which provides guidelines for selecting response strategies during a crisis. Semi-structured interviews with communicators were conducted while Facebook posts, which were used as part of the crisis communication strategy, were also analysed. The study found evidence of a lack of planning for the crisis, which contributed to communication challenges. By evaluating the crisis communication strategies used by a university of technology during the #FeesMustFall movement and making recommendations for future crisis response strategies, the researcher aimed to contribute to existing knowledge on crisis communication at higher education institutions.

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GLOSSARY

CCP	Crisis Communication Plan
CPUT	Cape Peninsula University of Technology
PR	Public Relations
SCCT	Situational Crisis Communication Theory

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1. Introduction

In October 2015 South African higher education institutions witnessed the largest student-led protests since the apartheid era (Chingo, 2016). The movement started as a protest over the proposed fee increases for the following academic year but spiralled into a countrywide call for free education "reminiscent of the mass-based people's power movements of the 1970s and 1980s" (Naicker, 2016:53). Demands included fee-free education for all and the decolonisation of universities through the removal of colonial-era statues and symbols and changes to curricula (Lishivha, 2019). The movement also called for an end to the outsourcing of service workers, with many workers taking on a key role in the movement (Luckett & Mzobe, 2016:94).

The FeesMustFall hashtag was soon dominating social media in South Africa and the protests sparked nationwide debate (EWN, 2015). The movement followed on the #RhodesMustFall movement at the University of Cape Town earlier in 2015 and spread from Wits University to higher education institutions across the country (Luckett & Mzobe, 2016:94). The protests brought classes at several institutions to an abrupt halt, with violence and destruction reported on several campuses (Gasa & Dougan, 2016). The overall damage to property at the country's institutions was estimated at R786 million—a sum "equivalent to the annual state subsidy provided to a small university" (Kahn, 2018).

The #FeesMustFall movement took its demands to Parliament on 21 October 2015 and on 23 October 2015 marched on the Union Buildings in Pretoria (Mavunga, 2019:87). Soon after, President Jacob Zuma announced that there would be no increase in university tuition fees in 2016 (News24, 2015). In the 2015 Annual Report of Universities South Africa (Usaf, 2015), the body representing South African universities, its chairperson, Professor Adam Habib, proclaimed that the students had

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"achieved in seven days what we had been talking about for over a decade" (Usaf, 2015:5).

> *Many vice-chancellors had been lamenting the underfunding of*
> *higher education for over a decade with little effect and it was*
> *the students with their marches on Parliament and the Union*
> *Buildings that shook the state, changed the systemic*
> *parameters and began the process of fundamentally*
> *transforming higher education.* (Usaf, 2015:5).

Figure 1.1. Students and workers demonstrating during #FeesMustFall (IOL, 2017).

In January 2016 President Jacob Zuma established the Commission on the Feasibility of Fee-Free Higher Education and Training, led by Judge Jonathan Heher (TimesLive, 2017). However, the protests were far from over. While the commission started its work, the academic programme at several universities across the country continued to be disrupted (Usaf, 2016).

At the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT), the largest university in the Western Cape, classes were suspended for prolonged periods and, in November 2015, exit examinations had to be postponed until January 2016 (CPUT, 2015). Students were asked to vacate their residences (Sesant & Malgas, 2015). At times the protests turned violent. Staff members' cars were stoned and set alight and, in October 2016, two security guards were hospitalised after being locked into a burning building (Van der Merwe, 2016). To ensure that students could write their examinations, the university arranged a military base as an exam venue (Evans, 2016).

The university's Annual Report for 2016 describes the protests as "a logistical nightmare for management" (CPUT, 2016). In the report Prof John Volmink, who was the university's acting Vice-Chancellor at the time, describes the impact of the crisis on the institution:

> *It is difficult to convey the disorienting and almost paralysing effects that violent protests have on an academic institution like CPUT. The administration was forced into crisis mode, making extraordinary arrangements for the continuation of academic processes and administrative services. Similarly, academic staff had to work long hours, find creative ways to communicate with their students and eventually had to sacrifice their well-deserved rest at the end of the year.* (CPUT, 2016:11).

The protests presented several challenges for corporate communicators at higher education institutions. One of the challenges was that the #FeesMustFall movement was able to spread their message rapidly and efficiently through social media and thus quickly gained momentum. In an article on IT web, Prof Anton Harber, a journalism professor at Wits University, commented:

> *Social media is allowing us all to follow what is happening from minute to minute, hear the voices of all those involved and letting everyone have their say. It is enabling students and student leaders to talk to each other in real-time and to speak to their*

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peers across the country. The debate and discussion on social media is rich, multi-layered and multi-voiced. (Rawlins, 2015).

In contrast, the messages from universities appear not to have had the same effect. A study by Wessels (2017:11) states that "universities' various public communications were widely received with derision". The study found that "miscommunication between universities and protesting students could be attributed to failure on the part of universities to make use of social media for dialectical engagement with students" (Wessels, 2017:2). Similarly, a study by Morwe, Garcia-Espana and Luescher (2018:921), which focused on the factors that triggered the countrywide student protests, highlighted poor communication between students and university authorities as a challenge, noting that "Poor communication creates a rift between the parties concerned, breeds mistrust, escalates the conflict to violence causing irreparable damage to the relationship of concerned parties".

In its Annual Report for 2016 Universities South Africa, CEO Professor Ahmed Bawa, states that: "the crisis of 2015–2016 highlighted the need for the sector to respond more coherently to student protests and demands as well as instability on campuses". He also articulates the organisation's goal to create a common messaging system for universities "to inform their communication and engagement with key stakeholders" (Usaf, 2016).

Marra (1998:461) argues that communication is a key element of crisis management and poor communication by organisations "often make bad situations worse". The researcher works in communication in a higher education institution and was motivated to study crisis communication during one of the biggest crises in higher education, with the aim of adding to existing knowledge on crisis communication in the sector.

#FeesMustFall dominated media coverage, resulting in a demand for information from journalists. According to media monitoring company ROI Africa, the protests received 40 percent of the news coverage in South Africa in the week ending 23 October 2015 and about 60 percent of social media coverage (Wakefield, 2015). The National Press

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Club named #FeesMustFall as the Newsmaker of the Year for 2015 "based on the amount of media coverage the movement received and the impact it had on universities" (Corke, 2015).

However, the way in which the media framed the crisis presented a problem for universities. In its Annual Report for 2016, Usaf states that: "The media also framed the challenge as a dispute between students and universities, rather than the state, leaving universities to fend for themselves" (Usaf, 2016). During a 2017 seminar that focused on the how the media covered #FeesMustFall, Wits University Deputy Vice-Chancellor, Tawana Kupe, said: "the media had failed to contextualise the protests as part of a bigger issue of higher education funding, which was a challenge for nations in all continents" (Witsvuvuzela, 2017). This implies that the universities had to take the blame for a crisis which they had not created. Crisis communication scholar, Timothy Coombs, argues that if an organisation is blamed for a crisis, this creates negativity towards it which could lead to reputational damage and other consequences (Institute for PR, 2007).

In addition to a demand for information from the press and the media, the universities' main stakeholders, including students and staff, had to receive regular communication. According to David (2011:72), under "normal" circumstances internal communication is crucial to ensure that an organisation functions effectively. He argues that, for the effective management of crises, the role of internal communication becomes even more vital. However, Hussain and Rawjee (2014:150) point out that a large staff contingent, a large student population and multiple campuses create communication challenges for higher education institutions during a crisis.

According to Olsson (2014:113), research on crisis communication "has traditionally focused on private organizations' reputation and blame avoidance strategies" and, as a result, research on crisis communication in public organisations remains limited. This research aims to contribute to knowledge on crisis communication, specifically from a higher education perspective. Universities of Technology play an integral role in society and "have made a major impact on the development of their countries and regional

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economies by preparing graduates for the world of work, and applying their research skills to identifying the problems and needs of society and industry, and together finding solutions to those problems" (Du Pre, 2010:2). Protests, which have the potential to become crises, have become regular occurrences at higher education institutions, including universities of technology. Such crises may have an adverse effect on the reputation of an organisation and how an organisation responds can play a crucial role in how it is viewed by its stakeholders (Coombs, 2007:163).

By evaluating and understanding the crisis communication strategies used by crisis communicators at a university of technology during the biggest student-led protests since apartheid, the research may be of benefit to communicators in future crises. The study was guided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory, which provides guidelines for selecting response strategies during a crisis.

1.2. Problem statement

South African Higher Education Institutions have witnessed several crises over the past few years (Van Rensburg, Conradie & Dondolo, 2017:62). These crises could harm relationships with stakeholders and increase the risk of the organisation suffering reputational damage. In addition, these institutions risk losing financial support from donors and from other avenues. Crises at universities often play out in the public eye via traditional and social media and result in an increased demand for information and a need for effective crisis communication responses.

It is the role of Public Relations to communicate with stakeholders during a crisis (FearnBanks, 2017:358). However, previous research indicates that issues such as the size of university communities, which are spread across several campuses, could present a challenge for crisis communicators (Hussain & Rawjee, 2014:150) while the bureaucratic nature of these institutions also impact on communication. Furthermore, there is limited academic research on the crisis communication strategies employed by university communicators in South Africa during student protests. By evaluating the crisis communication strategies and the communication channels used by a higher

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education institution during #FeesMustFall and making recommendations for future crises, the study aims to contribute to knowledge on crisis communication and crisis planning.

1.3 Research objectives

To evaluate the crisis communication strategy of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology during the #FeesMustFall movement.

Specific objectives:

- To investigate the crisis communication strategies employed by CPUT during the student movement.
- To analyse the university's pre-crisis, crisis event and post-crisis communication responses in terms of Situational Crisis Communication Theory.
- To analyse how social media and traditional channels were used in the crisis communication strategy

1.4. Research questions

1.4.1. Main question

What were the institution's crisis response strategies (as defined in Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory) during the #FeesMustFall movement?

1.4.2. Sub-questions

- How were these strategies executed in each of the three crisis phases prescribed by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory?
- How were different channels used in the crisis communication strategy during the #FeesMustFall movement?

To answer these research questions, the research followed a constructivist worldview. This worldview allows researchers to construct "meanings from the phenomena under study" through their own experiences and from the viewpoint of the research participants (Adom, Yeboah & Ankrah, 2016:5). A qualitative research design, which

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allows research participants to "talk about a topic in their own words, free of the constraints imposed by fixed-response questions that are generally seen in quantitative studies" (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013:11). By following a qualitative research, design the researcher was able to evaluate the institution's crisis communication strategy during the #FeesMustFall movement by gaining an understanding of it from the participants, in their own words, as well as by analysing posts made by the institution to its official Facebook page during the crisis.

Data collection was conducted via semi-structured interviews. In addition, data from posts made to the university's official Facebook page were collected. To analyse the data, the researcher applied thematic analysis, a "method for identifying, analyzing, and interpreting patterns of meaning ('themes') within qualitative data" (Clarke & Braun, 2017:297).

There are several thematic analysis procedures. In this study, Theory-driven thematic analysis was applied which, in the development of codes, uses the theory as a starting point (Boyatzis, 1998:29). The theoretical framework for this research is based on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), which provides a framework for communicators on the response strategies and options they can apply in times of crisis. The theory is one of the most "widely tested" in crisis communication (Cooley & Cooley, 2011:205). SCCT recommends selecting the crisis response strategy(ies) that are appropriate to the characteristics of the crisis (Coombs, 2006:242). By understanding the crisis, the crisis manager can select the crisis response strategy that will best protect the organisation's reputation.

Through an evaluation of a university of technology's crisis response strategies during #FeesMustFall, using the guidelines provided by SCCT, the study found evidence of a lack of planning for the crisis, which contributed to communication challenges. There was a concerted effort to provide communication to help ensure the safety of stakeholders and provide updates on the crisis. While a range of communication channels was used, the findings pointed to an absence of two-way communication with stakeholders and other social media users.

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1.5 Significance of the study

The higher education sector has been marred by student uprisings in recent years (Vally, 2019), highlighting the need for effective crisis communication strategies. This study will aim to add value to the base of knowledge on crisis communication strategies in South Africa's higher education sector and aid university communicators as well as PR professionals in other organisations with crisis communication planning by making recommendations for future crises.

1.6. Structure of the research

This dissertation has been divided into five chapters.

Chapter One details the background and introduction to the study and outlines the research problem, research questions, research objective and the significance of the study.

Chapter Two presents a review of the literature on crisis communication and addresses the important role that public relations play in crisis communication. It outlines the theoretical framework for the study and sets out the vital role that social media has come to play in crisis communication strategies. The final part of the literature review focuses on crisis communication in the higher education sector.

Chapter Three unpacks the research methodology. The research paradigm, research approach, data collection method and method of analysis are explained. The following main themes and sub-themes were generated through the process of thematic analysis and by using the Situational Crisis Communication Theory as a guide:

Theme 1: Crisis preparedness

Subtheme 1: Crisis communication plan

Subtheme 2: Communication network

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Theme 2: Response strategies

Subtheme 1: Crisis Communicators

Subtheme 2: Choice of channels

Theme 3: Post-crisis messaging

Chapter Four presents the findings of the study. The findings are discussed according to the themes and subthemes generated through theory-driven thematic analysis.

Chapter 5 provides a summary of the research and research findings, discusses the limitations of the study and makes recommendations for future research.

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a review of the literature on crisis communication and the integral role public relations play in crisis management. It begins by exploring definitions and characteristics of crises and explores the impact of crises on organisations. The Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), the guiding theory for this research, is discussed in detail, including the guidelines it provides in terms of response strategies during a crisis. The increasing role played by social media in crisis communication and the benefits and the drawbacks thereof are unpacked. Lastly, the chapter explores crises and crisis communication in the higher education context.

2.2 Crisis defined

A crisis can occur in any organisation and can hold serious consequences for its future. According to Quinn, Folsom and Garretson (2019:16), a crisis can be defined as:

> *a critical event or point of decision that, if not handled in an appropriate and timely manner, can turn into a catastrophe with the potential to harm people or property, seriously interrupt or completely halt business operations, damage an organization's reputation with stakeholders, adversely affect overall enterprise value, spark employee departures, and/or create new opportunities for competitors.*

St. John III and Pearson (2017:4) describe a crisis as "an event that is often unexpected, often determined by the perspectives of stakeholders and can prove disruptive to the status quo of the organisation". A crisis has the potential to attract negative media coverage and can therefore have a negative impact on the organisation's reputation (Fearn-Banks, 2017:40). While communication scholars offer

different definitions for a crisis, they agree that a crisis can threaten an organisation's very survival and impact on its stakeholders. It therefore, has to be managed well.

As discussed in Chapter One, protests, which have the potential to result in crises, are a regular occurrence at higher education institutions. The #FeesMustFall movement illustrated the severe impact a crisis can have on institutions. Several campuses around the country were forced to close and damages to infrastructure ran into hundreds of millions of Rands. In addition, a study by George Mavunga found that "a culture characterised by tensions and distrust amongst stakeholders such as students, university management and the government" emerged from the protests (Mavunga, 2019:81). However, effective PR "can prevent a critical situation from resulting in irreparable damage to the business's reputation and goodwill" (Alzahrani, 2016:1086).

Certain characteristics are often associated with a crisis and can influence how individuals view a crisis (Rollo & Zdziarski, 2007:24-26). These characteristics include:
- The element of surprise—crises are often unexpected;
- A limited response time—organisations usually have to make decisions, compile responses and act quickly to keep a crisis contained;
- A disruption in the organisation's operations; and

- Threat to the safety and well-being of stakeholders.

Crises can take a variety of forms and can be very fluid. Boin (2004:165) points out that new forms of crises have surfaced in recent times, including cyberterrorism and changing weather patterns, forcing organisations to deal with new threats. While some crises, including natural disasters, are unavoidable, others such as mismanagement, can be avoided (Coombs, 2015a:144).

A crisis can pose three potential threats to an organisation: reputation loss, financial damage and public safety concerns (Institute for PR, 2014). With much at stake, crises have to be handled efficiently. If handled poorly, a crisis can be detrimental to an

organisation but, if managed well, it can bring "positive recognition and enhanced stakeholder value" (Pearson, Roux-Dufort & Clair, 2007:vii).

The coronavirus pandemic has illustrated the massive impact of a global crisis. According to Guy Ryder, chief of the International Labour Organisation, the pandemic has plunged the world of work into "unprecedented crisis", while the United Nations World Food Programme predicts that the pandemic will result in an "unprecedented food crisis" (Reuters, 2020).

2.3 Crisis management and the role of Public Relations

Crisis management aims to "prevent or lessen the negative outcomes of a crisis" and to shield the "organisation, its stakeholders and industry from harm (Coombs, 2015b:5). Coombs (2010:61-62) highlights the prominence of crisis management in Public Relations (PR) research by stating: "It is safe to say that crisis management has become the dominant topic in public relations research", while Fall (2004:238) argues that PR's role as a crisis management function is increasing.

• Public relations function

The PR function plays an integral role in crisis management as it "provides information, defines an event, places crisis in a context" and outlines the organisation's stance to its stakeholders (Cooley & Cooley, 2011:203). Veil, Buehner and Palenchar (2011:111) argue that "sharing available information openly and honestly" before and during a crisis is vital to minimise threats and to ensure that the public's need for information is met by the organisation "so they do not turn to other sources". These authors argue that once information provided by the organisation is no longer accepted as trustworthy, crisis management will also be unsuccessful (Veil, Buehner & Palenchar, 2011:113). Hagan (2009:430) argues that "good crisis communication" requires an understanding of how the crisis impacts on stakeholder relationships, being responsive, and communicating responsibly to all stakeholders.

PR professionals add value to their organisations by building "high-quality relationships" with stakeholders (Grunig & Grunig, 2002:37). A stakeholder is "any group or individual who can affect or is affected by the achievement of the firm's objectives" (Freeman, 1984:32). As Lauzen (1997:66-67) asserts, the PR strategists'

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knowledge and understanding of internal and external stakeholders put them in a position to play a unique part in helping to make sense of the issues affecting the organisation by being able to provide the external perspectives. The relationship cultivated with stakeholders before a crisis can determine how they will respond during the crisis. Ulmer (2001:610) states that organisations that treat their stakeholders poorly will not be able to rely on their goodwill during a crisis. However, if a positive relationship with stakeholders exists prior to the crisis, they will be more likely to show support to the organisation during the crisis.

Hagan (2009:433) notes the role that environmental scanning by PR professionals can play in detecting issues that could eventually result in a crisis. Environmental scanning can help the organisation to identify trends in its environment and to identify issues (Lauzen, 1995:187).

• Crisis communication

A crucial part of managing a crisis successfully is "controlling the flow of information by developing and disseminating key messages" to stakeholders (Wigley & Zhang, 2011:2). For crisis management to succeed, organisations have to use effective and strategic communication strategies (Ki & Nekmat, 2014:141). Crisis communication strategies are an organisation's "verbal and non-verbal responses" to address a crisis (Coombs, 1999:128).

Crises are "highly emotional experiences" for the organisation and its stakeholders and crisis communication helps stakeholders "to make sense of the situation" (Van der Meer & Verhoeven, 2014:526-527). Fearn-Banks (2017:2) posits that effective crisis management includes crisis communication that not only helps to address the crisis but also helps to ensure a more favourable reputation for the organisation.

Crisis communication is "an applied field that seeks to provide guidance for crisis managers" to limit the harm that a crisis can cause for stakeholders and the organisation (Coombs, 2014:1). Fronz (2012:2) posits that crisis communication is "a

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highly important, critical and highly perceived discipline for companies to react, inform and interact" with their stakeholders during times of crises.

Effective crisis communication needs to be planned in advance and successfully managed (Kadarova, Mihalčová, Kádár & Vida, 2015:1119). The main aim of crisis communication is to repair the reputation of the organisation and regain the trust of its customers and other stakeholders (Utz, Schultz & Glocka, 2013:41). According to Gotsi and Wilson (2001:29), reputation

is a stakeholder's overall evaluation of a company over time. This evaluation is based on the stakeholder's direct experiences with the company, any other form of communication and symbolism that provides information about the firm's actions and/or a comparison with the actions of other leading rivals.

According to Murray and White (2005:348), corporate reputation is considered as "perhaps the pre-eminent business asset", while PR is viewed as "a central plank of the strategic communications function focusing on building and protecting reputation". During crises, organisations rely on PR professionals as communication experts "to play a key role in mitigating damage and maintaining stakeholder confidence in the organization" (Ferguson, Wallace & Chandler, 2012:10). Thus, PR professionals play a critical role in developing the organisation's crisis response messages (Institute for PR, 2014).

Vielhaber and Waltman (2008:313) posit that the choice of channel is an important aspect of crisis communication and can assist communicators in their efforts to protect the organisation's reputation. They state that by selecting appropriate channels communicators address problems of ambiguity, and, in times of crisis, these channels "help strategic communicators provide consistent, clear, authoritative information to their many stakeholders". Therefore, this researcher will determine the communication channels selected by the institution during the #FeesMustFall crisis and how the channels were used in the crisis communication strategy.

• Theoretical Framework

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In the following section, the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, the theory which guides the research is outlined.

2.4 Situational Crisis Communication Theory

A theoretical framework is a vital facet of the research process and provides the foundation "from which all knowledge is constructed" (Grant & Osanloo, 2014). The theoretical framework for this research is based on Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT). Crisis communication scholar W.T. Coombs and his colleagues started developing SCCT in 1995 (Coombs 2010:38). SCCT is the "most widely acknowledged and evaluated framework" in crisis communication (Gerken, Van der Land & Van der Meer, 2016:879).

SCCT has its roots in Attribution Theory (Coombs, 2007:165). Attribution theory is based on the premise that people need to control what happens in their social environments "and to perceive them as predictable" (Schwarz, 2008:32). Schwarz argues that people therefore consistently analyse events or behaviour "in order to attribute them certain causes" (Schwarz, 2008:32). According to Coombs (2015a:143), "the more crisis responsibility stakeholders attribute to an organisation, the higher the damage from the crisis on the organisation".

Crisis responsibility—the degree to which stakeholders hold an organisation responsible for the crisis— "is the centrepiece of SCCT" (Coombs, 2004:268). It argues that if stakeholders are convinced that the organisation could have controlled the crisis, they will place responsibility for the crisis on the organisation. The three main types of crises identified by SCCT, based on the organisation's degree of responsibility for the crisis, are: the victim cluster, the accidental cluster and the preventable cluster (Coombs, 2007:168). The victim cluster includes natural disasters, and workplace violence, for which a low level of responsibility for the crisis will likely be attributed to the organisation. The accidental cluster includes technical error accidents, for which a moderate level of responsibility is likely to be attributed to the organisation. In the preventable cluster, the level of responsibility attributed to the organisation is likely to be high. This includes organisational misdeeds and accidents as a result of human error. Table 1.1. outlines the crisis types and crisis clusters according to Situational Crisis Communication Theory.

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Table 1.1: SCCT crisis types by crisis clusters (Coombs, 2007:168)

Victim Cluster: Weak attributions of crisis responsibility = Mild reputational threat	Accidental Cluster: Minimal attributions of crisis responsibility = Moderate reputational threat	Preventable Cluster: Strong attributions of crisis responsibility = Severe reputational threat)
Natural disaster: Acts of nature damage an organisation such as an earthquake.	*Challenges:* Stakeholders claim an organisation is operating in an inappropriate manner.	*Human-error accidents:* Human error causes an industrial accident.
Rumour: False and damaging information about an organisation is being circulated.	*Technical-error accidents:* A technology or equipment failure causes an industrial accident.	*Human-error product harm:* Human error causes a product to be recalled.
Workplace violence: Current or former employee attacks current employees onsite.	*Technical-error product harm:* A technology or equipment failure causes a product to be recalled	*Organisational misdeed with no injuries:* Stakeholders are deceived without injury.
Product tampering/Malevolence: External agent causes damage to an organisation		*Organisational misdeed management misconduct:* Laws or regulations are violated by management.
		Organisational misdeed with injuries: Stakeholders are placed at risk by management and injuries occur.

Coombs (2006:243) asserts that the severity of the damage caused by a crisis can increase perceptions of responsibility. The severity of the damage refers to "the amount of financial, physical, environmental, or emotional harm a crisis can inflict" (Coombs, 2006:243). Coombs (2015a:144) posits that there are certain factors, called 'intensifiers', that will increase the reputational damage the crisis will cause. The first is 'history of crisis', which refers to whether the organisation had previously experienced similar crises. Coombs (2004:287) argues that "by accounting for the effects of crisis history, crisis managers can craft messages that more effectively protect the organization's reputational assets". The second is the relationship history that the organisation has with its clients. Coombs (2007:167) argues that a prior negative relational reputation suggests that the organisation has little considerations for its stakeholders and that this lack of consideration is not limited to crisis periods.

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The organisation's level of responsibility for the crisis also "determines the nature of the crisis response" best suited to the crisis (Coombs, 2018:22). Crisis responsibility is a key element of determining the threat the crisis holds for the organisation (Coombs, 2010:38). SCCT recommends applying the crisis response strategy(ies) that are best suited to the characteristics of the crisis (Coombs, 2006:242). If crisis managers understand the situation, they will be able to select the crisis response strategy or strategies that will best protect the organisation's reputation. The term 'response strategies' refers to what the organisation says and does once the crisis commences (Coombs, 2006:242).

SCCT recommends that instructing and adjusting information should be the starting point for every crisis response (Coombs, 2015a:141). Instructing information helps stakeholders to protect themselves from physical harm and includes, for example, warnings to leave the premises because of safety concerns. Coombs (2007:165) posits that the first priority in a crisis is to shield stakeholders from harm rather than protecting reputation. Adjusting information includes "expressions of sympathy", information about the crisis, counselling, and corrective action. This is aimed at helping stakeholders cope with the crisis (Coombs, 2015a:142).

Once instructing and adjusting information have been provided the organisation can shift its focus to repairing its reputation. Reputation repair aims to diminish the negative effects of a crisis on an organisation's reputation. SCCT stipulates that reputation repair strategies may be used in the crisis and post-crisis phases (Institute for PR, 2014).

SCCT groups reputation repair communication strategies into three primary categories (Coombs, 2007:17), namely:

- Deny: These strategies aim to prove that there is no crisis, or that the organisation is not responsible for it.
- Diminish: Aims to let people see the crisis in a less negative light

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- Rebuild: Aims to strengthen the reputation of the organisation by offering some form of "compensation and/or aid".

'Reinforcing' is considered as a supplemental or secondary strategy and can be used to support the primary strategies. The aim is to add positive information about the organisation. It is also referred to as 'bolstering'.

Table 2.1: Crisis response strategies and response options (Coombs, 2007:170)

Primary Response Strategies		
Deny	Diminish	Rebuild
Attack the accuser: Confronting the person or group alleging something is wrong with the organisation	Excuse: minimising the organisation's responsibility by denying intent to do harm and/or claiming inability to control the events that sparked the crisis.	Compensation: Offering money or other forms of compensation to victims.
Denial: Asserting that the crisis doesn't exist.	Justification: Minimising the perceived damage caused by the crisis.	Apology: The organisation takes full responsibility for the crisis and asks stakeholders for forgiveness.
Scapegoating: Placing responsibility for the crisis on an individual or group outside of the organisation.		
Secondary Response Strategies - Bolstering strategies:		
Reminder: Reminding stakeholders of the organisation's past good record.		
Ingratiation: Offering praise to stakeholders.		
Victimage: Reminding stakeholders that the organisation is a victim of the crisis too		

SCCT provides the following guidelines or recommendations for crisis managers (Coombs, 2010:42):

- Informing and adjusting information should be the initial response for a crisis that has victims or potential victims.

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- The base response is effective for victim and accidental crises with no intensifying factors. According to Coombs (2007:165) 'base response' means that all victims should receive adjusting and instructing information as well as sympathy, information on corrective actions and trauma counselling, if needed.
- Diminish crisis response strategies can be used for accidental crises with no intensifying factors.
- Rebuild crisis response strategies should be used in instances where intentional actions by members of the organisation caused the crisis and for and accidental crises that have intensifying factors.
- Denial crisis response strategies should be reserved for rumour and challenge crises.
- The victimage crisis response strategy can be used with the base response for victim crises.
- The reminder crisis response strategy may be useful when an organisation has past good works but risks creating the impression of the organisation as egocentric. The Reminder strategy is not recommended when attributions of crisis responsibility are strong.
- The ingratiation crisis response strategy can be used any time stakeholders have helped in addressing the crisis.

SCCT outlines three stages for managing a crisis. The first, pre-crisis, includes "signal detection", prevention measures and preparing for the crisis (Coombs, 2010:20). In this stage a crisis management team is selected. King (2002:236) recommends that this team should consist of representatives from every department, including senior administration, PR, technical operations, advertising and investor relations.

Another important element of the pre-crisis phase involves developing a crisis communication plan (CCP), also referred to as a 'crisis management plan' (Coombs, 2006:8). Fearn-Banks (2017:358) states that the CCP assigns duties to different employees and outlines goals, policies and purposes. It typically includes information such as the crisis communication team members' details and duties, and a media pack that includes frequently asked questions about the organisation and photographs and key messages the organisation wishes to convey (George, 2012:37). Coombs points

out that the media often want responses immediately and preparing spokespeople for the crisis needs to happen during the pre-crisis phase (Institute for PR, 2014).

Coombs (2009:101) argues that establishing communication networks are a vital part of the pre-crisis phase. This is done to ensure that "as much risk-related information as possible is collected" by the organisation and that the network consists of a cross-section of internal and external stakeholders.

The second stage of managing a crisis, the crisis stage, is focused on the responses to the crisis event. This stage is divided into two parts: crisis recognition and crisis containment (Coombs 2015:11). Communication with stakeholders is a vital element of this phase. Crisis recognition includes an understanding of how an event becomes recognised or accepted as a crisis and "selling this to management" (Coombs, 2015:11). Importantly, Jaques (2007:154) argues that recognising a crisis "may seem simple and obvious, but the reality is far different". Crisis containment focuses on the organisation's response to the crisis, including its contingency plans and reputation management (Coombs, 2015:11).

The third stage of managing a crisis, the post-crisis stage, includes providing follow up messages on the crisis, as required. It seeks ways to better prepare the organisation for the next crisis while commitments made during the second phase are fulfilled.
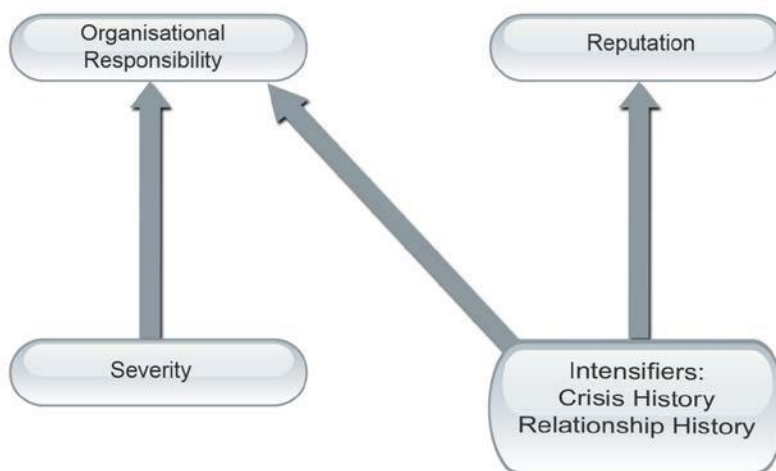
Figure 2.1: Relationships between SCCT concepts (Coombs, 2008:245)

SCCT has been criticised by some scholars, including Lee (2004:601-602), who argues that it doesn't consider "audience orientation" (2004:601). Lee states that an audience could be divided in their opinion of how an organisation should be held to account for a particular crisis.

Lee (2004:601) also calls SCCT's applicability in non-Western cultures into question. However, Vielhaber and Waltman (2008:313) assert that SCCT provides communication professionals with a useful framework for examining crisis communication responses. These authors argue that communication professionals can determine whether their messages are defensive or accommodative by examining these responses (Vielhaber & Waltman (2008:313). This framework provides the foundation for the researcher to evaluate the crisis response strategies of a university of technology during #FeesMustFall.

2.5. Use of social media in crisis communication

Social media platforms are increasingly being deployed in crisis communication. Social media can be defined as "mobile and web-based technologies mobilised to create highly interactive platforms via which individuals and communities share, co-create, discuss, and modify user-generated content" (Kietzmann, Hermkens, McCarthy, & Silvestre, 2011:241). Social media platforms include social networking sites such as Facebook, sites for professional networking, including LinkedIn, video- sharing sites like YouTube, micro-blogging sites like Twitter and photo-sharing services such as Instagram. (Whiting & Williams, 2013:363).

Social media has had a major impact on traditional communication patterns and "enables two-way and more symmetrical interaction between organisations and their publics" (Macnamara & Zerfass, 2012:287). The number of social media users around the world has grown exponentially over the past few years. According to *Digital 2020 Report* by Hootsuite and We are Social, close to half of the world's

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population, or 3.8 billion people, use social media, an increase of 321 million since 2019 (Datareportal, 2020) (Figure 2.2).
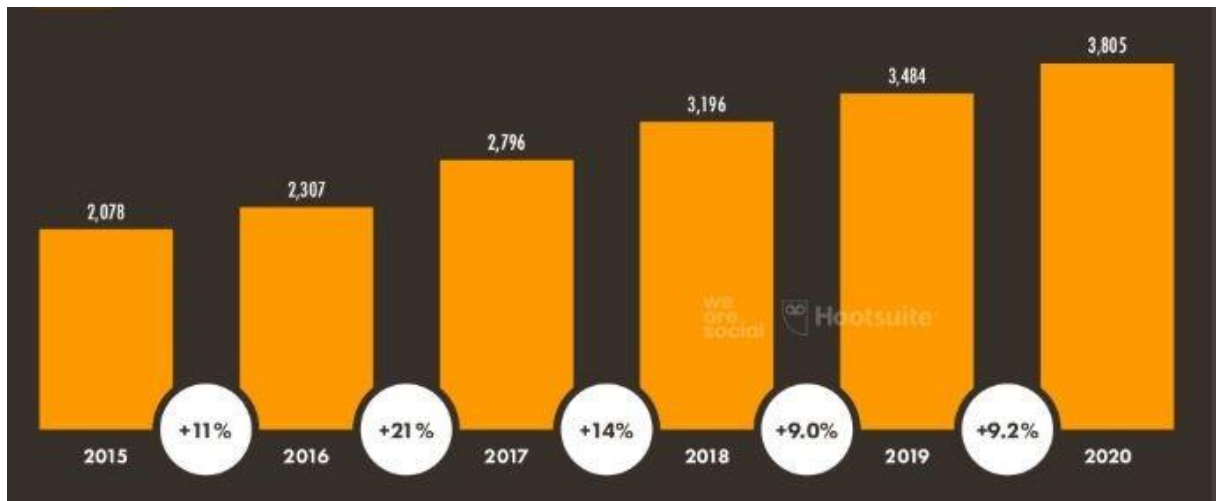
Figure. 2.2: Year-on-year growth of active social media users around the world (Datareportal, 2020).

Social media has had a significant impact on the way PR is practised. Robson and Sutherland (2012:103) state that "publics are increasingly geographically dispersed, traditional media and user-generated content are converging, and the discrete titles of 'consumer' and 'producer' often no longer apply". Whereas traditional media such as television only allowed for passive recipients, users of social media can now actively participate in the sending and receipt of information and can generate their own content (Cheng & Cameron, 2017:9). According to Distaso and McCorkindale (2012:75) "no area in the history of public relations has grown and spread as fast as social media". Thus, the growing popularity of social media offers practitioners a multitude of options to engage with stakeholders (Distaso, McCorkindale & Wright, 2011:325).

Evans, Twomey and Talan (2011:4) state that, because PR "is the practice of managing relationships", social networking platforms provide an "excellent tool" to manage a number of relationships at once and communicate with the public. DiStaso and McCorkindale (2012:76) state that early research on social media indicated minimal efforts by organisations to encourage dialogue on social media platforms, but in recent years organisations have started placing social media at the centre of their

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communication strategy and are using these platforms to engage their stakeholders. Coombs and Holladay (2014:1908) consider social media as an important step in the evolution of PR practice but point out that the "underlying concepts that enable public relations to be a strategic communication effort still exist".

For organisations, the use of various types of social media platforms has become an "important strategy" in crisis management in order to share information with their publics quickly and easily (Derani & Naidu, 2016: 650). Hess and Waller (2015:100-102) point out that journalists also use social media platforms to gauge what the issues are that are drawing attention on social media and to find people they can reach out to for interviews to contextualise issues. The authors argue that PR professionals are the best placed in any organisation to take charge of social media, especially in times of crisis, as they possess "the specialist knowledge and skills to manage media relations and communications with all stakeholders". Social media can assist practitioners with environmental scanning. It provides unique data in times of crises as it helps crisis managers to determine how stakeholders are responding to the organisation's crisis responses (Institute for PR, 2014).

Social media can, however, also exacerbate a crisis or be the breeding ground for one. It has brought great power to individual users. Allcott and Gentzkow (2017:211) state that a user "with no track record or reputation" has the ability to reach as many people as a major television network, and the content shared will not necessarily have been filtered or checked for accuracy. The authors define 'fake news' as "news articles that are intentionally and verifiably false, and could mislead readers" (Allcott & Gentzkow, 2017:213).

Pang, Hassan, and Chong (2014:96) found that crises often arise when "stakeholders are empowered by social media platforms to air their grievances". The authors argue that blogs and other online platforms can fuel the spread of crises beyond immediate stakeholder groups, which can result in the crises gaining credibility offline.

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Research by Roshan, Warren and Carr, (2016:350) found that many organisations use social media to provide status updates to their stakeholders during crises but fail to reply to responses received from stakeholders. These authors argue that a lack of understanding by the organisation on how to use social media to communicate during a crisis could lead to "mishandling" the crisis and cause harm to the organisation's competitive position (Roshan et al., 2016:352).

In his book *Ongoing Crisis Communication: Planning, Managing and Responding*, Coombs highlights the increased importance of social media in crisis management and states it has "added a layer to broadening the view of crises" (Coombs, 2015b:15). He argues that social media has added an extra category to organisational crises, the social media crisis. Social media crises "emerge" in or are heightened by social media (Coombs, 2015b:22).

Coombs also argues that social media has had a number of effects on crisis communication and uses the three phases of crisis management, as prescribed by SCCT, as a framework (Coombs, 2015b:26-29). In the pre-crisis phase, social media can be used for scanning by finding crisis-warning signs from stakeholders. Coombs argues that social media has influenced the emergence of crisis and is moving the pre-crisis phase from "private to public view". In the crisis phase the selection of the channels used to communicate has to be done strategically to reach the targeted audience. Furthermore, the nature of the crisis also plays an important role in selecting social media options to deliver crisis responses (Coombs, 2015b:29). In the post-crisis phase communicators can use social media as additional channels to update stakeholders or answer any questions they might have.

Turning to the use of social media in South Africa, the *Digital 2020 Report* shows that the number of active social media users in South Africa is also growing rapidly. In January 2020 this number stood at 22 million, an increase of 19 percent since January 2019 (Figure 2.3).
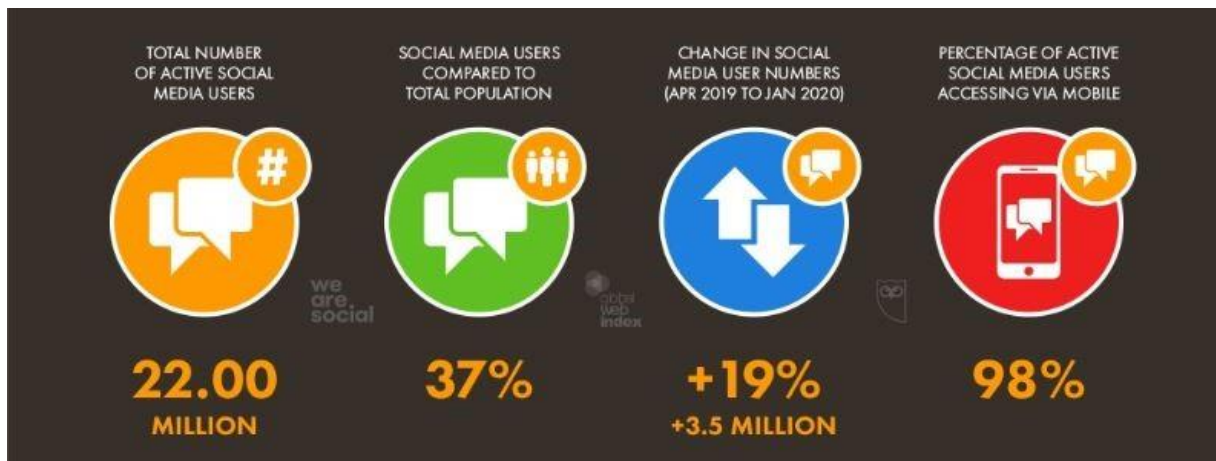
Figure 2.3: Social media overview of South Africa (Datareportal, 2020)

According to the report, South Africans spend on average more than three hours per day on social media and individual users had an average of eight social media accounts (Figure 2.4).
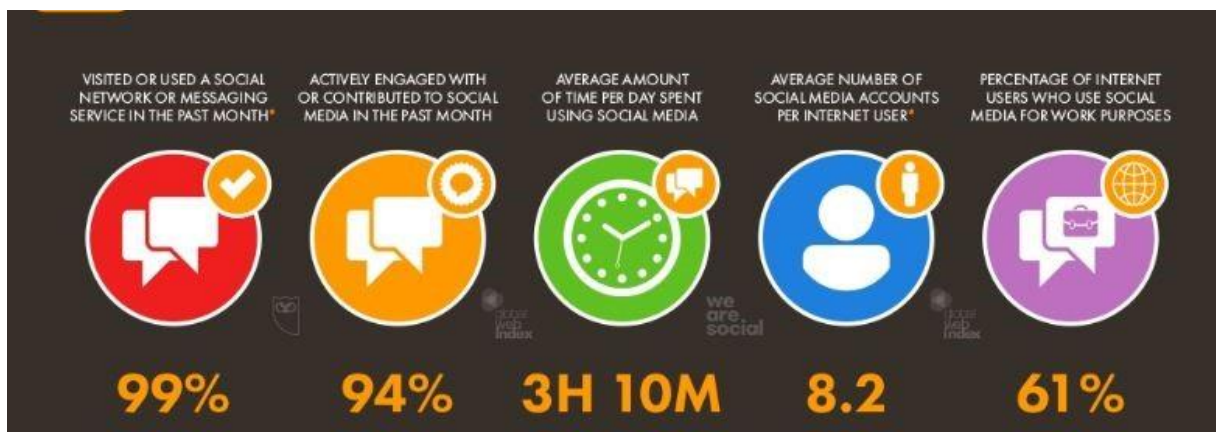
Figure 2.4: Social media behaviour of South Africans (Datareportal, 2020)

Crises often dominate social media and news headlines as, for example, the 2017 listeriosis outbreak in South Africa and, more recently, the coronavirus pandemic. Social media platforms have become important sources of information for the public during such crises.

2.6. Crises at Universities

Over the past few years crises at universities have often been in the spotlight. Some scholars argue that universities are particularly vulnerable to crises. Thelen and Robinson (2019:444) state that crises at universities and colleges "are quite often looming events that can overshadow and threaten their normal operations." According to Duke and Masland (2002:30), university communities, "with their large population of single young adults, experiencing their first taste of freedom away from parental supervision" are particularly susceptible to crises. According to Rollo and Zdziarski II (2007:26), almost all crises pose a threat to the university community. They state that while threats are present throughout society, "the thought that something bad can happen at an educational institution seems to create the greatest sense of concern for us, perhaps because our campuses contain such a wealth of human capital".

In the United States university crises have included campus shootings, which in the case of the Virginia Tech and University of Texas shootings, led to loss of life (Mastrodicasa, 2008:37). Wang and Hutchins (2010:553) argue that higher education institutions in the United States "have been beset" by a spike in crises at various levels, including ethical breaches by university administrators, student unrest and cases of harassment and discrimination. In New Zealand a massive earthquake that hit the Canterbury region caused damaged to the University of Canterbury, resulting in the temporary closure of the institution (Dabner 2012:69) while in South Africa crises at universities "have become a regular occurrence" over the past few years (Van Rensburg, Conradie & Dondolo, 2017:62) However, a study by Lawton-Misra (2019:149) showed a lack of adequate crisis leadership among the leaders of higher education institutions in South Africa The study recommended that the Department of Higher Education take an active role in providing training to support university leaders as well as in formulating a national crisis communication strategy for the sector (Lawton-Misra, 2019:iv). In addition, the study recommended that university leaders be equipped to engage efficiently on social media (Lawton-Misra, 2019:148).

The coronavirus pandemic is expected to result in further crises at universities. An article on the website of *Nature Magazine* argues that universities will never be the same after the coronavirus crisis. It argues that universities are facing huge challenges, which were affecting their financial outlook, as income from students, including

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international students declined "and endowment funds implode as stock markets drop" (Witze, 2020).

Romano (2013:8) highlights the importance of stakeholder relationships for universities and states that these institutions have a range of stakeholders, both internal and external, to whom they must be accountable. Romano (2013:8) posits that students are the primary client, and often times are the stakeholders that are most vulnerable during a crisis although other stakeholders, such as parents or family members of students, may also be affected. Coombs (2015a:142) argues that organisations have to consider how their crisis response strategies will affect the perceptions of stakeholders. In a 2014 study Kettunen (2014:34) developed a stakeholder map for higher education and argues that it is not only important to identify the stakeholders but also to categorise their connection in terms of the strategic management of the organisation. Kettunen (2014:34) posits that the success of a higher education institution largely depends "on its ability to take care of its stakeholder relationships".
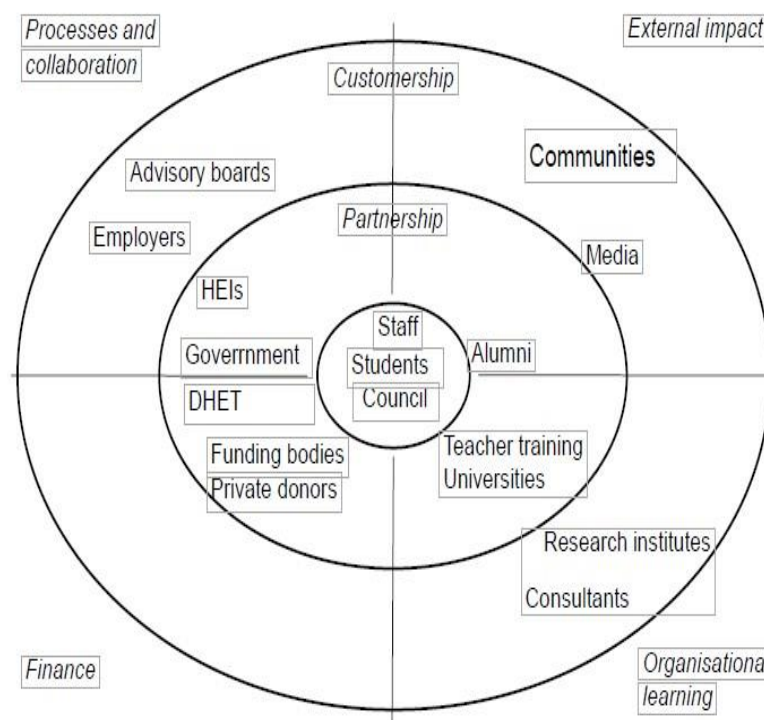
Figure 2.5: Stakeholder map for a Higher Education Institution. (Adapted from Kettunen 2014).

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Crisis events can cause panic among university stakeholders and raise doubts about whether universities can, in a timely manner, "prepare and respond to crisis events while still maintaining a culture of inclusivity and open access" (Wang & Hutchins, 2010:553). The safety of students should be of prime concern to educational institutions and to achieve this requires "extraordinary security measures as well as comprehensive emergency, risk and crisis communication strategies" (Barker & Yoder, 2012: 79-80). These authors argue that educational institutions face unique challenges when dealing with crises because of the "vulnerability" of student stakeholders and because a threat to student safety could result in the institution being jeopardised "more severely than what would the case in other industries".

Mastrodicasa (2008:39) argues that the public expects university staff to communicate with its constituencies "with compassion, concern, and sensitivity to the situation in a timely manner". Rollo and Zdziarski II (2007:5) argue that by acting on the basis of "an ethic of care" for the university community during crises, a university can "put a human face" on their institution.

Similar to other organisations, universities also risk suffering reputational damage during a crisis (Len-Rios, 2010:268). Reputation is an important resource to higher education institutions because a good reputation can attract valuable resources such as endowments, sponsors, and talented scholars, "which could boost its educational, economic, and other development programs" (Effiong, 2014:457). He argues that the reputation of higher education institutions could be enhanced or eroded by the nature of information disseminated during a crisis.

2.6.1. Use of social media in South African Higher Education Institutions

Gainey (2010:308) posits that new communication technologies and other issues, such as stakeholders becoming more outspoken, are placing further pressure on educational institutions. During crises, aligning messages among many communication channels and structures can be difficult (Moerschell & Novak,

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2019:30). However, by drawing up crisis communication plans, universities can be better prepared for crises. Communication teams should develop communication strategies "to influence the cause of conflicts" for the benefit of the university's stakeholders (Hussain & Rawjee, 2014:144). These authors argue that instantaneous communication and social media should be a priority in order to ensure clearer communication and to limit confusion.

An online article in *University World News* provides evidence that university leaders in South Africa are embracing new as social media and are acknowledging the role it can play in engaging with staff and student stakeholders. The article quotes Professor Tshilidzi Marwala, Vice-chancellor of the University of Johannesburg (UJ), as saying: "They are hooked on Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram, etc. As vice chancellors, we should go where our students and staff are. We should use all forms of media to communicate as much as is possible. These should include social media, radio, television, internal memos etc.," (Naidu, 2020).

Prof Adam Habib, who was the Vice-Chancellor of Wits University at the time told the same publication that Twitter allowed him "to engage with the broader university community, including students, academic and administrative staff and alumni". Prof Habib added:

> It [Twitter] allows me to understand and have a feel for the university community that I wouldn't have had if I wasn't on Twitter. I can engage easily, if there are things that happen, for example, the aircon goes down in the law library, somebody will tweet it. I pick it up. That's important, something I find valuable. (Naidu, 2020).

Wenting (2019:15-16) posits that social media has affected three aspects of crisis management at universities:

- Social media aids efforts to monitor the environment, which can help the institution to initiate early crisis warning measures and crisis

management measures and improve the efficiency of dealing with the crisis.

- Universities can communicate with the outside world much faster than they did in the past and can use "words, pictures and videos to disclose the truth of the crisis".

- Social media provides a convenient channel for dialogue between institutions and staff and students, which allows administrators to listen to the opinions of these important stakeholders, while it may help lecturers and students to understand the university's efforts and ability to cope with problems.

Hussain and Rawjee (2014:150), whose research investigated the role of communication during the planning and management of a crisis at higher education institutions, recommend more instantaneous communication and that the incorporation of social media should be considered a priority These authors made the following conclusions and recommendations (Hussain & Rawjee, 2014:150):

- Incorporating conflict management and crisis communication into strategic plans for universities should be a pre-requisite.

- Higher education institutions should have a Risk Policy, which includes the role of public relations and communication.

- Issue management should be conducted in a strategic manner and should be a priority at higher education institutions.

- Senior management should constitute crisis teams out of key stakeholders. They should receive adequate training.

- A plan of action is needed to address the problems of a large staff and student numbers, multi campuses and legal and health issues, which create additional communication challenges during a crisis.

2.7. Summary

Effective crisis communication can play an integral role in managing a crisis and protecting the reputation of higher education institutions. The Situational Crisis

Communication Theory, which underpins this research, provides guidelines for communicators on the selection of crisis response strategies and serves as the framework for the researcher to evaluate the crisis communication strategy of the university during the #FeesMustFall movement.

Universities in South Africa and abroad are prone to crises, which can have serious consequences, including financial and reputational damage. These crises are often in the spotlight for a variety of reasons, including the vulnerability of student stakeholders. Social media has provided communicators with an additional tool to use during crises but can often exacerbate a crisis or even the cause of a crisis.

Situational Crisis Communication Theory provides the foundation for the analysis of the data, which is outlined in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1. Introduction

Research methodology, according to Kumar (2014:34), is the "path to finding answers to your research questions". Research methodology involves the various steps the researcher has to make "in studying his research problem along with the logic behind them" (Kothari, 2004:8). According to Jonker and Pennink (2010:vii) research methodology "consists of the paradigms, methodologies, methods, and instruments used to collect, classify, and analyse data".

The research paradigm, methodology and method of data collection which were used to aid the researcher in answering the research problem set out in Chapter One are presented in this chapter. The ethical considerations inherent within the selected research process are also outlined.

3.2. Research paradigm

This research is guided by the constructivist worldview or paradigm. A paradigm is a worldview that steers the researcher's choices in terms of method but also in "ontologically and epistemologically fundamental ways" (Guba & Lincoln, 1994:105). It determines the researcher's philosophical orientation and impacts on every choice that will be made in the research process (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017:26).

Unlike research in the positivist paradigm which is "associated with realism, objectivism and the aim of uncovering a single truth" (O'Neil & Koekemoer, 2016:3), constructivists on the other hand, recognise "that it is rarely the raw physical reality which shapes our behaviour and our response to the physical world" (Lincoln & Guba, 2013:12). Constructivists are of the view that "knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind" (Schwandt, 1998:236). They argue that "much of meaning is socially constructed through perception, interaction, and language" (Sellnow & Seeger, 2013:18).

According to Hunter, Chung, Gretzel and Koo (2015:106), constructivism stresses that the researcher and participants "reflexively and mutually influence each other They posit that constructivist studies "focus on interpreting relationships between or across viewpoints and on the potential replicability of the study" instead of "generalizable and result oriented findings". Among the arguments against constructivism is that it makes different claims with regard to reality, while Speed (1991:395) highlights the argument that constructivists "have gone too far in their assumption that a structured reality makes no contribution to what can be known".

The constructivist approach, however, holds several strengths. Some scholars consider it an efficient tool that helps with "understanding the complexities and multiplicity of phenomena especially in this 21st century where creative ideas and inventions marking novelty is earnestly sought through our research and education" (Adom, Yeboah & Ankrah, 2016:9). The constructivist paradigm allowed for an evaluation of the higher education institution's crisis communication strategy during #FeesMustFall Movement through gaining an understanding of it from the participants, in their own words, as well as by analysing posts from the university's official Facebook page. Adom *et al.* (2016:5) state that the paradigm is associated with qualitative research as it "seeks to understand a phenomenon under study from the experiences or angles of the participants using different data collecting agents". The qualitative research approach will be discussed in more detail in the next section.

3.3. Qualitative research methodology

There are two widely recognised approaches to conducting research in various fields: quantitative research and qualitative research (Rahman, 2017:102). According to King, Keohane and Verba (1994:3), quantitative research

uses numbers and statistical methods. It tends to be based on numerical measurements of specific aspects of phenomena; it abstracts from particular instances to seek general description or to test causal hypotheses; it seeks measurements and analyses that are easily replicable by other researchers.

However, Rahman (2017:106) points out that quantitative research "fails to ascertain deeper underlying meanings and explanations". Therefore, quantitative methodology was not considered appropriate for the current research. The researcher needed to not

only gather a nuanced perspective on the crisis response strategies but also understand and contextualise the collected data to answer the research questions. Instead, the qualitative methodology was used. This involved using semi-structured interviews and collecting social media posts. This will be discussed in detail later in this chapter.

In contrast to quantitative methodologies, qualitative methodology refers to "research that produces descriptive data – people's own written or spoken words and observable behaviour" (Taylor, Bogdan & DeVault, 2016:7). According to Auerbach and Silverstein (2003:3), qualitative research entails the analysis and interpretation of interviews and text to derive patterns of meaning pertaining to a particular phenomenon. Aspers and Corte (2019:139) define qualitative research "as an iterative process in which improved understanding to the scientific community is achieved by making new significant distinctions resulting from getting closer to the phenomenon studied". As outlined in table 3.1., there are several advantages to the qualitative research methodology, including that it allows the researcher to gain more detailed information from participants and the costs involved are relatively low.

Table 3.1.: Advantages of Qualitative Research (Smith & Bowers-Brown, 2010:115).

Advantage	Detail
Exploration	If research is done on an under-researched area, we may not know which questions to ask straight away and therefore qualitative research would be much more appropriate than quantitative research. It helps the researcher to explore the area in an open manner before developing a more nuanced approach (if so desired).
Detail	You may require a more detailed explanation to understand an issue.
Access	It is easier to reach 'hard to reach' groups using qualitative methods, for example, homeless people, youth groups or individuals with literacy problems.
Sensitivity	When something is taboo, delicate or intimate then people may need an approach which builds trust and confidence before responding to such issues.
In the development of quantitative methods	Asking open-ended questions through a focus group or interview can help you to develop a more nuanced structured questionnaire through which you would attempt to find out how widespread the issue is.
Cost	The cost is in time 'time resource', that is practitioner research time, rather than in equipment costs.

The qualitative approach also has certain weaknesses or limitations, including that it can be time-consuming and makes use of small sample sizes (Rahman, 2017:102). However, data based on human experience can be "powerful and sometimes more compelling than quantitative data" and can unearth certain "subtleties" about the research subjects or topic that positivistic enquiries cannot access (Anderson, 2010:2).

A qualitative methodology was selected for this research as it allowed for an in-depth understanding and evaluation of the communication strategy used by the institution during the crisis. It allowed for the conduct of semi-structured interviews with those responsible for communication and analysis of the content of Facebook posts made to the institution's official Facebook page.

3.4. Data collection

Researchers use various methods to collect qualitative data (Gill, Stewart,

Treasure & Chadwick, 2008:291). For this study, the researcher collected data in two phases and using different sources. In the first phase, the researcher conducted semi-structured interviews with two people who were mainly responsible for the institution's crisis communication responses during the #FeesMustFall movement—the Media Liaison Officer, who is based in the institution's Marketing and Communication Department, and the person who held the position of Director of Marketing and Communication at CPUT during the #FeesMustFall movement.

According to Adams (2015:493), semi-structured interviews are conversational in tone and make use of a "blend of closed- and open-ended questions, often accompanied by follow-up why or how questions". Adams states that while it may be time-consuming to prepare for and conduct the interviews, and then to analyse the generated data, semi-structured interviews can "meander around the topics on the agenda" with the advantage that they may also go into unforeseen issues.

The interviewees' responses provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the communication strategy employed by the university as they could describe the processes, choice of responses and choice of channels employed during the various stages of the crisis. The researcher's initial plan was to conduct these interviews in person but, because of the coronavirus pandemic and rules around social distancing, telephonic interviews had to be conducted. A smartphone was used to make voice recordings. The interviews were recorded with the permission of the interviewees and saved as password-protected files. Each interview was approximately 45 minutes long. In compiling the list of questions for the interviewees, the researcher was guided by the research questions as well as by the guidelines on communication strategies provided by Situational Crisis Communication Theory. The interviews were transcribed verbatim into Microsoft Word.

In the second phase data was collected using posts made by the university to its official Facebook page. The Marketing and Communication Department of the institution were responsible for all Facebooks posts made to the page during
#FeesMustFall movement. According to Ditchfield and Meredith (2018:497),

Facebook provides researchers with "an entirely preserved archive of data" including status updates, wall posts, pictures and comments on other users' posts, all of which are suitable for qualitative analysis. A total of 21 posts, which specifically related to the crisis, were collected. This consisted of 19 posts which were made during October 2015. The researcher selected these posts as October 2015 was the first month during which CPUT was affected by the #FeesMustFall movement and this allowed for an evaluation of the response strategy during the crisis stage, as defined by Situational Crisis Communication Theory. The crisis phase is focused on the responses to the crisis event (Coombs, 2015b:11).

Two posts made during January 2016 were also collected. These posts were specifically selected as January 2016 was the first month after the crisis hit that classes and work returned to normal. While the crisis resumed afterwards, the researcher considered January 2016 as the post-crisis stage as operations had returned to normal. The post-crisis stage "involves dissecting the crisis management effort, communicating necessary changes to individuals, and providing follow-up crisis messages as needed" (Coombs, 2010:20). By collecting data from the interviewees as well as Facebook, the researcher was able to gain insight into the processes behind the communication strategies used during the crisis, as well as the execution of these strategies.

3.4.1. Thematic analysis

Clarke and Braun (2017:298) define thematic analysis as "a method for identifying, analysing, and interpreting patterns of meaning (themes) within qualitative data". Researchers can apply thematic analysis "across a range of theoretical frameworks" epistemologies and research questions, (Clarke & Braun, 2017; Nowell, Norris, White & Moules, 2017).

Clarke and Braun (2017:297) state that thematic analysis provides "accessible and systematic procedures for generating codes and themes from qualitative data". They note that codes "are the smallest units of analysis that capture interesting features of the data (potentially) relevant to the research question". The objective is to make

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connections between various parts of the data and the codes "provide the building blocks for themes" (Alhojailan, 2012; Clarke & Braun, 2017). King and Horrocks (2010:150) state that themes are "recurrent features of participants' accounts, characterising particular perceptions and/or experiences, which the researcher sees as relevant to the research question". Themes provide the framework for the researcher to organise and report the observations from their analysis (Clarke & Braun, 2017:297).

There are two main varieties of thematic analysis – data-driven thematic analysis and theory-driven analysis (Gibson & Hugh-Jones, 2012:130). These authors state that data-driven analysis does not start with any pre-determined theoretical concepts and involves being as open-minded as possible about what the data might produce. Theory-driven thematic analysis also referred to as 'theoretical thematic analysis' by some scholars, is used when the researcher wants to apply a set of theoretical concepts to analyse the data (Gibson & Hugh-Jones, 2012:130). When developing codes in theory-driven thematic analysis the researcher begins with the theory as the starting point and then generates codes that are consistent with the theory (Boyatzis, 1998:29).

Theory-driven thematic analysis was selected for this research as it allowed the researcher to draw from the theory and to understand and present the perspectives of the participants in a detailed manner. The research is guided by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory, which provided the base for the researcher to develop codes, which were then used to generate the themes used in this study. Data from the semi-structured interviews were combined with data from the social media posts, with the aim of conducting a detailed and insightful analysis.

3.4.2. Credibility

According to Nowell, Norris, White and Moules (2017:16), qualitative researchers have to illustrate that the analysis of the data has been "conducted in a precise, consistent, and exhaustive manner through recording, systematizing, and disclosing the methods of analysis with enough detail to enable the reader to determine whether the process

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is credible and for it to be accepted as trustworthy". These authors assert that if researchers are not clear about how the data was analysed, it becomes difficult to evaluate the trustworthiness of the process.

To ensure the trustworthiness and credibility of the process, the researcher was guided by Braun and Clarke's six-phase guide for doing thematic analysis, which starts with the researcher familiarising themselves with the data and ends with completing the report (Braun & Clarke, 2006:87). Table 3.2 sets out the phases of thematic analysis according to Braun and Clarke's guide (Braun & Clarke, 2006:87)

Table 3.2 The process and phases of thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006:87)

Phase	Description of the Process
Familiarising yourself with your data	Transcribing data (if necessary), reading and re-reading the data, noting down initial ideas.
Generating initial codes	Coding interesting features of the data in a systematic fashion across the entire data set, collating data relevant to each code.
Searching for themes	Collating codes into potential themes, gathering all data relevant to each potential theme.
Reviewing themes	Checking if the themes work in relation to the coded extracts and the entire data set, generating a thematic 'map' of the analysis.
Defining and naming themes	Ongoing analysis to refine the specifics of each theme, and the overall story the analysis tells, generating clear definitions and names for each theme.
Producing the report	The final opportunity for analysis. Selection of vivid, compelling extract examples, final analysis of selected extracts, relating back of the analysis to the research question and literature, producing a scholarly report of the analysis

In the first phase the raw data from the semi-structured interviews were transcribed. The researcher read the data numerous times. Initial patterns and ideas were noted. This process was then repeated in terms of the content of the Facebook posts from the official CPUT website.

In the second phase, the initial patterns and ideas identified in phase one were broken down into codes, guided by the SCCT as the theoretical framework and the research question. See Figure 3.1 below as an example of how the researcher generated codes from the data.

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Transcribed text	Code generated	
Did the university have a formal communication plan for times of crises? Let me say this there was a plan but that plan was never formally adopted by council.	Crisis communication plan not officially recognised	IF **Ilse Fredericks**

Figure 3.1. Example of coded script

In the third phase the codes generated in the previous phase were sorted and codes that were not associated with the theory or research question were eliminated. Possible themes were noted. In the fourth phase the initial themes were reviewed by the researcher. Where necessary, themes were renamed and redefined to be more succinct. In the fifth phase the researcher read through the data again and moved to naming and defining the themes and making distinctions between the various themes identified. Where necessary, themes were divided into sub-themes. The following themes and sub-themes were identified:

- **Theme 1**: Crisis preparedness

- o Subtheme 1: Crisis communication plan

- o Subtheme 2: Communication network

- **Theme 2**: Response Strategies

- o Subtheme 1: Crisis communicators

- o Subtheme 2: Crisis communication

  channels

- **Theme 3**: Post-crisis messaging

The sixth and final stage of the analysis involved writing up the analysis of the data. This included providing examples of extracts from the semi-structured interviews as well as from the Facebook data. Figure 3.2 illustrates how different codes, which were generated based on SCCT, were grouped to form the main themes for the study.

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Figure. 3.2. An example of how codes were used to generate themes

3.5. Ethical considerations

The researcher saw to the required ethical issues before any data any was collected. Permission to undertake the research was obtained from the Faculty Research Committee of the Faculty of Informatics and Design, and a site permission letter was obtained from the Institutional Ethics Committee at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology (see Addendums C and D).

Participants took part in the study voluntarily. The participants gave their consent for the researcher to use the responses provided for the purposes of the study and completed a consent form. The aim of the research and how the data would be used and stored was explained to the participants before the interviews were conducted. The researcher obtained permission from the participants to voice record the interviews. The voice recordings were transferred to a password-protected file and transcriptions were saved as a password-protected document.

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In terms of the collection of data from Facebook posts, only the information available on the institution's official Facebook page was collected. Where posts or responses from individual users were collected or used in the study, the names were blanked out.

3.6. Summary

In this chapter, the researcher unpacked the research methodology of this study. By following a qualitative research approach, the researcher was able to gain a deeper understanding of the crisis communication responses and strategy, not only from those behind the strategy but also by accessing the crisis communication responses provided on Facebook. The process of collecting and analysing the data was described as well as the process applied in generating codes and themes. The researcher applied a six-step approach to ensure the credibility and trustworthiness of the study. Table 3.3 summarises the methodological approach for the study. In the following chapter the research findings will be analysed and discussed.

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Table 3.3: Summary of the methodology applied in the study

Research Paradigm	Constructivist
Research Approach	Qualitative
Data Collection	Semi-Structured Interviews Facebook posts
Data Analysis	Thematic Analysis (Theory-Driven)

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

4.1. Introduction

This chapter presents the findings of the study. As discussed in the previous chapter, theory-driven thematic analysis was used to analyse the data set. Guided by communication scholar Timothy Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SSCT) three main themes were generated:

Theme 1: Crisis preparedness

Theme 2: Response strategies

Theme 3: Post-crisis messaging

In addition, two subthemes, 'Crisis communication plan' and 'Communication network', were generated under Theme 1, while the subthemes 'Crisis communicators' and 'Crisis communication channels' were generated under Theme 2. The findings will be discussed according to each theme and subtheme as well as how it responds to the main research question and sub-questions.

The main research question and sub-questions that guided the study are as follows:

Main Research Question:

- What were the university's crisis response strategies (as defined in Coombs' Situational Crisis Communication Theory) during the #FeesMustFall movement?

Sub-questions

- (SQ1) How were these strategies executed in each of the three crisis phases prescribed by the Situational Crisis Communication Theory?

- (SQ2) How were different channels used in the crisis communication strategy during the #FeesMustFall movement?

4.2. Theme 1: Crisis preparedness

This theme revolves around the steps taken by the institution, and specifically the Marketing and Communication Department, to prepare for a crisis. It responds to SQ1 by evaluating how the institution prepared for the crisis in terms of communication. The findings in terms of each sub-theme generated through thematic analysis are presented below, followed by a discussion on the overall theme.

4.2.1. Crisis communication plan

As disused in Chapter 2, the crisis communication plan assists organisations to communicate faster and more effectively and outlines the roles of different employees as well as goals, policies and purpose Fearn-Banks (2017:358). The semi-structured interviews revealed that the university did not make use of a crisis communication plan during the #FeesMustFall movement. The Marketing and Communication Director stated

> "Let me say this, there was a plan but that plan was never formally adopted by council."

The Media Liaison Officer, who was the university's main communicator during the crisis, stated that she had never seen the crisis communication plan. She said:

> "I took over the role and almost immediately #FeesMustFall happened. So, I know that the plan existed but it wasn't in my ambit to know about it before that."

As recommended by SCCT, the Marketing and Communication Department drafted a crisis communication plan before the crisis occurred. However, no further steps were taken to formalise the plan. The Marketing and Communication Director indicated that the university's highest decision-making body, the University Council, never adopted

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the plan. The content of the plan was never shared with the media liaison officer, who was new to the role and the university's main spokesperson during the crisis.

Advance knowledge of the content of the plan may have assisted the media liaison to respond faster and more effectively. The fact that media liaison had not seen the plan also indicates that the institution missed a key step in the preparation process— testing the plan in advance to identify any potential problems. Coombs argues that crisis management plans should be tested in advance. Considering that the media liaison officer had never seen the plan, the assumption can be made that it was not tested. As the Media Liaison officer was new to her role, the plan could have provided a quick reference guide, which could have helped to speed up communication in a potentially volatile situation.

4.2.2. Communication network

The size of the university, which has various faculties, spread out over various campuses in different parts of the province, presented a communication challenge during the crisis. The university attempted to address this by nominating people in different buildings on the various campuses to communicate to the Marketing and Communication Department what was happening in their location. However, the Marketing and Communication Director indicated that this plan was unsuccessful. He stated:

> *"I think what was key was that we had to know what was happening on all the different campuses of the University and I must confess it was a challenge. We even went so far as to nominate people in different buildings on the different campuses to contact us if there were any problems in those buildings. … In fact, if you ask me on a scale of 10 how well that worked, then I would say to you probably a three."*

The Marketing and Communication Director noted that the meetings with the contacts in the various buildings, whom he referred to as 'ambassadors', needed to happen during "peacetime" and not while a crisis was in progress.

The Media Liaison Officer was not only responsible for communication with the press and media during the crisis but also for internal communication. According to the Media

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Liaison Officer, the choice of one communicator was aimed at ensuring that the message "stayed pure". This was echoed by the Director of Marketing and Communication, who indicated that the message to internal stakeholders and the media "were often the same message but just adapted".

SCCT recommends that a communication network be established in the pre-crisis phase. The institution only set up a communication network in the various buildings once the crisis was already underway, but this did not have the desired effect. A network established before the crisis broke out could have contributed to environmental scanning in the pre-crisis phase and could have provided accurate updates on what was happening on the ground during the protests. This information could have fed into crisis communication responses, especially with regard to staff and student safety.

4.2.3. Summary

SCCT recommends that the organisation ready itself for a crisis during the pre-crisis phase. However, the evaluation of the data found a lack of planning and preparation for the crisis. There were no dry runs of the communication plan, which was a missed opportunity for the Marketing and Communication Department to identify potential problems with the plan. This may also have identified the need to establish contacts across campuses to feed information to communicators during the crisis.

When the communication network was established during the crisis, it proved to be unsuccessful. A network of communicators tested prior to the crisis may have eliminated the challenges faced and could have contributed to environmental scanning, which would have helped the institution to identify potential issues before the crisis. More targeted planning in the pre-crisis phase would have contributed to a more effective crisis response strategy during the crisis.

As indicated in Subtheme 1, the Media Liaison Officer stated that while she knew the crisis communication plan existed, "it wasn't in my ambit to know about it" before the #FeesMustFall movement. This meant that the media liaison officer could not refer to the contents of a crisis communication plan for assistance when the crisis hit and had to start without a template for action when the crisis broke out. Familiarising the Media

Liaison Officer with the content of the plan would have better prepared the officer for the crisis.

4.3. Theme 2: Response strategies

Crisis response strategies refer to what the organisation says and does after the crisis occurs (Coombs, 2006:242). During a crisis the organisation's stakeholders and the public want to be informed about what happened, and conveying the organisation's side of the story will be key for management (Institute for PR, 2014). The first part of the analysis and discussion around Theme 2 will focus on the crisis responses strategies, or the messages communicated. However, in order to provide a comprehensive understanding of the response strategies, it is important to understand how the messages were delivered to the university and by whom. Therefore, two subthemes—'Crisis communicators' (focussing on the role of the crisis spokespeople) and 'Crisis communication channels' (focussing on the channels used to communicate with stakeholders during the crisis)—are analysed and discussed. Theme 2 relates to the main research question as well as the two sub-questions.

• Crisis response strategies

SCCT, which underpins the theoretical framework for this research, provides a guide in terms of response strategies during crises. As outlined in the literature review, it recommends selecting the crisis response strategy(ies) that are appropriate to the characteristics of the crisis situation (Coombs, 2006:242).

4.3.1.1. Instructing Information

As discussed in Chapter 2, instructing information refers to information that helps stakeholders to protect themselves physically (Coombs, 2010:42). The Director of Marketing and Communication and the Media Liaison Officer indicated that the safety of stakeholders was the main and first priority for the institution and was the main message that they tried to convey. The Director of Marketing and Communication stated that:

> *"Safety was a priority. Our staff and student safety was actually our top priority. That is always a very big theme when we communicate around crises."*

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The message of safety was a constant feature in the institution's messages to stakeholders via social media, as indicated in two posts from the university's official Facebook page (Figure 4.1 and 4.2), both from October 21, 2015.

Figure 4.1: Post 1: Regarding the safety of stakeholders.

Figure 4.2: Post 2: Regarding the safety of stakeholders, 21 October 2015.

As recommended by SCCT, the safety of stakeholder was key for the institution during the crisis. The Media Liaison Officer indicated that this was the institution's top priority, which was reflected in the data that showed that instructing information was a constant and important part of the institution's communication strategy during the crisis. However, safety messaging may have been enhanced had the institution put in place an effective communication network across campuses to provide information to the Marketing and Communication Department on what was happening in each building.

4.3.1.2. Adjusting information

As discussed in Chapter 2, adjusting information is also referred to as the 'care response' and includes expressions of sympathy (Coombs, 2010). The data show that, in line with the prescripts of SCCT, instructing information was followed by adjusting information. After providing safety information to the stakeholders, the institution

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provided information on the crisis situation and attempts to resolve it. Further, the Facebook messages included expressions of sympathy with stakeholders. The following two posts are examples of how the institution applied adjusting information.

Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) ✓
October 26, 2015 ·

Dear Staff and Students,

I am happy to inform you that all activities at CPUT will return to normal tomorrow morning. This is based on an agreement we have reached with the SRC and student leadership after a full day of liaising and discussions. We continue to monitor the situation on the ground and I am confident that as from tomorrow all campuses will be back to normal. The police have also given us of their full support in continuing to monitor the situation and in the unlikely event that anyone attempts to disrupt our return they will be there to support and intervene.

I know that many of you were scheduled to write exams this week. Please note that these exams remain postponed until further notice. It is only after the Senate executive has met and thrashed out a catch up plan that we will be able to confirm the new exam period and academic support for students. This same meeting will also arrange a contingency plan for missed classes and all other academic related issues. I urge all students to settle back into their respective academic programmes and also be patient with us as we strive to normalise conditions for all. Any student who needs it should also use the services of student counselling should they experience any problems with their studies.

This has been one of the most testing times in the history of our country and of CPUT and I wish to thank you for your patience and support as we worked to resolve the remaining student issues.

Thank you
Your Vice-Chancellor
Dr Prins Nevhutalu

Figure 4.3. Post 3: Adjusting information provided by the university, 26 October 2015

Figure 4.4. Post 4: Adjusting information provided by the university, 17 October 2015

As recommended by SCCT, the adjusting information provided by the institution focused on helping stakeholders to cope with the crisis. The selected Facebook posts illustrate that the institution showed sympathy with the plight of stakeholders, provided updates on the crisis and what was being done to resolve it, and offered counselling to affected students.

4.3.1.3. Reputation repair crisis response strategies

As discussed in detail in Chapter 2, SCCT recommends selecting the crisis response strategy(ies) that are appropriate to the characteristics of the crisis situation, (Coombs, 2006; 2015) argues that response strategies should respond to the context, the level of responsibility for the crisis, and the presence (if any) of intensifiers.

While there were several issues of contention at the institution that were highlighted by the #FeesMustFall movement events at the institution, the #FeesMustFall movement stretched across universities, which meant that some of the issues had to be addressed at the national level. Statements by South African university leaders

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indicated that government and not universities were responsible for the funding crisis at universities. In its Annual Report for 2015, Universities South Africa (Usaf), the organisation representing South Africa's universities, stated:

> *Many vice-chancellors had been lamenting the underfunding of higher education for over a decade with little effect and it was the students with their marches on Parliament and the Union Buildings that shook the state, changed the systemic parameters and began the process of fundamentally transforming higher education.*
> (Universities South Africa, 2015:5)

This sentiment was echoed in CPUT's Annual Report for 2015 (CPUT, 2015), in which the chairperson of the university council stated:

> *In response to the erosion of government funding over the years, the universities responded by increasing student fees. This had the unintended consequence of making higher education unaffordable for many poor and* middle-class *students, giving rise to the #FeesMustFall movement, which caused considerable damage to the sector's reputation and infrastructure.*

When the level of responsibility for the crisis is low, SCCT places the crisis into the victim cluster, which includes crises where violence is present. SCCT stipulates that providing instructing and adjusting information may be a sufficient response for crises in the victim cluster unless intensifiers such as a history of crisis are present. If intensifiers are present, diminish response strategies are recommended. As discussed in Chapter 2, there are two types of diminish strategies:

Excuse: Minimising the organisation's responsibility by denying intent to harm and/or claiming an inability to control the events that sparked the crisis. Justification: Minimising the perceived damage caused by the crisis.

In addition, in terms of SCCT, the victimage response, which aims to reinforce the belief that the organisation deserves sympathy, may also be used as a secondary or response-in-addition to other crisis responses.

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The semi-structured interview revealed the presence of at least one intensifier, a history of crisis. In answer to a question on whether the institution had experienced previous crises, the Marketing and Communication Director replied: "The answer is yes. There were other crises". According to the Marketing and Communication Director, the previous crises were sparked by issues around financial aid for students. The Media Liaison Officer also indicated that there were previous crises, such as a strike but "not on the same level" as #FeesMustFall.

However, the data did not show evidence of the institution using the diminish strategies, which is recommended when a crisis falls into the victim cluster and there is an intensifying factor, such as a history of crisis. As discussed in this chapter, university authorities stated that underfunding of higher education by the State resulted in the crisis. The institution (CPUT) may therefore have benefited by using one of the diminish strategies of SCCT—the excuse strategy, which aims to minimise the organisation's responsibility by claiming inability to control the events that sparked the crisis. It is important to note that the research did not include crisis responses made in statements to the press or television, which may have included the diminish response.

The data showed that the institution used the victimage response to show that it deserved sympathy. In a post to its Facebook page on October 25, the institution noted how it was trying to resolve issues around the crisis but was disrupted by further protests and could not continue meetings so as to avoid further damages or possible injuries. Figure 4.5. illustrates how the victimage response was applied.

Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) ✓
October 25, 2015 · 🌐

Dear staff and students,

This morning I was forced to cancel a special Council meeting because of security threats. The meeting was being held to discuss President Jacob Zuma's announcement that there would be a zero percent fee increase in 2016 and how this would be realised at CPUT. A Man Com meeting which was going to discuss exam rescheduling and academic support after the protest action was also postponed for the same reason. We understand that a group of students intended to interrupt these meeting and to avoid any further damage to CPUT property and ensure the safety of all involved I decided to cancel.

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Figure 4.5. Post 5: Victimage response from the university, 25 October 2015

In addition to the victimage response, the research found evidence of the attack the accuser response being used in Facebook posts during the crisis phase. The attack the accuser response forms part of the deny-response strategy of SCCT and is used to confront the person or group who allege that something is wrong with the organisation (Coombs, 2007:170). The following transcript extract from a video of the Vice-Chancellor at the time, Dr Prins Nevhutalu, which was shared to Facebook on October 27, 2015, illustrates how the institution addressed the issue of students they believed were responsible for disruptions.

> *There is a small group—indeed of less than 50 students—who, for some reason, want to continue on this struggle, which for me already does not make any sense. And I urge those students who are trying to disrupt the activities of all the other 3500 students to desist from doing that. And I urge all the good people to identify and isolate these students. We don't know what their motives are. And perhaps they have not studied enough, they want to disrupt examinations for everybody. Good people of CPUT should stand together and not allow anybody to disrupt activities of students who studied throughout the year. We are busy trying to design and develop design a catchup plan.* (Vice-Chancellor, Dr Prins Nevhutalu).

SCCT prescribes using deny-strategies, such as the attack-the-accuser response, when the crisis was a result of rumours. This was not the case with #FeesMustFall and, as mentioned earlier, the institution may have found more value in using diminish strategies to highlight that it was not responsible for the crisis.

4.3.2 Crisis communicators

The crisis communicators or spokespeople are the voice of the organisation in times of crisis and therefore have a very specialised role in the crisis management team (Coombs, 2012:86). In a 2014 article for the Institute for PR, Coombs states the spokespeople have to be briefed on the key points the organisation is trying to convey in the messages (Institute for PR, 2014). As discussed in the literature review,

spokespeople are often required to respond immediately to questions from the media and have to be well prepared to do so by having all relevant information at their disposal.

The institution under review chose to have one main communicator or spokesperson, the Media Liaison Officer, during the crisis. According to the Director of Marketing and Communication, all communication during the #FeesMustFall movement had to be approved by the Marketing and Communication Department. Both the Director and the Media Liaison Officer conveyed that the Media Liaison Officer was the university's main communicator during the crisis, with the Vice-Chancellor and the Director taking on the role of the communicator on rare occasions. The Media Liaison Officer reported:

> *"So, I would say that, ultimately, I probably had, during that time, I would have done around 90% of the communication."*

The Marketing and Communication Department Director recalled:

> *"What became clear for us was one spokesperson, that was key. So only the University spokesperson spoke to the press, to the media, and I only spoke if she was not available for whatever reason. And that happened very, very rarely."*

The Media Liaison Officer was responsible for almost all communication during the crisis. This included external communication, including press and media, as well as communication to internal stakeholders. As discussed under Theme 1, the Media Liaison Officer started the crisis unaware of the contents of the crisis communication plan. SCCT underscores the importance of having a crisis communication plan and testing it.

Furthermore, the Media Liaison Officer indicated that she was the main communicator so as to ensure that the organisation's messages were consistent. However, Coombs argues that people often equate speaking with one voice with having a single crisis spokesperson and argues that different spokespeople who bring different expertise may be required as a prolonged crisis makes it "impossible for one person to be the

sole voice of an organisation" (Coombs, 2010:29). #FeesMustFall was a prolonged crisis and the institution could have benefited from using spokespeople with different expertise, for example in the area of Student Affairs, during the crisis.

While the communication network did not succeed, both the Director of the Marketing and Communication Department and the Media Liaison Officer indicated that they had direct and free access to the institution's management and were invited to meetings where important information around the crisis was discussed and shared. The Director said:

"I even sat of course on all the top management meetings, executive meetings, the meeting with all the Deans. So I got all the information first-hand an if I thought it was necessary for the spokesperson to be there I would include her in those meetings."
Similarly, the Media Liaison Officer recalled that:

"Either I was in the meeting myself or I would be given a mandate by my boss."

Daily briefings with the Vice-Chancellor were held in which the Director of Marketing and Communication was provided with the latest updates on the crisis and what needed to be communicated stakeholders next. The Marketing and Communication Department Director recalled:

"Before I even started my day I would trot off to the Vice-Chancellor's office and we would sit and talk about what happened yesterday, what happens today and what we need to communicate."

SCCT underscores the importance of the spokespeople being kept informed of the key messages the organisation wants to convey. Both the Media Liaison Officer and the Marketing and Communication Director indicated that they were fully briefed on the crisis situation by the institution's management and had free access to top management. However, as discussed earlier in the chapter, the communication efforts were hampered by the fact that a communication network across campuses failed. Had

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this not been the case, it would have allowed communicators to respond faster and more comprehensively during the crisis.

4.3.3. Choice of channels

Coombs recommends using the "shotgun response" or all available channels to protect the safety and welfare of stakeholders during a crisis. (Coombs, 2018:34). He argues that while this might lead to stakeholders or target audiences receiving the message several times, it is better if they see it repeatedly than not see the message at all. The data from the semi-structured interviews indicated that CPUT used a number of channels to communicate with stakeholders during the crisis and often repeated the same message across the various channels. The Media Liaison Officer reported:

> *"So social media would follow once the Newsflash [email] is out*
> *and we would publish the same Newsflash. The Newsflash would*
> *also be loaded to the university website"*

On the same matter, the Marketing and Communication Director recalled that:

> *"The channels we used were mainly the website and also*
> *obviously email would go out to both staff and students. That*
> *happened, especially during the crisis, virtually on a daily basis,*
> *we will send out communiques via email to people. This was*
> *probably the main form of communique was via email.*
> *Facebook was supplementary to that."*

The university utilised its official email system, Newsflash, in combination with the university website and Facebook as a social media channel to communicate during the crisis. Both the Director and the Media Liaison Officer mentioned that YouTube had been used on one occasion during October 2015 to share a video of the Vice-Chancellor. The same video was shared on the university website and via the official Facebook page. Figure 4.6 provides extracts of communications that show how the university shared the same message on Facebook and to its official website.

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Figure 4.6. Message repetition across channels – Facebook & website

However, while the university used Facebook as a channel of communication, it failed to interact with stakeholders who responded to the institution's messages. The Facebook posts evaluated for October indicated that several questions were posted by Facebook users in response to crisis messages posted by the institution. Coombs (2015:156) points out that selecting social media as a channel for crisis communication may "create an expectation for interaction". He argues that organisations have to

ensure that it has the resources in place to respond to these additional requests for information from social media users.

The examples in Figure 4.7 show questions posed by Facebook users and how some users reacted to the unanswered posts..
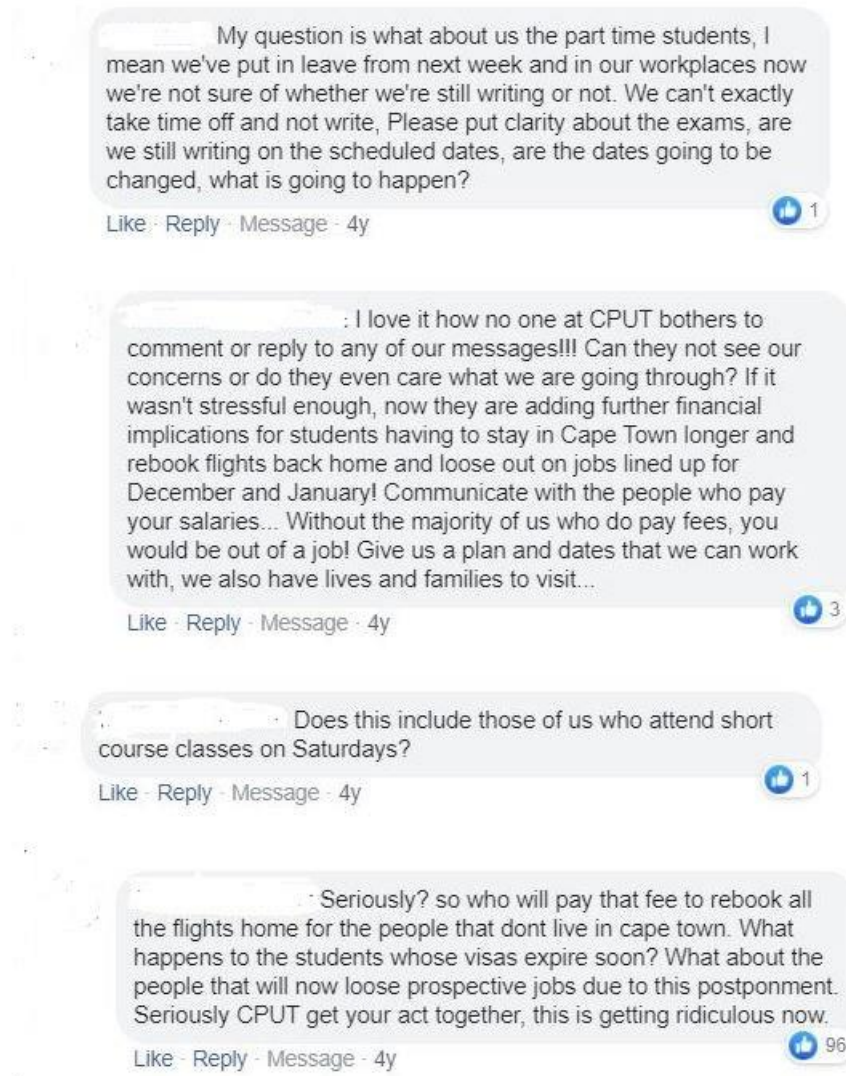
Figure 4.7. Responses to university Facebook post on 25 October,2015

While the institution opted to use a range of channels to communicate during the crisis, it failed to meet stakeholders' expectations. The data suggests that the institution's failure to respond left some stakeholders frustrated. The comment by one of the users (included in Fig.4.7) illustrates this frustration, providing evidence that the institution failed to use two-way communication:

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"I love it how no one at CPUT bothers to comment or reply to any of our messages!!! Can they not see our concerns or do they even care what we are going through?"

4.3.4. Summary

Given that the crisis communication plan had not been formally adopted or tested, the organisation's response strategy had to start during the crisis phase. The Director of Marketing and Communication indicated that he had daily briefings with the Vice-Chancellor to ensure his department was abreast of the crisis. Furthermore, the Director attended management meetings where the crisis was discussed and then briefed the Media Liaison Officer on what to communicate. On occasion the Media Liaison Officer would attend the meetings herself.

However, as stated earlier in the findings of Theme 1, the Marketing and Communication Department's biggest challenge was getting information from the various buildings on campus. An attempt to introduce contacts in these buildings to feed information to the Marketing and Communication Department failed. Had the system been tested in advance, the department would have been able to respond faster and more effectively.

The university combined a number of responses as part of its crisis communication strategy. As recommended by SCCT, the safety of stakeholders was the main focus of communication when the crisis hit. As the crisis developed, the institution moved to provide adjusting information. This included updates on the crisis and what was being done to correct the situation, expressions of sympathy and information on trauma counselling and assistance available.

The base response was used in conjunction with the bolstering strategy of victimage. The organisation attempted to show that it was also a victim of the crisis while continuing to provide messages of safety. The findings indicate that the attack the accuser response was used by the institution to articulate that some protesting

students were continuing to cause disruptions while staff and students wanted to return to normal operations.

To execute these strategies, the institution applied a range of channels to communicate during the crisis. Its strategy was to communicate to internal audiences first, via its Newsflash emails, and this message was then repeated on the CPUT website and Facebook.

However, the institution failed to interact with its stakeholders once messages had been posted to Facebook. Stakeholders, including students, who asked for feedback on Facebook posts made by the institution, received no response and some noted their frustration on Facebook. This was a lost opportunity to enhance stakeholder relationships, which could have been used to bolster the university's response strategy.

4.4 Theme 3: Post-crisis messaging

In the post-crisis phase organisations return to operation and important follow-up communication needs to be provided (Institute for PR, 2014). According to Coombs the follow-up information includes updates regarding the crisis recovery process, steps taken to ensure the crisis is not repeated, any information that the organisation promised to provide to stakeholders during the crisis and information on investigations related to the crisis (Coombs, 2009:114).

As noted earlier in the chapter, the #FeesMustFall movement did not conclude at the end of 2015. However, the researcher has selected January 2016 as the post-crisis phase as this was the first month that saw operations at CPUT returning to normal.

For this phase the researcher evaluated two Facebook posts relating to the #FeesMustFall movement.

The first Facebook post selected, made by the institution on 7 January 2016, provided follow-up information and is in line with what SCCT prescribes. The post covered

information on exams that had been delayed as a result of the crisis as well as updates on the registration progress.

Cape Peninsula University of Technology (CPUT) ✓ ...
· January 7, 2016 · 🌐

Dear Students,
Below please find the most recent information regarding exams, exam venues, residence students and registration.

Examinations (for residence based students only)
In order to streamline the examination and transport arrangements for residence students it has been decided that all residence students will be required to register for their place in residence during exams. This will allow us to know who is residing in residence during exams and will require transport to different venues.
1. Registration for residence students from Cape Town and Bellville campuses will take place at the Multi-Purpose Hall in Cape Town campus from 9am to 5pm on Saturday 9 January and Sunday 10 January.
2. Residence students from Wellington must register at the Goodnow Hall in Wellington from 9am to 5pm on Saturday 9 January and Sunday 10 January.
3. Transport will be provided for residence students (only) to examination venues (specifics of this will be communicated at a later stage). To facilitate this, students will be grouped in residences according to their programmes/ courses. Please note that students who are not in residences will not be allowed into buses.
4. All students who will be given accommodation in residences to write exams must note that in terms of the university rules they must vacate the residence within 24 hours after writing their last exam.
5. Entry to the residences for exam purposes will only be permitted from January 9.
6. Students who are suspended from the institution will not be allowed access to CPUT under any circumstances including exam venues.

Figure 4.8: Post-crisis messaging by the institution to Facebook, 7 January 2016

The second post, which was made on January 14, provided important follow-up information following the crisis phase. The extract in Figure 4.9 is an example of follow-up information provided, where the institution kept stakeholders updated on the progress being made with the writing off of debt.

Debt write-off- The debt of almost 5000 poor students who studied between 2012 and 2015 was written off amounting to roughly R111 million. These students were selected because they were eligible for NSFAS funding but did not receive it because of a lack of funds from the scheme. CPUT understands the plight of desperate, poor students who see education as their only way out of poverty. We believe the debt write-off is a significant investment into the growth of our country and its future leaders.

Figure 4.9. Post-crisis messaging by the institution to Facebook, 14 January 2016

In addition to providing follow-up information, the institution applied the reputation repair strategy of bolstering. The institution applied all three bolstering crisis response strategies in the January 14 post. According to Coombs (2007:173) bolstering is a supplemental strategy which "offers a minimal opportunity to develop reputational assets". As discussed in Chapter 2, the three bolstering strategies provided by SCCT are: reminder, ingratiation and victimage.

The following extract from the January 14 post shows how the institution used the reminder response, by reminding stakeholders of its graduation numbers

CPUT continues to deliver the greatest amount of graduates into the workforce each year. That is over 100 000 alumni who are proud to be our graduates. I wish all our students well on their own journey to this point and I look forward to welcoming their parents and guardians to their graduation someday soon. Everything of the best for 2016.

Figure 4.10.: Reminder strategy post by institution on14 January 2016

The extract in Figure 4.11 illustrates how the institution applied the ingratiation strategy by commending stakeholders for their support.

Finally I would like to thank students and parents for their continued faith in our institution as well as your unwavering support during last year's crisis.

Figure 4.11: Ingratiation strategy post by the institution on 14 January 2016

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The extract in Figure 4.12 from the January 14 post shows the victimage strategy was used. As discussed under Theme 2, SCCT recommends that the victimage strategy be used for crises in the victim cluster and aims to illustrate that the organisation deserves sympathy.

Assessments: Because of increased security concerns last year during our exam period the unprecedented decision to postpone exams to January 2016 was taken. This has had a major financial and logistical impact on the institution. The integrity of our exams and the safety of our students are of paramount importance and we have been working diligently to ensure both.

Figure 4.12: Victimage strategy post by the institution on 14 January 2016

However, while the institution focused on providing follow-up information to stakeholders during the crisis phase, it failed to follow-up on the questions posed by stakeholders. The January 14 Facebook post contained several updates and received more than 100 comments from Facebook users. The extract below provides examples of some of the posts which were left unanswered.

> When must the business faculty students register?? #FirstYear coz im confused HELP PLEASE
>
> Like · Reply · Message · 4y · Edited

> How do you assist students who are having problems with Visa because some students visa have expired already and the International Office can't assit us.
>
> Like · Reply · Message · 4y   👍 5

> ! Poor management!!! Very. i still think letting student write in jan was a very poor decision.
>
> Like · Reply · Message · 4y   👍 9

> As a concerned parent, where will our kids go after exams because I believe they will be kicked out of the residence after exam, and some are from other provinces and far away, How is CPUT gonna address he situation as We parents can't afford the travelling and we are still expected to pay registration and all other things. Please clarify that,
>
> Like · Reply · Message · 4y   👍 13

> This is a question session; not question n answer; as usual!
>
> Like · Reply · Message · 4y   👍 1

Figure 4.13. Unanswered Facebook comments to university's 14 January 2016 post

4.4.1. Summary of Theme 3 – Post-crisis messaging

The post-crisis phase communication involves providing follow-up information to stakeholders, including on the recovery process and efforts made to avoid a repeat of the crisis (Coombs, 2009:114). In line with SCCT, the university's main focus in terms of post-crisis communication was providing follow-up information. The first post in the post-crisis phase focused on providing information important to the recovery from the crisis, including information on examinations, residences and suspensions.

The second post also followed the prescripts of SCCT by providing more detailed information on the steps that had been taken to address the issues raised by the #FeesMustFall movement, including on debt write-offs and new bursaries for students.

The post also showed that the institution had started focusing on reputation repair by using all three bolstering strategies. The university applied the reminder response by reminding stakeholders of its graduation numbers, while the ingratiation response was used to praise stakeholders for their support during the crisis. The victimage response was used to show how the university had been affected by the crisis. However, the safety of stakeholders remained a focus of communication in the post-crisis phase.

While the institution provided vital follow-up information to stakeholders in the post-crisis phase, it failed to respond to follow-up questions from stakeholders. This left some stakeholders frustrated with one Facebook user commenting: "*This is a question session, not question n answer, as usual*". The university missed an opportunity to interact with its stakeholders and to strengthen its response strategy.

4.5 Summary

In this chapter the researcher reported on the findings of the study in terms of each of the themes identified in Chapter Three. The findings illustrated the importance of the pre-crisis and how it can impact the crisis stage. While SCCT recommends extensive planning in the pre-crisis phase, including drawing up a crisis communication plan and testing it, the data showed a lack of planning. The crisis communication plan was not shared with the main crisis spokesperson prior to the crisis. A comprehensive communication plan, which had been tested in advance, would have assisted the spokesperson with providing prompt and informative responses.

Furthermore, a communication network was not established, as recommended by SCCT. This had repercussions in the crisis phase as the organisation found it challenging to gather information from various locations. This resulted in a communication network being established in the crisis phase, but this network failed.

The data from the semi-structured interviews showed that the Marketing and Communication Department had direct and free access to management and were therefore able to communicate the organisation's perspective. However, the organisation may have benefited from appointing more than one main spokesperson as the crisis continued for a prolonged period and different spokespeople with different expertise may have been of value to the organisation.

As prescribed by SCCT, the organisation's focus during the crisis was the safety of stakeholders and this was reflected in its Facebook posts in the crisis phase. Messages to help ensure stakeholders' safety were followed by adjusting information, which aimed to help stakeholders cope with the crisis.

In line with SCCT, the organisation also applied the victimage response. However, while university leaders stated publicly that the institutions were not responsible for the crisis, the organisation failed to use the excuse response in its Facebook posts to highlight that it was unable to control the events that sparked the crisis. As stated in Chapter 1, the framing of the crisis by the media as a dispute between students and universities and not students and the state, presented a challenge for universities. By using the excuse response, the institution would have been able to convey that it was not responsible for the crisis.

The institution failed to use two-way communication with stakeholders. While it used a range of channels during the crisis, stakeholders' responses to crisis messages on social media were ignored, resulting in frustration and anger. The institution would have benefited from appointing a social media communicator to address the questions and concerns highlighted by Facebook users.

As stipulated by SCCT, the institution used the post-crisis phase to provide follow-up information to stakeholders, including on the resolutions taken. It also started focusing on reputation repair. However, the institution continued to ignore questions posed by Facebook users in response to its post-crisis messaging.

Chapter Five will focus on the conclusions of the research as well as recommendations emanating from the research.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1. Introduction

Effective crisis management and crisis communication are becoming increasingly important. The coronavirus pandemic, which has affected every industry, has illustrated the importance of crisis communication—not only to ensure the safety of individuals but also to quell anxiety. Coombs (2019:991) states that studying crises cases help communicators to learn more about crisis management and communication.

The researcher set out to evaluate the crisis communication strategy of a university of technology during the #FeesMustFall movement—a crisis which affected higher education institutions across South Africa. As set out in the Introduction, the main objective of the research was to evaluate the crisis communication strategy of a university of technology during the #FeesMustFall movement. The research specifically set out to:

- Investigate the crisis communication strategies employed by CPUT during the #FeesMustFall movement.
- Analyse the university's pre-crisis, crisis event and post-crisis communication responses in terms of Situational Crisis Communication Theory.
- Analyse how social media and traditional channels were used in the crisis communication strategy.

To meet these objectives the researcher started by conducting the literature review. The literature review outlined the theoretical framework for the study, which was based on the Situational Crisis Communication Theory (SCCT), developed by communication scholar Timothy Coombs. SCCT provides guidelines for communicators on the selection of crisis response strategies and these guidelines were applied to evaluate the institution's crisis response strategies during the #FeesMustFall movement. Crisis response strategies refer to what an organisation says and does in times of crisis.

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Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the university's main communicator during the crisis, the Media Liaison Officer, as well as the Director of the Marketing and Communication Department, the department that approved and was responsible for all communication during the crisis. In addition, the content of Facebook posts made during the crisis and post-crisis phases of the crisis were also collected. The semi-structured interviews allowed the researcher to gain an in-depth insight into the planning processes and decisions made in terms of communication during the crisis. The Facebook data provided insight into the strategies used and how these were executed in the various crisis phases.

A theory-driven thematic analysis was conducted on the transcribed data as well as on the content of the Facebook posts made during the crisis phase and the post-crisis phase. Theory-driven thematic analysis is used when the researcher wants to apply a set of theoretical concepts in their analysis of the data (Gibson & Hugh-Jones, 2012:130). SCCT was used as the starting point for the coding process. The resultant themes therefore aligned to both the theoretical framework and the literature review, as well as the research questions.

The research found evidence of:

- A lack of planning in the pre-crisis phase, including a crisis communication plan that had not been tested or used to prepare the spokesperson for the crisis.

- Communication challenges, which arose from having to collect data in various locations, across various buildings spread across the province.

- An unsuccessful communication network of individuals in various buildings established during the crisis.

- A free flow of information from the management of the institution which aided the Marketing and Communication team in conveying management's position in crisis responses.

- A variety of communication channels used in the crisis communication strategy.

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- The use of the base response as the starting point of the crisis response strategy. This included instructing information, which focused on ensuring stakeholders' safety. This was followed by adjusting information, including updates on the crisis and expressions of sympathy with stakeholders.
- The use of the victimage response in the crisis stage to remind stakeholders that the organisation is also a victim of the crisis.
- The presence of an intensifying factor – a history of crisis.
- No evidence of the use of diminish response strategies was found.
- The post-crisis phase was used to provide follow-up information on the crisis, including resolutions reached.
- Bolstering responses were used in the post-crisis phase, including the victimage, attack-the-accuser and ingratiation.
- Failure to respond to stakeholders and other Facebook users who posed questions in regard to the institution's posts during the crisis and post-crisis phase. This left many users frustrated.

5.2. Recommendations for future crisis response strategies

Based on these findings, and in line with the guidelines provided by SCCT in terms of response strategies during a crisis, the researcher makes the following recommendations for future crises, specifically in relation to crisis communication planning for universities of technology.

- **Identify crisis communicators for different crisis scenarios**

The spokespeople or crisis communicators need to be identified in the pre-crisis phase. Coombs argues that crisis spokespeople do not necessarily have to come from the PR or communication department alone as different crises may require different expertise (Institute for PR, 2014). It is therefore important to identify potential crises scenarios beforehand.

The researcher recommends that institutions identify a spokesperson for each potential crisis scenario. Should a potential crisis scenario be realised, the individual identified would work with the general spokespeople of the institution in the communication

department as the main communicators during the crisis. For example, should a health crisis such as the coronavirus pandemic break out, a spokesperson from campus clinics or the institution's Department of Health could serve as a spokesperson with the institution's spokesperson. A crisis related to student accommodation may require a spokesperson from student housing to be, along with the general spokesperson, the voices of the institution during the crisis. This will assist in taking the pressure off the general spokesperson during a prolonged crisis and delivering a more informed response.

Training, including media training, would have to be provided for the individuals identified and the communication or public relations department can play an important role in preparing these individuals.

- **Establish a communication network across campuses**

The recommended communication network differs from the spokespeople proposed in the first recommendation in that they will feed information to the communication team instead of communicating to stakeholders. The study found that the size of the institution, which has various buildings, spread across different campuses, presented a communication challenge. It is recommended that individual contacts be established in the pre-crisis phase with the aim of providing on-the-ground information to the communication team during a crisis. Test runs with the contacts should take place during the pre-crisis phase to identify any potential problems.

- **Develop a comprehensive crisis communication plan (CCP)**

A crisis communication plan will help communicators to respond fast and efficiently during a crisis. Should the institution's general spokesperson be unavailable during a crisis, the person who stands in should be able to pick up the plan and know exactly what to do. To aid communicators to gather information quickly during a crisis, this plan needs to include the numbers of important contacts in various parts of the institution, such as campus protection services, the deans of faculties, student affairs, health and safety representatives, members of management, human resources and the legal department.

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Campus radio stations and call centres could also play an important role in getting information across campuses during a crisis and should also form part of the contact list in the crisis communication plan.

In addition, the crisis communication plan needs to include the contact details of the individuals selected as spokespeople for specific crises, as discussed under recommendation one. The individual identified as a spokesperson for the specific scenario will have to join the team immediately to work on crisis responses with the general spokesperson.

The CCP should provide a list of the institution's stakeholders to ensure that all relevant stakeholders are communicated to during a crisis. This should include the channels that will be used to communicate with each stakeholder group, as student stakeholders may have a different preferred method of communication than alumni or members of the institution's council.

The crisis communication plan should stipulate the roles of the various members of the communication team including:

- Who will be responsible for press enquiries?
- Who will be responsible for communication with internal stakeholders?
- Who will take charge of communication with external stakeholders, such as the donor community?
- The crisis communication channel the team member is responsible for.

The crisis communication plan should contain a section on social media communication during a crisis. A social media crisis team should be established in the pre-crisis phase to ensure two-way communication with stakeholders and other social media users during the crisis. The plan should identify the people or persons responsible for answering questions posted to social media during a crisis and establish timeframes within which questions need to be answered. Adding a member of the campus call centre to the social media team could be of value as call centre teams are kept up-to-date on important information which students or other

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stakeholders may request and may therefore be able to respond speedily to such questions on social media platforms. The plan should stipulate which social media channels will be used during a crisis, the social media crisis communicators and how this will link to other communication channels used.

The plan should also contain pre-drafted information about the institution—for example, the students and staff population and photographs of leaders—which could help to speed up the communication process during the crisis.

The plan needs to be shared with all members of the communication team in the pre-crisis phase and should also be tested at least once a year.

- **Monitor media and social media**

It is the role of PR to scan and monitor the environment for potential issues and to help resolve these issues through communication (Steyn & De Beer, 2012:65). Steyn & De Beer state that this includes regular monitoring of media to gain an insight into the "agenda and behavioural patterns" of publications as well as identifying activist groups whose actions may affect the organisation.

Higher education institutions need to engage in environmental scanning in the pre-crisis phase, including of social media channels, to help identify potential issues that may impact the organisation. For example, student activist groups or incidents at other institutions that could have a spill over effect. Environmental scanning needs to continue into the crisis and post-crisis phase to help organisations resolve issues but also to help organisations identify stakeholders' communication needs.

- **Debriefing and assessment in the post-crisis phase**

The post-crisis phase should not just focus on repairing the institution's reputation following the crisis. It should also be a time to reflect on the crisis, including on mistakes made in terms of communication, successes and the lessons learnt.

Therefore, all role-players who contributed to communication responses during the crisis should meet in the post-crisis to reflect and discuss possible gaps identified in the communication process as well as positive outcomes. Communication teams may benefit from conducting surveys with particular stakeholders during the post-crisis phase to assess how crisis communication messages were received and which

aspects of the crisis communication strategy could be improved on. This may also identify additional crisis communication channels.

5.3. Limitations of the study and recommendations for future research

This study aimed to add to existing knowledge on crisis communication, specifically in higher education institutions. It evaluated a university of technology's crisis communication strategy during the #FeesMustFall movement by conducting semi-structured interviews with those responsible for communication and by analysing social media posts.

The study was limited to crisis communication responses posted to social media. Future research could focus on higher education institutions' crisis responses to the media and how this impacts on the media's framing of the crisis. The social media posts evaluated in this study were also mainly targeted at staff and student stakeholders. A future study could focus on the donor and alumni communities' perceptions of a higher education institution's communication strategy during a crisis and how this affects the institution's reputation among these stakeholders. Another area of exploration could investigate environmental scanning by communication departments at higher education institutions and how this feeds into communication during the pre-crisis phase.

As indicated in Chapter Four, the post-crisis phase was limited to January 2016 only as this was when operations at the institution first returned to normal. Future studies could focus on how lessons learnt in the post-crisis phase informs communication strategies in future crises.

As mentioned earlier, the coronavirus pandemic has impacted universities, with cyber communication serving as a main means to engage with various stakeholders. The above-mentioned recommendations for future studies should also consider cyber ethics, as highlighted in two studies by Mbinjama-Gamatham (Mbinjama-Gamatham, 2014; Mbinjama-Gamatham & Olivier 2020), in developing crisis communication strategies.

5.4. Conclusion

This research set out to add to existing literature on crisis communication in the higher education sector, a sector which has seen repeated student protests in recent year and is expected to face further crises in future. By applying the Situational Crisis Communication Theory to evaluate the crisis communication strategy of a university of technology, the researcher was able to identify gaps in the strategy as well as areas of alignment with SCCT. Based on the findings, a set of recommendations were made which could aid higher education communicators in future crises. Efficient crisis communication preparation, tried and tested systems and optimal use of communication channels will help ensure an effective communication strategy during a crisis and help organisations to mend their reputation and relationship with stakeholders following a crisis.

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Appendix A: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR MEDIA LIAISON OFFICER

What is your role at the institution?

Were there any other crises at the institution before the Fees Must Fall crisis?

Does the university have a formal communication plan for times of crises?

If so, what (broadly) does this plan stipulate?

How are the crisis communication roles defined?

If not, how does the organisation prepare for a crisis in terms of communication to internal and external stakeholders?

How are the crisis communication roles defined?

Who determines the messages to be communicated or response strategy during a crisis?

Who is the university's main communicator during a crisis?

Which channels do you use to communicate internally prior, during and after a crisis?

What was the main message/s you tried to convey to internal audiences prior, during and after the Fees Must Fall crisis?

Which channels do you use to communicate externally prior, during and after a crisis?

How did the messages on your website and internal emails differ from the messages on your social media platforms?

What was the main message you tried to convey to external audiences prior, during and after the crisis?

Appendix B: SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW QUESTIONS FOR FORMER MARKETING AND COMMUNICATION DIRECTOR

What was your position at the institution during Fees Must Fall?

How long were you in the position at the time the crisis hit?

Were there any other crises at the institution before the Fees Must Fall crisis?

Did the university have a formal communication plan for times of crises in October 2015 (when the crisis started)?

If so, what (broadly) did this plan stipulate?

How were the crisis communication roles defined?

Who determined the messages to be communicated in the days leading up to the crisis, during the crisis and after the crisis?

Who is the university's main communicator during a crisis?

Which channels do you use to communicate internally prior, during and after a crisis?

What was the main message you tried to convey to internal audiences prior, during and after the crisis?

How did the messages on your website and internal emails differ from the messages on your social media platforms?

What were the main lessons learnt during the crisis?

Appendix C: CONSENT TO INTERVIEW FORMER MARKETING AND

COMMUNICATION DIRECTOR

Cape Peninsula
University of Technology

FID/REC/ICv0.1

FACULTY OF INFORMATICS AND DESIGN

Individual Consent for Research Participation

Title of the study: An evaluation of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's crisis communication strategy during the Fees Must Fall movement.

Name of researcher: Ilse Fredericks
Contact details: frederickskennediji@cput.ac.za phone:

Name of supervisor: Dr Adelina Mbinjama-Gamatham
Contact details: email: MBINJAMAGAMATHAMA@cput.ac.za
phone:

Purpose of the Study:

This study will aim to add value to the base of knowledge on crisis communication strategies in South Africa's higher education sector. The sector has been marred by student uprisings in recent years (Vally, 2019), highlighting the need for effective crisis communication strategies

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of being interviewed.

Confidentiality: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential unless noted below. I understand that the contents will be used only for M Tech thesis and journal article and that my confidentiality will be protected. Should I, ask at a later stage, for any information to be withdrawn or kept confidential, the researcher shall oblige.

Anonymity will be protected in the following manner (unless noted below).
Participant has agreed to be identified.

Conservation of data: The data collected will be kept in a secure manner. Digital recordings will be made on a password protected device and transferred to a password protected file. Transcriptions will be saved as a password protected document, which will only be accessed by the researcher until the completion of the research.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will destroyed.
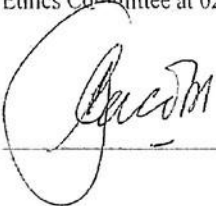
I

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Additional consent: I make the following stipulations (please tick as appropriate):

	In thesis	In research publications	Both	Neither
My image may be used:				X
My name may be used:			X	
My exact words may be used:			X	
Any other (stipulate):				

Acceptance: I, (print name)_____NORMAN   JACOBS._____

agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Ilse Fredericks of the Faculty of Informatics and Design Public Relations Department at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, which research is under the supervision of Dr Adelina Mbinjama Gamatham.

If I have any questions about the study. I may contact the researcher or the supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the secretary of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at 021 469 1012, or email naidoove@cput.ac.za.

Participant's signature:_____   Date:___19/2/20·___

Researcher's signature:_____   Date:___20/2/20___

2

Appendix D: :CONSENT TO INTERVIEW MEDIA LIAISON OFFICER

Cape Peninsula
University of Technology

FID/REC/ICv0.1

FACULTY OF INFORMATICS AND DESIGN

Individual Consent for Research Participation

Title of the study: An evaluation of the Cape Peninsula University of Technology's crisis communication strategy during the Fees Must Fall movement.

Name of researcher: Ilse Fredericks
Contact details: frederickskennediji@cput.ac.za phone:

Name of supervisor: Dr Adelina Mbinjama-Gamatham
Contact details: email: MBINJAMAGAMATHAMA@cput.ac.za
phone:

Purpose of the Study:

This study will aim to add value to the base of knowledge on crisis communication strategies in South Africa's higher education sector. The sector has been marred by student uprisings in recent years (Vally, 2019), highlighting the need for effective crisis communication strategies

Participation: My participation will consist essentially of being interviewed.

Confidentiality: I have received assurance from the researcher that the information I will share will remain strictly confidential unless noted below. I understand that the contents will be used only for M Tech thesis and journal article and that my confidentiality will be protected. Should I, ask at a later stage, for any information to be withdrawn or kept confidential, the researcher shall oblige.

Anonymity will be protected in the following manner (unless noted below).
Participant has agreed to be identified.

Conservation of data: The data collected will be kept in a secure manner. Digital recordings will be made on a password protected device and transferred to a password protected file. Transcriptions will be saved as a password protected document, which will only be accessed by the researcher until the completion of the research.

Voluntary Participation: I am under no obligation to participate and if I choose to participate, I can withdraw from the study at any time and/or refuse to answer any questions, without suffering any negative consequences. If I choose to withdraw, all data gathered until the time of withdrawal will destroyed.

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Additional consent: I make the following stipulations (please tick as appropriate):

	In thesis	In research publications	Both	Neither
My image may be used:				X
My name may be used:			X	
My exact words may be used:			X	
Any other (stipulate):				

Acceptance: I, (print name) _Lauren Kansley_____

agree to participate in the above research study conducted by Ilse Fredericks of the Faculty of Informatics and Design Public Relations at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology, which research is under the supervision of Dr Adelina Mbinjama Gamatham
supervisor).

If I have any questions about the study, I may contact the researcher or the supervisor. If I have any questions regarding the ethical conduct of this study, I may contact the secretary of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee at 021 469 1012, or cmail naidoove@cput.ac.za.

Participant's signature: _____ Date: _18 February 2020_

Researcher's signature: _____ Date: 20 / 02 / 20

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Appendix E: APPROVAL LETTER- RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE- FACULTY OF INFORMATICS AND DESIGN

Cape Peninsula
University of Technology

P.O. Box 652 • Cape Town 8000 South Africa •Tel: +27 21 469 1012 • Fax +27 21 469 1002
80 Roeland Street, Vredehoek, Cape Town 8001

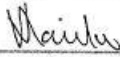| Office of the Research Ethics Committee	Faculty of Informatics and Design

17 March 2020

Ethical clearance was granted to Ms Ilse Fredericks, student number 199077452, for research activities related to the MTech in Public Relations Management at the Faculty of Informatics and Design, Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Title of research proposal:	An evaluation of a university of technology's crisis communication strategy during the Fees Must Fall movement

Comments

- Formal consent is required from CPUT.
- Research activities are restricted to those detailed in the research proposal.

[signature]	17/3/20
Signed: Faculty Research Ethics Committee	Date

RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE
INFORMATICS AND DESIGN
ETHICS APPROVAL GRANTED
17 MAR 2020
Cape Peninsula
University of Technology

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APPENDIX F: CONSENT TO CONDUCT RESEARCH FROM INSTITUTIONAL RESEARCH COMMITTEE.

Office of the Deputy Vice Chancellor:
Research, Technology Innovation & Partnerships
Bellville Campus
P O Box 1906
Bellville 7535
Tel: 021-9596242
Email: dvcresearch@cput.ac.za

5 May 2020

Ms. Ilse Fredericks (CPUT Student no: 199077452)
MTech: Public Relations Management
Faculty of Information and Design
Cape Peninsula University of Technology

Dear Ms. Fredericks

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT CPUT

The Institutional Ethics Committee received your application entitled: "*An evaluation of a university of technology's crisis communication strategy during the Fees Must Fall movement*" together with the dossier of supporting documents.

Faculty Ethics Committee Approval Date: 17 March 2020.

Permission is herewith granted for you to do research at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology.

Wishing you the best in your study.

Sincerely

D Phaho

Dr David Phaho
Deputy Vice-Chancellor: Research, Technology, Innovation & Partnerships
Cape Peninsula University of Technology | #WeAreCPUT

t: +27 (0) 21 959 6242 | e: dvcresearch@cput.ac.za w: www.cput.ac.za
PO Box 1906 Bellville 7535 | Symphony Way, Bellville, Cape Town, South Africa

Appendix G: DECLARATION FROM LANGUAGE EDITOR

Dear Ms Fredericks

This is to confirm that in November 2020 I edited your Masters dissertation entitled:

AN EVALUATION OF A UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY'S CRISIS COMMUNICATION STRATEGY DURING THE FEES MUST FALL MOVEMENT.

The editing was done in my private capacity, and as an editor on the Nelson Mandela University list of approved editors.

I edited and proofread the document for spelling, grammar, vocabulary, punctuation and sentence construction. I completed the edit in track changes and using text boxes. Recommendations for changes were given, where considered appropriate.

Kind regards

Vicki Igglesden (MSc)

+27 72 432 2260

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