

# **Response Strategies and Marketing Communication Efforts of Cape Town Gardening and Plant Retailers in Reaction to the Water Crisis: An Explorative Study**

## **Research Report**

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# Declaration

I hereby declare that the Research Report submitted for the BA Honours in Strategic Brand Communication degree to The Independent Institute of Education is my own work and has not previously been submitted to another University or Higher Education Institution for degree purposes.

# Abstract

Completely dependent on water for its survival, the green industry encounters various obstacles when faced with water shortages. Having experienced its worst drought in over a decade, Cape Town's water crisis forced gardening and plant retailers to re-examine and adjust their existing strategies in an attempt to remain profitable. With the use of semi-structured in-depth interviews, the response strategies, communication efforts and sales performance of five gardening and plant retailers with varying characteristics were explored in order to identify the effectiveness of these responses. Findings indicated that adaptation, redeployment and offensive strategies were utilised, of which the latter proved to be most successful. With higher budgets, larger plant retailers are able to employ more aggressive strategies, which essentially leads to an advantage over smaller nurseries that have limited funds to work with. However, business size does not necessarily determine success, seeing as the use of an offensive strategy can provide any business with a competitive advantage, regardless of its size. While no new communication channels need to be employed in reaction to the environmental issue, the use of campaigns relating to the issue are effective at informing customers of offerings that will satisfy their changing needs.

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# 1 Introduction

## 1.1 Contextualisation and Background

“Water is the lifeblood of our bodies, our economy, our nation and our well-being” (Johnson, 2007). But what happens when water runs out? Having experienced its worst drought recorded over a period of three consecutive years, the city of Cape Town could have become the world’s first major metropolis to run out of water (Olivier, 2017; Ahmed, 2018).

According to Smith (2017), drastic fluctuations in water availability, quality or price has the potential to affect entire sectors. Businesses in the Western Province indicated that they were extremely worried about availability of water, with 94 per cent of organisations in the province reporting water shortages to be a direct risk to their operations (Western Cape Government Provincial Treasury, 2017:49).

Petersen (2018) noted that Cape Town’s water crisis forced businesses to implement drastic water-saving methods in a bid to cut back on consumption to avoid the reality of water being turned off. Some of these activities included the installation of water saving shower heads in hotels, replacing free-flow taps in public schools and the usage of greywater systems at carwashes (Witten, 2018).

Sawutana (2017) and the WWF (2018) indicated that the impact of a water crisis is felt especially by the green industry – which includes the agricultural sector, plant nurseries and gardening services – as this industry is completely dependent on water. In agreeance to this, Evans (2017) mentioned that negative effects on the city’s economy was also unavoidable which would lead to thousands of job losses especially in the green industry.

Seeing as the green industry was hit the hardest by the Cape Town water crisis, the study focused on this industry to identify their stories of success and failure. The study investigated the impact of the water crisis on Cape Town gardening and plant retailers by exploring their response strategies and marketing communication efforts in reaction to the drought as a means to maintain sales. Analysis was then performed to identify strategies and marketing communication efforts that had been successful based on the resulting influence it had on the ability of these businesses to maintain sales volume.

## 1.2 Rationale and Relevance

According to the City of Cape Town (2018), harsh penalties had been imposed on commercial and agricultural users who did not reduce water use. However, when green industries are forced to cut back on water usage, it often results in reduced quantities and compromised quality of crops and plants (Kang, Khan & Ma, 2009).

Level 6B water restrictions that were instated as of 1 February 2018, also limited each resident of the city to as little as 50 litres of municipal water per day and deemed irrigation of residential gardens illegal (City of Cape Town, 2018). As an effect, plant sales declined, which threatened the sustainability and growth of Cape Town gardening and plant retailers (May, 2018). These gardening and plant retailers were forced to adapt or change their offerings to cater to the changing needs of consumers while adhering to the water restrictions imposed by the City of Cape Town.

Some gardening and plant retailers had implemented noticeable changes such as introducing new product lines and services to cater to the water crisis. May (2018) noted that the Cape Garden Centre for example had managed to maintain sales volume throughout the drought by shifting their focus from selling plants, to encouraging sales of water-saving products and services, such as water tanks and borehole creation.

Other gardening and plant retailers chose to incorporate less drastic measures. Gernon (2017) mentioned that some gardening and plant retailers offered a wider variety of water-wise plants that require little water to survive. The manager at Dr Boomslang's Indigenous Nursery indicated that a change in consumer buying-patterns was evident, with customers mainly purchasing succulents and indigenous mountain plants which require less water (Gernon, 2017).

Although evidence existed that Cape Town gardening and plant retailers had implemented some changes to their product and service offerings in reaction to the water crisis, no empirical data was available to indicate how the specific changes were communicated to consumers and whether the communication efforts were successful in maintaining sales. By conducting this study, the lack of such data was therefore addressed by exploring the unique experiences of the Cape Town gardening and plant retailers with the water crisis.

Various responses in terms of changing product and service offerings, as well marketing communication practices that have been employed by these businesses were investigated in this study to provide insights to the horticultural industry on manners in which to respond to a water crisis or drought. Seeing as the Western Cape Government Provincial Treasury (2017:49) indicated that 94 per cent of businesses in the Western Province view water shortages as a direct risk to their operations, the findings of this study could also prove to be valuable to businesses in other industries.

## **1.3 Research Problem**

The research problem was centred around the broad topic of the effects of Cape Town's water crisis on local businesses. The topic was narrowed down to focus specifically on the impact of the water crisis on Cape Town gardening and plant retailers, as there was no empirical data available explaining exactly how these gardening and plant retailers were responding to the water crisis. The concept was narrowed down further to explore the manner in which the change in customers' gardening needs influenced adjustments in product and service offerings and whether such adjustments had an impact on the communication efforts of these retailers.

Seeing as the success or failure of the gardening and plant retailers could have depended on their ability to successfully communicate changes in their product and service offerings, the research problem was therefore aimed at identifying which response strategies and marketing communication efforts were being implemented and also how successful these strategies and communication efforts were at maintaining sales.

## **1.4 Research Purpose and Question**

### **1.4.1 Purpose Statement**

The purpose of the study was to identify the response strategies utilised by the gardening and plant retailers in Cape Town in reaction to the water crisis; and explored which marketing communication efforts were used to communicate these strategies as a means to maintain sales. This purpose was derived from the primary research question as stated on the following page.

## 1.4.2 Research Questions

### ***Primary Research Question***

Which response strategies and marketing communication efforts have been implemented by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers in reaction to the water crisis and how successful were these responses and communication efforts in maintaining sales?

### ***Secondary Research Questions***

- Which response strategies have been employed by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers in reaction to the water crisis?
- Which communication efforts have been employed by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers in reaction to the water crisis?
- How successful have the employed response strategies and communication efforts of Cape Town gardening and plant retailers been in maintaining sales volume?

## 1.5 Research Objectives

The study had two main objectives that it wished to address in order to identify the impact of the water crisis had on Cape Town gardening and plant retailers' sales. These objectives were supported by two models that were used as the framework for the study. The first objective was the identification of the response strategies of these businesses with the use of du Plessis, Jooste and Strydom's (2005) theory of response strategies to environmental issues. The second was the communication modes that were used to communicate these responses and was addressed with the use of Kotler and Keller's (2016) marketing communications mix.

## **2 Theoretical Foundation**

As indicated by the objectives, the study focused on two outcomes, including response strategies and marketing communication efforts of Cape Town gardening and plant retailers in reaction to the water crisis as a means to maintain sales. The study therefore made use of two separate theories to address these outcomes. Before discussing these theories however, other key concepts that formed part of the study are identified in order to ensure that each concept is understood as intended for this particular study.

### **2.1 Key Concepts**

#### **2.1.1 Gardening and Plant Retailers**

For the purpose of the study, gardening and plant retailers referred to retail businesses in Cape Town that offer plants and gardening supplies and services as their core product or service offerings. These retailers could differ in size, location and age and was essentially the research population for this study.

#### **2.1.2 Response Strategies**

Cant (2015:51) notes that response strategies are employed as a reaction or response to an environmental issue, as in this case being the responses of the gardening and plant retailers to the water crisis. This included reactions such as changing product lines, introducing new services, increasing stock of certain items that were already available in the stores or any other strategies that assisted in maintaining sales volumes and brand equity.

#### **2.1.3 Changing Needs of Customers**

For the purpose of this study, the changing needs of customers referred to changing gardening needs that customers might have had due to the water crisis. Other needs that could have been satisfied by gardening and plant retailers were therefore also taken into account, as the introduction of new products such as water tanks or offering more services such as borehole creation, could have been seen as a reaction by these retailers in response to the water crisis to satisfy new needs of their customer base.

## **2.1.4 Marketing Communication Efforts**

The marketing communication efforts referred to the eight modes of communication that organisations can make use of to communicate with customers. This could have included any form of digital and traditional media used for marketing and advertising purposes, such as magazine advertisements, television commercials, in-store promotions, etc. (Kotler & Keller, 2016:583).

## **2.1.5 Sales Volume**

According to the online dictionary of Cambridge University Press (2018), sales volume refers to the quantity or number of products that are sold or services that are provided by a company in a particular time period. For the purpose of this study, this sales volume referred to the number of products or services that were sold by gardening and plant retailers before the drought and during the drought to evaluate whether the sales volume had increased, maintained similar or decreased during the drought.

## **2.1.6 Brand Equity**

Aaker (2013) defines brand equity as a set of brand assets and liabilities linked to a brand name and symbol, which add to (or subtract from) the value provided by a product or service. The value of brand equity is determined by the perceptions that consumers have of it as the consumers experience the value of a brand when being exposed to it in terms of its communication efforts or physical product or service offerings (Aaker, 2013). For this study, the brand equity referred to the value that consumers ascribed to the gardening and plant retailers and was represented by the sales volume or performance, since sales will naturally decline when brands don't satisfy the demands of consumers.

## **2.2 Response Strategies to Environmental Issues**

The first outcome of the study identified how Cape Town gardening and plant retailers responded to the water crisis. In order to address this outcome, du Plessis, Jooste and Strydom's (2005) theory of response strategies to environmental issues was incorporated. Cant (2015:51) notes that response strategies indicate a response to an environmental issue, but is not necessarily undertaken after the event and can be reactive or proactive.

The response strategies of nurseries in Cape Town could therefore vary from measures taken by these businesses before and after the city was declared a disaster area. Most marketing strategies however are reactive in nature as they derive from environmental constraints that have been defined by management (Cant, 2015:51).

According to Du Plessis, *et al.* (2005:41), there are six response strategies that are commonly used by organisations when experiencing environmental issues. The response strategies supported the study by providing a framework by which responses of the gardening and plant retailers could be categorised. Table 1 below identifies the six response strategies that were used to categorise the responses of the Cape Town gardening and plant retailers in reaction to the water crisis.

**Table 1: Response Strategies to Environmental Issues (Adapted from Du Plessis, Jooste & Strydom, 2005:41)**

Response Strategy		Description
1	<b>Opposition Strategy</b>	Opposition strategies attempt to delay or influence environmental issues. Such strategies have limited effectiveness with environmental factors being largely beyond the control of organisations.
2	<b>Adaptation Strategy</b>	Adaptation is often compulsory in order to attend to environmental issues. The danger of pursuing an adaptation strategy to the extreme, is allowing the environment instead of management to control the business.
3	<b>Offensive Strategy</b>	An offensive strategy uses the environmental issue to improve the organisation's competitive position. When key environmental issues have destabilising effects on an industry, opportunities may arise for more aggressive organisations.
4	<b>Redeployment Strategy</b>	A redeployment strategy involves modifying the allocation of resources to decrease the impact of environmental issues on the organisation. Any resources of the organisation can therefore be allocated differently to decrease the impact that is experienced.
5	<b>Contingency Strategy</b>	Contingency strategies are mostly proactive in nature as it involves isolating environmental scenarios that organisation may have to face in the future and designing appropriate responses for each. These responses are therefore planned ahead of time.
6	<b>Passive Strategy</b>	Passive strategies are used when organisations refrain from responding to the environmental issue altogether. The outlook of such a strategy, is that no response is better than a response that might further increase the impact of the issue on the organisation.

## 2.3 Marketing Communications Mix

The second outcome of the study identified the modes of communication that were being used by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers as a means to inform customers of their changing product and service offerings due to the water crisis. In order to address this outcome, Kotler and Keller's (2016) marketing communications mix (see Table 2) was utilised as a framework to identify the modes of communication that these gardening and plant retailers had employed.

**Table 2: Modes of Communication in the Marketing Communications Mix (Adapted from Kotler & Keller, 2016:583)**

Advertising	Sales Promotion	Events & Experiences	Public Relations & Publicity	Online & Social Media Marketing	Mobile Marketing	Direct & Database Marketing	Personal Selling
Print and broadcast ads	Contests, games and lotteries	Company museums	Charitable donations	Facebook, Twitter and Instagram	Text messages	Electronic shopping	Sales presentations
Posters and leaflets	Fairs and trade shows	Street activities	Company magazines	YouTube channels	Online marketing	Tele-marketing	Sales meetings
Packaging	Premiums	Sports	Press kits	Websites	Social media marketing	Television shopping	Incentive programs
Cinema ads	Sampling	Festivals	Speeches	E-mail		Catalogs	Samples
Billboards	Exhibits	Arts	Seminars	Search ads		Mailings	
Display signs	Coupons	Causes		Display ads		Fax	
POP displays	Rebates	Factory tours					

It is important to note that the marketing communications mix was not used to inspect each mode and simply indicate whether they were used or not, but rather to identify the mixes that were useful for the Cape Town gardening and plant retailers during the water crisis. For example, while some nurseries might have found Facebook useful due to its targeting capabilities (residents in Cape Town), other may have found other modes to be more useful. The purpose of using this framework was therefore to determine which modes were popular during such crisis situations and to gain an understanding as to why the communication modes were chosen by these organisations.

## 3 Literature Review

In order to determine the necessity of conducting the proposed study, search of available literature was performed. The investigation into existing literature was based on the two broad themes surrounding the green industry on a global scale. These two themes, as determined by the objectives of this study, focused on gardening and plant retailers' reaction strategies and marketing communication efforts. However, the scope of the search needed to be extended (national to international), seeing as limited information was available on South African gardening and plant retailers' reactions to droughts in terms of changing product or service offerings and marketing communication efforts.

### 3.1 Response Strategies

Du Plessis, Jooste and Strydom's (2005) theory of response strategies to environmental issues was used to explore the various responses of gardening and plant retailers in reaction to droughts. Previously recorded responses utilised by nurseries, as well as the outcomes of these responses, could have been helpful to Cape Town gardening and plant retailers when determining what might have been effective for their businesses when the water crisis occurred.

Available literature did not necessarily categorise response strategies, but did address changes that were implemented by gardening and plant retailers in reaction to droughts. The reactions of the gardening and plant retailers in available literature was categorised by consulting the descriptions of the six response strategies in Table 1 on page seven and then comparing it to the various changes that occurred in these organisations.

#### 3.1.1 Opposition Strategies

Emrich (2017) – member of the South African Nursery Association (SANA) – noted that the association attempted to influence the decision of the City of Cape Town to implement water restrictions in 2015. According to Emrich (2017), the association wished to be proactive, since the City of Cape Town was known for implement water restrictions without consulting the green industry.

SANA requested to work with the City of Cape Town to get the message out there to the public on the importance of saving water before simply implementing restrictions (Emrich, 2017). Emrich (2017) continued by mentioning that SANA went as far as appointing staff at all the Garden Centre Association (GCA) affiliated garden centres in Cape Town, where staff were trained and armed with pamphlets to give to customers on how to save water.

SANA made use of an opposition strategy. Opposition strategies attempt to delay or influence environmental issues (Du Plessis, *et al.*, 2005:41). With an opposition strategy, SANA attempted to inform the public of water shortages in Cape Town with the hopes of delaying or ultimately avoiding the water crisis. The problem with this strategy, was that even if less water was consumed, there would still be no control over weather conditions which provides water to the city. Water restrictions were therefore inevitable from the start.

### **3.1.2 Adaptation Strategies**

According to Du Plessis, *et al.* (2005:41), adaptation strategies are often compulsory if organisations wish to survive environmental issues. Dr Boomslang's Indigenous Nursery is an examples of a gardening and plant retailer in Cape Town that implemented such a strategy. The manager at the nursery stated that a change in consumer buying-patterns was evident, which led to customers mainly purchasing succulents and indigenous mountain plants as they require less water (Gernon, 2017).

Gernon (2017) noted that Dr Boomslang's Indigenous Nursery allocated funds towards purchasing water-wise plants in order to cater to the changing demands of their customers. However, this led to problems in being able to provide variety to customers, since the only plants that they showed interest in were these water-wise plants (Gernon, 2017). Gernon (2017) also mentioned that adapting plant stock did not make up for all the losses caused by the drought, as the nursery was still experiencing significantly lower sales figures than before the drought. The reaction of this nursery therefore appears to have had limited effectiveness.

Having experienced a severe drought in recent years, literature on plant nurseries in California provided relevant examples of responses in reaction to their drought. Boxall (2017) mentioned that California experienced a severe drought that lasted five long years before finally ending in 2017.

According to Williams (2015), the drought in California forced plant nurseries to provide artificial grass to consumers due to obvious demand. Manufacturers of artificial grass also indicated that the majority of plant nurseries weren't at all interested in their products before the drought, leading to the assumption that adaptation was forced due to circumstances (Williams, 2015).

### **3.1.3 Offensive Strategies**

When key environmental issues have destabilising effects on an industry, opportunities may arise for more aggressive organisations (Du Plessis, *et al.*, 2005:41). According to Williams (2015), some businesses were thriving in California because of the drought as it provided opportunities to manufacture or provide new or adapted products.

Village Nurseries (2015) noted that inoculating their plants with mycorrhizae fungus led to a significant improvement in plant performance (increase in nutrient uptake) and drought resistance. The nursery managed to gain a competitive advantage, seeing as their plants performed better than those of competing nurseries, especially during droughts. Customers also confirmed that the plants did in fact provide these advantages, which according to Village Nurseries (2015), led to positive word-of-mouth marketing for the brand.

### **3.1.4 Redeployment Strategies**

Cape Town's drought led to a notable decline in the sales of plants, which threatened the existence of gardening and plant retailers (May, 2018). According to May (2018), the Cape Garden Centre managed to maintain sales volume throughout the drought by reallocating resources that used to be spent on purchasing plants and instead investing it on providing water-saving products such as water tanks and borehole creation services .

Du Plessis, *et al.* (2005:41) notes that redeployment strategies involve modifying resources of an organisation to decrease the impact of the environmental issue that is experienced. The Cape Garden Centre's actions could have been seen as an example of the implementation of such a strategy, since the brand reallocated resources to invest in stock that customers were interested in at the time.

### 3.1.5 Contingency Strategies

Contingency strategies are proactive, as it involves isolating environmental issues that the organisation might face and developing strategies for each of the scenarios (du Plessis, *et al.*, 2005:41). This could have included any actions taken by gardening and plant retailers as preparation for future drought situations, such as prior installation of grey-water systems, using borehole water or any other plans that might have been in place before Cape Town experienced the water crisis.

Nelson Mandela Bay also experienced drought conditions in recent years, and although proactive steps were taken by the city to create public boreholes, the landscaping and gardening sector showed no improvement (Setokoe, 2017). However, these public boreholes were created in townships and weren't available to residents in suburban areas where the majority of the target market resided.

Existing literature lacked in providing examples of gardening and plant retailers that already had plans in place to deal with the water crisis. Conducting this study was therefore also necessary in terms of revealing whether Cape Town gardening and plant retailers had any plans in place before the water crisis occurred.

### 3.1.6 Passive Strategies

Du Plessis, *et al.* (2005:41) defines passive strategies as refraining from responding to an environmental issue. While it is sometimes better to refrain from responding instead of making a situation worse, the Cape Town water crisis would have forced gardening and plant retailers to at least decrease their water usage. Available literature however indicated that this was not enough, with the water crisis causing job losses in the nursery industry as plan sales declined sharply (May, 2018).

Businesses in the landscaping and gardening sector in Nelson Mandela Bay indicated that the drought experienced in the province had a negative effect on the industry (Setokoe, 2017). With hefty water restrictions in place, Green Acres Landscaping reported that their business experienced a retail drop in turnover of approximately 70 per cent, since clients were no longer interested in purchasing seedlings or maintaining lawns (Setokoe, 2017). In this particular case, failure to respond to the drought led to significant losses, which possibly could have been avoided if the business adapted its offerings to changing customer needs.

## 3.2 Marketing Communications Mix

Available literature on response strategies to droughts indicated that such situations generally lead to some form of change in the businesses of gardening and plant retailers, regardless of how small these changes might be. The second part of the literature was focused on the manner in which gardening and plant retailers marketed their responses (changed or adapted product and service offerings) to their target audiences.

Although there were some useful studies available on marketing communication efforts of plant nurseries, many were outdated and were not related to droughts. With the constant development of new and better methods to communicate with customers, especially with improving technology, older studies were also not relevant when today's widely used modes such as mobile, online and social media marketing did not exist yet.

One recent study however proved to be useful in terms of marketing communication efforts of plant nurseries in Kansas, but did not cover criteria of being related to a drought. This qualitative study conducted by Stebner, Boyer, Baker and Peterson (2017) explored the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders of garden centres in Kansas as they used new media tools such as social media to market their offerings. Although the study originally included 23 plant nurseries, it was narrowed down to four due to its qualitative nature (Stebner, *et al.*, 2017).

According to Stebner, *et al.* (2017), results of the study indicated that garden centre operators preferred to use traditional media channels to market to their customers, as they were sceptical as to how newer media tools such as social media would impact their sales. Traditional forms of advertising that were preferred by plant nurseries included television, radio, newspaper and direct-mail campaigns as these were according to them considered to be timeless and evidence existed of the effectiveness of these modes in the past (Stebner, *et al.*, 2017).

Stebner, *et al.* (2017) noted that although the plant nurseries preferred traditional media platforms, all of them had a presence on at least one social media platform, with Facebook being the most popular. Findings of this study however led to the assumption that social media was used by this conservative industry as an afterthought, rather than for the benefits that these platforms could offer to businesses in modern days.

Another study on marketing practices and trade flows in the United States green industry, yielded different results. This study, also not related to a drought, indicated that the most popular advertising media for plant growers and dealers was the internet, accounting for 19 per cent of the industry's total advertising budget (Hodges, Khachatryan, Palma & Hall, 2015). According to Hodges, *et al.* (2015), the second most popular advertising channel was trade journals, which accounted for 15 per cent of advertising spend. Channels that ranked the lowest in popularity included billboards, gardening publications and newsletters (Hodges, *et al.*, 2015).

### **3.3 Literature Review – Key Findings**

After exploring available literature, it was clear that water shortages often have an impact on consumers' purchase behaviours that would require a definite response strategy. It was also clear from existing literature that there seems to be a distinct correlation between the nature and extent of the response and the ability to maintain sales volumes.

The water crisis could have been expected to induce similar reactions from Cape Town gardening and plant retailers, no matter how small these reactions might have been. Since the green industry is completely dependent on water, Cape Town gardening and plant retailer's survival largely depended on the manner in which they responded to the water crisis, and whether they were able to effectively communicate possible changes in their product or service offerings to their target audiences.

Overall, limited literature was available on the topics that were investigated by this study. While response strategies could be identified, the manner in which these responses were communicated to target audiences was not clear. The majority of the available literature also related to gardening and plant retailers in other countries and could not necessarily represent responses that would be effective in the South African market.

Furthermore, literature on the marketing communication efforts used by gardening and plant retailers specifically in reaction to droughts could not be found. The majority of the studies and literature were either outdated and did not represent current marketing channels or were not related to droughts. There was therefore a noticeable gap in the literature that has been filled by conducting the current study.

# 4 Research Plan

## 4.1 Research Paradigm

The framework of this qualitative study was explorative in nature. Diggins (2013a) and Nieuwenhuis (2016:55) notes that qualitative research allows for the analysis and interpretation of data that cannot be meaningfully quantified, and when approached in an explorative manner, has the objective of identifying key issues to gain a greater understanding of a phenomenon. The phenomenon which the study explored, was the manner in which Cape Town based gardening and plant retailers' reactions to the water crisis and resulting marketing communication efforts, influenced sales performance.

According to Nieuwenhuis, (2016:55) explorative studies tend to primarily be inductive, working with an emerging theoretical framework rather than within an established theory, necessitating flexibility and open-mindedness in the search and collection of data. An exploratory approach was most suitable for the study as two different theories were combined (response strategies and the marketing communications mix) and explored in an attempt to better understand the connection between these theories and their effects on brand equity as represented by an increase or decrease in sales volume, which led to subjective conclusions.

From an ontological perspective, the study primarily adopted a nominalist view, which according to Cohen, Manion and Morris (2001:5) means that social reality can be understood through words and names (abstract aspects) created by the mind within levels of consciousness. The study collected data on the response strategies and marketing communication efforts of gardening and plant retailers; and then analysed it to identify the influence that it had on the abstract aspect of brand equity, which deemed this ontological perspective suitable for the study.

Epistemologically, the study assumed an interpretivist paradigm, which according to Maree (2016:33) and Nieuwenhuis (2016:60) analyses a situation with the aim to offer insight into the manner in which a particular group of people make sense of phenomena that they encounter. In this case, the phenomena that was encountered was the water crisis; while the group of people were the gardening and plant retailers.

Nieuwenhuis (2016:60) continues by mentioning that interpretivists believe that social reality is typified by a multiplicity, since dissimilar people interpret events differently, leaving multiple perspectives of an incident. This perspective of reality was supported by the decision to view the research through an anti-positivist lens, which Vanson (2014) describes as an approach that rejects absolute facts, again implying that the research findings could be subjective in nature as different researchers view results from their own perspectives.

An anti-positivist approach allowed the research to be built upon the interpretation of possible effects that response strategies and marketing communication efforts could have had on brand equity of the gardening and plant retailers in Cape Town.

## **4.2 Research Design**

It is important to note that the study did not aim to make statistical or numerical conclusions, but rather to gain an understanding as to why certain response strategies were chosen by gardening and plant retailers, how these strategies were communicated and how it influenced their businesses. A qualitative research approach was therefore chosen.

According to Elliott and Timulak (2007:147-169), qualitative research uses open-ended exploratory research questions as this allows for understanding of phenomena. Simple 'yes' and 'no' answers gained by quantitative studies cannot give the researcher an understanding or explanation as to why certain actions are taken and therefore are not as effective for explorative studies (Elliot & Timulak, 2007:147-169).

### **4.2.1 Research Approach**

A phenomenological research approach was used for this qualitative study. Phenomenology is the study of phenomena, which includes appearances of things, things as they appear in our experience, the ways we experience things, thus the meaning that things have in our experience (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, 2013).

The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy (2013) continues by indicating that we acquire a background of having lived through a given type of experience and we look to our familiarity with that type of experience.

According to Nieuwenhuis (2016:60), phenomenology strongly influenced interpretivism, since phenomenology advocates the need to consider the subjective interpretations of human beings and their perceptions of the world, which is very similar to interpretivism. Using the phenomenological approach was therefore further supported by the chosen interpretivist paradigm for this study.

Qualitative researchers identify a phenomenon and then collect data from persons who have experienced the phenomenon to develop composite descriptions of the essence of the experience for all the individuals (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:77). The decision to use inductive reasoning for this study was also supported, as the different experiences of the gardening and plant retailers in Cape Town were analysed and compared to reach combined conclusions.

It was also clear that although all the gardening and plant retailers in Cape Town experienced the same phenomenon (the water crisis), their experiences were very different from one another.

## 4.2.2 Population

The population of the proposed study included all gardening and plant retailers in Cape Town that offer plants or gardening supplies and services as their core offerings.

These gardening and plant retailers could be located in any of the areas of Cape Town as seen in Figure 1 on the right. See *Annexure A for the list of the gardening and plant retailers that operate in this region.*

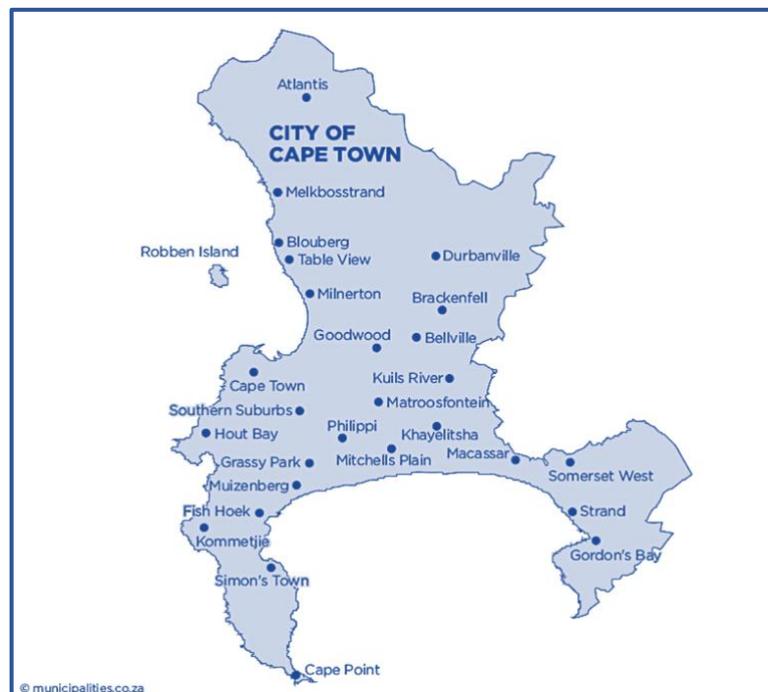


Figure 1: Cape Town Map (Adapted from City of Cape Town Metropolitan Municipality, 2018)

With the use of South Africa's Horticultural Directory for the Cape Town area as well as a map search of all listed gardening and plant retailers in Cape Town, it was possible to identify the gardening and plant retailers that formed part of the research population. Roughly 40 gardening and plant retailers were operating in the area at the time of the study, allowing for the choice of a wide range of businesses with different characteristics to be chosen for the study.

Other businesses that form part of the green industry that were not considered for the study, included specialist services such as beekeeping, reptile experts, environmental training courses, climate control experts and environmental groups that were also listed on the Horticultural Directory, seeing as none of them sell plants as a core product or service offering. As mentioned, Annexure A provides a table listing the gardening and plant retailers in the Cape Town area that were included in the population, from which the sample was selected.

### **4.2.3 Sampling**

The study made use of a non-probability sampling method, which according to Diggines (2013b) are sampling methods where the probability of a specific unit of the population being selected for the sample is unknown. This means that all the units of the population for the study did not necessarily have an equal opportunity at being selected to participate in the study.

The sample was chosen strategically to ensure that it included nurseries that displayed different characteristics. This sampling method could therefore further be classified as purposive. A common element of purposive sampling is that participants for the sample are selected according to predetermined criteria (Patton, 2002). In this case, the criteria included the size, age and location of each of the businesses.

Of the 40 gardening and plant retailers that were part of the research population, five were chosen for the sample group. The sample was carefully selected to ensure that rich information could be gained from gardening and plant retailers with different characteristics as they could have experienced the water crisis differently to one another. Essentially, selecting samples in a homogenous group (gardening and plant retailers in Cape Town) with heterogenous characteristics (difference in size, age and location) further classified the sampling method as stratified purposive sampling.

The Robert Wood Johnson Foundation (2008) notes that stratified purposive sampling can be seen as selecting a sample within a sample and is also seen as an approach that lends credibility to a study. The use of stratified purposive sampling proved useful in gaining insight as to how the different characteristics of these retailers played a role in their responses to the crisis, as well as the marketing communication efforts that were used to communicate with their customers in an attempt to maintain sales.

#### 4.2.4 Data-collection Methods

The primary data-collection method that was used for the study, was interviewer-administrated personal interviews with five employees at five different gardening and plant retailers in Cape Town. The aim of qualitative interviews are to see the world through the eyes of the respondents as they can provide valuable information that is rich in detail and allows the researcher to gain an understanding of their experiences (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:93). Tustin, Ligthelm, Martins and van Wyk (2010:145) states that it is the interviewer's task to contact the respondents, conduct the interviews and record the answers.

Originally, the sample population was contacted by the researcher via email to request their participation in the study. Poor response rates however, necessitated the use of alternative methods to reach the respondents. While some interview dates were arranged telephonically, others required an actual visit to the stores to make arrangements, seeing as the phone calls proved unsuccessful. The information that was disclosed in the original email (see *Annexure B*), provides an outline as to the discussions that took place with each of the respondents when arranging for suitable times to conduct the interviews.

Upon arrival at the gardening and plant retailers on the day of the interviews, the researcher requested for interviewees to sign a letter of consent. The letter needed to be read and signed to ensure that all respondents were aware of and approved the conditions that applied when participating in the study (see *Annexure C*). By signing the letter, respondents gave the researcher permission to use their responses for the purpose of this study. Once the letter was signed, the interviews were conducted.

All interviews were audio-recorded to ensure that the data was available for transcription after the interviews had taken place. This proved helpful to the researcher, seeing as answers needed to be revisited multiple times after the interviews were conducted.

The interviews adopted a semi-structured form. Semi-structured interviews are usually based on a line of inquiry developed by the researcher in advance of the interview and involves certain open-ended questions that are followed by further probing for clarification (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:93). Key questions that were asked during the interviews, were crafted in advance and were based on the key topics of response strategies, marketing communication efforts and sales volume information.

Being semi-structure in nature, the line of questioning (*See Annexure D*) ensured that all key areas were covered in order to answer the research question; while still allowing for the collection of other relevant information that added depth and richness to the findings of the study.

#### **4.2.5 Data-analysis Strategy**

Data-analysis in phenomenological studies focus on how individuals experience the world (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:105). According to Moustakas (1994), data that is collected for phenomenological studies is analysed by the researcher by reducing the information to significant statements or quotes and combining the statements into themes.

The steps that were followed during this particular study, was closely related to that of the Grand Canyon University, Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching (2018). The process of this institution involves three simple steps, which includes becoming familiar with the phenomenon, organising the information that was collected and then identifying commonalities among the different accounts of respondents (Grand Canyon University, Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching, 2018).

This process was used as a framework for the particular study's data-analysis process, but was extended to include three additional steps that the researcher deemed necessary in order to answer the research question effectively. The first stage of data-analysis involved carefully reading the interview transcripts to become more familiar with the experiences of the different gardening and plant retailers with the water crisis.

Responses for each of the questions were then tabulated into separate tables to allow for effortless viewing of combined answers for each question. The data was then organised by placing each tabulated question under a sub-category (response strategies, communication efforts or sales volume and performance) based on the aspect of the research questions

that it addressed. Responses could then be compared to identify themes within the sub-categories, which led to the discovery of commonalities and differences within the themes and with existing literature. This in affect, allowed the researcher to draw conclusions, which were used to answer the research question. Figure 2 below provides a visual representation of the process that was followed by the researcher during the data-analysis process.

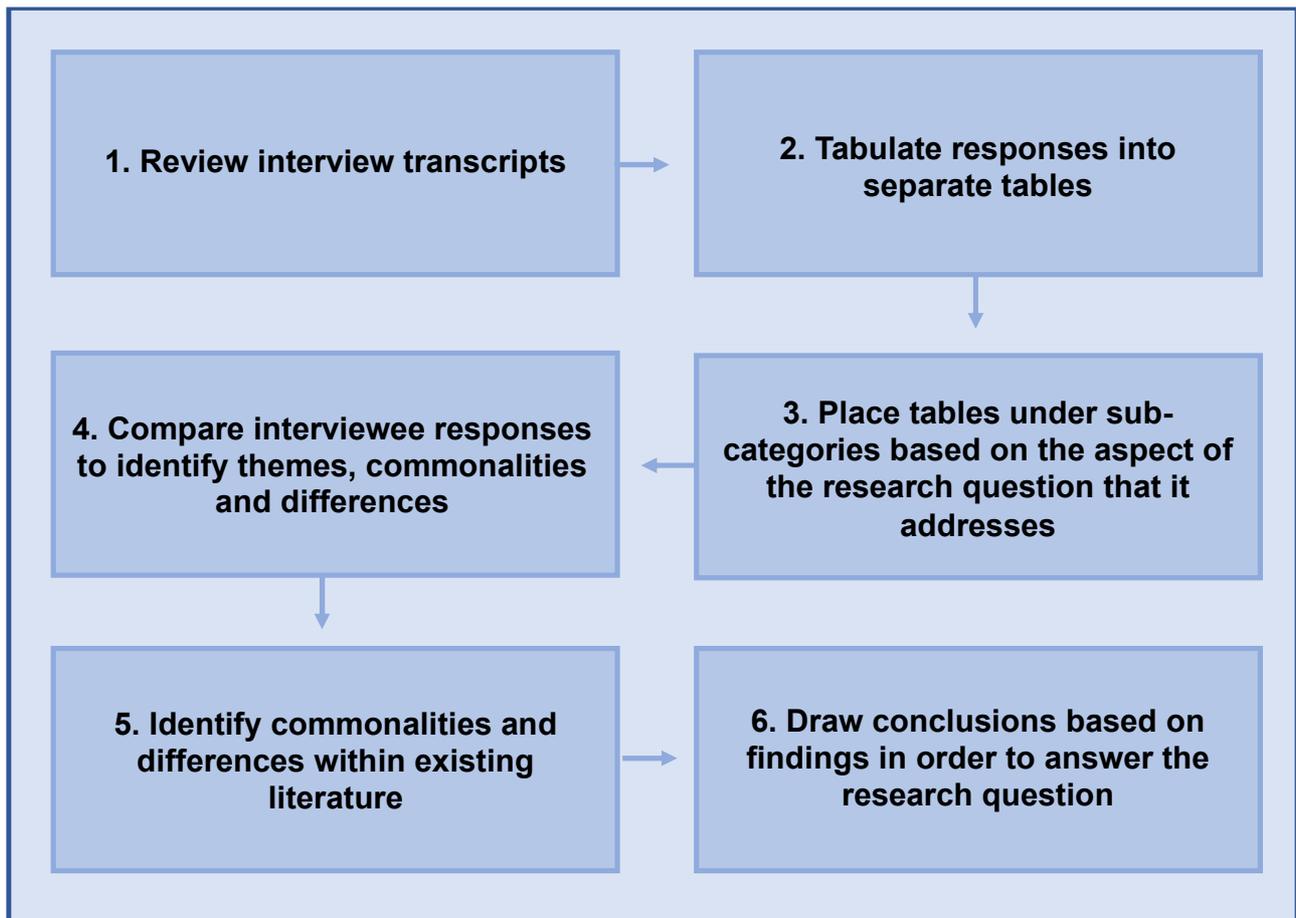


Figure 2: Data-analysis Process (Adapted from Grand Canyon University, Center for Innovation in Research and Teaching, 2018)

#### 4.2.6 Validity and Reliability

According to Brink (1993), researchers doing qualitative studies need to be especially sensitive to the issues of validity and reliability, since the researcher's subjectivity can so readily cloud the interpretation of the data. Major sources of error to the validity of studies include researcher bias, untruthful participants, collecting data under incorrect social contexts and not selecting the correct data-collection methods (Brink, 1993).

Various guidelines provided by Noble and Smith (2015) were taken into consideration when conducting the study to ensure its reliability and validity. Noble and Smith (2015) notes that unlike quantitative research where statistical methods are applied for establishing validity and reliability of research findings, qualitative researchers aim to design and incorporate methodological strategies to ensure the 'trustworthiness' of their findings. It was therefore important to follow the guidelines provided by Noble and Smith (2015) at all times during the data collection process to ensure the trustworthiness of the study.

Noble and Smith (2015) suggests that the researcher first needs to take into account and acknowledge personal biases which might have an influence on the findings. Being aware of personal biases enabled the researcher to set these aside when collecting data, ensuring for a seamless process without involving personal judgement.

It is also important to ensure that meticulous record keeping takes place to demonstrate a clear decision trail and ensuring that the interpretations of the data is consistent and transparent (Noble & Smith, 2015). All data collected during interviews was therefore audio-recorded, allowing the researcher to revisit interview discussions and ensured that all interviews could be transcribed and interpreted in the exact same manner.

Another strategy suggested by Noble and Smith (2015) is to seek out similarities and differences across all accounts to ensure that the different perspectives are represented. This was enforced during the data-analysis, as indicated by the fifth step in the data analysis process of Figure 2 on page 21.

According to Gerber (2013:241) a measure of validity can also be viewed as the degree to which the research instrument, such as a survey or interview, measures what it was designed to measure. Since the interviewer guide was approved by the IIE (see Annexure G), this ensured that the interview questions covered all required aspects to eventually answer the primary research question of this study.

# 5 Findings and Interpretation of Findings

## 5.1 Research Findings

The results that are presented in this section, were gained from semi-structured in-depth interviews with five participants at five selected gardening and plant retail stores in Cape Town. Before commencing with the presentation of these findings, Table 3 below provides an outline of the characteristics of the participating brands, as well as a description of the respondents' positions at the brands. In order to secure anonymity, respondents are simply referred to as R1, R2, R3, R4 and R5 and their respective brands as B1, B2, B3, B4 and B5.

**Table 3: Gardening and Plant Retailer Characteristics**

Brand	Brand Characteristics	Respondent Description
<b>B1</b>	B1 is a plant nursery situated in a high-income neighbourhood. The layout of the business is very much like a traditional nursery with all the pots and plants being stored outside. The brand does however sell some other gardening products such as water tanks and water pumps. In relation to the other participants of the study, B1 is considered to be medium-sized. The brand primarily uses their Facebook page to reach the target audience.	R1 is the owner of the brand and has worked at B1 for over 12 years. While R1 is very involved in the business, there are other staff members on-site at all times to run the store.
<b>B2</b>	B2 is a medium to small, modern plant retailer situated in an urban area. All the plants are situated indoors, creatively displayed in rope hangers, woven baskets and geometric stands. B2 is considered to be modern in comparison to the other respondents, seeing as this brand is up to date with current horticultural trends and heavily depends on online sales and the use of social media to advertise their offerings. The brand was launched during the early stages of the water crisis.	R2 is the content associate at B2 and has worked here for over a year. R2 performs other tasks as well, which includes plant care, plant packaging and front of shop assistance.
<b>B3</b>	B3 is a small, traditional plant nursery situated in a suburban area. No other nurseries appear to be operating in close vicinity. The nursery has a very traditional layout with all plants and pots being stored outside, while some other products such as plant seeds and fertilisers are stored under a netted roof. The brand depends solely on word-of-mouth marketing to reach the target audience and has no form of online marketing strategies apart from being listed as a business on Google.	R3 is the manager at B3, but performs practically all other tasks including customer service and cashier duties, seeing as the nursery has limited staff. R3 has worked at B3 for a couple of years.
<b>B4</b>	B4 is the smallest nursery in the sample, and is situated in an urban area, far away from any other nurseries. The nursery is extremely traditional, with all plants being stored under a netted roof. The brand depends on word-of-mouth marketing to reach target audiences and has a Facebook page that is hardly being used.	R4 is the manager at B4 and performs all tasks at the nursery. R4 has worked at the nursery for over five years.
<b>B5</b>	B5 is by far the largest gardening and plant retailer in the sample group. The business is one of the branches of a franchise and is situated in an upper-class suburban area. The facility is on a large plot of land and has plenty of space available to store products in the store as well as outside under the netted roof that is attached to the building. The brand uses a variety of traditional and digital media channels to reach the target audience.	R5 is the branch manager at B5 and performs various managerial tasks. R5 has worked at B5 for over three years.

The study results are presented in the order of the three secondary research questions (see page four) and were analysed with the use of the data-analysis process as presented in Figure 2 on page 21.

## 5.1.1 Response Strategies

In order to identify the various response strategies that were employed by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers in reaction to the water crisis, respondents were asked questions pertaining to their compliance to water restrictions; adaptations that might have occurred in terms of stock and resources; the competitive impact that changes might have had on the brand; and proactive approaches that could have possibly been in place. Findings indicated the following:

### ***Cape Town gardening and plant retailers respond to droughts in both a proactive and reactive manner***

When asked whether the brands had any prior plans in place in preparation for a situation such as the water crisis, two of the respondents (R2 and R5) indicated having some form of plan in place, while the remaining three respondents (R1, R3 and R4) indicated having no prior plans. The latter, indicated that the brands were not prepared and only adjusted stock when certain products weren't selling anymore because of the water crisis.

The largest nursery in the sample group, B5, reacted in a proactive manner as indicated in R5's statement below:

*We did have plans. Our top senior team actually worked very closely with the City of Cape Town to make them aware about where we are going in terms of water. We knew about it, we had a sort of a feeling that it was coming based on previous studies within the water table, so we've been proactive in our approach in terms of being aware way back in terms of saving water. Our marketing material adapted to this in 2015 and in 2016 we started to drive it very strongly when we saw the implementation of Level1 water restrictions. We were already trying to be proactive in our approach as a business and as a brand to conserve water and to get the message out there as well. We've actually had the city of Cape Town coming to our branches and educate our customers from a marketing perspective.*

According to R2, proactive measures were in place at their nursery for the possibility of an even drier future. While B2 was only launched at the beginning stages of the water crisis when the owner noted a gap in the market for indoor plants, plans were in place for if the water crisis had to get worse. These plans included the strategy to radically switch towards only selling water wise plants and fetching water from the river to keep these plants alive. Since the business was performing well despite the water crisis, it was not necessary to implement these plans.

### ***Cape Town gardening and plant retailers do not resist environmental change***

Interviewees were asked whether the businesses were compliant to water restrictions in an attempt to uncover whether opposition or passive strategies were employed. The answer was unanimous, with all respondents illustrating compliance to the restrictions. This indicated that the brands had no intention of resisting or ignoring the environmental change, ruling out the possibility that opposition or passive strategies were utilised.

Respondents eagerly mentioned methods that were used to save and store water, which included reuse of water that drained from plant containers, installation of water tanks, watering plants by hand and even collecting water from a nearby river. Some of the brands also wished to share their knowledge and concerns, with R1 noting that nurseries needed to lead by example and use water sparingly, since the public was watching. Similarly, R5 mentioned that notices had been put up in-store to make customers aware of the crisis.

### ***Cape Town gardening and plant retailers utilise various response strategies***

When asked about changes that might have occurred in the business in reaction to the water crisis, respondents had lists of items to mention. Adaptation strategies were the first choice for smaller nurseries with the responses of R2 and R3 suggesting that these brands were stocking more water wise plants. While R1 and R5 also mentioned adaptation in plant stocks, redeployment strategies were also visible, with both these larger nurseries indicating that more resources were allocated towards purchasing water tanks and pumps to address customers' demands.

Additionally, R5 noted that less funds could be allocated towards employee benefits such as staff outings and monetary incentives for employee of the month. Monthly gardening talks that used to be offered by B5, was also removed from the brand's service offering, seeing as this free of charge service led to a expenses that could not be afforded anymore.

### ***The water crisis generated opportunities for new businesses***

B2 made use of an offensive strategy, since the business was launched at the beginning stages of the water crisis with the aim of addressing the rising horticultural trend in indoor plants, largely motivated by the water crisis. This gave the business a competitive edge, seeing as customer demand suggested to be leaning towards the purchase of indoor plants. R2 was under the impression that the water crisis was also experienced positively by other gardening and plant retailers, which findings proved not to be the case at all.

## 5.1.2 Communication Efforts

With the aim of identifying how the water crisis influenced communication efforts of Cape Town gardening and plant retailers, respondents were asked about the brands' communication efforts that were employed before and during the water crisis. This allowed the researcher to identify whether the water crisis had an influence on the communication efforts of these businesses. Interviewee responses revealed the following:

### ***Facebook is the most popular communication channel, often utilised in conjunction with other channels***

When asked about the communication channels that the nurseries used to reach target audiences, Facebook was the 'most mentioned' communication channel with R1, R2, R4 and R5 indicating that their brands had Facebook pages. While used by most, Facebook was only listed as being the main form of communication for B1 with the other respondents listing other channels including Instagram, Twitter, email, SMS, newspaper, radio, websites, online stores, blogs, in-store displays and newsletters.

### ***Online handles are created on various platforms, but rarely used***

Findings indicated that some gardening and plant retailers created online handles on various social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook and Twitter, but abandoned these pages a while ago. R4 mentioned that the nursery had a Facebook page, but that the business did not use it. Similarly, R1 mentioned that although the business had Instagram and Twitter handles, these platforms were not used anymore.

While these pages still exist, they aren't updated with any new content. Having social media accounts that aren't updated regularly, could lead to the incorrect assumption that these business do not exist anymore. This would result in the loss of potential customers and a decrease in sales.

### ***Small, traditional nurseries hardly use communication channels to reach audiences***

When asked about the communication channels that the nurseries used to reach audiences, it was evident that the small, traditional nurseries hardly used any form of marketing to reach audiences. With practically no marketing efforts being implemented, it appeared that the reputations or locations of B3 and B4 could have allowed these nurseries to survive despite their lack of communication with target audiences.

### ***The water crisis encouraged the launch of water related campaigns***

For the brands that actually made use of communication channels, the water crisis appeared to be a popular topic in communication campaigns, especially to promote related offerings. R1 mentioned that the business purchased water tanks from Johannesburg and once these offerings were available to customers, B1 promoted it on its Facebook page. Similarly, R2 noted that their brand communicated the water crisis to customers in the following manners:

*We have had a couple of product focuses and we have written an article on how to save water while watering plants and what water you can reuse for your plants since certain water can't be reused. We also did a water wise range, which we still have. We have also done some collaborations with Visi magazine, and they did a post with us on water wise plants for which they used some of our products for that for the online magazine.*

According to R5, the brand made use of newspaper advertisements in local papers to promote drought tolerant plants, especially when different levels of the water restrictions were implemented. R5 continued by noting that these campaigns were integrated by airing the same message on local radio stations, sending SMS's to the brand's in-house customer base and posting campaigns on B5's social media pages.

### ***Communication channel choices largely remained unchanged during the water crisis***

In terms of using new communication channels during the water crisis, Cape Town gardening and plant retailers appeared to be mostly unchanged in their choice of medium. Minor changes were noted, but do not necessarily qualify as the use of a new channel.

According to R4, the only form of new communication in the nursery was posters from STOCKOSORB (one of the suppliers) that had been displayed to promote water saving products such as water-wise crystals that can be added to soil to prevent water from going to waste. R5 also mentioned that this same brand of product was stocked in their store.

While in-store displays aren't necessarily considered a new communication channel for B5, this brand appeared to embrace this channel in a creative manner since the water crisis occurred. R5 noted: "...we've changed our whole display modelling." In order to give customers ideas on how to garden with the use of succulents and pavers, R5 mentioned that the brand now has various displays on the premises to showcase new garden design concepts that are changed on a regular basis. "In that respect, we've gained a lot of new clients..." R5 noted.

Other than above mentioned adjustments, none of the remaining respondents made use of any new channels to reach target audiences. R1 went as far as mentioning that B1 is a “very non-commercial nursery” and this led to the respondent’s decision to stay away from most marketing practices.

### **5.1.3 Sales Volume and Performance**

In order to identify how the responses of Cape Town gardening and plant retailers influenced their ability to maintain sales, interviewees were asked questions pertaining to changes in sales figures, customer demands and shifts in the customer base. With sales figures being highly confidential, exact numbers were not requested. The question was therefore addressed by focusing on customers’ reactions towards the brand in terms of satisfaction levels and demands for new or adjusted offerings, which would have an influence on the overall brand equity. The following findings surfaced:

#### ***The water crisis was experienced negatively by most of the retailers***

When asked whether the water crisis had a positive or negative effect on the businesses, the majority of the respondents indicated that it had a negative effect on their businesses. R2, was the only participant to state that the crisis had a positive effect on the business, reason being that customers were looking for alternatives to outdoor plants. R2 mentioned that there was a “huge trend towards indoor plants”, which suited this business perfectly with indoor plants being its only offering.

#### ***Gardening and plant retailers generally noted a decrease in sales volume***

Respondents were asked whether the brands experienced a notable increase or decrease in sales, to which the majority again indicated experiencing a definite decline. According to R3, sales went down by as much as 45 per cent. Similarly, R4 mentioned that there were less customers in the nursery once the water crisis occurred.

Again, B2 appeared to be the only brand that didn’t notice a change in sales, however this could very likely have been due to the fact that the business was launched when the water crisis was underway, thus eliminating the opportunity to compare sales against earlier figures. R2 did however mention that the brand didn’t perform badly at any stage during the water crisis.

### ***Nursery size influenced the extent to which customer needs could be satisfied***

From the interviewees' responses, it was evident that the larger nurseries were able to administer more changes to the businesses to adapt to changing consumer needs, which appeared to count in their favour. The two smallest nurseries were only able to adapt on a small scale by offering more succulents (R3) and by offering fynbos and water-wise crystals (R4). Some products that used to generate an income also couldn't be sold anymore. According to R3, the business had to remove hosepipes from their shelves; while R4 noted that colourful, flowering plants weren't selling anymore. The overall responses from R3 and R4 painted a dire picture for small, traditional nurseries.

### ***Responding to changing consumer needs allowed brands to gain and maintain customers***

As a follow-up to the previously mentioned finding, the nurseries that were able to apply significant changes to satisfy changing consumer needs appeared to have an advantage over the other nurseries. The two gardening and plant retailers that applied redeployment strategies (R1 and R5) indicated that they believed that their brands had the upper hand.

When asked whether their brands had a competitive advantage over other gardening and plant retailers, R1 noted that there was more benefit to visiting B1, because customers could purchase water tanks at their nursery and didn't need to go elsewhere to satisfy this need. In response to the same question, R5 mentioned the following:

*We actually did well in respect – in my humble opinion – in terms of other nurseries to drive it home with our customers. Our customers were completely impressed with the way we've dealt with the water crisis in terms of getting products that are water wise...*

When asked whether the customer base was the same before and during the water crisis, respondents indicated that although a decrease was visible, the customer base remained the same for the most part. However, R5 eagerly mentioned that although their brand had many of the same customers, the brand managed to gain many new customers as well, especially after the brand started showcasing hard-landscaping displays in the store. According to R5, these displays inspired customers to install the featuring items in their gardens, exactly as they were displayed in the stores.

## 5.2 Interpretation of Findings

After exploring the interviewee responses as discussed in the previous section, the findings of this study could be compared to existing literature to identify commonalities and differences. While some findings were supported by the results of previous studies, others proved to be the exact opposite of what available literature indicated. Some findings were not supported or opposed by any previous studies, which could be explored in future studies.

As with the previous section, response strategies, communication efforts as well as sales volume and performance was viewed separately before drawing the final conclusions. This eventually allowed the researcher to answer the three secondary research questions, that when combined, addresses the primary research question.

### 5.2.1 Response Strategies

As seen in the literature review section of this document, gardening and plant retailers all over the world are able to make use of all six response strategies identified by Du Plessis, *et al.* (2005:41). The results of this study indicated that Cape Town gardening and plant retailers made use of redeployment, adaptation and offensive strategies.

Redeployment strategies that were employed by the two larger nurseries in the sample group [B1 and B5], involved allocating more funds towards purchasing water tanks and water pumps that were on high demand. With residents of Cape Town desperate to install devices that could assist in storing and purifying water, these brands invested in adding pricy new items to their offerings. In agreeance, literature indicated that the Cape Garden Centre, a very large gardening and plant retailer, responded similarly by providing water-saving products such as water tanks and borehole creation services when the water crisis occurred (May, 2018).

Gernon (2017) mentioned that Dr Boomslang's Indigenous Nursery, a small plant nursery, responded to Cape Town's water crisis by stocking more succulents and indigenous mountain plants to cater to changing consumer buying-patterns, which can be categorised as an adaptation strategy. Adaptation strategies that were implemented by the participants of this particular study, were identical. The two smallest nurseries in the sample [B3 and B4] employed adaptation strategies by stocking more succulents and water wise plants, since consumers were no longer interested in colourful, flowering plants that require a lot of water.

Key environmental issues often have destabilising effects on an industry, which could lead to opportunities arising for other organisations (Du Plessis, *et al.*, 2005:41). One of the participants in the study, R2 mentioned that their brand was launched at the beginning stages of the water crisis when the owner noticed a gap in the market for indoor plants. This could be classified as an offensive strategy, seeing as this trend was influenced by the water crisis. The product offerings were inspired by a new horticultural trend, which created an opportunity for this brand to enter the market despite obvious water shortages. According to Williams (2015), some businesses were thriving in California because of the drought as it provided opportunities to manufacture or provide new or adapted products; supporting the findings of this study that an environmental issue is not always experienced negatively.

While no literature existed on nurseries that have employed contingency strategies in similar situations, and none of the nurseries in the sample group applied a contingency strategy *per se*, findings did indicate that responses of Cape Town gardening and plant retailers were not solely reactive in nature. Proactive measures were for instance employed by the largest nursery in the sample group by keeping notified on studies of the water table, which warned this nursery of the possibility of a drought in the near future. The nursery that made use of an offensive strategy also indicated that the brand had plans in place for if the crisis had to get worse.

### **5.2.2 Communication Efforts**

While findings indicated that Cape Town gardening and plant retailers made use of both traditional and digital media channels, it was evident that digital platforms were more popular among the sample group. This was supported by the work of Hodges, *et al.* (2015), which found digital channels, specifically the internet, to be the most popular advertising media for plant growers and sellers in the United States. However, the study of Stebner, *et al.* (2017) yielded different results and found that gardening and plant retailers in Kansas preferred using traditional media channels.

Of all the communication channels, Facebook was the most popular platform to be utilised by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers. Although the study of Stebner, *et al.* (2017) found that traditional media channels were preferred by gardening and plant retailers in Kansas, the study also found Facebook to be the most popular social media platform when taking participants' digital marketing practices into consideration.

Research further revealed that some participants created online handles on different platforms, but barely used them to reach audiences; a theme that also emerged in the study of Stebner, *et al.* (2017). R1 mentioned that their nursery had accounts on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, but only used Facebook to reach audiences and no new content was posted on the other account pages. Similarly, R4 mentioned that the nursery had a Facebook page, but that it was not being used. This leads back to original assumptions that older gardening and plant retailers create social media accounts because competitors use it, rather than using it for the real benefits that these platforms could offer in terms of targeting capabilities.

The largest nursery in the group was the only brand that made use of traditional media channels such as radio and newspaper advertisements. Since these channels are very costly, larger franchised nursery brands such as B5 were able to spend on such marketing activities, while the remaining gardening and plant retailers resorted to more affordable, digital channels such as online and social media marketing.

The study also found that while gardening and plant retailers were not employing new channels in reaction to the water crisis, water related campaigns were launched, especially to promote new and adapted offerings, such as drought tolerant plants, water tanks and water pumps. Creative product displays and supplier posters were also used in some of the stores to inspire consumers to switch out their water-thirsty gardens with modern, water wise plants and pavers.

### **5.2.3 Sales Volume and Performance**

Results indicated that despite their efforts, Cape Town gardening and plant retailers generally experienced a decrease in sales volume. The modern, digitally-run plant nursery was the only participating brand that wasn't effected negatively by the water crisis, with R2 indicating the belief that the water crisis had a positive effect on the industry, allowing for new opportunities to stock water wise plants.

B2 made use of an offensive strategy, which proved to be successful. Available literature strengthened this argument, with Williams (2015) noting that California's drought provided new opportunities for businesses (offensive strategies) that allowed them to thrive while others were suffering.

While indicating that the water crisis had a negative effect on sales volume, the two brands that made use of redeployment strategies appeared to be better off than the remaining two nurseries that made use of adaptation strategies. Both R1 and R5 made use of redeployment strategies and indicated that their businesses gained a competitive advantage over other nurseries since they supplied water tanks and water pumps that were in high demand.

May (2018) noted that the Cape Garden Centre managed to maintain sales volume throughout the drought by reallocating resources (redemption strategy) to offer water-saving products such as water tanks and borehole creation services. The use of redeployment strategies therefore proved to be an effective strategy for Cape Town gardening and plant retailers to perform better than competing brands, even with sales figures being lower.

The two remaining nurseries [B3 and B4] made use of adaptation strategies by stocking more succulents and less flowering plants that require a lot of water to survive. Of all the nurseries, these nurseries appeared to be suffering the most, with R3 mentioning that sales had decreased by as much as 45 per cent. Dr Boomslang's Indigenous Nursery applied the same strategy and according to Gernon (2017), this strategy did not make up for all the losses caused by the drought since the nursery's sales were significantly lower than before the water crisis.

Apart from using an offensive strategy that gave the brand a competitive advantage, B2 made use of multiple communication channels to reach target audiences. According to R2, this included Instagram, Facebook, a website with an online store, email, a blog and collaborating with Visi, a popular online magazine. Overall, this brand appeared to be aware of the audience's preferences in terms of the platforms that they wished to be approached on, which further strengthened the position of this brand.

The largest nursery in the sample group, B5, also made use of various media channels to reach audiences, which also appeared to assist the brand in its efforts to drive sales during the water crisis. According to R5, the brand communicated with the brand's in-house customer base through SMS and other channels such as radio, newspaper, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and online newsletters. Conscious efforts were also made to refresh in-store displays that were very successful in driving sales of pavers and water wise plants.

The lack of variety in channel use proved unsuccessful for the two small nurseries. When questioned about communication efforts, it was evident that the small, traditional nurseries were not communicating with customers effectively. The lack of communication could have been an likely contributor to the poor performance of these nurseries.

# 6 Conclusion

The purpose of the study was to identify the response strategies utilised by the gardening and plant retailers in Cape Town in reaction to the water crisis; and explored which marketing communication efforts were used to communicate these strategies as a means to maintain sales. This research question set out in the first section of the study, is repeated here for convenience.

## ***Primary Research Question***

Which response strategies and marketing communication efforts have been implemented by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers in reaction to the water crisis and how successful were these responses and communication efforts in maintaining sales?

## ***Secondary Research Questions***

- Which response strategies have been employed by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers in reaction to the water crisis?
- Which communication efforts have been employed by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers in reaction to the water crisis?
- How successful have the employed response strategies and communication efforts of Cape Town gardening and plant retailers been in maintaining sales volume?

## 6.1 Answering the Research Question

### 6.1.1 Secondary Research Questions

***Which response strategies have been employed by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers in reaction to the water crisis?***

Cape Town gardening and plant retailers made use of various response strategies in reaction to the water crisis. Of the six response strategies, the implementation of three of these strategies were evident in this particular study. Responses that were employed included redeployment, adaptation and offensive strategies.

There appeared to be a relationship between nursery size and choice in response strategy, which is likely influenced by available funds. The larger nurseries applied redeployment strategies, which was a costly investment. These nurseries had enough funds to purchase multiple water tanks or water pumps to offer to their customers and both believed that this provided a competitive advantage.

With limited funds and storage space, the smaller nurseries were not able to invest in redeployment strategies, leaving adaptation of plant stocks as the next best option. Du Plessis, *et al.* (2005:41), noted that adaptation strategies are often compulsory if organisations wish to survive environmental issues, which proved to be true in this case.

However, while being small, this observation did not apply to the modern, digitally-run nursery brand. This business implemented an offensive strategy by following the rising horticultural trend in indoor plants, which proved to be the most effective strategy of all during the water crisis.

***Which communication efforts have been employed by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers in reaction to the water crisis?***

Cape Town gardening and plant retailers indicated the use of various traditional and digital media channels however, none of these were employed with the sole purpose of communicating water-related messages. The brands therefore did not dedicate for instance an entire social media handle or new blog page aimed at the water crisis alone.

While no new communication channels were employed in reaction to the water crisis, some brands did indicate that they were running water related campaigns on their existing communication platforms to promote new and adapted offerings, such as drought tolerant plants, water tanks and water pumps.

The study also uncovered that Cape Town gardening and plant retailers were mostly utilising digital communication channels such as e-mail, SMS and social media platforms to reach target audiences. Traditional channels were however still present, with the franchised nursery brand being able to invest in more expensive methods such as newspaper and radio advertisements to reach their target market.

### ***How successful have the employed response strategies and communication efforts of Cape Town gardening and plant retailers been in maintaining sales volume?***

Of the strategies that were employed by Cape Town gardening and plant retailers, the use of an offensive strategy appeared to be most effective in maintaining sales volume, especially since this provides a brand with a competitive advantage that allows it to outperform competing brands.

Redeployment strategies also appeared to offer some form of advantage over nurseries that did not apply significant changes in their product offerings, but it came at a cost. These nurseries needed to invest in purchasing more expensive items such as water tanks, which in one of the cases forced the business to cut on employee benefits. This in itself can cause future problems, especially if employees were to demand the reintroduction of past benefits now that the dam levels have been on the rise.

Struggling to keep their doors open, the nurseries that applied adaptation strategies in reaction to the water crisis, proved to have chosen the least effective strategy of all. Minor adaptation in plant stocks were not enough to promise a secure future for these nurseries. With the sales at one of these nurseries having dropped by nearly 50 per cent, it might be time to consider employing other strategies.

When considering communication channels, there appeared to be a correlation between nursery performance and channel choice. The two nurseries that appeared to be performing the best during the water crisis, were the only brands to employ a variety of communication channels to reach audiences. The use of multiple communication channels to target audiences with new or adapted offerings, therefore proved to be more successful than the absence thereof.

### **6.1.2 Primary Research Question**

The final answer to the research question, is therefore that Cape Town gardening and plant retailers made use of a variety of response strategies (redeployment, offensive and adaptation) and launched water related campaigns to communicate these responses as opposed to employing entirely new channels. The use of an offensive response strategy and communicating this over various communication channels in an integrated manner, proved to be the most effective strategy.

## 6.2 Implications and Contributions of Findings for Future Practices

The present study made contributions from a theoretical, methodological and practical perspective. Theoretically, the study contributed to the understanding of how response strategies to an environmental issue such as the water crisis, can assist gardening and plant retailers in maintaining sales volume when communicated effectively.

While the study focused specifically on gardening and plant retailers, the response strategies and communication efforts of businesses in other industries could also be explored in order to identify whether their experiences with the water crisis were similar. Future studies could also explore responses to environmental issues other than the water crisis, seeing as the model of du Plessis, Jooste and Strydom (2005), can be applied to any environmental issues.

The formulation of a simple data-analysis process (see *Figure 2*) that was useful for the analysis of the qualitative data that was collected for this particular study, allowed the study to contribute on a methodological level. Researchers that are conducting qualitative studies, could make use of the process that was formulated for this particular study to analyse the data in their qualitative studies.

From a practical perspective, the study provided insights on the effectiveness of various response strategies to an environmental issue such as the water crisis, which could prove useful to businesses in the horticultural industry. While the crisis was experienced in the Western Province, future droughts experienced in other locations could pose similar challenges, to which the findings of this study could provide helpful suggestions on manners in which to approach such environmental issues.

Findings also indicated that the implementation of communication efforts relating to the crisis are important during such situations, since changing consumer needs essentially force brands to adapt or change offerings, which need to be communicated in order to maintain sales. The gardening and plant retailers that were more successful during this time, used various channels to reach audiences. This suggests that other businesses in the horticultural industry could expect an improvement in performance by simply ensuring that audiences are aware of their responses to the issue.

## 6.3 Ethical Considerations

When conducting research, engaging in ethical practices is not a matter of choice; it is a necessity (Diggines, 2013c). The particular study made use of human participants in order to gain the required data. According to Walton (n.d.), studies that involve human subjects or participants raises unique and complex ethical, legal, social and political issues.

The use of in-depth interviews raised even more ethical issues that needed to be taken into consideration. Allmark, Boote, Chambers, Clarke, McDonnell, Thompson and Tod (2009) notes that major themes to consider when conducting in-depth interviews include privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, personal harm, as well as dual-role and over-involvement.

Privacy is threatened when the interviewer probes into areas that interviewees might want to prefer to keep private (Allmark, *et al.*, 2009). All participants of the study were assured that brand names and the names of interviewees would remain strictly anonymous as the goal was not to name and shame, but rather to explore how different retailers had experienced and responded to the water crisis.

Informed consent is another issue that arises when conducting personal interviews and should not be taken lightly (Allmark, *et al.*, 2009). Participants of the study were given a letter of consent to read and sign before interviews were conducted, which outlined the conditions of participating in the study (*See Annexure C*).

When conducting research, respondents may not be harmed physically or mentally and efforts should be made to ensure that participants are not embarrassed and feel comfortable during the interviewing process (Diggines, 2013c). Interviews took place in a comfortable setting on a one-on-one basis, which ensured that participants did not feel uncomfortable to disclose information that they did not want to discuss publicly.

Dual-role and over involvement can become an issue when the interviewer tries to act as a therapist (Allmark, *et al.*, 2009). The researcher addressed this issue by remaining professional and unbiased at all times to ensure that valuable insights could be gained on the perspectives of various gardening and plant retailers, without criticising or attempting to give advice on the matter.

## 6.4 Limitations and Delimiters

Although the findings can be of use to other businesses in the horticultural industry, there are factors that need to be taken into consideration that could have had an influence on the reliability of the findings of this study. Participants were chosen at the discretion of the researcher based on certain characteristics (business size, location and age) to ensure that information was gathered from a diverse group of the research population. While this allowed the findings to provide rich and diverse information, it is not necessarily representative of the entire research population.

This use of non-probability sampling means that findings cannot be used to make generalisations about the population, seeing as all gardening and plant retailers did not have an equal opportunity at being selected to participate in the study. Being qualitative in nature however, the aim of the study was not to identify accurate statistical findings, but rather to provide insights on the experiences.

There is also the possibility that participating gardening and plant retailers were not being completely truthful when providing information on sensitive topics such as their marketing communication strategies and sales performance, due to competitive reasons. If this was the case, the reliability of the findings might be questionable, since the insights would have been based off the inaccurate accounts of the participants. In order to prevent this, respondents were assured that information would only be used to gain insights and responses would remain strictly anonymous.

## 6.5 Recommendations

Upon completion of the study, recommendations were formulated with the aim of providing insights to gardening and plant retailers on effective manners in which to respond to an environmental issue such as a water crisis in order to remain profitable.

While various response strategies are available for utilisation in the event of experiencing an environmental issue, the use of a response strategy that provides brands with a competitive advantage appears to be most successful.

Environmental issues can create opportunities for existing and new brands to satisfy changing customer needs. Staying up to date with consumers' changing needs therefore proves to be important, especially if a brand wishes to spot gaps in the market that can satisfy these needs.

Findings also indicated that it is extremely important to make use of various communication channels to inform target audiences of the brand's response, since the environmental issue will result in changing buying behaviours. With the existence of new needs, customers will search for brands that can satisfy these needs. Without effective communication, brands could miss out on the opportunity to satisfy these needs with their product and service offerings.

While no new communication channels are necessarily required, the use of campaigns to inform customers of changing products that will satisfy needs relating to the environmental issue is an effective manner to maintain sales.

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