



## **Strategic Brand Communication Through A Crisis: Exploring The Risks and Opportunities for Aquila Safari**



Thesis submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the  
degree Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership at The  
Independent Institute of Education, Vega School.

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Supervisor: Dr Franci Cronje

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3 April 2024

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by

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A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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Submission Date: 3 April 2024

## **PLAGIARISM DECLARATION**

I hereby declare that the dissertation submitted for the Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership 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 a degree.



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3 April 2024

## **ABSTRACT**

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted the tourism sector across the world. Crises are trying times for brands, and when confronted with a crisis, they have the responsibility to keep their consumers informed and carefully consider how to respond and communicate to facilitate post-COVID-19 crisis recovery. Once lockdowns and travel restrictions were eased and travel was allowed to resume, there was uncertainty amongst tourism brands on how to communicate to show both confidence and give vital information on health and safety to domestic and international travellers. This study examines Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 crisis brand identity and brand communication through the lens of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the Discourse of Renewal theory. Utilising semi-structured, in-depth interviews and thematic analysis, the research reveals that Aquila Safari's brand identity remained consistent and easily recognizable, aligning closely with the Brand Identity Prism. Moreover, the brand's communication successfully incorporated the four subcomponents of the Discourse of Renewal theory: organisational learning, ethical communication, prospective vision, and sound organisational rhetoric. An interesting finding from the study highlights that while Aquila Safari excelled in ethical communication and maintaining a forward-looking perspective, there is room for improvement in leader-based communication and the development of a comprehensive crisis communication plan. These insights offer valuable guidance for enhancing brand resilience and ensuring effective communication strategies in future crises.

**Keywords:** Brand communication, COVID-19 crisis, Discourse of Renewal, Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism.

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# **1 CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION**

This chapter provides the background and context of this study, the rationale, problem statement, purpose statement, research questions, research aim and research objectives. It highlights how the tourism sector worldwide has been adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. It discusses how travel restrictions and lockdowns have eased globally and how the increase in domestic tourism is helping to lessen the blow. It also discusses how tourism brands have focused on brand identity and brand communication to restore and re-activate the sector while safeguarding jobs and businesses.

The tourism industry experienced significant disruption due to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, as the implementation of lockdown measures and travel restrictions resulted in a complete halt of local and international travelling (Wong, Ho, Olusanya, Antonini & Lyness, 2020; Zenker & Kock, 2020; Kaczmarek, Perez, Demir & Zaremba, 2021; Rastegar, Seyfi & Rasoolimanesh, 2021). According to the World Tourism Organization, arrivals of international tourists declined by 73% globally, there were 1 billion fewer travellers worldwide in 2020 than there were in 2019, which put 100-120 million tourism jobs at risk (UN Tourism, 2021). It is important to acknowledge that, alongside governmental restrictions on individual mobility, there has been a decline in the overall perception of travel, thereby playing a role in the diminishing trend in tourist flows (Hoekstra & Leeftang, 2020; Ngoh & Groening, 2022).

The tourism industry had slower recovery compared to other sectors during a crisis like the COVID-19 pandemic, this can be attributed to its impact on a destination's reputation and brand image, which directly impacts its attractiveness (Cassedy, 1992). While the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic was felt across the global tourism industry, 2021 saw the beginning of recovery for the sector (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020a). However, this was slower than anticipated in part due to poor coordination among governments to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic and the impact of the inconsistent and strict border restrictions (UN Tourism, 2021). Domestic tourism increased and helped to mitigate the impact on tourism brands as travellers

opted for lower risk holiday options closer to home (Ferretti, Castro & Kovalski, 2021). All this reflected domestic travellers' growing confidence in the tourism industries' ability to recover and in the health and safety assurances they offered (OECD, 2020c). At the time, many countries continued to discourage non-essential international travel although several international destinations slowly eased COVID-19 border restrictions and were delighted to welcome tourists back. As a result, in 2021 the future outlook was favourable, and the tourism sector demonstrated its resilience and ability to bounce back (Behsudi, 2020).

To take advantage of this, tourism brands needed to prepare for recovery to retain guest loyalty in a post-COVID-19 market, drive profitable tourist demand, and make up for impacted revenue from international tourists (Orîndaru, Popescu, Alexoei, Căescu, Florescu & Orzan, 2021). While the COVID-19 virus remained a threat, South African tourism brands were faced with their most challenging job yet, communicating their brand image and offerings to the domestic and international market while still providing efficient and safe tourism services. Going forward, brands needed to re-examine their brand identity, brand communications and operations through a health and sanitation perspective, adjust their businesses to reduced capacity, and lower international occupancy for the near future (Čorak, Živoder & Marušić, 2020). In short, the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a significant transformation in the tourism sector, resulting in a re-evaluation of a brand's post-crisis brand identity and brand communication strategies in order to facilitate recovery.

## **1.1 Rationale**

Tourism brands have been heavily struck by the COVID-19 pandemic and are eager to resume normal operations now that lockdowns are being lifted and people can travel again (OECD, 2020c). International tourism activity has resumed to some extent, but it is still quite restricted. Although domestic travel has picked up again in many countries, it can only partially make up for the decline in inbound international travel (OECD, 2020b). As individuals prefer to stay close to home and travel to places within their own country, domestic tourism is projected to increase (OECD, 2020a). An increase in domestic tourism means that most tourism brands face brand

communication challenges resulting from consumer behavioural adjustments (Platon, 2020). This is forcing them to reassess their brand identity and brand communication strategies and reinvent themselves to remain relevant to their domestic and international consumers (Dias, Pessôa & Andrade, 2020). Additionally, according to Orîndaru *et al.* (2021), service quality characteristics such as cleanliness and safety are increasingly becoming important to comprehending tourist considerations when making the next travel and accommodation reservations.

The COVID-19 crisis is unlikely to be the last worldwide pandemic to endanger brands (Pachucki, Grohs & Scholl-Grissemann, 2022); understanding how one tourism brand handled post-COVID-19 recovery makes it possible to understand how other South African tourism brands can tackle similar crises. This research paper examines the strategies utilised by Aquila Safari to adapt its post-crisis brand identity and brand communication to promote and renew its brand in response to customer behavioural shifts after the COVID-19 pandemic. The study draws upon existing literature on Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and Discourse of Renewal theory to support the analysis. This research adds to the existing body of knowledge regarding the ways in which tourism brands can effectively address and adopt brand identity and brand communication strategies in a post-pandemic scenario.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

Brands often struggle during times of crisis, and since they have a responsibility to inform their stakeholders, they must carefully consider their response and communication strategies. Tourism brands were not to blame for the COVID-19 crisis and thus traditional post-crisis communication responses that focus on culpability, blame, or reputation or image are limited (Pachucki *et al.*, 2022).

Research to date has remained silent on how brand communication by tourism brands might handle situational uncertainty while showing both confidence and providing consumers with essential information (Itani & Hollebeek, 2021; Moorman & McCarthy, 2021). In addition, there is a lack of research regarding the occurrence of a brand identity crisis when there is a disconnect between a business' perceived pre-crisis brand and how it is received by the public during a worldwide pandemic. The difficulty associated with maintaining a strong and consistent brand identity and

developing and planning effective post-crisis brand communication for tourism brands suggests that dedicated study efforts are required, and this study seeks to fill this gap (Pachucki *et al.*, 2022).

### 1.3 Research Aim

This research study aimed to investigate the strategies utilised by Aquila Safari, a South African Big 5 Safari tourism brand, to adapt its brand identity and brand communication following the global COVID-19 pandemic. The study examined the strategies taken by Aquila Safari to address challenges and achieve recovery. In so doing it served the purpose of identifying the brand identity that Aquila Safari intended to promote in its post-COVID-19 recovery phase. Additionally, the study analysed how Aquila Safari's brand communication strategies aligned with the principles of the Discourse of Renewal theory. Furthermore, the research offered recommendations for effective brand communication in the post-pandemic and future crisis scenarios. The study sought to contribute to the body of knowledge on effective brand identity and brand communication in the tourism sector during global crises and post-pandemic recovery. The study applied a qualitative exploratory approach to provide insights and practical implications. In addition, it endeavoured to explore the strategies used by tourism brands to effectively navigate challenges and demonstrate resilience in the aftermath of crises. The findings of this study aimed especially to establish relevance for South African tourism brands that encounter similar challenges.

### 1.4 Research Objectives

The study comprised three objective, namely:

- **Objective 1:** Explore what brand identity does Aquila Safari's staff want to promote in their post-COVID-19 recovery.
- **Objective 2:** Explore how Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 crisis brand communication reflects the Discourse of Renewal and its four subcomponents, and

- **Objective 3:** Identify what recommendations can be made for Aquila Safari's staff to engage in the Discourse of Renewal when dealing with the post-COVID-19 crisis future brand communication crises.

## 1.5 Research Questions

Each of the three research questions of the study listed below mapped respectively to one of the above-mentioned three research objectives. They addressed:

- What brand identity does Aquila Safari aim to establish and promote in the context of its post-COVID-19 recovery?
- In what ways does Aquila Safari's brand communication during the post-COVID-19 crisis align with the Discourse of Renewal and its four components?
- What strategies can be recommended for Aquila Safari's staff to effectively engage with the Discourse of Renewal in addressing both the current post-COVID-19 crisis and future brand crises?

## 1.6 Research Approach

The qualitative exploratory approach was used for this study and is the main research strategy. Qualitative research using purposive sampling and in-depth interviews with Aquila Safari's trade and marketing managers was done to uncover findings about the research problem. The data was analysed using thematic analysis, the main themes and codes were identified, initially based on deductive coding. The findings were structured in line with the conceptual framework outlined in the literature review, centred around Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the theory of Discourse of Renewal.

The study acknowledges several limitations and ethical considerations. Its generalizability is limited due to the small sample size of eight participants and focus on a single tourism brand in South Africa post-crisis. While providing valuable insights into Aquila Safari's brand identity and communication strategies, a broader study encompassing multiple brands could reveal additional nuances in the travel

sector's response to the COVID-19 crisis. Ethically, the research adhered to standard practices, including obtaining informed consent from participants who were aware of the study's nature and their right to withdraw. Confidentiality and anonymity were prioritised, with identifying information restricted to the researcher unless explicitly permitted otherwise. The researcher maintained objectivity and integrity throughout the process, presenting findings truthfully and without alteration. These measures ensured the study's ethical conduct while recognizing its scope limitations.

## **1.7 Key Terms, Definitions and Abbreviations**

**Big 5 Safari:** The big 5 are the focal point of the nature-based tourism experience in sub-Saharan wildlife viewing. The big 5 species encompasses the lion, leopard, elephant, buffalo, and black rhinoceros (Williams, Burgess & Rahbek, 2000).

**COVID-19:** A respiratory disease brought on by the SARS-CoV-2 virus that is highly contagious (World Health Organization, 2024).

**Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism:** The Brand Identity Prism allows brand managers to examine their brand's strengths and weaknesses using the six elements of the prism. Brand identity is influenced by elements such as physical appearance, personality, culture, relationship, consumer reflection, and self-image (Kapferer, 2008).

**Discourse of Renewal Theory:** It is a post-crisis communication response theory that frames crises as opportunities rather than risks. Discourse of Renewal Theory focuses on crisis communication that emphasises organisational learning, growth, ethical communication, prospective rather than retrospective vision, and sound organisational rhetoric (Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, 2019).

**Organisational Learning:** relates to understanding that crises offer important opportunities for both growth and learning (Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, 2019).

**Ethical Communication:** is a communication choice made by organisational members including values, standards, and norms that apply within the Organisation. Ethical communication consists of three key elements: strong business values,

relationships with stakeholders, and providing significant choice for all stakeholder groups (Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger, 2019).

**Prospective rather than Retrospective Vision:** A form of forward-looking communication that highlights the brand's acquired knowledge from a crisis. This type of communication places significant emphasis on ethical considerations and exhibits an optimistic quality (Ulmer and Sellnow, 2020).

**Sound Organisational Rhetoric:** The act of drawing attention to pertinent issues and concerns within contemporary organisational contexts, with a particular focus on matters of identification and persuasion (Cheney and Lair, 2005).

Table 1.1 sets out relevant abbreviations included in the study.

***Table 1.1 Abbreviations***

| Item     | Description                                            |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------|
| COVID-19 | Coronavirus Disease 2019                               |
| OECD     | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development |
| UNWTO    | United Nations World Tourism Organization              |

In conclusion, this chapter provides a thorough examination of the study, contextualising the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the tourism sector worldwide. It emphasises the decline in international and domestic travel and the notable obstacles faced by tourism brands in maintaining operations. It highlights the slow recovery of the global tourism industry due to factors such as strict border restrictions and poor governmental coordination. Despite the slow recovery, the increase in domestic tourism has provided a glimmer of hope for tourism recovery. The chapter sets the stage for understanding the importance for tourism brands to adapt their brand identity and communication strategies in response to the crisis.

## **1.8 Justification for Studying Aquila Safari**

For this research paper Aquila Safari was selected as the focal point driven by several strategic considerations. The researcher's professional involvement in the company's marketing and trade department provided a unique vantage point to examine the brand's resilience and recovery strategies during the unprecedented global COVID-19 pandemic. This health crisis, affecting the entire world simultaneously and not attributable to any single entity, offered a distinctive context for studying post-crisis brand communication in the tourism sector.

Aquila Safari's noteworthy recovery efforts in the South African tourism landscape presented a compelling case study. The research aimed to identify post-crisis brand communication strategies, growth opportunities during a crisis and enhance business operations for post crisis recovery. The study's findings are expected to yield multiple benefits for Aquila Safari, including: developing a post-crisis brand communication guide for future crises; informing strategic brand communication initiatives; facilitating market expansion; enhancing reputation management; and improving operational efficiency and resilience.

Conducted independently and without financial incentives, this research benefited from the exemplary cooperation of the Aquila Safari team. Their willingness to participate and provide comprehensive information ensured the collection of accurate and in-depth data. This collaborative approach underscores the significance of the study in advancing understanding of crisis recovery strategies within the tourism industry, particularly in the realm of brand communication during unprecedented global crises.

## **1.9 Concluding the introduction**

This chapter provides a comprehensive foundation for investigating the strategic responses of tourism brands, specifically Aquila Safari, to the COVID-19 pandemic. The global tourism industry faced unprecedented challenges due to extensive travel restrictions and lockdowns, resulting in a significant decline in both international and domestic travel. The subsequent recovery process has been characterised by

gradual and inconsistent progress, emphasising the necessity for tourism brands to adapt their brand identity and communication strategies effectively.

The context presented highlights the substantial obstacles encountered by tourism brands in maintaining operations and rebuilding customer confidence. It underscores the crucial role of domestic tourism in mitigating the impact of reduced international travel and demonstrates the resilience exhibited by the tourism sector amidst ongoing uncertainties. The chapter introduces key theoretical frameworks, including Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the Discourse of Renewal theory, which serve as the analytical foundation for this study.

The research aim, objectives, and questions are framed to elucidate the importance of examining Aquila Safari's navigation of the post-crisis landscape. This exploration is essential for understanding the broader implications for South African tourism brands and their capacity to adapt to future crises. The chapter emphasises the significance of strategic brand communication and the need for brands to reevaluate and reinvent their identity in response to major disruptions.

The detailed exposition of the study's rationale, problem statement, and methodological approach establishes a comprehensive framework for the subsequent analysis. By establishing a clear link between the challenges posed by the pandemic and the strategic responses of tourism brands, it lays the groundwork for an in-depth examination of Aquila Safari's post-crisis brand identity and communication strategies. This foundation is crucial for deriving actionable insights and recommendations to enhance the resilience and recovery of tourism brands in a post-pandemic context.

## **2 CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter explores the literature regarding crises within the tourism industry and the importance of strategic brand communication during such events. It discusses the role of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism in post-crisis strategic brand communication. Additionally, it evaluates theories like corporate apologia, image repair theory, and situational crisis communication theory. Furthermore, it discusses post-COVID-19 strategic brand communication and the role of Discourse of Renewal theory in shaping recovery strategies.

### **2.1 Crises Within the Tourism Industry**

A crisis can be defined in a variety of ways; however, in this study, a crisis event is defined as an unexpected, non-routine event that creates a prominent level of uncertainty and jeopardises a brand's high-priority goals (Ulmer *et al.*, 2019). Furthermore, in tourism research, a crisis has been defined as any sudden, unplanned disruption causing a negative impact on the number of tourists or tourism revenue generated at a destination (Blake & Sinclair, 2003; Hall, 2010). The tourism crises examined in scholarly research mainly focus on natural disasters, terrorist attacks, political instability, social unrest, economic recession, disease outbreaks and biosafety and food safety hazards have a direct influence on the decision-making processes, attitudes and confidence of travellers (Chen, 2011; Sawalha, Jraisat & Al-Qudah, 2013; Alegre & Sard, 2015; Cró & Martins, 2017). However, crises within the sector can arise not only as a result of external events or disasters, but also due to operational failures (Hall, 2010).

Additionally, an aspect related to brand communication in the context of crisis management is the recognition that a crisis is an occurrence that has the potential to adversely impact a brand's image, reputation, business growth, financial performance and survival (Li & Wei, 2016). Thus, it is imperative for businesses to rebuild the brand following a crisis. Balakrishnan (2011) conducted a study to investigate the strategies employed by businesses in managing brand burn within the tourism sector during times of crisis. Although crises such as war, terrorism and health crises in the tourism industry are infrequent, they have a significant impact on

tourist attitudes towards and confidence in travel, particularly health crises, which cause tourists to be more concerned about their health and safety (Hoekstra & Leeflang, 2020). Therefore, the tourism sector may experience a lengthier recovery period compared to other industries, as it takes time to rebuild trust and assurance among tourists (Ngoh & Groening, 2022).

The most recent crisis to negatively affect the tourism industry is the COVID-19 pandemic (Yu, Lee & Hyun, 2021). The tourism sector has been hit harder than most industries as a result of lockdown measures, the closure of a substantial number of tourist attractions, the postponement or cancellation of events, and worldwide government-imposed restrictions on both domestic and international travel (Kim, Han & Ariza-Montes, 2021; Rastegar, Seyfi & Rasoolimanesh, 2021). As a result, the widespread enforcement of travel restrictions in light of the COVID-19 pandemic led to a significant decline of 98% in the number of international tourist arrivals in May 2020 when compared to the corresponding month of 2019. In addition, there was a significant decline of 42% in domestic visitor spending, and an unprecedented 68.4% decrease in international visitor spending (UN Tourism, 2021). In addition, a report published by the World Travel and Tourism Council in partnership with Oxford Economics predicts that the industry experienced a loss of approximately USD 4.5 and 4.7 trillion in 2020. Furthermore, its contribution to global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) decreased by 49.1% from 10.6% to 5.5% resulting in the loss of 62 million jobs (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020b). Moreover, in the post-COVID-19 industry recovery once lockdowns had eased, tourism brands were among the last to resume operations, and even then, they had to adhere to strict health procedures and containment measures, which limited their ability to function (OECD, 2020c).

Tourism brands have encountered numerous pandemics in previous instances, and thereby acquiring valuable insights from crises such as Ebola, SARS, swine flu, bird flu, and others (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020). However, according to Pforr and Hosie (2008), each crisis must be handled individually due to its unique circumstances. Due to the abrupt onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism brands have encountered significant challenges in adequately preparing for the severe impacts associated with temporarily ceasing business operations and suspending all

global tourism operations (Hyland-Wood, Gardner, Leask, & Ecker, 2021). With the globalisation of tourism worldwide and industrial growth, crises happen more frequently such that tourism destinations around the world will experience a tragedy of some kind at some point in their history (Faulkner, 2001). Therefore, it is crucial for the industry and its stakeholders to acknowledge and understand the regional distribution of tourism crises. In this way, a more effective response to crises when they arise could be elicited (OECD, 2020c).

As for the specific case of South Africa, the tourism industry has encountered several challenges including a water crisis, political instability, xenophobia, birth certificates requirements for minors and recently load shedding which have impacted the industry negatively (Rogerson & Rogerson, 2020). Furthermore, according to the 2020 Statistics South Africa data, the tourism sector made a significant contribution to the South African GDP in 2018, amounting to approximately 130.1 billion rand. This accounted for nearly 3% of the total GDP. In 2019 alone, South Africa welcomed 15.8 million tourists. Just one year later in 2020, foreign arrivals had fallen by 71%; less than 5 million tourists visited South Africa, according to the same source (Statistics South Africa, 2021). The COVID-19 pandemic has undeniably had a severe and significant impact on the tourism sector in South Africa.

In sum, crises in the global tourism industry are not new and the COVID-19 pandemic is the latest to negatively impact the industry. The South African tourism industry has also faced its own unique crises and has not been unscathed in the onset of COVID-19 health crisis to affect the world.

## **2.2 Strategic Brand Communication During A Crisis**

During the post-crisis phase, effective communication plays a pivotal role in managing the situation. According to Reiersen, Sellnow, and Ulmer (2009), brands must engage in post-crisis brand communication with travel partners and tourists in order to establish confidence among all stakeholders regarding the health and safety situation following the crisis. It is imperative to communicate with staff to exchange information and cultivate teamwork during the crisis. According to the findings of Mazzei, Kim, and Dell'Oro (2012), the establishment of effective internal communication plays a pivotal role in fostering staff collaboration during crisis

recovery. Trust in the brand is enhanced when staff are provided with sufficient and precise information, thereby mitigating the risk of harm caused by COVID-19. This also encompasses the government's post-crisis communication strategy that is implemented which has an impact on tourists' perception of risks. On the other hand, effective communication also enhances the likelihood of tourists perceiving risks associated with the crisis.

As worldwide lockdowns eased, tourism brands encountered a formidable challenge in delivering safe and efficient travel services amidst the persistent threat posed by the COVID-19 virus (Shin & Kang, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic had a devastating impact on the sales of destination products and services and going forward into recovery, brands needed to re-examine their brand identity, brand communications and operations through a health and sanitation perspective and adapt their business to accommodate reduced capacity and lower international occupancy in the near future (Ngoh & Groening, 2022). Consequently, consumer travel demands and purchasing behaviour had drastically changed, and as a result, brands have had to reassess their brand identity, brand communication strategies in order to survive and facilitate post-COVID-19 recovery. Galoni, Carpenter and Rao (2020), assert that the existence of disease might have a systematic impact on consumer behaviour in a tangible way that is significant to brands, therefore, it is expected that changes in consumption will occur in response to the global pandemic. As a result, brands changed their brand communication strategy and started utilising online media more agilely. Brands increased the level of user engagement and also analysed the conversation across social media platforms to gain deeper insights into their customers and tailor their messaging strategies.

Following the ease of lockdowns and restrictions, there was an inherent need to communicate how they handled the COVID-19 pandemic to encourage guests to visit (Pachucki *et al.*, 2022). Thus, tourism industry brand communication needed to focus on adjustments to operations, staff practices, and redesigned public areas that protected guests and staff better (Jiménez-Barreto, Loureiro, Braun, Sthapit & Zenker, 2021). Additionally, brand communication on how they implemented improved sanitation procedures and touchless alternatives to reduce the risk of virus transmission in line with the World Health Organisation guidelines, all while

communicating and facilitating a pleasant travel experience (OECD, 2020d). In such extraordinary circumstances, digital and social media platforms provided reliable channels for engaging customers and opportunities to address these developments (Pachucki *et al.*, 2022). However, there was a lack of knowledge about how to communicate persuasively about the tourism industry's COVID-19 cleaning initiatives and a pleasurable travel experience which would consequently endanger the future of the industry (Jiménez-Barreto *et al.*, 2021).

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic (Radic, Lück, Ariza-Montes & Han, 2020), research on crisis or disaster management in tourism was limited (Faulkner, 2001). The literature tends to concentrate on the effects of natural disasters or political unrest on tourism destinations (Saha & Yap, 2014) and how these disruptions are operationally handled as they happen, which is typically characterised as chaotic, unstructured management in the midst of a crisis (Sönmez, 1998; Ritchie, 2004). Summarising previous research on crisis management in tourism, Mair, Ritchie and Walters (2014) use as examples things like poor stakeholder communication, sensationalism in the media, ineffective marketing messages, poor management, damage to destination reputation and image and changes in tourism behaviour as post-crisis effects.

Additionally, the implementation of COVID-19 lockdowns and economic losses limited the marketing budgets of tourism industry; hence brands looked for more efficient and cost-effective tools, such as using social media in their post-COVID-19 recovery brand communication (Itani & Hollebeek, 2021; Moorman & McCarthy, 2021; Wong *et al.*, 2020; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Despite the unprecedented circumstances brought about by the virus, social media platforms facilitated ongoing interactions and conversations between brands and customers, resulting in increased brands' reach and improved financial outcomes for brands in the near future (Kim & Kim, 2019; Nezakati, Amidi, Jusoh, Moghadas & Aziz, 2015; Xiang & Gretzel, 2010). Simultaneously, COVID-19 pandemic led to an increase in consumer use of digital media thereby displacing traditional tourism communication channels like travel agencies and trade shows, which were compromised by the pandemic (Pachucki *et al.*, 2022). Social media is acknowledged as a dependable channel for brand communication during crises, due to its actuality, time and geographical

independence, ability to reach both local and global audiences (Möller, Wang, & Nguyen, 2018; Wut, Xu & Wong, 2021; Yang, Kim & Pennington-Gray, 2021).

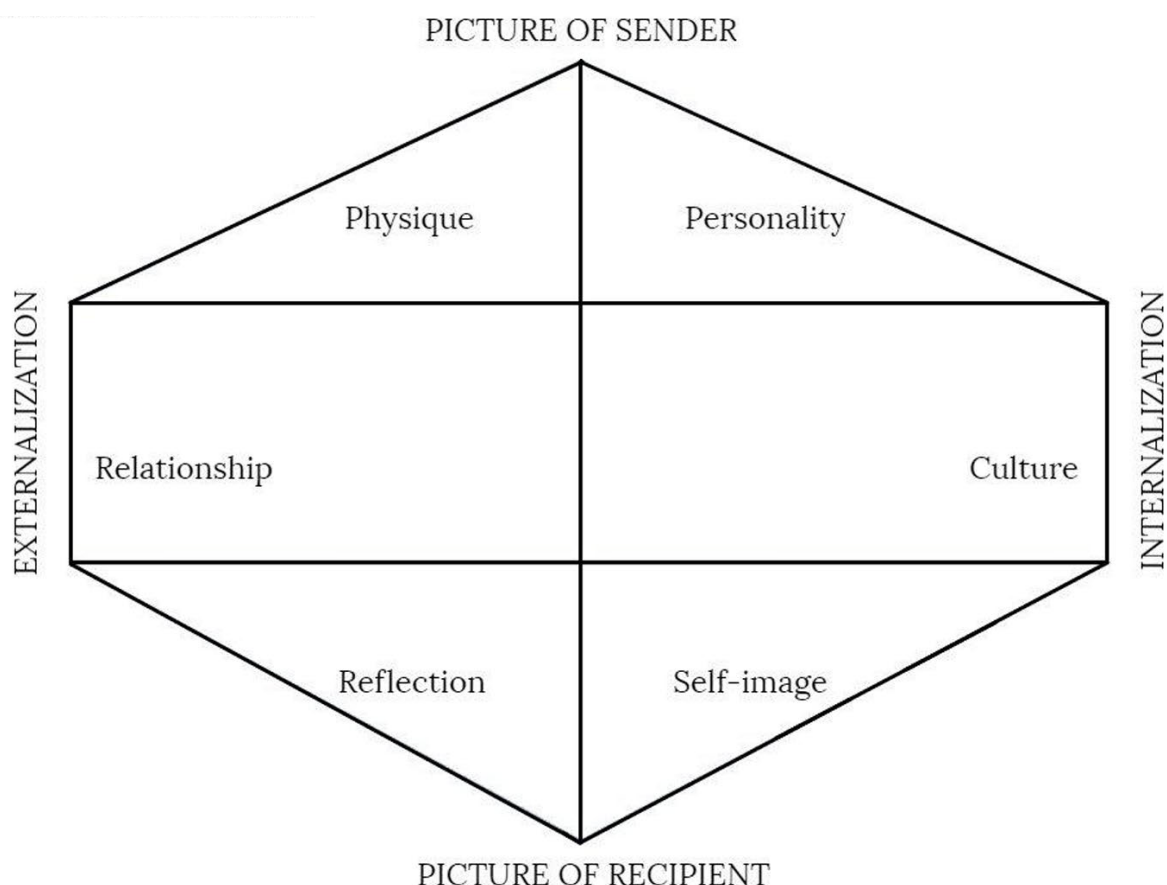
Lastly, there has been a notable transformation in brand communication subsequent to a crisis, with its primary objectives to increase brand awareness, restore stakeholders or customers' trust, assist consumers in remaining positive and overcoming adversity, and be relevant to their followers and customers (Ngoh & Groening, 2022). Nonetheless, the role of brand communication within the context of a crisis has yet to be identified. Traditionally, crisis literature has only addressed crisis management or crisis communication (He & Harris, 2020). Few studies look at the actions of a single brand during a crisis through the perspective of brand identity and brand communication. Additionally, recent studies by Wut *et al.* (2021) and Zenker and Kock (2020) have confirmed the need for more research into tourism sector communication and the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, particularly its intense shift into tourism recovery. As a result, the purpose of this study is to fill a gap in the research on these topics.

## **2.3 The Role of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism in Post-crisis Strategic Brand Communication**

The Brand Identity Prism model developed by Kapferer in 1986 has been widely used by brand managers as a strategic branding tool for establishing and identifying their brand identity. The Brand Identity Prism categorises various aspects of branding in order to define its concept and identity (Kapferer, 2008). The process of branding involves many aspects and extensive communication in order to establish a comprehensive and holistic brand identity. There is a prevalent misconception that the identity of a brand is exclusively embodied in its graphic design components, such as the logo. However, it is important to note that these visual elements should be derived from the brand's identity, which should be explicitly defined in advance (Kapferer, 2012).

The Brand Identity Prism is based upon the core principle that a brand's long-term success is dependent on its ability to effectively communicate its identity to prospective consumers (De Chernatony, 1999). The Brand Identity Prism as illustrated in Figure 2.1 below is based on communication theory, in that there is a

sender and a receiver (Kapferer, 2008). The sender, symbolised by the top of the prism, contains the brand's message about who it is and purpose. The bottom of the prism, which represents the receiver, symbolises the customer and their understanding of the message (Kapferer, 2012). Kapferer's (2008) Brand Identity Prism identifies personality, physique, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image as the six components of brand identities. Kapferer (2012) highlighted the importance of communication in the existence of brands, asserting that they can only survive if they communicate and become obsolete if they remain silent. Typically, the six dimensions are divided into two categories. The brand owner's internal components are represented on the right side, while the external components are represented on the left side, as perceived by external observers or recipients. Kapferer (2008) argues that successful brands can effectively communicate a clear and compelling brand identity to audiences by bringing all components into a comprehensive brand with well-defined positioning.



**Figure 2.1 Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (Kapferer, 2008)**

The brand identity prism is an essential tool in brand communication as it allows brand managers to effectively communicate messages about their products and brand to their target market. Their objective is to establish a strong brand identity that will be perceived by their target audience. The primary objective of brand communication is to generate awareness and interest in the brand, thereby improving business performance by enhancing consumer brand perception and leading product and service purchases. Kempf and Smith (1998) argue that brand communication has a significant role in fostering positive attitudes towards the brand target market. Choosing a clear-cut element from the brand identity prism can enhance the effectiveness of branding activities.

The brand identity's physique and personality are represented at the top of the prism, representing the picture of the sender. Kapferer (2012) states that the physical characteristics of a product are its physique, which determines its tangible worth within a brand. In the context of market entry, the establishment of brand recognition through visual means plays a pivotal role in fostering early brand loyalty. To strengthen the brand identity, it is imperative to combine various components of the brand into the physical appearance (Kapferer, 2008). This step holds significant importance for tourism brands as it gives them a clear competitive edge over rival brands. The physique aspect of many brands can pose challenges as it tends to prioritise either tangible products or intangible values, which may undermine their overall brand identity. Therefore, it is crucial for a strong brand to integrate both tangible and intangible elements (Kapferer, 2012). The author asserts that each brand possesses a unique personality that needs to be communicated effectively to the consumer. The customer perceives this personality as an outward image that they may find relatable (Kapferer, 2008).

In order to create a loyal customer base that genuinely values the future and well-being of a brand, it is important to establish a culture centred around it. A culture fosters a sense of personal connection between customers and the brand. Establishing a strong following through personal relationships forged during cultural events is beneficial when embarking on a local or international holiday, as it can significantly impact the sales of their product (Galli, Boger & Taylor, 2019). As the number of tourism brands grows, this becomes increasingly crucial in their market.

The relationship is seen as the manner in which the brand interacts with the customer. Each interaction with a customer establishes a connection, which exerts a substantial influence on the brand's behaviour. One crucial aspect of tourism services is establishing a strong rapport with the client by providing personalised service (Costa, Glinia, Goudas & Antoniou, 2004). Developing relationships with customers who visit a destination can serve as a straightforward means of establishing a personal connection, which in turn has the potential to foster repeat business (Kapferer, 2008).

The concept of reflection is a picture of the brand's archetypal consumer, which is developed through the promotion of popular products and the implementation of strategic brand communication. The consumer will be able to visualise this image and envision themselves as a part of it. Customers are more inclined to develop brand loyalty if they perceive that the brand represents their perceived identity. Upon purchasing a product, customers may not perceive themselves as the brand's consumer reflection, but they still aspire to assume that role (Kapferer, 2012).

The self-image of the customer functions as the final pillar of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. A brand has a distinct personality that stands for something and when customers align themselves with this personality, they are more likely to purchase the product or service. Consumer reflection differs from this in that it primarily relies on the purchasers' self-perception rather than the brand's perception of their customer. Customers will develop a stronger sense of identification with a brand if its values align with their own. Customers' perceptions of themselves play a vital role in shaping the brand identity of the tourism industry, as they may link specific destinations or tourism brands with themselves based on several factors (Kapferer, 2012).

There are numerous other brand identity models that have gained extensive recognition within this field of research. De Chernatony (2007) argued that although Kapferer's (2008) Brand Identity Prism has its merits, it should be modified to conceptualise the brand's identity in relation to its vision and culture. Based on the theoretical framework proposed by De Chernatony (1999), it can be asserted that the vision and culture of a brand are intricately linked to four key dimensions, namely presentation, positioning, personality, and relationships. On the other hand, Aaker

(1996) developed a theoretical framework that conceptualises a brand's core and extended identity. The present model categorises these identities into four distinct classifications: brand as a product, brand as an organisation, brand as an individual, and brand as a symbol. Each of these four categories has unique descriptors that enable a brand to differentiate itself from competitors (Aaker, 1996). Brand identity is the initial stage in Keller's (2013) brand resonance model, which outlines the four steps a brand must follow to effectively connect with its intended audience. The main objective of this model, however, is to provide a conceptual structure for constructing brands that prioritise the perception of the brand by consumers (Keller, 2013).

The theoretical framework proposed by Kapferer (2008) is considered the most suitable for examining Aquila Safari's intended brand identity in their post-crisis brand communication and manager's interpretation of it. This model places significant emphasis on the process of a brand projecting its identity and manager's interpreting that identity, which aligns with the central focus of this study. This model differs from the other models that were examined. De Chernatony's (2007) model and Kapferer's (2008) model share similar aspects of brand identity. However, the interrelationships between these models are more intricate and include internal brand stakeholders, which falls within the scope of this study. Keller (2013) places significant emphasis on customer perceptions of a brand, whereas Aaker (1996) highlights the importance of establishing a brand's identity through a broad platform.

According to Kapferer (2012), the concept of post crisis brand identity revival involves reviving and modernising a brand's overall product and service offering, while ensuring that the brand identity remains intact. Kapferer (2008) defines revival as a strategic approach aimed at attracting a new market. The tourism brand should be able to develop a new strategy to differentiate itself from competitors within a previously untapped market segment, potentially by leveraging alternative distribution channels. Lastly, Kapferer (2012) identifies five distinct strategies for revitalising a brand when using Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism, namely new segmentation, innovations, engagement with new opinion leaders, distribution modifications, and new product and service applications.

A counterargument to Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism reveals several critiques, primarily concerning its static nature, oversimplification, limited focus on customer

engagement, lack of specificity on brand relationships, and overlapping elements. Firstly, the model presents brand components as fixed aspects, neglecting their dynamic nature and the evolution of brand identity over time. Aaker and Keller (1990) critique this perspective, advocating for viewing brand identity as a work in progress rather than static entities. Secondly, the model's categorization of components into internal and external aspects oversimplifies the complex interactions between them. Aaker (1991) suggests a more nuanced approach that recognizes the interconnectedness of internal and external factors in managing brand equity. Thirdly, the emphasis on how brands present themselves overlooks the active role of customers in shaping brand identity. Schmidt and Redler (2018) highlight the importance of customer experiences and interpretations in influencing brand identity dynamics. Fourthly, the vague treatment of brand relationships could be strengthened by specifying distinct types of relationships a brand fosters with customers. Zeithaml and Bitner (2003) propose a framework for understanding several types of customer relationships in the context of customer relationship management. Finally, the overlap between certain components, such as personality and culture, suggests a need for greater clarity and distinction within the model. Ghodeswar (2008) explores the intricate interplay between brand personality and culture, indicating the complexity of these elements.

Despite these critiques, the Brand Identity Prism is a significant strategic tool to successfully establish and communicate brand identity. Through exploring Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism as a strategic tool, this research aims to contribute to the understanding of post-crisis brand identity and its role in the recovery of tourist destinations. This study endeavours to shed light on the dynamics of brand identity reconstruction and its implications for the renewal and rejuvenation of the tourism sector in the aftermath of crises, thus addressing a critical gap in the existing literature.

## **2.4 The Role Post-Crisis Communication Theories: Corporate Apologia, Image Repair Theory and Situational Crisis Communication Theory**

According to Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2007), most post-crisis communication theories primarily aim to mitigate the threat to a brand's image during a crisis. There are three theoretical approaches to managing brand crises namely situational crisis communication theory (Coombs, 2018), corporate apologia (Hearit, 1995) and image repair theory (Benoit, 1997). Based on these theories, brands that use effective crisis communication strategies have the ability to succeed in safeguarding and restoring their reputation prior to, during, and after a crisis. Corporate apologia is a strategic approach to managing the threat posed by an attack on a brand. It involves using defensive communication strategies to apologise for any wrongdoing (Hearit, 1995). Image repair theory builds on the concept of corporate apologia and includes various communication strategies aimed at holding individuals responsible for their misconduct, ultimately aiming to restore the brand's reputation (Benoit, 1997). According to Coombs (2018), the theory of situational crisis communication analyses the potential damage to an individual's reputation caused by a crisis situation. It then suggests crisis response strategies that are in line with the degree of reputational risk. According to several studies (Avery, Lariscy, Kim & Hocke, 2010; Ha & Riffe, 2015; Ma & Zhan, 2016; Nekmat, Gower & Ye, 2014), there is a noticeable bias in academic literature to prioritise the aforementioned three communication techniques when addressing the challenge of safeguarding the brand's image during a crisis. In contrast, the Discourse of Renewal theory places emphasis on the potential for brands to experience growth in the face of crises, rather than solely focusing on responding in a manner that improves their image. While these theories are frequently used in the field of crisis communication, they possess certain limitations.

These theories are limited in their scope due to their focus on the crisis response phase rather than the post-crisis period. Renewal theory takes a future-oriented view and analyses the period after a crisis, placing specific emphasis on the brand's rebuilding and renewal after a crisis. According to Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2015), reputation and image are important concepts in organisations. However, they may not always have a significant impact on resolving brand crises. In such cases,

rebuilding, learning, and opportunity may be more crucial. Furthermore, as stated by Xu (2018), a brand that primarily focuses on restoring its image after a crisis may give the impression that it is only focused on its own achievements and does not consider its stakeholders.

## **2.5 Post-COVID-19 Strategic Brand Communication and the Role of Discourse Renewal**

The definition of the situation influences every decision that is taken and the renewal process begins by viewing a crisis as a potential opportunity. To effectively identify an opportunity in a crisis, one must define the crisis in an unorthodox way (Ulmer, 2001). The opportunities presented by crises may benefit both brands and managers in charge of handling crises. According to Pyle, Fuller, and Ulmer (2020), the Discourse of Renewal theory conveys the message of opportunity, is inherently optimistic and centres on the fresh perspectives that arise from the crisis, rather than merely seeking to evade responsibility and culpability. According to Discourse of Renewal theory (Coombs, 2007), when the brand is not responsible for the crisis as in the case of the COVID-19 outbreak, the brand communication strategy should be based on an ethical approach and be expressed through the combination of informing stakeholders about the crisis and adjusting information by helping stakeholders cope with the crisis. In the context of post-crisis communication within the tourism industry during the pandemic, Hesse, Niederle, Schön and Stautz (2021) contend that brands should take the role of spokesperson. By advising, educating, and informing their audiences in line with governmental or industry policies and demonstrating solidarity, by offering support. However, little research has been undertaken concerning post-crisis brand communication strategies for the tourism industry.

Meyers and Holusha (2018) argue that crises present opportunities and challenges that are absent during other periods. The study conducted by Meyers and Holusha (2018) identified seven opportunities associated with a crisis. These opportunities include new strategies emerge, the development of new competitive advantages, the establishment of early warning systems, heroes emerge, the acceleration of change, the confrontation of latent problems, and individuals are altered (Meyers & Holusha,

2018). Recently, several academics have stated that a crisis has the potential to present opportunities that would have been unattainable under alternative circumstances (Dubrovski, 2014; Pyle *et al.*, 2020). Dubrovski (2014) identifies the acquisition of new knowledge as the most significant advantage of a crisis, which cannot be achieved solely through simulation. Furthermore, crises consistently require innovative, audacious, and brave management approaches, along with the willingness to confront the most difficult business decisions and resolve the most complex situations. Discourse of Renewal examines the potential opportunities associated with a crisis and highlights a business's new sense of vision, purpose, and direction following its recovery from a crisis.

The tourism industry has demonstrated its ability to withstand various global crises over the years, but it has not encountered a crisis of this magnitude before (Kaczmarek *et al.*, 2021). The industry has recovered rapidly from previous epidemics and downturns (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020). Travel restrictions are considered the primary barrier to the recovery of international tourism, alongside COVID-19 virus infections and low consumer confidence (Ngoh & Groening, 2022). However, it is important to consider suitable premises when analysing the future. While it is true that brands prioritise long-term planning and adapt for the future, it is understandable that the majority of brands are currently primarily concerned with short-term survival. This is achieved through cost control measures and, when feasible, the development of new, innovative ways to meet and retain domestic customers (OECD, 2020b). Consequently, there was a lack of understanding about how to communicate persuasively about tourism COVID-19 cleaning initiatives and would consequently endanger the future of the industry.

## **2.6 Discourse of Renewal**

The Discourse of Renewal theory, proposed by Reiersen *et al.* (2009), is a post-crisis communication response theory that frames crises as opportunities rather than risks. The theory explains how crises generate significant opportunities for brand growth, transformation, and renewal. The Discourse of Renewal focuses on crisis communication, emphasising the significance of learning, opportunity, ethical communication and change (Heath, 2013). The pioneering academics Seeger,

Sellnow, and Ulmer (1998) conducted studies that examined crises as opportunities for renewal. This has revolutionised the approach to and investigation into crisis response among scholars, prioritising the efficacy of crisis communication over its shortcomings. The initial study conducted by Pyle *et al.* (2020) demonstrated an elevated level of sophistication. Subsequently, further studies were undertaken to explore the relationship between crisis response, effective communication, and renewal.

A more effective approach to brand communication is to analyse a crisis from the perspective of renewal (Pyle *et al.*, 2020). The application of renewal theory is beneficial for a brand as it establishes a clear objective for the brand to pursue following crises, while simultaneously boosting stakeholder trust. According to Reiersen and Littlefield (2012), the effectiveness of renewal responses is dependent upon their capacity to secure the support of stakeholders and offer them a clear goal to pursue to overcome the crisis. Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2015) argue that narratives dealing with blame, image, reputation or culpability are not commonly identified as the dominant themes after a crisis.

Finally, there are four subcomponents in Discourse of Renewal that effectively aid in brand rebuilding: organisational learning, ethical communication, prospective vs retrospective vision, and effective organisational rhetoric (Coombs, 2018). Firstly, organisational learning is the optimism about the brand's ability to adapt and improve as a result of the crisis. Ethical communication is the provisional communication that results from necessity. Next, prospective vs retrospective vision is when prospective communication imagines a more secure future because of the crisis. Lastly, effective organisational rhetoric is leader-based communication, as opposed to conventional spokesperson communication. Pyle *et al.*, (2020) found that these factors can effectively steer a brand's crisis response, enabling it to communicate in a manner that increases its chances of renewal following a crisis.

### **2.6.1 Organisational Learning**

The first subcomponent of organisational learning relates to understanding that crises offer important opportunities for both growth and learning. Given that crises represent cases of organisational failure, it is vital for brands to learn lessons from

them in order to improve their resilience as well as their ability to anticipate future crises that may arise (Simon and Pauchant, 2000). Several Discourse of Renewal studies have shown that learning is essential for effectively managing a crisis since it enables a brand to confront its challenges or shortcomings. This point of view is supported by Sitkin (1996), who argues that crises and failure are crucial to a brand's learning process. Dang (2020) asserts that a brand's ability to learn from its mistakes and identify them in a timely and analytical manner determines whether it succeeds or fails. Similar to this, Zemke (2020) believes that a successful post-crisis response may transform an incident that might otherwise be a disaster for a brand into an opportunity for growth and success in the aftermath of the incident. While this is accurate, Staricek (2019) suggests that while brands can benefit from learning from past mistakes, making these mistakes a sole focus is undesirable and impedes future progress and business growth. As a result, brands that fail to learn from crises or put obstacles in the way of learning may face criticism from stakeholders and challenges moving forward. Thus, the data indicates that if a brand wants to overcome its current limitation, it must be willing to undergo a cultural transition focused on organisational learning (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2015).

Huber (1991) presents a comprehensive synthesis of processes and types of organisational learning within the framework of organisational learning theory. The acquisition of knowledge involves four fundamental processes: The process involves four main steps: 1) acquiring knowledge; 2) distributing information from various sources; 3) interpreting information when there are commonly understood interpretations; and 4) storing knowledge in organisational memory for future use. Organisational learning comprises many components, including learning from failure, vicarious learning, organisational memory, and unlearning. According to Bazerman and Watkins (2003), the process of learning from failure is a crucial component of organisational learning. Failure to learn from failure can place a brand in a precarious and susceptible position, potentially leading to the recurrence of future crises. Learning cannot be solely attributed to negative experiences, as it calls for individuals to modify their attitudes and beliefs in order to subsequently alter their behaviour (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2015). According to Fuller, Ulmer, McNatt and Ruiz (2019), the shift in attitudes, beliefs, and values has the potential to facilitate a successful brand transformation. Following a crisis, a brand should communicate its

learning as soon as possible (Pyle *et al.*, 2020). According to Ulmer and Sellnow (2020), it is imperative to engage in both internal and external communication regarding the process of learning. Internal communication includes the process of implementing organisational changes aimed at eliminating ineffective procedures that may have played a role in the crisis, and thereafter disseminating this information to all members of the organisation (Pyle *et al.*, 2020). After the completion of internal communication, the next step involves external communication. This involves disseminating information to stakeholders, the general public, and the communities that the brand caters to, regarding the insights gained from the crisis. Observing a brand engage in a conversation about learning increases stakeholders' trust that the brand has successfully addressed the crisis (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2015).

Learning can be acquired through direct experience or indirectly, such as through observation. Brands should not only endeavour to learn from their own errors, but also from the errors made by similar brands. This practice can assist brands in preventing crises (Fuller *et al.*, 2019). The analysis of both effective and ineffective crisis management strategies employed by other brands enables brands to partake in vicarious learning, helping leaders in preventing the replication of errors made by other brands within their respective industries (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2015). For example, the tourism industry implementing Safe Travels Global Protocols has exemplified vicarious learning in post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020c). These protocols aimed to have the tourism industry lead the definition of best practices as it transitioned from crisis management to post-crisis recovery. It was clear that there was a need for industry change to re-establish trust with domestic and international travellers' due to a lack of consumer trust and confidence. In addition, the World Travel and Tourism Council created a SafeTravels stamp to help travellers in identifying brands and destinations around the world that have implemented the Safe Travels global standardised health and hygiene requirements (World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020c). The outcome of the protocols was to put travellers and industry workforce safety, health, and security at the forefront of reviving the sector. As a result, over 20,000 tourism brands worldwide adopted the Safe Travels global protocols involving changes in safety, efficiency, and care that resulted in improved practices and industry credibility

(World Travel and Tourism Council, 2020d). The tourism industry demonstrated vicarious learning from the COVID-19 pandemic by establishing protocols that altered how the industry operated worldwide.

In order to prevent the recurrence of crises, brands must retain the knowledge they have acquired through a process known as organisational memory, which involves learning from their own failures as well as the failures of others (Pyle *et al.*, 2020). Organisations are required to consistently engage in the processing and retention of information via their organisational memory. To ensure the retention of learning, brands can engage in regular conversations about their operations and the lessons they have learned (Novak & Sellnow, 2009). Organisational learning can occur through a process of unlearning, in addition to learning from mistakes, vicarious learning, and retaining the lessons learned (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2015). This involves the process of a brand unlearning bad procedures or habits. Hence, previous tactics may prove unsuitable for a present circumstance, necessitating the abandonment of the outdated strategy. The implementation of unlearning can serve as a pivotal approach in the realm of crisis management. The COVID-19 pandemic has caused a disruption in the data patterns of traveller journeys, leading to a renewed need for tourism brands to listen to travellers. This situation serves as an illustration of unlearning by these brands (Zemke, 2020). Tourism brands made strategic investments in social listening, audience sentiment research, data analytics, and insights into traveller lifestyles in order to gain a comprehensive understanding of their post-COVID-19 audience (Dang, 2020). As a consequence, brands were able to make well-informed decisions regarding brand communication by utilising real-time data. In addition, customers benefited from the consistent, relevant, positive content across all channels.

In response to the prevailing emphasis on organisational learning, a counterargument emerges, challenging the notion that simply acquiring new knowledge is sufficient for organisational success. Drawing from Fiol and Lyles (1985), it is argued that an excessive focus on knowledge acquisition may lead to neglect of the critical processes of unlearning outdated practices and fostering critical thinking about the application of knowledge. This perspective is further supported by Argyris and Schön's (1978) concept of double-loop learning, which

emphasises questioning assumptions alongside acquiring new knowledge. Therefore, while organisational learning frameworks champion adaptability and innovation, it is crucial to address critiques such as the neglect of applying acquired knowledge within organisational contexts (Ghodeswar, 2008) and the oversight of power dynamics influencing learning processes (Schmidt & Redler, 2018). These counter arguments underscore the need for a more nuanced approach to organisational learning that incorporates not only knowledge acquisition but also critical reflection and application, while also considering power dynamics within organisational structures.

In summary, crises present opportunities for brands to learn through acquiring knowledge. Brands are more likely to undergo renewal following a crisis when they possess the ability to perceive failures as opportunities, derive lessons from their own failures as well as those of other brands, retain the knowledge acquired through the learning process, and unlearn destructive habits. Ethical communication is the second essential component of Discourse of Renewal, alongside organisational learning.

### **2.6.2 Ethical Communication**

It is important for brands to use ethical communication prior to, during, and after a crisis (Pyle *et al.*, 2020). According to Staricek (2019), brands that fail to sufficiently prepare for a crisis or partake in unethical business practices will bear accountability for their actions following the occurrence of a disaster. It is important to highlight that unethical business conduct often leads to a crisis (Anderson & Guo, 2020). According to Van der Bles, Van der Linden, Freeman and Spiegelhalter (2020), it is probable that unethical practices exhibited by a business prior to a crisis will become evident during said crisis. According to Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2019), ethical crisis communication consists of three key elements: strong business values, relationships with stakeholders, and providing significant choice for all stakeholder groups.

Firstly, ethical communication demands a brand to identify the values that should govern its crisis response. It is important to note that crises do not shape the character of a brand; rather, they expose its character (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger,

2015). Consequently, brands that have already demonstrated a commitment to ethical principles, including integrity, accountability, responsibility and trust prior to a crisis are more inclined to create post-crisis renewal. According to Du Plessis (2018), brands addressing post-COVID-19 brand communication should shift their attention towards activating their brand's vision and purpose in order to effectively engage with consumers. In their study, Anderson and Guo (2020) emphasise the significant impact of leaders in the process of ethical communication. They argue that ethical communication in Discourse of Renewal theory is achieved when leaders set the positive tone for communication after a crisis and demonstrate ethical behaviour by taking care of their staff, engaging the community, and designing brand change for a better future after crises.

In addition, it is important for brands to secure the support of their stakeholders, in addition to establishing strong organisational principles. Pyle *et al.*, (2020) highlighted the importance of consistently investing in stakeholder relationships, even during the pre-crisis period. Establishing strong and positive stakeholder relationships enables brands to effectively address a crisis in a provisional, as opposed to a strategic manner. Ulmer and Sellnow (2020) assert that a provisional response can be distinguished by its authenticity and realism, in contrast to being manipulative or deceitful. A provisional focus based on ethical considerations acts as a source of inspiration for stakeholders, thus increasing stakeholder support. The effectiveness of a provisional response outweighs that of a strategic response due to its emphasis on an organic and immediate reaction towards a crisis, as opposed to the formulation of responses aimed at accomplishing goals such as safeguarding the brand's reputation or avoiding blame.

The formation of provisional communication relies on the leader's character and is typically cultivated over time (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2020). The likelihood of achieving success in the process of renewal when faced with a crisis is higher for leaders who demonstrate ethical and honest attributes and have already established trust among stakeholders. Effective communication based on ethical values can be achieved by a leader who has gained the trust and support from stakeholders, as opposed to relying on tactics that revolve around allocating responsibility or attributing blame. Ulmer and Pyle (2021) argue that ethical communication involves recognising the

presence of uncertainty, communicating one's limited knowledge to stakeholders, and effectively communicating one's current knowledge. Another aspect of ethical communication is the capacity of an ethical leader to effectively communicate about a crisis in a temporary manner, thereby enabling them to make important decisions.

It is important for a brand to provide stakeholders the chance to make a significant choice (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2015). The concept of significant choice involves the proficient communication of essential information about what is beneficial for stakeholders, while refraining from any kind of information manipulation (Ulmer & Pyle, 2021). According to Nilsen (1974), it is argued that individuals require impartial and unbiased communication in order to arrive at logical decisions. In contrast, communication that is unclear or deceptive can impede stakeholders' ability to make informed and rational choices. Reiersen *et al.* (2009) concur that their findings align with those presented by Nilsen, as they agree that human dignity is contingent upon the capacity to engage in rational decision-making. According to Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2015), providing stakeholders with the chance to make significant choices increases the probability of brand renewal in the aftermath of a crisis.

In considering ethical communication within the discourse of renewal, it is crucial to recognise the potential drawbacks of prioritising transparency alone. As highlighted by Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004), excessive transparency during change initiatives might inadvertently lead to heightened anxiety or distrust among stakeholders. Therefore, a nuanced approach that integrates sensitivity alongside transparency is advocated by Beverland (2018), who promotes the concept of "bounded rationality" in communication strategies. This approach underscores the importance of adapting communication methods to contextual constraints to mitigate potential negative outcomes, such as undermining morale or instigating panic by openly discussing sensitive topics. Critiques of renewal discourse within ethical communication further suggest that an exclusive focus on transparency may obscure underlying agendas or power dynamics, as argued by Schmidt and Redler (2018). Additionally, concerns about overlooking stakeholders' needs and perspectives indicate that renewal messages might fail to adequately address the concerns of various stakeholders, as posited by Freeman (1984).

To summarise, brands should prioritise ethical communication before, during, and after a crisis. This should be done by relying on the brand's strong values and stakeholder relationships, and by promoting honesty, trust, and meaningful decision-making for the purpose of renewal.

### **2.6.3 Prospective Rather Than Retrospective Vision**

Effective post-crisis communication should not only offer stakeholders honest and ethical communication, but it should also be forward-thinking, with a focus on the future (Ulmer, Sellnow & Seeger, 2015). Ulmer and Sellnow (2020) state that prospective vision can be defined as a form of forward-looking communication that highlights the brand's acquired knowledge from a crisis. This type of communication places significant emphasis on ethical considerations and exhibits an optimistic quality. Both ethical communication and organisational learning are included within this framework. Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007) provided an overview of the main focus of post-crisis theories, such as image restoration, on what has happened. These theories often focus on the past, examining the crisis to identify the causes and assign blame, with the aim of evading responsibility and hoping this will potentially restore the brand's reputation. According to Pyle, Fuller, and Ulmer (2020), a mindset that prioritises the past tends to have a retrospective focus. In contrast, renewal discourse takes a more forward-looking or prospective position, aiming to rebuild rather than lamenting on the past. Discourse of Renewal adopts a forward-looking perspective, as opposed to a retrospective focus.

Discourse of Renewal transitions from a retrospective perspective to a more prospective one, highlighting the brand's potential for growth and success following the disaster, rather than emphasising communication centred around denial and blame. Discourse of Renewal seeks to go beyond the scope of image restoration in order to meet the communication needs related to rebuilding, recovery and revitalisation (Seeger & Griffin Padgett, 2010). Discourse of Renewal provides a more ethical, aspirational, and normative approach to crisis communication compared to traditional methods. It allows brands to focus on improvement rather than fault, making it a more future-focused approach. Brands that have successfully created renewal their image following a crisis prioritises future-oriented strategies, which entails maintaining an optimistic outlook. To sustain this prospective focus,

brands must effectively communicate their optimism. Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2015) define the Discourse of Renewal as a positive form of communication that highlights a brand's capacity to renew itself by taking advantage of the opportunities presented by a crisis. Brands exhibit greater resilience in the face of a crisis when their leaders adopt a positive outlook and prioritise the possibility for renewal, rather than fixating on the potential risks associated with the crisis. Ulmer and Pyle (2021) observed that tourism brands faced challenges in maintaining future-oriented focus during the COVID-19 crisis due to the absence of a crisis communication plan. Communication managers acknowledged that their lack of planning resulted in a more responsive approach. Despite encountering challenges in implementing a proactive brand communication strategy in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism brands demonstrated a degree of success in their prospective vision. These brands reported maintaining an optimistic outlook and prioritising renewal over assigning blame. They recognised the influence of COVID-19 on their product and service offerings and openly communicated this to their stakeholders, while also demonstrating their readiness and strategic preparations for future disasters.

In the ongoing discourse between Prospective and Retrospective Vision approaches, there is a counterargument that suggests an overemphasis on the future may lead to overlooking valuable insights from past experiences, potentially resulting in the repetition of past mistakes (Beverland, 2018). Weick's concept of "enacted sensemaking" further supports this perspective by advocating for organisations to incorporate both past experiences and future possibilities into their learning processes to enhance decision-making and adaptive responses to change (Weick, 1993). However, critics of the prospective vision approach argue that an excessive focus on the future may present an unrealistic portrayal, hindering adaptive capacity (Schmidt & Redler, 2018). They propose a balanced approach that integrates vision with strategic realism to foster effective organisational renewal. Additionally, neglecting past experiences and lessons may limit renewal efforts, underscoring the importance of incorporating retrospective insights into renewal discourse for more effective adaptation strategies (Desai, Maslach & Madsen, 2017).

Overall, Discourse of Renewal adopts a forward-looking perspective on crisis communication. Ethical and future-oriented post-crisis communication should

prioritise brand renewal. The shift from attributing blame to future growth promotes a sense of optimism and resilience. The third component of Discourse of Renewal, effective organisational rhetoric, is intricately linked to prospective communication.

#### **2.6.4 Sound Organisational Rhetoric**

Cheney and Lair (2005) provide a definition of organisational rhetoric as the act of drawing attention to pertinent issues and concerns within contemporary organisational contexts, with a particular focus on matters of identification and persuasion. The primary objective of effective organisational rhetoric is to disseminate information to stakeholders and the wider public regarding a brand's responses to a crisis, with the intention of improving their understanding of the crisis (Ulmer & Sellnow, 2020). According to Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2015), when stakeholders perceive alignment between their interests and a brand's initiatives, it can result in increased stakeholder support, thereby increasing the likelihood of brand loyalty. The role of leaders is of significant importance in this process.

According to Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007), brand leaders hold considerable influence in effective organisational rhetoric due to their role as brand representatives. Leaders play a crucial role in effectively managing and overcoming crises, so it is important for leaders to communicate the brand's crisis response. It is imperative to engage in ethical communication with both internal and external stakeholders. Brands should actively participate in transparent communication and the sharing of information internally (Ulmer & Pyle, 2021). From an external perspective, brands should not only disseminate information to stakeholders, but also try to motivate and engage them. According to Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2015), it is imperative for leaders to serve as sources of inspiration and motivation for stakeholders, encouraging them to support the brand during times of crisis and offering them an unclouded vision for post-crisis recovery. The likelihood of a brand's renewal can be increased by leaders through the effective use of organisational rhetoric, which involves the communication of hope and commitment to stakeholders.

Following the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism brands emphasised the presence of exceptional internal communication, specifically highlighting the adoption of a one

team mentality. Their internal dialogue was professional, honest, and productive. Tourism brands effectively conveyed their aspirations for the future to external stakeholders by expressing their hopes for post-pandemic travel and outlining their strategies for future operations and other crises.

Overall, effective organisational rhetoric involves addressing a crisis within organisational settings, with the goal of persuading and bringing stakeholders in agreement. Leaders who engage in ethical communication foster support, loyalty, and inspiration among stakeholders, which are essential for effectively managing crises and facilitating renewal.

When examining the topic of effective organisational rhetoric, scholars like Mumby and Stohl (2007) advise against employing excessively persuasive rhetoric. They argue that such rhetoric may obscure fundamental issues within an organisation and impede employees from participating in the process of organisational renewal. Ghodeswar (2008) further asserts the significance of employing balanced rhetoric, highlighting that although inspirational language has the potential to inspire, it is crucial to supplement it with tangible actions in order to prevent the development of cynicism among stakeholders. Indeed, Schmidt and Redler (2018) emphasises the importance of consistency between verbal communication and behaviour in the context of organisational dynamics. Conversely, critics contend that although there is rhetoric advocating for renewal, it may not consistently be supported by concrete actions, which could result in doubt among those involved. This perspective aligns with concerns raised by Beverland (2018) regarding the use of specialised terminology in the context of renewal, advising against excessive use that may obscure the message and hinder effective communication.

While the Discourse of Renewal theory provides valuable insights into the potential restoration and revival of the tourism sector, it falls short in offering a comprehensive understanding of the challenges associated with post-crisis brand communication. Additionally, it fails to offer specific strategies that tourism brands may use to effectively tackle significant issues that arise in the aftermath of a pandemic. Therefore, it is crucial to undertake an exploratory analysis of the challenges faced by tourism brands after a crisis and the brand communication strategies they implemented, in addition to using the theory to situate the strategies developed by

brand managers within the broader crisis communication context. According to Ulmer *et al.* (2007), in order to implement renewal, it is necessary to consider the type of crisis. This highlights the significance of identifying the strategies employed by tourism brands and subsequently using Discourse of Renewal theory to provide further analysis.

Consequently, the following research questions were formulated:

- What brand identity does Aquila Safari aim to establish and promote in the context of its post-COVID-19 recovery?
- In what ways does Aquila Safari's brand communication during the post-COVID-19 crisis align with the Discourse of Renewal and its four components?
- What strategies can be recommended for Aquila Safari's staff to effectively engage with the Discourse of Renewal in addressing both the current post-COVID-19 crisis and future brand crises?

Given the crucial significance of brand identity and brand communication after a crisis, conducting research addressing these questions can provide tourism brands with evidence-based data to aid them in effectively handling crises such as COVID-19 during the post-crisis and recovery stages. Moreover, it expands the scope of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and Discourse of Renewal Theory to a new context.

## **2.7 Concluding the literature review**

This chapter examined different crises in the tourism sector with a particular focus on the global impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Following that, the role of post-COVID-19 brand communication in the tourism sector was discussed. Then, Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism was introduced which serves as a vital tool for brand managers to effectively establish and communicate brand identity, especially in the tourism sector post-crisis. As the tourism industry faces unprecedented challenges like the COVID-19 pandemic, understanding and leveraging brand identity becomes crucial for recovery and renewal, making Kapferer's model a valuable resource in

post-crisis brand communication strategies and brand renewal efforts. Following this, there was an in-depth exploration into the Discourse of Renewal theory and its subcomponents organisational learning, effective crisis communication, prospective vision, and effective organisational rhetoric. Through this lens, the study contributes to understanding the dynamics of brand communication in crises, shedding light on strategies for effective post-crisis recovery and brand renewal in the South African tourism sector.

### **3 CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This chapter starts by discussing the interpretivist research paradigm, exploratory research design with qualitative methodology. It then looks at the population selected, the sampling process, data collection via semi-structured in-depth interviews and data analysis using thematic analysis, validity, reliability, trustworthiness and ethical considerations applied to the study.

#### **3.1 An Interpretivist Research Paradigm**

The purpose of this study was to investigate and comprehend the post-COVID-19 crisis brand identity and brand communication applied by Aquila Safari. In this qualitative study an interpretivism paradigm was applied, which proposes that humans are distinct from objects. Academics cannot study humans in the same way they study objects because their social reality is neither objective nor singular. Because their reality is always changing, humans are impacted, moulded, and affected by their experiences, the environment, and social situations (Maree, 2016). The interpretivist paradigm, as defined by Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout (2021), is a philosophical approach to understanding human experiences based on the premise that these experiences are subjective and determined by the context in which individuals live. Humans are best examined within their socio-historical environments by reconciling the subjective perspectives of diverse participants. This approach was acceptable because this study aimed to investigate Aquila Safari's post-crisis brand identity and brand communication strategies and responses which were influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The ontological viewpoint in the interpretivism paradigm is concerned with understanding the world through the subjective experiences of the individual. An ontological stance holds that reality is subjective and formed by human interaction, which means that no two people's realities, opinions, or experiences are ever the same (Maree, 2016). An interpretivism paradigm was applied in this study because it emphasises the need to have a thorough understanding of multiple realities and experiences (Seidman, 2013). Because knowledge is socially created and

mind-dependent, it is epistemologically subjective (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). Rather than generalising and forecasting causes and effects, the purpose of an interpretivist paradigm study is to comprehend and interpret meaning in human experiences (Malhotra, 2010). Truth and knowledge derive from human experience. This position was significant because it provided a context for the researcher to investigate; what the research participants had to say about their experiences with Aquila Safari's post-crisis brand identity and brand communication and whether the principles associated with Discourse of Renewal theory played a role in the brand's strategic decisions in post-COVID-19 recovery.

The goal of an interpretivism paradigm is to understand and interpret human behaviour and why humans behave the way they do (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). This research project was able to acquire knowledge about Aquila Safari's post-crisis brand identity and brand communication during COVID-19 pandemic recovery. Because the study was focused on the managers' behaviour and intentions, an interpretive paradigm allowed the researcher to see the world via the views and experiences of these participants (Seidman, 2013). This signified that the researcher was interested in understanding human behaviour from the perspective of the individual (Maree, 2016). An interpretivism paradigm was appropriate because it did not detach participants from the research (Seidman, 2013). It was imperative that the participants were involved and considered throughout the research; they were central to exploring Aquila Safari's post-crisis brand identity and brand communication and whether the principles associated with Discourse of Renewal theory played a role in the brand's post-crisis recovery.

The primary purpose of interpretivism in this study was to comprehend the managers' behaviour (Malhotra, 2010). Furthermore, interpretivism made the study more inclusive as it allowed the researcher to investigate many points of view from various individuals (Maree, 2016). The study investigated and sought to comprehend distinctions amongst managers because the paradigm regards participants as unique, and one should not attempt to generalise their perspectives (Seidman, 2013). The use of this paradigm also implied that the study could provide an in-depth understanding of management behaviour (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). As a result of the study, the researcher was able to understand and evaluate Aquila Safari's

managers' opinions on crisis, brand identity and brand communication and the subcomponents of the Discourse of Renewal.

### **3.2 Exploratory Research Design**

Exploratory research was the most suitable approach for this study as it entailed investigating a specific topic or situation (Maree, 2016). This study's design purpose was to offer insights and comprehension of the research problem, as well as gain greater understanding and direction. Because there was little or no information accessible concerning the research problem, exploratory research was used (Malhotra, 2010). The design was chosen because it is used when a phenomenon has to be investigated from a new perspective. Exploratory research is best suited when economic, technological, and social systems are involved in the research, and social systems were involved in this study since they influenced the experience of Aquila Safari's trade and marketing managers. While the topic of the crisis communication, brand identity, brand communication of South African tourists has been studied, this study aimed to investigate post-crisis brand identity and brand communication with the COVID-19 crisis in mind.

### **3.3 A Qualitative Research Strategy**

To conduct exploratory research, the researcher employed a qualitative methodology. The goal of qualitative research was to find meaning and to analyse the participants' experiences, particularly how they understood their social world (Malhotra, 2010). The researcher was able to collect descriptive and rich data about the brand identity and brand communication strategies using qualitative data (Seidman, 2013). Participant qualitative data is typically obtained through focus groups, in-depth interviews, and case studies, and this study used in-depth interviews (Maree, 2016). Once the data was acquired, it was organised and analysed to produce concepts and theories.

Case study research facilitates the examination and understanding of complex matters. Case studies in their purest form analyse and examine current real-world phenomena through in-depth contextual examination of events or conditions and the connections between them (Du Plooy-Cilliers *et al.*, 2021). Case study research is an

empirical investigation that examines a current phenomenon in its actual setting where the distinctions between the event and context are not immediately apparent, and diverse sources of data are utilised (Maree, 2016). The researcher hoped to interpret the data through interpretive case studies by creating conceptual categories and either supporting or refuting the assumptions made about them.

However, one of the most prominent complaints levelled against crisis communication research in recent years has been its reliance on case study research (Seeger & Ulmer, 2002; Reiersen *et al.*, 2009; Veil, Sellnow & Heald, 2011; Xu, 2018; Pyle *et al.*, 2020). While a case study technique has virtues especially in examining crises and post-crisis responses, it also raises issues regarding the validity and reliability of a case approach as the primary approach to crisis communication research. Unlike experiments, surveys, or other established research methodologies, case studies are not generalisable. This critique applies equally to the Discourse of Renewal research and any other theory in the crisis communication discipline (Pyle *et al.*, 2020). Furthermore, Coombs (2007) asserts that crisis management necessitates evidence-based management in crisis communication guidelines. While this is correct, Discourse of Renewal theory has provided a new perspective on case study research. Researchers talk to participants to acquire insight into the post-crisis brand communicative process from managers, and post-crisis communication decision-making is also more closely examined in these studies (Ulmer *et al.*, 2007). As a result, this Aquila Safari case study provides some unique insights into how trade and marketing managers perceive the process.

Qualitative research investigates the 'why' and 'how' parts of a study in order to better understand the processes and the cultural and social factors that underpin various behavioural patterns (Seidman, 2013). It also focuses on systems or individuals; interacting with and observing people in their natural habitat with the emphasis on interpretation and meanings. The emphasis in qualitative research is on information depth and quality rather than the breadth and scope of the information offered (Maree, 2016). Because of the nature of the problem statement, which was to analyse human behaviour of individual staff members and their execution of Aquila Safari's post-crisis brand identity and brand communications strategy and how this can be better aligned to the theories of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and

Discourse of Renewal, a qualitative technique was adopted. Qualitative approaches are effective in comprehending the context in which decisions and actions are made (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2021).

While qualitative research offers valuable insights and depth of understanding, it also presents several demerits, particularly in the context of strategic brand communication. One significant limitation is its subjective nature, which can introduce researcher bias and affect the interpretation of data. The findings from qualitative studies are often not generalisable due to the typically small and non-representative sample sizes (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2021). Additionally, qualitative research can be time-consuming and resource-intensive, requiring extensive data collection and analysis processes. The lack of statistical rigour and the difficulty in replicating qualitative studies further challenge the reliability and validity of the results. These limitations necessitate careful consideration and methodological rigour to ensure the credibility and applicability of the research findings (Maree, 2016).

Overall, these perspectives, methods, and practices offered valuable understanding of how other brands could engage in communication during a post-crisis situation. The methodology aligned with the study's objectives, which were to gain a better understanding of the post-crisis brand identity and brand communication strategy used by Aquila Safari and to investigate the role the principles associated with the Discourse of Renewal theory played in their brand communication.

### **3.4 Case Study Selection: Aquila Safari**

There are a number of factors that support the selection of Aquila Safari as the researchers' case study. It must be noted that the tourist destination is Aquila Private Game Reserve, while Aquila Safari is the trading name for the company responsible for managing and marketing the reserve. This distinction clarifies the difference between the reserve itself and the entity that promotes and oversees its operations.

Finding a case test tourism brand where the post-COVID-19 recovery process was already underway and had been actively observed by reliable sources was one of the researchers' top priorities. First, Aquila Safari has undergone an explicit

post-COVID-19 recovery process following a thorough analysis of secondary data that included numerous online sources, such as news articles, email newsletters and social media posts.

Aquila Safari has consistently been a renowned and widely recognised big 5 safari tourist destination in Cape Town. According to the literature that discusses Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 brand communication, recovery and revitalisation, Cape Town Tourism appears to be attempting to avoid what the Discourse of Renewal model also calls decline. Aquila Safari serves as an exemplary case study for further study into the post-crisis brand identity and brand communication process.

At Aquila Safari, the Marketing and Trade Departments play complementary roles in shaping the company's strategic brand communication, particularly in the context of post-crisis recovery. The Marketing Department is responsible for creating and managing digital marketing campaigns, which include search engine optimization (SEO), social media marketing, email marketing, and pay-per-click (PPC) advertising. This department's efforts are crucial for enhancing Aquila Safari's online presence, connecting with target audiences, and differentiating the brand in a competitive landscape. Digital marketing strategies are pivotal for boosting visibility and engagement, especially in the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, as they help the company reach a wider audience and adapt to changing consumer behaviours.

Meanwhile, the Trade Department manages relationships with key intermediaries such as tour operators, wholesalers, Destination Management Companies (DMCs), travel agents, and online retailers. These intermediaries are essential for attracting both domestic and international visitors to Cape Town, facilitating the sale of comprehensive travel packages that encompass accommodation, transportation, attractions, and experiences. The Trade Department's expertise in working with these intermediaries enables Aquila Safari to access new revenue streams and expand its market presence.

The synergy between the Marketing and Trade Departments is crucial for Aquila Safari's strategic communication efforts. The Marketing Department's focus on digital outreach complements the Trade Department's role in managing intermediary

relationships, creating a cohesive strategy for brand promotion and customer engagement. This integrated approach was particularly valuable for providing insights into post-crisis brand communication using the Discourse of Renewal theory. The Trade Department's extensive network and in-depth market knowledge, combined with the Marketing Department's digital expertise, made them ideal for addressing research questions related to brand identity and communication strategies during recovery. Their collaborative efforts in sales support, online assistance, travel advice, and educational initiatives underscore their collective contribution to navigating post-pandemic challenges and ensuring a robust brand presence.

The academic exploration of the South African tourism sector has been facilitated by the opportunities arising from the post-COVID-19 pandemic recovery period and Aquila Safari's proactive efforts to reinvent itself for a post-pandemic tourist market. Finally, recent developments in the tourism industry and swift surge in domestic and international tourist arrivals have facilitated this.

### **3.5 Population and Sampling**

#### **3.5.1 Population**

The target population for this study are employed at Aquila Safari. For this study, the researcher conducted interviews with the trade and marketing department; eight employees in total.

The unit of analysis for this research study was individuals in the trade and marketing department at Aquila Safari's head office in Cape Town. The individuals were the group marketing and trade manager (1), community managers (2), the trade relations executives (3) and regional trade executives (2). These individuals were specifically chosen for the study because they play a critical role in the development of brand identity, planning, and execution of Aquila Safari's brand communications strategy and would provide unique perspectives, insights, and practices into the process. Furthermore, the Discourse of Renewal is a leader-based communication approach, and brand leaders are critical actors in crisis resolution because they symbolise the brand and its values. This study also provided a clearer

picture of strategic brand communication decision-making (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2021).

### **3.5.2 Sampling**

The researcher considered the following variables while determining the sample size: financial costs, time constraints, and data analysis methodologies (Malhotra, 2010). Creswell (1998) recommends a total of 5 to 25 interviews for phenomenological research investigations. For this investigation, a n=8 sample size was used and interviewed. The study made extensive use of purposive sampling. Purposive sampling involves the intentional selection of participants based on specific characteristics, knowledge, or experiences relevant to the research objectives (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2021). Due to time restrictions, the researcher chose this procedure; the sample was simple and rapid to obtain. Purposive sampling, while useful for targeting specific participants who meet particular criteria, has several criticisms. One major concern is that it can introduce selection bias, as the sample may not be representative of the broader population, limiting the generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the researcher's subjective judgement in selecting participants can affect the consistency and reliability of the data. This method may also overlook perspectives from individuals who do not fit the predefined criteria but could provide valuable insights (Seidman, 2013).

In addition, this research was qualitative and exploratory in nature, and since it would have been difficult to acquire access to all of Aquila Safari's trade and marketing executives; a non-probability sampling method was used. During the study process, the researcher employed purposive sampling to pick individuals who could provide the most in-depth and insightful answers that were in line with the research purpose (Seidman, 2013). Lastly, the researcher sought to prevent data saturation, which occurred when no new Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism dimensions and Discourse of Renewal themes or information was noticed in the data acquired (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2021).

## **3.6 Data Collection**

### **3.6.1 Semi-structured, In-depth Interviews**

In-depth interviews were selected as the primary mode of data collecting, this method was ideal since it allowed the researcher to delve deeply into people's attitudes, perceptions, views, and motivations (Seidman, 2013). This strategy was also acceptable for this research study because interviews helped to acquire a thorough knowledge of the participants' thought processes and choices. In-depth interviews were chosen rather than focus groups because the researcher did not want participants to be influenced by the opinions of others (Maree, 2016). The study was not intended to provide longitudinal data but rather to allow for a range of observations about how tourism managers at Aquila Safari managed post-crisis brand communications at a specific time during the global pandemic recovery. This method of data collection gives an extraordinary voice to participants who are experiencing the phenomenon. This data set enabled a rich understanding into the post-COVID-19 crisis brand communication practice at Aquila Safari. A number of verbatim comments from the participants were selected to support the validity of the findings. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews are the most commonly utilised qualitative data-collecting method in brand identity and strategic brand communications research, as well as one of the most effective data-gathering strategies in brand identity Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and brand crisis Discourse of Renewal research (Pyle, Fuller & Ulmer, 2020). Lastly, the researcher undertook eight semi-structured interviews, over the period from April 2022 to June 2022. The date is significant because the South African travel and tourism industry had just re-started and they were the most recent months during which post-crisis brand communication could be investigated.

Data saturation in this research presents both advantages and challenges. On the positive side, the limited number of eight participants allowed for in-depth, detailed responses and thorough analysis, which can enhance the quality and depth of the findings. However, the small sample size may also limit the generalizability of the results, as it may not fully represent the broader population or capture all potential

perspectives. This trade-off between depth and breadth is a crucial consideration in interpreting the research outcomes (Maree, 2016).

### 3.6.2 Interview Guide Construction

The interview guide in Appendix C used predefined open-ended questions that allowed participants to provide extensive explanations while allowing interviewer control. The participants were able to respond in their own words to open-ended questions by providing their own perspectives and experiences (Seidman, 2013). The interviews were conducted at the Aquila Safari head office and were voice-recorded using Otter to help the researcher with data analysis.

**Table 3.1 Biographical information of Participants**

| Biographical Variable        | Number   | Percentage  |
|------------------------------|----------|-------------|
| <b>GENDER</b>                |          |             |
| Male                         | 2        | 25%         |
| Female                       | 6        | 75%         |
| <b>Total</b>                 | <b>8</b> | <b>100%</b> |
| <b>AGE</b>                   |          |             |
| 18 - 24                      | 0        | 0%          |
| 25 - 30                      | 2        | 25%         |
| 31 - 34                      | 3        | 37.5%       |
| 35 - 40                      | 3        | 37.5%       |
| 41 - 50                      | 0        | 0%          |
| 51 - >60                     | 0        | 0%          |
| <b>Total</b>                 | <b>8</b> | <b>100%</b> |
| <b>LEVEL IN ORGANISATION</b> |          |             |
| Top Management               | 1        | 12.5%       |
| Middle Management            | 7        | 87.5%       |
| <b>Total</b>                 | <b>8</b> | <b>100%</b> |

The biographical information of participants, presented in Table 3.1 above, provides an insightful overview of the demographics involved in this study on strategic brand communication. The gender distribution shows that 25% of the participants were female, while 75% were male. Regarding age distribution, 25% of the participants were between the ages of 25 - 30, 37.5% were between 31 - 34, and another 37.5% were between 35 - 40 years old. This range reflects a balanced mix of young and mid-career professionals. In terms of organisational level, 12.5% of the participants were in top management positions, while the majority, 87.5%, were in middle management. This diverse group of participants provided a comprehensive perspective on the brand communication strategies employed at various managerial levels within their organisations. Their varied backgrounds and experiences contribute valuable insights into the study's examination of post-crisis brand identity and communication strategies.

The interview guide was designed to measure the same constructs as past studies to ensure a level of internal consistency and to protect the study's internal reliability (Seidman, 2013). As a result, if the same interview were given to a different sample of the same population, the results would be identical (Maree, 2016).

The interview questions were developed using Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the Discourse of Renewal models which were used for the study. One disadvantage of in-depth semi-structured interviews is that they demand more patience and time to obtain data than structured interviews (Malhotra, 2010). Semi-structured interviews also require more effort and unique tools to analyse than structured interviews (Seidman, 2013). The researcher overcame these challenges by being patient with the participants during the interview process, asking more penetrating questions, and devoting appropriate time to data coding and analysis (Maree, 2016).

Semi-structured in-depth interviews were used for this study because they also allowed for comparisons of responses among persons from various levels of Aquila Safari's management while allowing the researcher to ask follow-up questions to ensure flexible answers. However, if the subject deviated from the interview question and the material was important to the study, the digression was permitted. This strategy helped individuals overcome interview obstacles such as passive

participation and uncomfortable formal settings (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2021).

### **3.7 Data Analysis Method**

In order to gain insights into the potential lessons that can be derived from Aquila Safari's brand identity and brand communication response following the crisis, Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the Discourse of Renewal theories were utilised as a framework to address the research questions. These theories were adopted due to the brand's duty to manage its brand and communicate with its customers at such a pivotal time of unpredictability. The staff, both domestic and international tourists and stakeholders of the brand depended upon it to offer credible and honest information and to help them navigate the crisis (Seidman, 2013). It is insufficient to divert blame and defend one's reputation in a situation like this.

Thematic analysis in Otter and Dovetail was employed to examine the data, involving two distinct coding methods - open coding and axial coding. The utilisation of coding enables the researcher to examine the correlation between data and a theoretical framework. The utilisation of coding through the framework of brand identity and brand communication aided in the identification of themes that aligned with Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the four subcomponents of the Discourse of Renewal theory. The data was first processed to identify patterns of meaning present within the texts, and open coding was then employed to identify early elements that fit inside the Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism dimensions and Discourse of Renewal theory criteria (Maree, 2016). Handwritten notes were made on the documents.

Following the process of open coding, the data underwent axial coding, which helped the researcher in narrowing and refining the categories. According to Maree (2016), axial coding involves the consolidation of identical codes into a single category. The axial coding process involved analysing messages that reflected Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism six dimensions- physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image and each of the four subcomponents of the Discourse of Renewal theory- organisational learning, ethical communication, prospective vision, and successful organisational rhetoric.

The themes were then assessed to find out when Aquila Safari's post-crisis brand communication was consistent with or contradictory to the theory's four components and brand identity was in line with Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism's six dimensions (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2021). In addition, post-crisis brand communication, recognised as being inconsistent with Discourse of Renewal recommendations, served as a lesson for the brand's future as well as other tourism brands in future crises.

The data was analysed with a specific focus on Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism dimensions namely physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image. In addition, the four subcomponents of the Discourse of Renewal theory, namely organisational learning, prospective focus, ethical communication and effective organisational rhetoric. Firstly, the brand demonstrated organisational learning through the implementation of policy changes during the studied time period. An illustration of unlearning can be observed in the identification and changes of ineffective practices. Furthermore, the brand's ethical communication contained statements that were honest and transparent that emphasised the brand's responsibility in the aftermath of the pandemic. Ethical messaging included transparently acknowledging the virus's potential risks, promptly addressing the situation, and setting a goal to safeguard the well-being of staff, both domestic and international tourists, and stakeholders. Ultimately, the brand had a responsibility to safeguard the people it serves, especially in times of public health crisis, and it would effectively convey this commitment to its stakeholders. In addition, the study was coded for prospective rather than retrospective vision. Consequently, future-oriented language was subjected to coding in order to help identify messages and language that are linked to prospective focus. Messages that placed emphasis on the objectives of the brand and offered the tourist a sense of optimism and understanding regarding the brand's desired future state following the recovery from the pandemic can be classified as prospective vision. Finally, the brand's crisis response exemplified effective organisational rhetoric through the use of motivating and hopeful messages. Giving stakeholders a vision motivated them to stay with the brand.

A thematic analysis was conducted to investigate the qualitative characteristics of the data. Seidman (2013) defines thematic analysis as a strategy for detecting, analysing, and reporting patterns in data. Thematic analysis is a versatile qualitative data analysis technique since it is not bound by any theoretical framework or epistemological perspective. The thematic analysis followed a deductive approach because the coding was done with a specific research objective in mind, and a deductive or theoretical method was applicable in this study taking Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and Discourse of Renewal theoretical frameworks into consideration (Maree, 2016).

The researcher employed this methodology to identify recurring patterns and connections that encapsulated the viewpoints of the participants regarding the research inquiry. Transcribing the participants' recordings into text, establishing codes for any themes detected, and analysing the themes were all part of the data analysis process. Following the analysis of the themes, conclusions were drawn to help answer the research question. Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-step data analysis procedure was followed:

- **Step 1: Familiarisation** The first step in the data analysis process was for the researcher to prepare and arrange the unprocessed data. This entailed transcribing the audio recordings of the interviews and then carefully reviewing the transcripts. This process allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data, identify recurring themes mentioned by the participants, and prepare for the next stage of thematic analysis. This initial familiarisation with the data was crucial for building a solid foundation for in-depth analysis.
- **Step 2: Generating initial codes** This stage involved creating initial codes, which facilitated the identification of key themes from the data collected. The researcher looks for interesting or meaningful pieces of information that could help answer the research question. Because this study was based on Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and Discourse of Renewal theory, the coding was done with the understanding that the topics of the study were theory-driven. As a result, specific questions grounded in these theories were asked which the researcher used to categorise the data.

- **Step 3: Searching for themes** Following the initial phases of coding, the researcher proceeded to identify recurring patterns within the dataset. A theme can be defined as a recurring pattern that captures an important or interesting aspect within the dataset. The approach involved the classification, organising, and combining the codes into more comprehensive themes. The codes that were frequently combined had similar meanings or had strong interconnections. For this investigation, the researcher used an additional sheet of paper with tables to categorise the codes into distinct theme groups.
- **Step 4: Reviewing themes** This was a comprehensive analysis of the themes aimed at assessing if initial themes could be combined, refined, separated or rejected. This stage ensured that all of the themes were well-represented by the data and had sufficient data to support each theme.
- **Step 5: Defining and naming themes** The thematic analysis proceeded by generating terms that defined meaning or relationships within the numerous identified themes. A definition was assigned to each subject, which offered a summary of content presented within each theme.
- **Step 6: Write-up** The final stage of the thematic analysis included authoring a report, where the key findings and interpretation of the data for this study were presented.

### 3.8 Trustworthiness, Validity and Reliability

Because the research study was based on qualitative data, trustworthiness was essential. In this research study, trustworthiness was ensured by paying attention to transferability and reliability.

The first trustworthiness requirement was transferability. The questions in the in-depth interview were open-ended to guarantee that participants answered in their own words and expressed their own thoughts. This meant that the researcher would not attempt to generalise about the entire population but would instead have the data represent the sample.

A suitable sample size was collected to assure confirmability, and an important feature was to verify that conclusions were drawn from all the participants. Efforts were made to assure the study's validity and the manner in which the data was obtained. Reliability is described as the ability to determine if the same instrument, when administered to a different sample from the same population, would produce comparable results (Maree, 2016). The survey questions were therefore designed to measure the same constructs as past research in order to ensure a level of internal consistency and to protect the study's internal reliability (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2021).

### **3.9 Ethical Considerations**

Ethical considerations were considered. This research was conducted with full approval from Aquila Safari management. The management was fully aware of the research objectives and methods, ensuring transparency and accountability throughout the study. The research's alignment with Aquila Safari's strategic interests, particularly in enhancing brand credibility and communication, further underscores its significance.

All the participants signed a consent form acknowledging that they had been fully informed and made aware that they were involved in the research process, that they had given consent for the researcher to use the information they provided in the interview, and that they understood the field and topic of the research (Maree, 2016). The individuals were not coerced, and if they felt uncomfortable at any point throughout the interview, they were permitted to withdraw from the study without any negative consequences (Malhotra, 2010). The participants' identifying information would remain fully confidential and anonymous and only made available to the researcher, unless permission was granted, and would only be used for the purposes of this study (Du Plooy-Cilliers, Davis & Bezuidenhout, 2021). The findings were not modified to fit the research objectives. The researcher guarantees that the findings will be presented in a truthful, helpful, and plagiarism-free manner to the crisis and brand communication field.

The researcher's position as a colleague within the marketing and trade department provided a unique perspective, yet measures were taken to avoid any credibility bias.

Throughout the research process, the researcher strived to be objective, to maintain a prominent level of integrity, professionalism and accountability, and to ensure that personal bias did not influence the research process and outcome of the study (Malhotra, 2010). The data collected was accurate, in-depth, and independently verified, contributing to the reliability and validity of the study. Data from this study will be stored securely for five years, in line with the standards of qualitative research. This retention period allows for any necessary verification and further analysis while ensuring compliance with ethical research practices.

Conducted independently and without financial incentives, the research benefited from the exemplary cooperation of the Aquila Safari team. Their willingness to provide comprehensive information ensured the collection of accurate and in-depth data. This collaborative approach underscores the significance of the study in advancing understanding of crisis recovery strategies within the tourism industry, particularly in the realm of brand communication during unprecedented global crises.

In conclusion, this chapter of the study explained the methodology and discussed the interpretivism research paradigm, exploratory research design, qualitative design approach and the population. Aquila Safari was selected as the case study due to its well-documented post-COVID-19 recovery process and its status as a renowned Big 5 Safari tourist destination in Cape Town. It then explained the sampling process, data collection via semi-structured, in-depth interviews and data analysis which was a thematic analysis. The thematic analysis guided by Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and Discourse of Renewal theories facilitated data interpretation. This methodological framework enables a comprehensive examination of post-crisis brand identity and brand communication, offering valuable insights for both theory and practice in crisis communication within the tourism sector. Finally, the chapter provided an analysis of the study's validity, reliability, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations.

## 4 CHAPTER FOUR: RESEARCH FINDINGS

This chapter outlines the critical findings obtained via the eight interviews. It starts with a summary of participants' information and lists the main themes and codes identified, initially based on deductive coding. Deductive coding was employed to divide the data into various categories and themes, which were relevant in ensuring that the objectives of this study could be fulfilled, and the research questions answered. The findings have been structured in line with the conceptual framework outlined in the literature review, centred around Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the theory of Discourse of Renewal and research questions:

- **Research Question 1:** What brand identity does Aquila Safari aim to establish and promote in the context of its post-COVID-19 recovery?
- **Research Question 2:** In what ways do Aquila Safari's brand communication during the post-COVID-19 crisis align with the Discourse of Renewal and its four components?
- **Research Question 3:** What strategies can be recommended for Aquila Safari's staff to effectively engage with the Discourse of Renewal in addressing both the current post-COVID-19 crisis and future brand crises?

### 4.1 Demographic Information of Participants

For this study eight interview responses were collected as shown in Table 4.1 below. This study sought information specifically from managers from Aquila Safari's trade and marketing department and they represented the study's target population. As for the participants' number of years at the company, seven out of eight of them had been with the company for three years, whereas one had been with the company for eight years. In terms of gender distribution, six participants were female and two were male.

**Table 4.1 Demographic information of Participants**

| Participant | Position                          | Gender | Years at the Company |
|-------------|-----------------------------------|--------|----------------------|
| P1          | Group Trade and Marketing Manager | Male   | 8                    |
| P2          | Trade Relations Executive         | Female | 3                    |
| P3          | Trade Relations Executive         | Female | 3                    |
| P4          | Trade Relations Executive         | Female | 3                    |
| P5          | Regional Trade Manager            | Female | 3                    |
| P6          | Regional Trade Manager            | Male   | 3                    |
| P7          | Community Manager                 | Female | 3                    |
| P8          | Community Manager                 | Female | 3                    |

## **4.2 Brand Identity Findings**

The brand identity results of the interview will be analysed through Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. The first part of this research paper is grounded in Kapferer's theory, the gathered data were organised according to the six dimensions of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. This facilitated the analysis of the data. As a result, the data were classified according to the following categories: physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection and self-image.

### **4.2.1 Physique**

The physique facet of Aquila Safari's Brand Identity Prism comprises Big 5 Safari, close to Cape Town, and Cape Town Safari. Participants overwhelmingly emphasised the crucial role played by these two findings in shaping Aquila Safari's brand's identity and recovery strategy.

As one of the most sought-after private game reserves in Cape Town, Aquila offers an authentic African Big 5 Safari experience just a two-hour drive from Cape Town. The reserve offers a wide range of experiences, from traditional game drives to adventurous safaris on horseback and quad bikes. Catering to both day-trip visitors and those seeking overnight stays, Aquila positions itself as the premier destination for safari enthusiasts and tourists alike.

Aquila Safari strategically communicated this competitive edge through various online brand communication channels, primarily leveraging social media platforms, paid media ads and the Aquila Safari website to engage with consumers. The physique facet of Aquila's brand identity prism features prominently the Big 5 Safari close to Cape Town and Cape Town Safari. This aspect was repeatedly highlighted during interviews, demonstrating the brand's commitment to reinforcing its core identity and ensuring consumer association with the Big 5 Safari concept.

For the domestic market, Aquila emphasised its status as a Big 5 Safari destination close to Cape Town, emphasising authenticity and accessibility. In contrast, for the international market, the focus shifted towards promoting the Cape Town Safari to resonate with international guests. Regardless of the target audience, Aquila Safari maintained a simple and consistent messaging approach, emphasising its unique selling proposition. This nuanced approach to brand communication messaging underscores the brand's adaptability and sensitivity to diverse consumer segments. In addition, this deliberate reinforcement aimed to engrain Aquila Safari's identity in consumers' minds and facilitate easy association with the quintessential African Big 5 safari experience. Participant 4 commented:

So, when it came to reaching our local travellers, we went straight for the Big 5 safari close to Cape Town. It just made sense since domestic travel was picking up, and we needed everyone to know what we're all about and where to find us. Now, for our international traveller, it was a bit different. We knew they weren't quite ready to hop on planes yet, so we decided to keep Cape Town in their minds. We figured if we kept reminding them about the city and then threw in the safari bit in our paid media ads, it would stick with them until they were ready to travel again.

Moreover, participants emphasised the significance of maintaining a clear and cohesive brand identity, with particular emphasis on the hierarchy of brand elements. While the Aquila Safari's name and logo were deemed paramount, colour and brand tagline also played pivotal roles in reinforcing the brand's physical presence and distinctiveness. Two participants commented:

When we talk about physique, it's all about those black and gold colours that really stand out, along with our iconic Aquila Safari lion. You'll see these colours

everywhere on our marketing materials and brochures. It's like our signature look, you know? (Participant 3).

And then there's our slogan, "Big 5 Safari close to Cape Town," which just sums up everything we're about. It's like our calling card, along with those striking black and gold colours. It's what people remember about us (Participant 8).

According to participants, the physique of Aquila Safari's brand, whether through digital or physical channels, is where its distinctiveness ultimately lies. The brand's brand identity, encompassing its logo, name, and corporate colours, serves as the cornerstone of its identity and remains integral to its overall branding strategy. By consistently highlighting Big 5 Safari close to Cape Town and Cape Town Safari, Aquila Safari effectively leverages its physical attributes to maintain consumer engagement and drive brand recovery amidst challenging circumstances.

#### **4.2.2 Personality**

The personality facet of Aquila Safari's Brand Identity Prism includes adventurous and adaptable. These traits reflect the brand's ability to overcome challenges and provide memorable experiences for guests during the recovery period.

Notably, Aquila Safari demonstrated adaptability by offering vouchers to consumers amidst the lockdown, providing them with something to anticipate once restrictions were lifted. This proactive measure showcased the brand's ability to pivot and innovate during times of crisis. The participants commented:

There was such a good response from visitors when we introduced the Save Now Safari Later voucher, they were excited to go out again and this voucher was like when we are able to go out again we can go on safari (Participant 3).

We adapted by introducing the vouchers for people to buy so that they had something to look forward to after the lockdowns were lifted and everyone could travel (Participant 8).

The focus on new adventures post-lockdown accentuates Aquila Safari's appeal as an exciting Cape Town destination where guests can immerse themselves in an adventurous day trip or overnight Big 5 Safari experience. Despite the imposed

restrictions, Aquila Safari remained committed to delivering exceptional experiences, illustrating its determination to adapt and thrive in challenging circumstances.

The personality aspect of the Aquila Safari brand becomes more significant in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic because it affects how stakeholders and consumers view the brand. The adventurous personality of Aquila Safari resonates with consumers seeking outdoor and adventurous experiences, particularly after a period of restricted travel and isolation. Participant 7 commented:

We had to stick to government rules to keep staff and guests safe. We were super committed to giving everyone an awesome Cape Town Big 5 safari experience. Whether they were just popping in for a day trip or staying overnight, we were itching to welcome them back for an adventure after lockdown.

In conclusion, the personality facet of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism plays a crucial role in shaping the perception and identity of Aquila Safari in the post-COVID-19 recovery period. The brand's adventurous and adaptable personality positions it as a resilient and innovative player in the tourism industry, capable of providing memorable experiences for guests while navigating the challenges of the pandemic and beyond.

#### **4.2.3 Culture**

The culture facet of Aquila Safari's Brand Identity Prism includes welcomeness, which is crucial for brands navigating the challenges brought about by the pandemic. Brands emphasising welcomeness demonstrate the ability to welcome guests and adapt to changing circumstances, innovate, and persevere despite challenges.

During the post-crisis recovery phase, Aquila Safari exhibited welcomeness in its brand culture by implementing initiatives aimed at maintaining flexibility and adaptability in its operations and communications. They offered flexible booking conditions including offering credit or vouchers on a future stay, date changes, and cancellations, so that visitors could alter their departure dates or not travel at all. This was facilitated via the brand website for visitors and stakeholders to receive more information regarding the issue. Participants stated:

We offered penalty free date changes and vouchers for a period of up to 24 months from the original date of arrival (Participant 3).

We communicated flexibility in our services, like the penalty free cancellations which were extra benefits provided to their potential customers (Participant 1).

We updated our cancellation policies and allowed refunds and flexible postponements; this was beneficial for the domestic market as it communicated that we didn't want to just keep their money (Participant 5).

Aquila Safari's ability to adapt its services, update cancellation policies, and communicate flexibility in its offerings showcased its commitment to customer satisfaction and business continuity amidst challenging circumstances.

In conclusion, the culture dimension of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism offers valuable insights into how a Big 5 safari brand in South Africa can navigate the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and position itself for recovery. By emphasising values such as welcomeness in its operations, communications, and customer interactions, the brand strengthens its identity and builds trust among stakeholders.

#### **4.2.4 Relationship**

The relationship facet of Aquila Safari's Brand Identity Prism centres on connection and adapting. This facet represents the brand's connection with its customers and employees, which is crucial for rebuilding trust and fostering positive relationships during the post-COVID-19 recovery phase.

Aquila Safari strategically leveraged its relationship with customers by introducing the Save Now Safari Later vouchers, offering visitors a glimpse of hope for future stays. These vouchers served as a promise of upcoming Big 5 Safari experiences, providing guests with something to anticipate and look forward to amidst uncertain times. By offering exclusive discounts like the Save Now Safari Later vouchers, Aquila Safari not only incentivised travellers but also demonstrated its commitment to supporting local tourism and fostering community engagement. In addition, such initiatives not only stimulated demand but also contributed to the brand's reputation as a value-driven and customer-centric organisation. Participants stated:

We implemented sales promotions for the domestic market offering low prices on our website mostly in periods of low demand during winter, which is something that we had never done in the past (Participant 1).

We started running specials to bring in domestic business (Participant 5).

Amidst the COVID-19 recovery phase, prioritising the upkeep of physical assets, including overnight accommodations, grounds and premises, safari vehicles became paramount for the Aquila Safari brand. This necessitated aligning these assets with new health and safety COVID-19 protocols which Aquila Safari called Safe Service Safaris to reassure visitors of their safety.

Aquila Safari undertook various measures aimed at ensuring the safety and well-being of both staff and guests. Aquila Safari communicated their Safe Service Safaris which were the protocols and measures they implemented and clearly through their website and social media platforms. The brand adopted stringent safety protocols, including enhanced cleaning and disinfection procedures for overnight accommodations, safari vehicles, and communal areas such as restaurants, Tranquila Spa, and the bar and lounge. Additionally, leveraging the World Travel and Tourism Council's Safe Travels stamp allowed Aquila Safari to further reassure guests of its commitment to health and safety standards. The participants commented:

So, everyone (staff and guests) had to go through a COVID-19 screening. This included signing an indemnity form, filling out a guest information form, and getting their temperature checked (Participant 1).

We adopted the World Travel and Tourism Council's Safe Travels protocols that were globally recognised to put local and international guests at ease so that we always have their safety in mind (Participant 2).

We made sure there were hand sanitising stations everywhere you'd expect them - at the reception, in the restaurant, safari game drive pickup point, and even at the Stone Cottage half-way stop (Participant 4).

After guests checked out, we made sure to give each room a full 24-hour decontamination period (Participant 6).

We kept reminding everyone in all our messages that Aquila Safari is totally committed to giving our guests Safe Service Safaris. Even as we continue to offer incredible Big 5 safaris and experiences in Cape Town—just a couple of hours from Cape Town (Participant 7).

Adapting to promote social distancing, Aquila Safari limited the number of guests per lodge or vehicle, offered private game drives, and modified dining arrangements to ensure adequate spacing between guests. This proactive approach not only enhanced guest safety but also demonstrated the brand's responsiveness to evolving health guidelines. The participants commented:

We adjusted the seating capacity in our restaurants according to the Adjusted Risk Strategy protocols. Plus, we made sure to let everyone know that we've got plenty of indoor and outdoor seating, all set up for social distancing (Participant 4).

We made sure to inform guests that the capacity of our safari vehicles was set by the Department of Transport, following the Adjusted Risk Strategy and government gazette. This allowed for social distancing (Participant 6).

We introduced a turn down service, but we only did it if guests specifically asked for it. We wanted to minimise how often we went into guest rooms (Participant 7).

By prioritising safety measures, hygiene protocols, and sustainability efforts, the brand successfully navigated the challenges of the pandemic while positioning itself as a trusted and responsible leader in the tourism industry. Through these measures, Aquila Safari reinforced its commitment to guest safety and well-being, paving the way for a resilient recovery in the post-pandemic landscape.

#### **4.2.5 Reflection**

The reflection facet of Aquila Safari's Brand Identity Prism centres on adventurous and responsible. Reflection, as a facet of this model, offers valuable insights into customer self-perception and its implications for post-COVID recovery strategies.

Individuals seeking safari experiences often identify themselves as adventurous explorers, eager to explore new territories and indulge in novel experiences. The desire to check items off their bucket list and unwind in unfamiliar settings drives

their pursuit of safari adventures. The inherent nature of going on a safari game drive embodies this sense of adventure and exploration. Participants stated:

Absolutely, we view our product and services as a must-visit destination, like ticking off a bucket list item. It's one of the top experiences in Cape Town, catering to both locals and international travellers alike (Participant 6).

When we think about our guests, we imagine adventurous souls seeking out new experiences as they delve into the city. Going on safari isn't just an activity; it's an adventure, appealing to those who crave something unique and exciting during their travels (Participant 8).

In the wake of lockdowns and restrictions, there is a heightened longing among travellers to fulfil their aspirations for adventure. This reinforces the allure of safari experiences, where safety and exploration converge.

Aquila Safari has adeptly recognised these self-perceptions among its target audience and has responded by implementing rigorous health and safety protocols. By addressing customer concerns while providing adventurous experiences, the brand positions itself as a reliable choice for post-pandemic travel. By aligning brand experiences with customers' aspirations for adventure and responsibility, while addressing health and safety concerns, Aquila Safari effectively drives recovery and rebuild consumer confidence in the tourism sector.

#### **4.2.6 Self-image**

Despite the unprecedented challenges posed by the pandemic, the essence of the brand remains resilient, anchored in the enduring appeal of its core offering Big 5 safari close to Cape Town. The focus shifts to how Aquila Safari has prioritised the safety of both its staff and guests, adapting its operations to ensure a secure environment while maintaining its commitment to providing memorable wildlife encounters.

During the recovery phase, Aquila Safari endeavours to position itself as a beacon of trust and reliability for travellers seeking safe and enriching experiences in nature. By prioritising the safety of both staff and guests, Aquila implements robust health and

safety protocols. Transparent communication of these measures underscores the brand's commitment to ensuring the well-being of its clientele.

In the aftermath of COVID-19, traveller preferences have undergone a paradigm shift, with safety and well-being assuming paramount importance in destination selection. By aligning its brand identity with these evolving consumer expectations, the Big 5 safari brand can carve a distinct niche in the market, appealing to travellers seeking not only adventure but also assurance in uncertain times. Through strategic self-reflection and adaptation, Aquila Safari embodies resilience, reaffirming its position as a beacon of trust and reliability amidst the challenges posed by the pandemic.

### **4.3 Discourse of Renewal Findings**

The analysis of brand communication of Aquila Safari highlighted the importance of organisational learning, ethical communication, a prospective vision, and sound organisational rhetoric, as outlined in the Discourse of Renewal theory. Through the process of content analysis, nine categories emerged, namely (i) learning from the situation (ii) adapting their service offering (iii) adapting their brand communication strategies (iv) actively building a crisis communication plan (v) learning from the customer (vi) data acquisition (vii) shifting to digital channels (viii) communicating the vision for the future (ix) restoring visitor's confidence. The following three primary themes emerged from this qualitative analysis: (i) actively learning from the crisis (ii) understanding target audiences and (iii) digital transformation. This is depicted in Table 4.2 below.

**Table 4.2 Code Categories and Derived Themes**

| Themes                                     |                                     |                                       |
|--------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|
| 1.<br>Actively learning from a crisis      | 2.<br>Understanding their audiences | 3.<br>Digital Transformation          |
| Learning from the situation                | Learning about their customers      | The shift to digital channels         |
| Adapt their service offering               | Data acquisition                    | Communicate the vision for the future |
| Adapt their brand communication strategies |                                     | Restoring visitors' confidence        |

The definitions of the code categories and derived themes are shown below in Table 4.3 below.

**Table 4.3 Code Categories and Derived Themes and Definitions**

| Code Categories and Derived Themes         | Definition                                                                                                                                                                                                                           |
|--------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Actively learning from the crisis          | The learning process that brands go through to understand the opportunity presented by a crisis.                                                                                                                                     |
| Learning from the situation                | To demonstrate to stakeholders that the brand was actively learning from the ever-changing post-COVID-19 pandemic industry recovery, allowing the brand to renew and develop, and this is representative of organisational learning. |
| Adapt their service offering               | To understand and change its product and service offering within the post-COVID-19 crisis context and recovery.                                                                                                                      |
| Adapt their brand communication strategies | Providing customers with accurate, easily accessible, digestible, and timely information they assisted consumers in their post-COVID-19 travel destination decision-making.                                                          |
| Understanding their audiences              | To understand what their consumers' needs were and meet them through post-crisis brand communication.                                                                                                                                |
| Learning about their customers             | To effectively connect with both local and international customers, it's crucial that the brand's post-crisis brand communication aligns with their updated concerns and needs.                                                      |
| Data acquisition                           | The opportunity presented by the crisis allowed Aquila Safari to address its deficiencies and demonstrated its readiness to adapt by internally collecting data across their trade and marketing departments.                        |

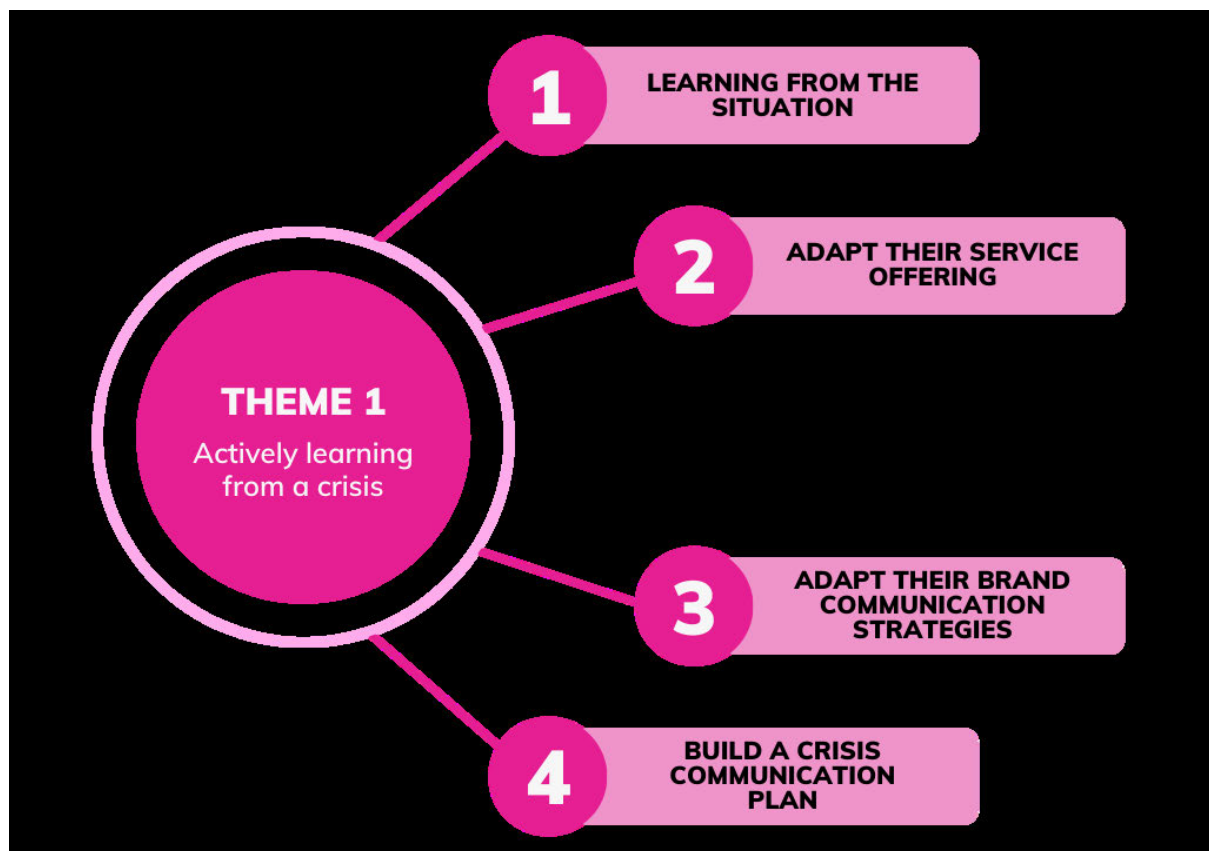
|                                       |                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                                     |
|---------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Digital Transformation                | Digital transformation means moving to digital channels to share the brand's vision for the future and help restore visitor confidence.                                                                                                                             |
| The shift to digital channels         | The shift to digital channels means using technology and new online communication channels to keep in touch with their audience during and after the crisis.                                                                                                        |
| Communicate the vision for the future | The vision for the future is all about looking ahead and making travel even better as brand's move past the COVID-19 crisis.                                                                                                                                        |
| Restoring visitors' confidence        | Restoring visitor's confidence in the brand and reassuring travellers about safety are key priorities. By demonstrating that it's safe to travel again, the aim is to rebuild trust and encourage people to explore with peace of mind after the COVID-19 pandemic. |

The code frequencies and percentages are depicted below in Table 4.4 below.

**Table 4.4 Code Frequency and Percentages**

| Themes                            | Code                                       | Frequency  | Percentage |
|-----------------------------------|--------------------------------------------|------------|------------|
| Actively learning from the crisis | Learning from the situation                | 40         | 20.2%      |
|                                   | Adapt their service offering               | 25         | 12.6%      |
|                                   | Adapt their brand communication strategies | 20         | 10.1%      |
| Understanding their audiences     | Learning about their customers             | 36         | 18.1%      |
|                                   | Data acquisition                           | 19         | 9.6%       |
| Digital Transformation            | The shift to digital channels              | 23         | 11.6%      |
|                                   | Communicate the vision for the future      | 15         | 7.6%       |
|                                   | Restoring visitors' confidence             | 20         | 10.1%      |
|                                   | <b>Total</b>                               | <b>198</b> |            |

### 4.3.1 Theme 1: Actively Learning from the Crisis



**Figure 4.1 Theme 1: Actively Learning from the Crisis**

The learning process that brands go through to understand the opportunity presented by a crisis is illustrated by this theme of actively learning as shown in Figure 4.1 above. These opportunities could assist the tourism sector in developing a new image and reputation depending on how they handled the crisis. Brands demonstrate learning by committing to correcting the mistakes that led to the crisis and communicating the lessons they learned to their stakeholders (Ulmer, Seeger and Sellnow, 2007). Three predominant factors emerged as important, namely: learning from the situation, adapting the service offering, and building a crisis communication plan.

Prior research has indicated that visitors' concern about the imminent local recovery process acts as a deterrent for them to visit a destination after a disaster (Lehto, Douglas & Park, 2008; Walters & Clulow, 2010). Tourists may respond positively to the fact that the local community has recovered and is now supportive of tourism (Walters & Mair, 2012). Additionally, tourists outside their normal surroundings often

suffer from information deficit, and Aquila Safari took care to offer assistance and information in many formats via digital channels. In order to make the safari destination more appealing and entice tourists as soon as the pandemic was over, they also provided timely and accurate information to international travellers via social media and trade partners. This positioned the brand as responsible, inspiring trust and confidence among stakeholders.

### ***Learning from the situation***

Aquila Safari exemplified vicariously learning from observing successful global industry brands and implemented changes. Firstly, in actively learning from the crisis, Aquila Safari adopted the World Travel and Tourism Council's Safe Travels global protocols certification that approved Aquila Safari to welcome guests from throughout the world. Aquila Safari communicated this certification clearly through their website and social media platforms as shown in Figure 4.2 below. This brand communication messaging assured stakeholders that the Aquila Safari brand was closely monitoring the ever-changing COVID-19 pandemic situation in South Africa and that the brand was also making informed decisions based on emerging data. It demonstrated to stakeholders that the brand was actively learning from the ever-changing post-COVID-19 pandemic industry recovery, allowing the brand to renew and develop, and this is representative of organisational learning. The participants commented:

We communicated our ongoing commitment to guest and staff safety and hygienic services through the Safe Service Safaris, where we detailed protocols throughout the guest journey before, during and after their stay (Participant 1).

We adopted the World Travel and Tourism Council's Safe Travels protocols that were globally recognised to put local and international guests at ease so that we always have their safety in mind (Participant 2).

There was frequent social media communication saying that we are committed to ongoing staff training, COVID-19 testing, social distancing and protocols to ensure guests are all safe while enjoying Big 5 Safari under 2 hours from Cape Town (Participant 7).

We got the World Travel and Tourism Council's safe travels stamp. This was important for the Aquila Safari brand internationally, as we were certified and approved to accept guests from across the globe (Participant 8).



**Figure 4.2 Aquila's Safe Travels Stamp**

In one instance, a participant commented on Aquila Safari's curious mindset about its post-crisis brand communication. Participants 3 stated:

We went in with the notion that we had to learn, as we didn't know anything about this pandemic and how long it was going to last, and we had to take it one day as it came and learning was important for us during this time as there was new

information that came out daily and we had to actively make decisions and communicate that via social media.

Another example where Aquila Safari exemplified vicariously learning was from observing global airline routes to Cape Town to grow and reach new international travellers as tactical markets had changed slightly over the pandemic. As the travel industry had yet to see stable international trends, Aquila Safari was guided by reinstated international air routes to Cape Town as lockdowns were being lifted. This strategy was implemented to focus on markets that showed interest in travelling to Cape Town and means that Aquila Safari changed its marketing spending in response to shifts in the COVID-19 situation, and consequently made decisions based on facts and statistics derived from post-pandemic industry recovery. They reconsidered their advertising and promotion techniques to be more in line with the current crisis scenario and more proactive in communicating with the correct target markets.

The revival of the tourism industry depended on boosting confidence in travelling and lessening the perceptions of risks involved (Assaf & Scuderi, 2020). This caused consumers to focus on health and safety. Thus, Aquila Safari implemented aggressive measures to decrease the risk of COVID-19 and assisted in facilitating communication at every stage of the traveller's journey. They implemented touchless solutions to reduce the risk of COVID-19 virus transmission while facilitating a pleasant travel experience. They adopted and implemented improved sanitation practices specifically created to stop COVID-19 from spreading. They also promoted health screening measures for staff, isolated staff who may be experiencing symptoms, and provided health services to clients and a screening policy for staff and guests. This involved adapting operations, modifying staff practices, and remodelling public spaces to help protect staff and clients. This strategy was aimed at reducing tourists' fears. Additionally, digitised video messages were sent from Aquila Safari to highlight their ongoing preparations to ensure passenger safety and to capture the staff's excitement and anticipation for Big 5 safaris in the future. This content was critical to keep the Big 5 safari experience alive in passengers' minds. Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 messages informed guests that travel would continue, but that the experience would be different from previous stays with government COVID-19 regulations in place. Aquila Safari showed evidence of

engaging in prospective, rather than retrospective vision by reminding domestic and international visitors that travel had resumed and they were taking guests and letting them know it is safe to do so.

### ***Adapt their service offering***

Aquila Safari's tactical international markets had changed over the pandemic, and the brand needed to understand its product and service offering within the post-COVID-19 crisis context. The pandemic-induced changes in the tourism market necessitated the development of new products and services for Aquila Safari, which required effective brand communication to new markets with new customers and domestic customers. Some participants highlighted:

We learnt that we do not speak to a niche market; it was critical to understand all those segments. That was a big learning for us that the voice we use to attract an international visitor is different to the voice that will attract a local visitor (Participant 2).

We needed to be all-encompassing in our product offering; when you think of Aquila Safari, you need to think of Halaal travel, youth travel, family travel, group travel, honeymoon, provincial and regional travel, backpackers and conferencing. The biggest thing we have learned is that one brand has many voices (Participant 8).

Aquila Safari had to retarget its brand communication efforts for its already existing products and services to the new type of customers. Several participants pointed out significant changes in customer profiles, particularly in the area of domestic travel, with a significant increase in regional and provincial travel and customer nationality, which altered as a result of travel restrictions. In order to implement these changes, brand communication had to be redirected toward specific customers with more individualised messaging and new customer demographics—focused on the domestic market and international markets that showed an interest in visiting Cape Town post-pandemic. Some participants highlighted:

Before the pandemic, the majority of our customers were Americans and British, but in 2021 we had a significant decline in traffic from these countries, so we were forced to reach out to new customers, primarily those from the domestic market and international visitors from resumed flight routes to Cape Town. We added Save Now

Safari Later deals, primarily in the months before and following the big summer season, advertised on our website and social media (Participant 3).

For the domestic market, the Save Now Safari Later campaign was huge for us as we offered 2-night stays with all meals and four game drives for two adults with the option to upgrade room types, as it offered people something to look forward to after the lockdowns were eased and helped Aquila Safari become more competitive (Participant 5).

The Save Now Safari Later voucher was used as a new product to stimulate local customer consumption. These vouchers were based on a discount voucher model for purchases in the tourism industry, with the aim of revitalising one of the sectors most affected by the crisis as shown in Figure 4.3 below.



**Figure 4.3: Save Now Safari Later banner**

One participant mentioned that the tourism industry struggled to reach domestic audiences, and due to Aquila's post-pandemic brand communication success, reached out for assistance. Participant 2 stated:

We were approached by different South African marketing agents, agencies, destinations, we were struggling with the local markets, Aquila Safari, can you please assist us or at least guide us in marketing to the local markets?

In conclusion, based on these responses, it is clear that Aquila Safari was able to adjust to the new post-COVID-19 market conditions and that they developed new products and services to meet the needs of these customers.

### ***Adapt their brand communication strategies***

It was evident that after the COVID-19 pandemic, tourism brands were unable to undertake promotions in the manner that they were used to. It became increasingly difficult to stay connected with customers and they had to adapt their brand communication strategies. The findings highlighted that health and safety measures were clearly the focus of brand communication messages after the pandemic. The participants stated:

We continuously provided information to guests and customers on the conditions of crossing the border according to the country of origin, on prevention measures that were in place and, in addition to all the necessary information affecting the guest safety (Participant 5).

Our focus was to communicate our health and safety measures such as social distancing, buffet in the eating area, sanitising stations (Participant 7).

Sales promotions were undoubtedly the most employed brand communication tool during the pandemic. Aquila Safari used price discounts and sales promotions deals as shown in Figure 4.4 below. The Aquila Brand has to offer a profitable product with a profitable relationship between the customer's willingness to pay and the average costs of offering the service. Additionally, a number of participants pointed out that some of these incentives had never been used in the past for the brand or were

employed under different circumstances such stimulating demand during the slow winter season.

We implemented sales promotions for the domestic market offering low prices on our website mostly in periods of low demand during winter, which is something that we had never done in the past (Participant 1).

We started running specials to bring in domestic business (Participant 5).

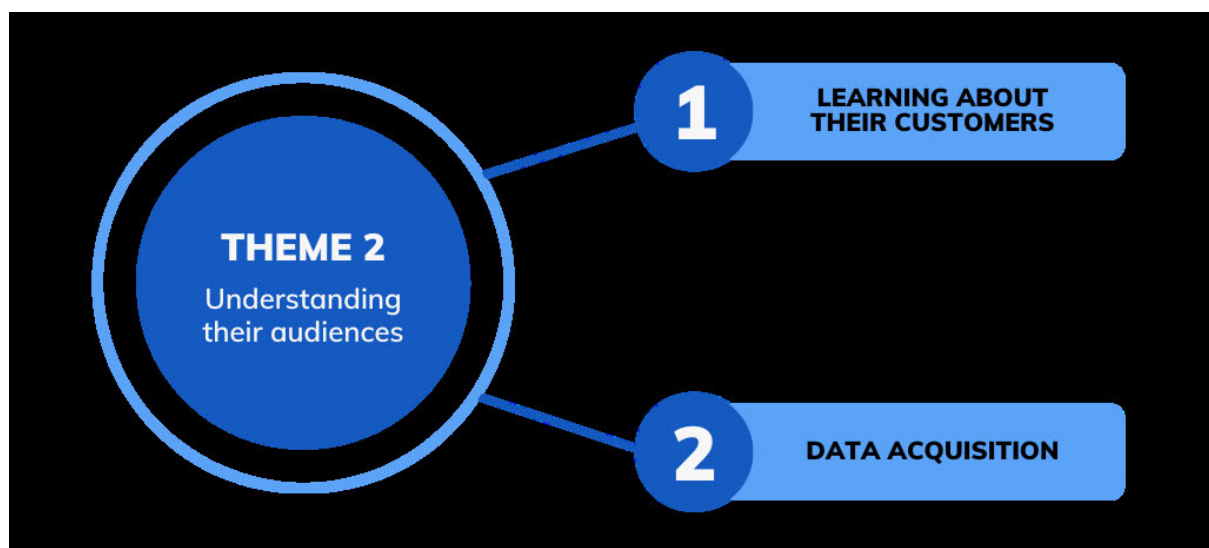
We ran specials with specific check in dates so we could get feet through the door (Participant 8).



**Figure 4.4 40% OFF Sales Promotion**

Furthermore, Aquila Safari exemplified willingness to unlearn in the way they changed their brand communication messaging. Initially, brand communication messaging was focused on building brand awareness to international new markets. Customers were desperate for information, concerned about their accommodation bookings, the refund process and cancellation policies. Consequently, they took to social media and Tripadvisor and made negative reviews. Recognising the ineffectiveness of their brand communication messaging, Aquila Safari changed the brand communication to be more focused on addressing customer needs. The customers, which included domestic and international guests, said that they felt much more heard and were also able to get more information than they had previously. Thus, by providing customers with accurate, easily accessible, digestible, and timely information they assisted consumers in their post-COVID-19 travel destination decision-making.

#### 4.3.2 Theme 2: Understanding Their Audiences



**Figure 4.5 Theme 2: Understanding Their Audiences**

The two most predominant factors in Understanding their audiences were learning about their customers and data acquisition as shown in Figure 4.5 above.

Discourse of Renewal theory highlights ethical communication as one of its core subcomponents. The brand's resolve to uphold these ideals is put to the test at times of crisis. Placing consumers first is one of the fundamental principles that Aquila

Safari seems to emphasise frequently as they sought to understand what their consumers' needs were and meet them through post-crisis brand communication.

### ***Learning about their customers***

Aquila Safari's tactical markets had changed over the pandemic, and they needed to understand their customers both locally and internationally once again. Additionally, post-crisis brand communication messages needed to be in line with customers' new concerns and needs. This called for a consumer-centric approach that put consumers first where Aquila Safari's managers needed to develop their communications in order to meet consumers' immediate demands. It was apparent that the trade and marketing department embraced the opportunity to know and understand their customers and put them at the centre of their brand communication efforts. Participants 6, 7 and 8 stated respectively:

In order to keep our brand alive, we had to learn who our customer was then be consistent and persistent with our messaging and offerings, and

We needed to keep up what people wanted.

Our focus was to put customers first in our recovery efforts.

When the participants were asked what lessons they learnt about renewing the brand's post-crisis brand communication during a crisis, the majority pointed to actively learning from the crisis as an essential aspect. Most of them highlighted learning about local customers. The participants stated:

We looked at our local market to determine what they were missing during the lockdown and how to market to them. We learned that encouraging being outdoors in wide open spaces was the greatest way to get things going. As a result, we produced video content showing outdoor open spaces while out on Big 5 Safari (Participant 1).

It was a very enriching time to start learning about the domestic and international travellers that engaged with our brand, where they were from and what they wanted (Participant 4).

Listening to their worries to determine what challenges they had with their service offering and how they could meet their needs post-pandemic (Participant 6).

We had to talk to our local market, and we had to change our whole marketing strategy, strategies and plans to talk to the relevant people (Participant 8).

Consumers changed both their behaviour and demands during the pandemic; this resulted in exponential growth in online shopping. Participant 8 confirmed this and stated:

Internal marketing reports indicated a change in consumer booking patterns.

Through understanding customer pain points, Aquila Safari met its customers with solutions that yielded fruitful results:

By understanding the consumers' need and appetite for direct booking capability, we were able to roll out a digital programme to build and host "Visit Cape Town" digital assets in key and tactical markets (Participant 2).

This also directly contributed to an increase in revenue, as Participant 7 stated:

Direct business outperformed all other channels, and we continue to improve our systems and reach to grow this channel.

Additionally, Aquila Safari showed evidence of engaging in sound organisational rhetoric in learning about their customers as they organised and participated in one-on-one and group zoom sessions with trade partners to keep them informed about the preparation and readiness of the South African tourism industry. Tourism businesses needed to create an environment of trust in relation to travelling to and in Cape Town, in which the safety and health of tourists was a priority. This was to help visitors make better sense of the crisis and to feel aligned with the brand's efforts. The strategy was to maintain existing and build new travel agency relationships that would continue to supply customers after the crisis, thus reinforcing that long-term credibility of the brand. However, another factor that affected client post-COVID travel globally was fear. This refers to tourists' fear of travelling abroad, and tour agencies play a significant role in communicating and persuading them to travel abroad again.

### ***Data acquisition***

In addition, an opportunity presented by the crisis allowed Aquila Safari to address its deficiencies and demonstrated its readiness to adapt by internally collecting data across their trade and marketing departments. The COVID-19 pandemic also affected the availability of typical data sources and collection techniques for tourism statistics, such as visitor surveys at borders or accommodation data during and after the crisis. Aquila Safari sought to continually understand its audiences and so they internally started collecting data, successful database management was at the core of this process, as the possession of valuable data on customers and mining this information could mitigate the risk and monitor or even predict customer behaviour with important implications for Aquila Safari, some participants mentioned:

The trade and marketing department focused on collecting more information on markets, target markets and used this information to develop digital content, paid media targeting and strategic marketing plans (Participant 4).

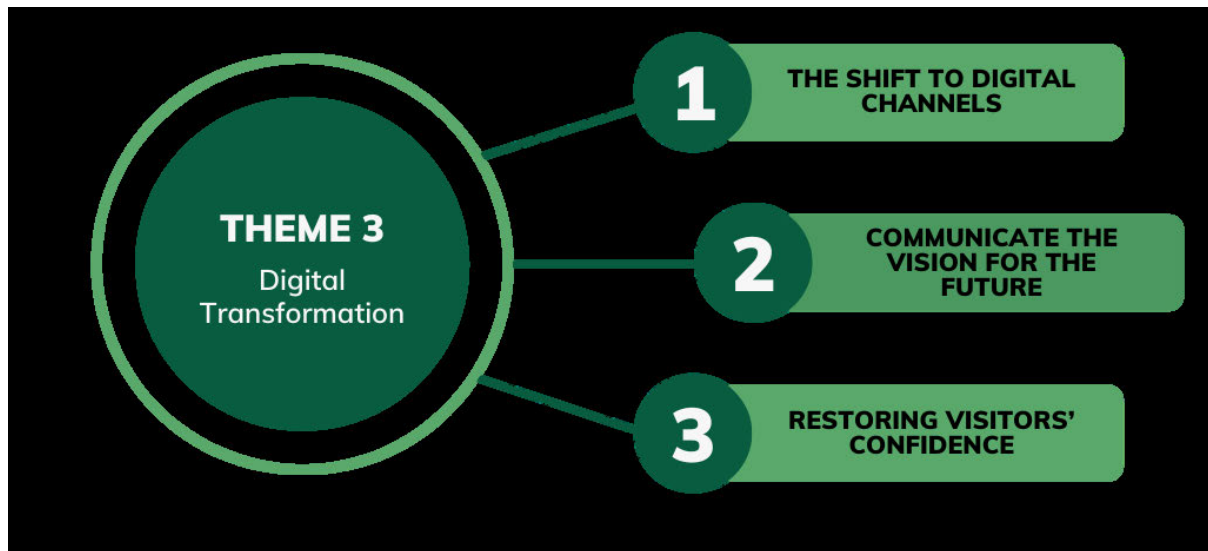
We sought to understand where our international guests were coming from as this data was scarce, so we made nationality data a prerequisite when booking (Participant 5).

We started the passport programme to collect, analyse and understand international key source markets (Participant 6).

This subsequently resulted in changes in targeted audiences and trade partnership procedures. For instance, Participant 7 stated:

We updated our travel partner standard procedures, which have allowed us to know better who our clients that we have compiled into a database, and we have readily accessible stats, how active they are.

### 4.3.3 Theme 3: Digital Transformation



**Figure 4.6 Theme 3: Digital Transformation**

The three most predominant factors in digital transformation were shifting to digital channels, communicating the vision for the future and restoring visitor confidence as shown in Figure 4.6 above.

#### ***The shift to digital channels***

All participants pointed out an increased usage of digital marketing communications such as social media, website, online media buying and online booking platforms. This resulted in the rise of digital transformation and the shift to digital channels as in-person experiences were impacted enormously during COVID-19. Aquila Safari made the most of these channels to inform current and potential consumers about health and safety measures, respond to all their questions, and meet all their needs and requests. As tourism brands slowly re-emerged from the crisis, the importance of engaging and building relationships and emotional links with consumers online had become more vital than ever before.

When asked a question relating to the barriers they faced in communicating their post-crisis brand communication messaging, there were a few points of interest, for example that certain participants struggled in communicating to domestic travellers on digital channels. Audiences had moved to more online channels and in a bid to meet their customers where they were, the transition was not extremely easy. Participants stated:

The challenges we faced are what [online] channels we needed to use to attract domestic audiences and be active in the minds of international audiences (Participant 4).

There was current information daily that we had to process and act on, and in some cases, just when we were about to communicate this, there was new information, and we had to make changes (Participant 6).

Aquila Safari began their shift to digital channels by carefully analysing their customers and marketing mix to determine which channels to utilise to communicate with customers. Some participants mentioned:

We carefully analysed our customers before deciding which digital channels to use to reach them (Participant 1).

For the first time, we had the opportunity to engage with potential customers online and build meaningful relationships. We started this process by analysing who our customers were and what digital channels they used the most, to determine which digital channels would be most effective reaching them (Participant 5).

There was a big shift into using social media post-crisis to reach the post pandemic traveller. We analysed the online channels we were using and not using to find the most effective. So that we could continue to function remotely and continue to communicate with and serve our customers (Participant 8).

An important observation from the participant responses was that post-crisis digital brand communication mainly occurred via social media channels Facebook and Instagram and online travel agencies such as Booking.com, Agoda and HotelBeds and the Aquila Safari website. They were the most utilised channels by Aquila Safari as they were the most effective in reaching their customers and boosting the brand's visibility, some participants mentioned:

We significantly increased the number of news and posts, including video content that was placed on social media, particularly on Facebook and Instagram (Participant 2).

It was understanding the wasteful expenditure we had in our marketing mix, that we were overweight in traditional marketing. Now we understand that we could bolster

and force recovery by using digital reach only with social media and online booking platforms like booking.com (Participant 5).

In addition, Aquila Safari made use of the brand's website, which saw an increase in online booking reservations. This came as a result of updating their website to meet the need and appetite for direct bookings. Some participants mentioned:

We updated our reservation systems and guest experience online platforms to help integrate all the information and data related to the reservations process, contacts from customers, and products and services they consume, among others which resulted in more successful operations management (Participant 4).

By understanding the consumer's need and appetite for direct booking capability, we were able to update our website (Participant 7).

By shifting to digital channels Aquila Safari maintained its survival and ability to continue to supply the same items and quality to customers despite the crisis. Additionally, Aquila Safari's shift to digital channels was the catalyst in their post-COVID-19 success. This sentiment was most evident in their internal marketing reports, which indicated a change in consumer booking patterns, as pointed out by Participant 1. This was affirmed by Participant 5, who stated:

Online direct business has outperformed all other channels, and we will continue to improve our systems and reach to grow this market.

Guests forced this behaviour change to online platforms and channels and Aquila Safari had made the necessary digital marketing changes and had the platforms ready to service domestic and international as they changed. Thus, by providing customers with accurate, easily accessible, digestible, and timely information they assisted consumers in their post-COVID-19 travel destination decision-making.

### ***Communicate the vision for the future***

The participants unanimously said yes when asked whether there were any post-COVID-19 brand communication messages focused on the future or moving beyond the crisis. Participant 5 said:

We were trying to inspire hope that there was something to look forward to once global lockdowns had eased.

Aquila Safari management demonstrated a prospective versus a retrospective approach, as evidenced by their proactive actions and focus on looking ahead to improve things. Cape Town Tourism serves as the designated Regional Tourism Organisation for the city of Cape Town. Its primary responsibilities include tourism marketing, visitor and industry services. To promote Cape Town as a viable tourism destination, the city of Cape Town's tourism office, in collaboration with partners and stakeholders in the travel industry such as Aquila Safari, launched a campaign titled "Find Your Freedom" as shown in Figure 4.7 below. The concept involved a rebranding campaign and an engaging campaign aimed at reminding travellers that this beautiful destination was still worth visiting. Aquila Safari was highlighted as a must-visit destination during a visit to Cape Town. Although not explicitly stated, the messages in the collective action discourse present a compelling prospective outlook focused on moving forward together to overcome a crisis. The conversation surrounding collective action discourse also serves to inspire stakeholders. According to renewal theory, when stakeholders feel aligned with a business, it increases their trust in the business and increases the likelihood of their ongoing support.



**Figure 4.7: Screenshot from Find your freedom launch video**

As mentioned, Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 brand communication messages focused on a prospective approach rather than backward-looking one. These centred around the notion that there will be travel again, which were geared towards the future and provided travellers with an optimistic outlook. Additionally, Aquila Safari's brand communication also consistently stressed that they were still offering world-class Cape Town Big 5 safaris just outside Cape Town throughout the entire time-frame studied. During the pandemic Aquila Safari launched Save Now Safari Later vouchers and once lockdown measures were lifted and domestic travel resumed, there was a notable surge in domestic travel to Aquila Safari. Their messages emphasised purchasing a future holiday as a pathway to looking forward to something. Nevertheless, Aquila Safari's prospective brand communication messages did not provide the future expectation of imagining a hotel stay free from COVID-19, rather it focused on that guests had secured a future holiday and had something to look forward to now that they could travel again. To amplify their messaging Aquila Safari engaged with influencers on various campaigns like the GoPro professionals, Miss Universe and other social media influencers during the recovery period putting Cape Town safaris on the radar of millions of potential visitors. This reinforced the message that Aquila Safari was open and a safe destination for domestic and international travellers.

### ***Restoring visitors' confidence***

This sub-theme highlights the brand's commitment to address the issue and move forward beyond the crisis. The use of a prospective rather than a retrospective approach is one of the Discourse of Renewals key subcomponents that is demonstrated here. In this approach, brands are expected to address the stakeholders right away following a crisis. The brand's stakeholders are reassured that the brand is dedicated to handling the situation in a way that lessens harm by the rapid rhetorical response, which eliminates ambiguity and aids in helping the brand move beyond the crisis. In support of this Participant 6 stated:

I think the big thing for us to give reassurance throughout that was our biggest thing, it was to create trust through the entire value chain, whether it be an existing customer, a future customer or a client.

In its post-crisis brand communication Aquila Safari offered flexible booking conditions including offering credit or vouchers on a future stay, date changes, and cancellations, so that visitors could alter their departure dates or not travel at all. This was facilitated via the brand website for visitors and stakeholders to receive more information regarding the issue. Participants stated:

We offered penalty free date changes and vouchers for a period of up to 24 months from the original date of arrival (Participant 1).

We communicated flexibility in our services, like the penalty free cancellations which were extra benefits provided to their potential customers (Participant 3).

We updated our cancellation policies and allowed refunds and flexible postponements; this was beneficial for the domestic market as it communicated that we didn't want to just keep their money (Participant 5).

The aim was to avoid immediate cash outflow and help Aquila Safari to get through the challenging post-crisis phase, with customers eligible to request a refund after 18 months if the voucher was not used. These messages showcase the brand's inherent value system and reflect how it cared about its stakeholders.

Aquila Safari also answered the customers questions in a series of frequently asked questions that were published on the Aquila Safari website. They answered questions like, how to make a new booking? How to get a refund? How to change your booking date? Here Aquila Safari talked about the steps the brand took to make it easier for customers to postpone, rebook for a future date or cancel and request a refund. Remaining committed to stakeholders to restore visitor confidence was at the forefront of Discourse of Renewal theory recommendations.

In addition, health and safety became a key aspect of travel decision making in the post-pandemic era; participants emphasised that highlighting their ability to adhere to new safety protocols at scale was an opportunity to reinforce brand trust and restore visitors' confidence. The participants mentioned:

We adopted the World Travel and Tourism Council's Safe Travels global protocols, which we communicated simply and clearly through social media, the company website, and to trade partners that were certified and approved to accept guests from across the globe (Participant 1).

Consumers were putting their faith in tourism brands they trusted, and after the pandemic, they associated brand trust with cleanliness, and we wanted to be at the forefront of that (Participant 3).

An important observation from the responses regarding restoring visitor confidence was that Aquila Safari focused on brand positioning by repeatedly stating: “*Big 5 Safari, under 2 hours from Cape Town*”. This created market differentiation in that Aquila Safari was within the travel radius, guests could easily drive there, and an outdoor socially distanced experience was offered. Some participants stated:

Video content was shared online to highlight the ongoing preparations to ensure visitor safety and to capture the staff’s excitement and anticipation of hosting visitors. Such content was critical to keep the Big 5 safari experience alive in the minds of passengers (Participant 6).

Messages were about we know that you are itching to get out and travel again; we have packaged some amazing Cape Town Big 5 safari offers just for you, under 2 hours from Cape Town! (Participant 7).

The World Travel and Tourism Council (2020d) recommended rebuilding visitor confidence through clear, consistent, and up-to-date information about the protocols and policies available to keep them safe. Singh, Nicely, Day and Cai (2022) propose that messages should ensure that visitors know about the measures being taken, believe the destination has COVID-19 under control, and feel confident and trust the information. Customers were directed to Aquila Safari’s website which provided more information on the brand’s operational and staff preparedness, how the company was ensuring a safe experience for visitors, and their innovative approach to health and hygiene in the post-COVID-19 world as shown in Figure 4.8 below.



## TRANSPORT REGULATIONS APPLICABLE TO YOUR SAFARI:

Disaster Management Act: Regulations: Alert level 1 during Coronavirus COVID-19 lockdown:

76 (1) For purposes of this regulation "long distance travel" is a trip of 200 km or more.

(3) (a) may not carry more than 70% of the licensed capacity for long distance travel; and

(3) (b) may carry 100% of the licensed capacity for any trip not regarded as long distance travel in terms of subregulation (1).

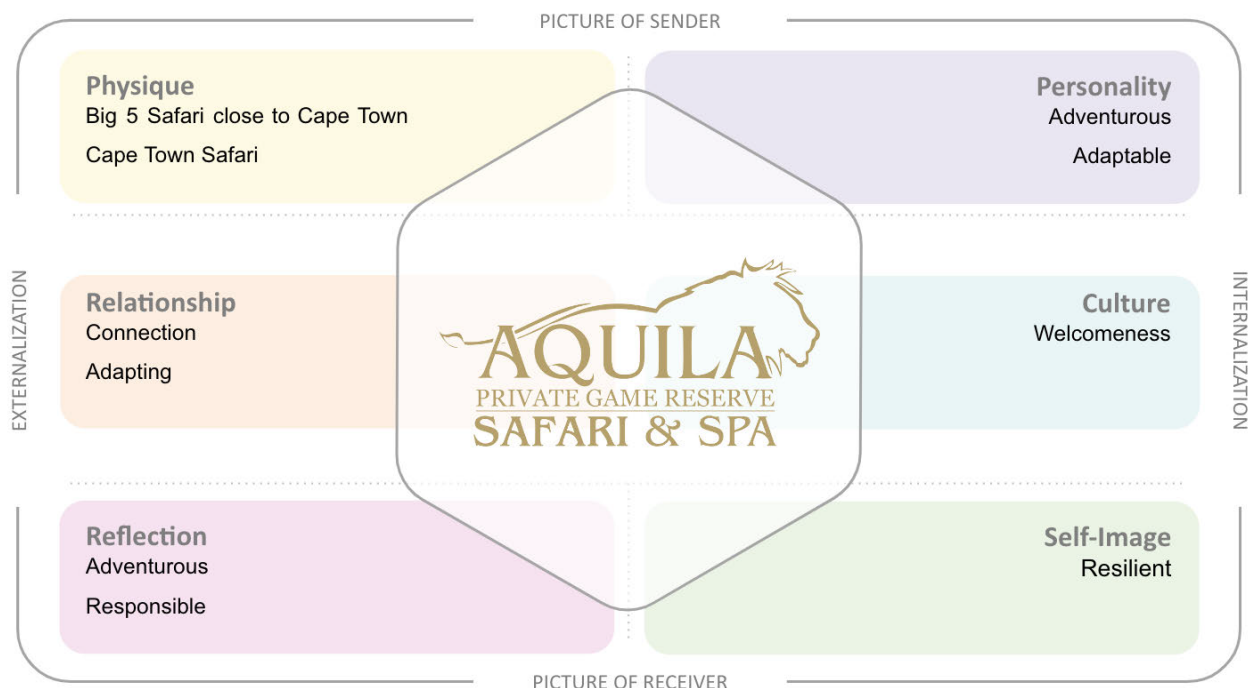
**Figure 4.8 Safe Service Safaris Poster**

## 5 CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

In this chapter the researcher's key findings are discussed according to the study's research questions and literature review, and in relation to Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and Discourse of Renewal theory. Additionally, this section discusses the study's anticipated contribution and limitations, and concludes with suggestions for future research. It must be noted that Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 brand identity remained consistent and easily recognisable and all four aspects of the Discourse of Renewal theory were found in Aquila Safari's brand communications spanning from March 2021 to March 2022, as detailed below.

### 5.1 Research Objective 1

**Research Objective 1:** Explore what brand identity does Aquila Safari's staff want to promote in their post-COVID-19 recovery.



**Figure 5.1** Aquila Safari's Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism

Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism provides a multifaceted approach to understanding and communicating Aquila Safari's brand identity during its post-COVID-19 recovery.

The model's six components—physique, personality, culture, relationship, reflection, and self-image—are integral in crafting a cohesive and appealing brand narrative for Aquila Safari.

Applying Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism (Figure 5.1) to analyse Aquila Safari's COVID-19 brand recovery reveals a strong brand identity centred around the core proposition of being the Big 5 Safari Close to Cape Town. This distinctive characteristic has been instrumental in shaping Aquila Safari's brand identity and its recovery brand communication strategy post-COVID-19. This tangible attribute is crucial in distinguishing the reserve from competitors. Post-pandemic, the focus on safety and resilience while maintaining the core safari experience reinforces the brand's physical appeal. Despite the pandemic's disruptive impact, Aquila Safari maintains a resilient brand identity, focusing on safety and resilience while offering authentic safari experiences. The reserve caters to a broad audience, offering traditional game drives, horseback safaris, and quad bike adventures. This strategic positioning as a premier destination for both day-trip visitors and overnight guests underscores the brand's commitment to providing a comprehensive safari experience.

While the repetition of certain descriptors like "safe" and "welcoming" across different facets may seem like a weakness, it underscores the brand's commitment to ensuring the well-being of its staff and guests during challenging times. Effective communication is vital in conveying Aquila Safari's brand identity. The team should focus on promoting the brand's core attributes, such as safety, resilience, and authenticity, while integrating these messages into all marketing channels. This approach ensures that the brand's essence is clearly communicated to both domestic and international markets. In addition, consistency in brand messaging and visual elements was crucial for maintaining a strong brand identity during post-crisis recovery. The Aquila Safari Trade and Marketing team needed to ensure that all communications aligned with the brand's personality and values, providing a cohesive experience for both new and returning visitors.

In post-pandemic branding efforts, Aquila Safari aims to communicate its values and offerings effectively to the public. Brand communication becomes vital in conveying the brand's essence and encouraging travel once COVID-19 restrictions ease. The

emphasis on the Big 5 safari experience close to Cape Town for the domestic market and the Cape Town safari experience for the international market aligns with Kapferer's (2008) assertion that destination brand features form the basis of its identity. Thus, balancing tradition with innovation is important for meeting modern consumer expectations. Aquila Safari should explore innovative approaches to enhance its offerings and communicate its brand identity while preserving the core values that define the brand.

Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism model offers a comprehensive framework to understand Aquila Safari's brand identity. The personality facet describes the brand as adventurous and free-spirited, shaping interactions between tourists and the local community. This portrayal aligns with the experiences Aquila Safari offers, from thrilling game drives to immersive wildlife encounters. The alignment between the brand's personality and its customer interactions enhances its appeal, fostering a strong emotional connection with visitors. The reflection facet portrays Aquila's visitors as seeking adventure and bucket-list experiences in Cape Town and wildlife encounters. The imagery and messaging used in promotions should reinforce this reflection, ensuring that potential visitors see themselves as part of the exciting and unique experiences offered by Aquila Safari. Aquila effectively integrates these facets into its physical appearance and communication strategies, maintaining consistency and competitiveness in the tourism market.

The culture surrounding Aquila Safari emphasises safety and a commitment to authentic safari experiences. By integrating local cultural elements into its offerings and ensuring a culturally sensitive approach, Aquila Safari strengthens its position in the market and builds lasting relationships with both staff and visitors. Aquila Safari's relationship with its customers is built on providing personalised and memorable safari experiences. This relationship is crucial for cultivating repeat business and customer loyalty. Effective communication of safety measures and personal connections made during the safari experiences are essential for rebuilding trust and encouraging repeat visits. Customers' self-image is closely tied to the brand's portrayal of itself. Aquila Safari needs to align its brand identity with the values and aspirations of its target audience. The brand should continuously evaluate and adapt its messaging to ensure that it resonates with customers' self-perceptions and expectations.

However, there are areas for improvement, particularly in aligning newer staff members' perceptions with the brand's identity. While the core values should remain intact, adaptation to modern consumer expectations is crucial, necessitating a balance between tradition and innovation. Aquila's commitment to its customers, characterised by reliability and loyalty, strengthens its brand identity and fosters long-term relationships.

Building and maintaining strong relationships with customers is key to fostering loyalty. Personalised experiences and responsive customer service are essential for reinforcing Aquila Safari's commitment to its visitors. The analysis also highlights the need for Aquila Safari to focus on promoting certain sub-items of its brand identity to reach a wider audience effectively. Communication strategies, such as the "Save Now Safari Later" promotion, play a vital role in shaping guests' perceptions and reinforcing the brand's resilience and safety measures.

Moreover, selecting appropriate terminology for each facet of the brand identity is essential for effective communication and alignment with managers' perceptions. Alternative words that capture the essence of Aquila Safari's identity should be explored to ensure clarity and understanding among stakeholders.

Aquila Safari's alignment with the Discourse of Renewal theory underscores its proactive approach to learning from the pandemic and adapting its operations to meet travellers' evolving needs. By incorporating industry-wide safety standards and communication strategies, Aquila Safari demonstrates its commitment to providing a secure and responsible travel experience.

In conclusion, Aquila Safari exhibits a robust brand identity characterised by resilience, safety, and authenticity. Leveraging Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and other theoretical frameworks, Aquila Safari can refine its branding strategies to effectively communicate its values and offerings, ensuring continued success in the post-pandemic tourism landscape. This strategic approach not only solidifies Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 brand identity but also ensures its enduring appeal in a competitive tourism market in recovery.

## **5.2 Research Objective 2**

**Research Objective 2:** Explore how Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 crisis brand communication reflects the Discourse of Renewal and its four subcomponents

### **5.2.1 Organisational Learning**

Aquila Safari demonstrated organisational learning by consistently interpreting and processing latest information, and subsequently adapting based on acquired knowledge within theme one, actively learning from the crisis. In addition, Aquila Safari's post-crisis brand communications under this theme subtly reflected the organisational learning process by describing how the trade and marketing department was closely watching the evolving trends and making decisions based on recently acquired knowledge to inform decision-making.

Aquila Safari prioritised the well-being and safety of both its staff and visitors as the most efficient method of promoting the Big 5 safari destination and progressing towards renewal in theme two, moving toward renewal in theme two, and understanding their audiences. Aquila Safari demonstrated organisational learning through its consistent research of its target audience and incorporating this information into its rhetorical approach and post-crisis brand communications.

The most frequently mentioned aspect of post-COVID-19 brand communication was the emphasis on health and safety. A health and safety message serves the purpose of notifying visitors that Aquila Safari is now secure and prepared to accommodate them after the pandemic.

In the third theme digital transformation, brand communication messages made clear that after the analysis of customers and its marketing mix, this influenced changes in the digital channels that it used to communicate with customers. Despite not overtly describing the process of learning, Aquila Safaris' brand communication messaging did articulate organisational learning through their meaning. Although Aquila Safari did not explicitly articulate its theme of the shift to digital channels in relation to learning, the brand's communication messages reflected elements of learning. In addition, Aquila Safaris' brand communication messages may more accurately represent organisational learning by providing an in-depth explanation of the learning

process. By incorporating the term learning the learning process could be described with greater accuracy.

Aquila Safari has demonstrated effective organisational learning throughout its post-COVID-19 recovery efforts. The brand has actively engaged in learning from the crisis by continuously interpreting and processing new information, adapting its strategies accordingly. This is evident in its updated communications and operational adjustments, showcasing a proactive approach to overcoming pandemic-related challenges. Additionally, Aquila Safari has committed to understanding its audience better through research and adapting its messaging, particularly by emphasising health and safety to communicate its preparedness for post-pandemic visits. This approach aligns with the principle of using acquired knowledge to inform decision-making and enhance brand communication. Furthermore, the shift towards digital channels in communication reflects Aquila Safari's adaptation to new trends and technologies. Although the brand has not explicitly articulated the learning process, its communication strategy demonstrates an understanding of the need to evolve and innovate in response to changing customer preferences and technological advancements.

Despite its successes, Aquila Safari faces challenges in fully articulating and leveraging its organisational learning. One area for improvement is the explicit communication of learning processes. While the brand has integrated aspects of learning into its communication, it would benefit from more clearly describing these processes. This enhanced transparency could build stakeholder confidence by demonstrating how lessons from the crisis have informed its strategies. Additionally, there is a need to balance knowledge acquisition with its critical application. This involves not only learning from failures but also unlearning outdated practices and fostering critical thinking about how to effectively apply new insights (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Argyris & Schön, 1978).

In conclusion, organisational learning is essential for effective post-crisis brand communication and renewal. Aquila Safari has successfully demonstrated several aspects of organisational learning, including adapting to new trends, understanding its audience, and incorporating feedback into its strategies. However, the brand can enhance its approach by more explicitly communicating its learning processes and

addressing outdated practices. By embracing a culture of continuous learning, Aquila Safari can better prepare for future challenges, improve its crisis management strategies, and strengthen its position in the market. The insights from this study highlight the importance of integrating organisational learning into brand communication strategies to achieve long-term success and resilience.

### **5.2.2 Ethical Communication**

The element of sound organisational rhetoric is related to theme three only. Within the third theme of digital transformation, Aquila Safari provided numerous examples of ethical communication. By giving accurate, up-to-date, transparent, and honest information about its cancellation and refund policies, it demonstrated suggestive evidence of ethical communication. The brand's messaging was clear, and it also acted ethically by providing reliable information in an effort to get a refund via the website. Visitors could easily understand where to go for more information or to request a refund, cancellation, or postponement thanks to the information supplied.

Aquila Safari has demonstrated a commitment to ethical communication through transparent and honest messaging. For example, during the pandemic, the brand provided clear and up-to-date information regarding cancellation and refund policies. This transparency is vital for building trust and reducing uncertainty among stakeholders. The brand's focus on clear communication about refund processes and safety measures aligns with the ethical principle of offering meaningful choices to stakeholders. By delivering accurate information and ensuring straightforward processes for refunds and cancellations, Aquila Safari upholds its responsibility to its stakeholders. Rebuilding trust is central to post-crisis communication, as noted by Lehto *et al.* (2008) and Ketter and Avraham (2021). Aquila Safari's approach to providing consistent and reliable information supports this objective, in line with recommendations from the World Travel and Tourism Council (2020d) and PATA (2024).

While Aquila Safari's commitment to ethical communication is evident, it is essential to recognize potential pitfalls, excessive transparency without sensitivity can lead to increased anxiety or distrust among stakeholders (Tenbrunsel & Messick, 2004). A nuanced approach, integrating sensitivity with transparency, is recommended to

avoid potential negative outcomes, such as undermining morale or causing panic. While transparency is vital, an exclusive focus on it might obscure underlying issues or power dynamics. Therefore, it is crucial to balance transparency with strategic realism to address stakeholder concerns comprehensively (Schmidt & Redler, 2018).

Providing evidence to lessen uncertainty and reassurance of safety are all part of building visitor confidence. It was the only factor on which all participants agreed completely. Gaining the trust of tourists is a primary goal of Aquila Safari's brand communication. According to Lehto *et al.* (2008), the main goal of post-crisis brand communication messages should be to earn back visitors' trust after a crisis. Ketter and Avraham (2021) discovered that the goal of post-COVID-19 brand communication was to restore customers' trust. Additionally, the World Travel and Tourism Council (2020d) suggested restoring tourists' trust by providing them with consistent, accurate and up-to-date information regarding the protocols and policies aimed at ensuring their safety. During 2020, PATA (2024) suggested effective communications should ensure that guests are informed about the implemented measures and provide confidence that COVID-19 is under control at the destination and trust the information supplied.

It is widely acknowledged among experts that travel destinations must provide comprehensive and accurate health and safety information. The message feature in question, known as factual information, refers to information that is both truthful and unbiased regarding travel after the pandemic. Although strongly associated with safety, this characteristic is distinguished by the message's goal. According to Coombs (2010), crisis communication includes two primary objectives: the management of meaning and the management of information. While the primary focus of the safety element is to control visitors' perspectives, effective information management necessitates the provision of accurate and impartial information. Coombs (2020) argues that in the Discourse of Renewal, brands should prioritise the management of information over visitors' perceptions. Kim and Liu (2012) conducted a study on H1N1 influenza, which suggests that locations that solely focus on perception management face the risk of enduring reputational harm.

An integral aspect of Discourse of Renewal theory is ethical communication, which significantly influences a brand's ability to navigate a crisis and gain the trust of

stakeholders. Aquila Safari's adherence to principles of transparency, honesty, and stakeholder engagement has significantly contributed to its effective crisis brand communication. By maintaining a focus on ethical communication, the brand has successfully rebuilt trust and supported stakeholder confidence. Effective communication during crises, marked by significant uncertainty, necessitates clarity and objectivity, while a brand must uphold its integrity. The increase in stakeholder support, confidence, and trust may ensue. By continuing to uphold strong values, engage stakeholders effectively, and balance transparency with sensitivity, Aquila Safari can enhance its post-crisis brand renewal efforts and sustain long-term success. In the course of this research, Aquila Safari has provided compelling evidence demonstrating the application of ethical communication. The findings contribute to a broader understanding of ethical communication in crisis management and offer valuable insights for travel industry professionals aiming to navigate the complexities of post-pandemic recovery.

### **5.2.3 Prospective Rather Than Retrospective Vision**

Aquila Safari's application of a prospective vision is evident in two key themes from their post-COVID-19 communication strategy with themes one and three. In the first theme actively learning from the crisis, Aquila Safari adapted their sales offering and formulated the Save Now Safari Later sales promotion. Providing brand communication messages with optimism that the brand is open for business and offering Big 5 Safari day trips and overnight stays two hours from Cape Town. This theme serves as an excellent example of prospective vision and a mindset that is focused on the future. Aquila Safari effectively communicated optimism about its operational capacity and readiness for future tourism.

The third theme, digital transformation, subtly conveyed messages that provided a compelling and forward-looking perspective on how to overcome the COVID-19 pandemic. According to experts, in the post-COVID-19 pandemic era, brand communication messaging should serve as a reminder of the destination's strengths and reputation, while also highlighting its ongoing existence of its distinctive characteristics. The final aspect is of considerable significance when considering travel after COVID-19, as South African tourists have expressed concern about how COVID-19 regulations might restrict their access to a vast array of attractions and

experiences (Moorman & McCarthy, 2021). Despite the challenges posed by COVID-19, Aquila Safari's digital communication highlighted the destination's strengths and its ongoing appeal. This approach reassured potential tourists about the brand's adaptability and readiness for the future, thus maintaining stakeholder confidence. Concurrently, scholars reached a consensus that brand communication messaging ought to emphasise the genuine local interactions of the location. This comprises genuine arts and entertainment, local culinary cuisine and culture activities.

Nevertheless, the Discourse of Renewal theory shifts the focus towards a future-oriented approach in post-crisis brand communication, specifically examining how the brand will recover from the crisis (Ulmer *et al.*, 2019). The application of Discourse of Renewal theory is advantageous for a brand as it provides a specific objective to strive for following a crisis and increases stakeholder confidence (Pyle, Fuller & Ulmer, 2020). In this case, the theory can help minimise negative effects during a global pandemic and facilitate post-COVID-19 tourism industry recovery.

Overall, by placing a major emphasis on optimism and moving forward, Aquila Safari's post-crisis brand communication messaging resonated with prospective vision. Positive narratives were found in two of the three themes. Aquila Safaris' brand communication messages did not reflect on the past but rather focused on the future; however, the messages did not offer a picture of what a renewed Aquila Safari would look like after successfully navigating the COVID-19 pandemic. The messaging predominantly focused on immediate safety and operational readiness, but did not fully articulate the long-term strategic vision or the enhanced experiences anticipated after overcoming the crisis.

The Discourse of Renewal theory underscores the importance of maintaining a balance between a forward-looking vision and strategic realism (Schmidt & Redler, 2018). Overemphasis on the future without addressing past lessons can lead to overlooking valuable insights and potentially repeating previous mistakes (Beverland, 2018; Weick, 1993). Therefore, integrating past experiences with future possibilities can enhance decision-making and adaptive responses (Desai, Maslach & Madsen, 2017).

For Aquila Safari's marketing and trade team, adopting a prospective vision is crucial for several reasons. Firstly, it enhances stakeholder confidence by clearly communicating an optimistic outlook, which is essential for brand recovery and growth. Secondly, a forward-looking approach can attract and retain customers by appealing to their desire for positive, future-oriented experiences, thereby making Aquila Safari more attractive compared to competitors that focus on past crises. Additionally, emphasising the brand's potential for growth and renewal helps rebuild its identity, demonstrating resilience and adaptability. Moreover, a prospective vision enables strategic planning that anticipates future challenges and opportunities, thereby improving the brand's preparedness and competitive advantage. Finally, highlighting future-oriented strategies helps differentiate Aquila Safari in the tourism market, showcasing its commitment to innovation and customer-centric experiences.

This study contributes to the understanding of post-pandemic brand communication by integrating the Discourse of Renewal theory and its emphasis on prospective vision. This study provides insights into post-pandemic brand identity and brand communication by examining key elements that can encourage visitors to visit Cape Town, with a specific focus on Aquila Safari. The participants' interview responses sparked a lively debate that will assist travel industry professionals get a better grasp on what to put in their post-pandemic marketing communication messages to appeal to local and international tourists. Furthermore, the findings of this study serve to reinforce the key role of safety in the field of post-crisis brand communication as a means of recovering from a pandemic. Moreover, this study addresses a notable void in the existing body of literature on brand communication in the aftermath of a crisis by incorporating the post-pandemic perspective.

In conclusion, Aquila Safari's use of prospective vision in its post-crisis communication demonstrates a commitment to future growth and renewal. By continuing to focus on a positive and forward-looking narrative, Aquila Safari can enhance its brand resilience, attract tourists, and maintain a competitive edge in the evolving tourism landscape.

#### **5.2.4 Sound Organisational Rhetoric**

The research underscores the critical importance of integrating sound organisational rhetoric into brand communication strategies, particularly in post-crisis scenarios. As posited by Cheney and Lair (2005), organisational rhetoric serves to highlight pertinent issues within contemporary organisational contexts, emphasising identification and persuasion. The findings align with Ulmer and Sellnow's (2020) assertion that effective organisational rhetoric aims to disseminate crisis response information to stakeholders, thereby enhancing their understanding of the situation.

The study revealed that when stakeholders perceive alignment between their interests and a brand's initiatives, it can lead to increased support and loyalty (Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger, 2015). This finding has significant implications for brand communication strategies, suggesting that brands should strive to articulate their crisis responses in ways that resonate with stakeholder interests and values.

This study examined the role of sound organisational rhetoric in Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 brand communication strategy, revealing implications for brand communication in post-crisis contexts. The element of sound organisational rhetoric is specifically associated with theme one. The first theme actively learning from the crisis related to sound organisational rhetoric subcomponent of renewal. Aquila Safari created an optimistic reality through motivating consumers that it was safe to travel again. By fostering a positive environment throughout the brand's post-crisis response, leaders are capable of effectively demonstrating a forward-looking perspective. The research highlighted the crucial role of brand communication leaders in effective sound organisational rhetoric, supporting the views of Ulmer, Seeger, and Sellnow (2007). Leaders were found to be pivotal in managing crises and communicating brand responses effectively. The study emphasised the importance of ethical communication with both internal and external stakeholders, advocating for transparency and information sharing (Ulmer and Pyle, 2021). They play a vital role in facilitating effective brand communication and fostering a positive atmosphere prior to, during, and subsequent to a crisis, owing to their noteworthy influence in the public sphere. Therefore, it is crucial that the individual holding the highest position within the organisation takes on the responsibility of serving as the primary means of communication.

The study underscores the vital role of leaders who actively engage in learning during a crisis. Additionally, it highlights the importance of balanced sound organisational rhetoric, supported by tangible actions. This aligns with Mumby and Stohl's (2007) caution against overly persuasive rhetoric that may obscure fundamental organisational issues. The findings suggest that consistency between verbal communication and behaviour is crucial in organisational dynamics (Schmidt and Redler, 2018). This supports Beverland's (2018) argument that renewal sound organisational rhetoric must be backed by concrete actions to prevent stakeholder doubt.

While Aquila Safari engaged in renewal theory in many aspects, there was a lack of leader-based post-COVID-19 brand communication. The research found that Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 brand communication demonstrated aspects of the Discourse of Renewal theory, particularly ethical communication, organisational learning and demonstrating a forward-looking perspective. However, the identified gap in leader-based communication suggests that the full potential of this theory was not realised in practice. Based on the analysis of all the interviews, it was found that none of the communication originated from a specific individual. Instead, the majority of the brand communication messages were disseminated by the brand through digital platforms like websites and social media, rather than from a leader. This finding suggests a potential missed opportunity in leveraging leadership communication to enhance stakeholder support and loyalty.

For Aquila Safari's marketing and trade team, understanding and implementing sound organisational rhetoric is essential for several reasons. Firstly, effective communication from brand leaders can significantly enhance stakeholder trust and loyalty, which is crucial for brand recovery and growth following a crisis. Secondly, conveying a clear and inspiring vision can motivate both internal and external stakeholders, fostering unity and a sense of purpose. Additionally, transparent and ethical communication helps mitigate scepticism and build a positive brand image, which is important for long-term success. Consistency between verbal communication and actual behaviour further strengthens stakeholder confidence in the brand's commitments and promises. Finally, incorporating lessons learned from the COVID-19 crisis into future crisis management strategies can improve the brand's resilience and preparedness.

This study underscores the necessity for tourism brands such as Aquila Safari to integrate principles of sound organisational rhetoric into their brand communication strategies, particularly in crisis contexts. By addressing identified gaps and leveraging insights from brand communication theories, tourism brands can enhance their brand communication and foster stronger, more resilient relationships with stakeholders.

In conclusion, this study contributes to the understanding of organisational rhetoric in brand communication, particularly in post-crisis contexts. It emphasises the significance of applying theories like the Discourse of Renewal, particularly its sound organisational rhetoric tenets such as leader-driven communication and balanced rhetoric backed by action, in developing effective brand communication strategies.

To the above aim, the study explored how Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 crisis brand communication reflected the four subcomponents of Discourse of Renewal theory: organisational learning, ethical communication, prospective vision, and sound organisational rhetoric. The findings demonstrate that Aquila Safari actively learned from the crisis, prioritised ethical communication, and adopted a forward-looking perspective in its messaging. However, the brand communication lacked leader-based communication, a key element of sound organisational rhetoric. Overall, this study highlights the value of Discourse of Renewal theory in guiding post-crisis brand communication for tourism destinations. Aquila Safari's successful application of the theory elements offers valuable insights for other destinations navigating similar challenges.

### **5.3 Research Objective 3**

**Research Objective 3:** Identify what recommendations can be made for Aquila Safari's staff to engage in the Discourse of Renewal when dealing with the post-COVID-19 crisis future brand communication crises.

The discourse of renewal highlights how crises can provide significant opportunities for organisational growth, transformation, and renewal. It is crucial to address recommendations that emerge from these opportunities, as understanding how to better navigate and leverage crises can lead to enhanced organisational outcomes.

Therefore, examining these recommendations is central to this research question, which seeks to explore effective strategies for responding to and capitalising on crises.

Based on the findings from this study, several recommendations are proposed to strengthen Aquila Safari's engagement with the Discourse of Renewal in addressing future brand communication crises.

- **Enhance Transparency of Learning Processes:** To build stakeholder confidence, Aquila Safari should more explicitly communicate its organisational learning processes. This can be achieved by providing regular updates on how insights and lessons from past crises are being integrated into current strategies. By transparently sharing the evolution of their approach, Aquila Safari can demonstrate a commitment to continuous improvement and learning.
- **Refine Balance in Ethical Communication:** While transparency is crucial, Aquila Safari should develop a more nuanced approach to disseminating sensitive information. Tailoring communication strategies to different stakeholder groups can help mitigate potential negative impacts, such as increased anxiety. This involves balancing the need for openness with sensitivity to the concerns of various audiences, ensuring that communication remains reassuring and constructive.
- **Articulate Long-Term Strategic Vision:** Aquila Safari should create and communicate a clear long-term strategic vision that integrates lessons from the crisis with future possibilities. This vision should outline the brand's direction and strategic planning, providing stakeholders with a comprehensive understanding of the brand's goals and how it plans to achieve them. Articulating a forward-looking strategy will enhance stakeholder engagement and confidence in the brand's future.
- **Implement Leader-Driven Communication:** The study highlights a gap in leader-based communication, which is central to the principles of the Discourse of Renewal theory. Aquila Safari should prioritise regular communication from its leadership, including the Chief Executive Officer and

Group Marketing and Trade Manager. Leader-driven messages can reinforce the brand's commitment to crisis management and future planning, thereby fostering greater trust and credibility among stakeholders. The analysis indicates that Aquila Safari's brand communication following the COVID-19 pandemic successfully engaged with the four subcomponents of the Discourse of Renewal theory. However, the absence of prominent leader-based communication highlighted a gap in alignment with the theory's principles. Leaders play a crucial role in effective organisational rhetoric and crisis communication, and their visibility can significantly enhance stakeholder trust and support.

- **Align Rhetoric with Action:** To maintain credibility and build long-term stakeholder relationships, it is essential for Aquila Safari to ensure that all communicated strategies and promises are reflected in the brand's actions. Consistency between rhetoric and action is crucial for reinforcing stakeholder confidence and demonstrating the brand's reliability.
- **Develop Crisis-Specific Communication Protocols:** Establishing clear protocols for crisis communication that incorporate the principles of the Discourse of Renewal is vital. These protocols should define roles, responsibilities, and guidelines for effective communication during and after crises. A well-structured crisis communication plan will enable Aquila Safari to respond promptly and effectively to future crises.
- **Conduct Regular Stakeholder Feedback Analysis:** Implementing a system for regularly collecting and analysing stakeholder feedback on brand communications is recommended. This approach allows for continuous improvement and adaptation of communication strategies, ensuring that they remain relevant and effective in addressing stakeholder concerns. Moreover, participants emphasised the need for a formal crisis brand communication plan. Implementing such a plan will provide Aquila Safari with a strategic framework for managing crises, including establishing clear procedures and ensuring that key spokespeople are well-prepared for future communication challenges.

In summary, these recommendations aim to enhance Aquila Safari's brand communication strategy by leveraging strengths identified in the study while addressing areas for improvement. By implementing these suggestions, Aquila Safari can strengthen its resilience, improve stakeholder relationships, and better position itself for future challenges and opportunities in the post-COVID-19 landscape.

## 6 CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION

This chapter presents the researcher's conclusions based on the study's research questions, literature review, and frameworks such as Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and Discourse of Renewal theory. It also covers the study's expected contributions, limitations, and provides recommendations for future research.

### 6.1 Research Objective 1

**Research Objective 1:** Explore what brand identity does Aquila Safari's staff want to promote in their post-COVID-19 recovery.

Aquila Safari's brand identity, characterised by resilience, safety, and authenticity, is well-supported by Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism. The model provides a comprehensive framework to understand and communicate the brand's identity effectively. By leveraging this framework, Aquila Safari can refine its branding strategies to align with both traditional values and modern consumer expectations.

The integration of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism in understanding Aquila Safari's post-pandemic brand communication underscores the importance of a cohesive brand identity in driving recovery and sustaining long-term success. Through strategic communication, staff alignment, and a balance between tradition and innovation, Aquila Safari can solidify its position in the competitive tourism market and continue to attract and engage its target audience.

This strategic approach not only fortifies Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 brand identity but also ensures its enduring appeal and resilience in the evolving tourism landscape.

#### **Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism Recommendations**

- **Enhance Brand Communication:** Utilise Kapferer's Prism to craft targeted messaging that highlights Aquila Safari's unique selling propositions and aligns with consumer expectations. Emphasise the brand's commitment to safety, adventure, and authenticity in all communications.

- **Strengthen Customer Relationships:** Invest in personalised customer interactions and responsive service to build trust and encourage repeat business. Develop loyalty programs and tailored promotions to reinforce the brand's dedication to customer satisfaction.
- **Integrate Innovation:** Explore new technologies and trends to enhance the safari experience and communicate the brand's identity effectively. This could include virtual tours, interactive content, and innovative booking solutions.
- **Monitor and Adapt:** Continuously monitor customer feedback and market trends to adapt the brand's messaging and offerings. Stay agile in responding to changes in consumer behaviour and expectations to maintain a competitive edge.

## 6.2 Research Objective 2

**Research Objective 2:** Explore how Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 crisis brand communication reflects the Discourse of Renewal and its four subcomponents

This study examined Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 brand communication through the lens of the Discourse of Renewal theory and its four subcomponents: Organisational Learning, Ethical Communication, Prospective Vision, and Sound Organisational Rhetoric. The findings reveal both strengths and areas for improvement in Aquila Safari's communication strategy.

- **Organisational Learning:** Aquila Safari demonstrated a commendable capacity for organisational learning, evident in its adaptive responses to the crisis. The brand's emphasis on health and safety measures and digital transformation reflects its ability to interpret and apply new information effectively. However, the explicit communication of these learning processes could be enhanced to provide greater transparency to stakeholders.
- **Ethical Communication:** The brand successfully implemented ethical communication practices, particularly in its handling of cancellation and refund policies. This approach aligns with best practices for rebuilding trust post-crisis. Nevertheless, maintaining a balance between transparency and sensitivity remains a challenge that requires ongoing attention.

- **Prospective Vision:** Aquila Safari's communication strategy effectively conveyed a forward-looking perspective, focusing on optimism and future readiness. This was particularly evident in the promotion of new offerings and digital engagement initiatives. However, the articulation of a long-term strategic vision could be more explicit to enhance stakeholder engagement and strategic planning.
- **Sound Organisational Rhetoric:** While Aquila Safari's communications aligned with some aspects of the Discourse of Renewal, a significant gap was identified in leader-based communication. The absence of visible leadership in brand communications represents a missed opportunity to strengthen stakeholder support and reinforce brand values.

### 6.3 Research Objective 3

**Research Objective 3:** Identify what recommendations can be made for Aquila Safari's staff to engage in the Discourse of Renewal when dealing with the post-COVID-19 crisis future brand communication crises.

In exploring Research Objective 3, this study has identified key recommendations for Aquila Safari to effectively engage with the Discourse of Renewal when addressing future brand communication crises. The Discourse of Renewal emphasises how crises can serve as pivotal opportunities for organisational growth, transformation, and renewal. Thus, understanding and implementing effective strategies for navigating and capitalising on these opportunities is essential for enhancing organisational outcomes.

The recommendations outlined in this section are designed to bolster Aquila Safari's alignment with the Discourse of Renewal theory and improve its brand communication strategy. Enhancing transparency of learning processes will build stakeholder confidence by demonstrating a commitment to continuous improvement. Refining the balance in ethical communication will ensure that sensitive information is disseminated in a manner that minimises potential negative impacts and maintains stakeholder reassurance.

Articulating a clear long-term strategic vision will provide stakeholders with a comprehensive understanding of the brand's direction and future planning, thereby enhancing engagement and confidence. Implementing leader-driven communication is crucial, as leadership plays a central role in effective crisis management and organisational rhetoric. This approach will address the current gap in leader-based communication and foster greater trust and credibility.

Aligning rhetoric with action is imperative for maintaining credibility and strengthening long-term stakeholder relationships. Developing crisis-specific communication protocols will provide a structured framework for managing crises effectively. Additionally, conducting regular stakeholder feedback analysis will enable Aquila Safari to continuously refine its communication strategies, ensuring they remain relevant and responsive to stakeholder concerns.

In conclusion, by adopting these recommendations, Aquila Safari can leverage its strengths, address areas for improvement, and better position itself for future challenges and opportunities in the post-COVID-19 landscape. These strategies will not only enhance the brand's resilience but also reinforce its commitment to effective and ethical communication in times of crisis.

## **6.4 Limitations**

The ability to make generalisations of our findings is limited due to the use of semi-structured interviews with only eight participants. The study exclusively examined the brand identity and brand communication of one specific tourism brand in South Africa after a crisis. A broader sample that examines various brands might reveal additional subtleties. While this study offered valuable insights into Aquila Safari's post-crisis brand identity and brand communication, a larger dataset could offer a more comprehensive and detailed understanding of the travel sector's post-crisis brand identity and brand communication response to the COVID-19 crisis.

## **6.5 Theoretical, Methodological and Practical Significance**

### **6.5.1 Theoretical Significance**

The study's theoretical implications are rooted in its application of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the Discourse of Renewal theory in understanding and analysing Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 brand identity and brand communication, offering a nuanced understanding of how tourism brands navigate crises and effectively communicate with their stakeholders. The findings underscore the importance of maintaining a consistent and recognisable brand identity, particularly during crises, while also highlighting the role of the subcomponents of Discourse of Renewal. Furthermore, this study contributes to the academic literature by integrating Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the Discourse of Renewal theory, which have not been used together in previous research within the same context, expanding the theoretical framework available for analysing brand communication strategies following crises. This fresh approach not only enhances the depth of analysis but also broadens the applicability of these theories beyond their traditional domains, paving the way for interdisciplinary insights and collaborations across different sectors. Furthermore, by demonstrating the practical applicability of these theories in the context of the tourism sector, the study provides a roadmap for future research endeavours that seek to explore the intersection of brand identity, crisis brand communication, and organisational resilience. Overall, the integration of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the Discourse of Renewal theory represents a new contribution to the field of brand communication research, offering fresh perspectives and promising avenues for further exploration and theoretical advancement.

### **6.5.2 Methodological Significance**

Methodologically, this research showcases the effectiveness of qualitative analysis, particularly thematic analysis, in exploring complex phenomena such as brand identity and brand communication strategies in the context of the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. The use of semi-structured, in-depth interviews and thematic analysis provides rich and context-specific insights into Aquila Safari's post-pandemic brand identity and brand communication efforts, offering a robust methodological approach for understanding complex phenomena such as brand

identity and brand communication strategies within the tourism sector. Thematic analysis was employed to ascertain that Aquila Safaris brand identity was in line with Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism's six dimensions and were consistent with the subcomponents of Discourse of Renewal theory. Consequently, providing rich insights into how Aquila Safari navigated the COVID-19 crisis recovery, with the results offering practical implications for brand managers and marketers operating within the tourism sector. Brand communication researchers can draw upon these methodological insights to inform their own empirical investigations and contribute to the advancement of knowledge in this area. Additionally, the study's focus on a specific tourism brand within a South African context increases the generalisability of its findings to similar brands facing similar crises. This allows academics in the field of brand communication to adopt similar approaches to explore brand communication responses to crises in other contexts, thereby adding to the methodological range of the discipline.

### **6.5.3 Practical Significance**

Practically, the findings of this study offer actionable recommendations for Aquila Safari and other South African tourism brands seeking to navigate post-COVID-19 crisis recovery and future brand communication crises. The study provides practical insights for tourism brands on how to effectively communicate their brand identity and values during crisis recovery, including aligning brand communication messaging with core values, prioritising safety communication, and leveraging digital channels for effective stakeholder reach. The identification of Aquila Safari's resilient brand identity and effective communication strategies provides a blueprint for other brands seeking to recover from the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic or future crises. By identifying key strengths and areas for improvement in Aquila Safari's brand communication strategies, the research provides practical guidance for enhancing brand resilience, fostering stakeholder trust, and effectively engaging with consumers following crises. Emphasising the importance of leader-based communication and the implementation of a crisis communication plan, the research provides tangible strategies for enhancing brand resilience and responsiveness in the face of future crises. Moreover, the recommendation to develop and implement a crisis communication plan underscores the importance of proactive planning and

preparedness in mitigating the impact of unforeseen crises on brand reputation and operations.

#### **6.5.4 Summary**

This study offers theoretical insights, methodological reflections, and practical recommendations for brand communication in the tourism sector, aiming to inform both research and industry practices. By shedding light on the complexities of brand communication in the context of post-crisis recovery, this research aims to empower tourism brands to adapt, innovate, and thrive in an ever-evolving marketplace. This paper not only contributes to the theoretical understanding of brand communication in crisis contexts but also offers practical insights for tourism brands seeking to navigate challenges and foster recovery in the post-pandemic landscape. Moreover, it outlines promising avenues for future research aimed at advancing knowledge and informing effective brand communication strategies within the tourism industry.

### **6.6 Suggestions for Future Research**

Given that the study was carried out during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic recovery, it would be beneficial to analyse other lengthy crises in order to explore the concept of post-crisis brand identity and brand communication and its evolution over time. In addition to researching an extended timeframe, it would be beneficial in the field of brand identity and brand communication research to include a diverse range of tourism brands. This analysis has the potential to offer valuable insights into the strategies used by assorted brands during their recovery from the COVID-19 crisis. The differentiation of tourism brands across different provinces in South Africa may additionally result in major differences.

Another recommendation for consideration is to broaden and analyse beyond solely conducting interviews. The simultaneous analysis of interviews and online content may aid the discovery of possible differences between the intentions of management and the online content communicated to the stakeholders. The recognition of possible gaps can offer valuable insights into the extent to which stakeholder needs are being addressed. In addition, expanding the data set could enable the

researcher to detect gaps between the communication conceptualization and the execution of the brand's communication strategy.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

In conclusion, this research has thoroughly examined Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 crisis brand communication through the lens of Kapferer's Brand Identity Prism and the Discourse of Renewal theory. The analysis reveals that Aquila Safari's brand identity remains consistent and easily recognisable, aligning well with the facets of the Brand Identity Prism. Additionally, the brand communication effectively reflects the four subcomponents of the Discourse of Renewal theory: organisational learning, ethical communication, prospective vision, and sound organisational rhetoric. The study highlights Aquila Safari's proactive approach to learning from the crisis, prioritising ethical communication, and maintaining a forward-looking perspective in its messaging. However, it also identifies areas for improvement, particularly in terms of incorporating leader-based communication and implementing a comprehensive crisis communication plan. Recommendations include enhancing leader autonomy in brand communication, developing and implementing a crisis brand communication plan to ensure prompt and coordinated responses to future crises, and refining brand messaging to better align with Discourse of Renewal principles. Overall, this research contributes valuable insights into post-pandemic brand identity and communication strategies for tourism destinations. By implementing the recommended strategies, Aquila Safari can further strengthen its brand resilience and effectively navigate future crises, ultimately fostering trust and loyalty among its stakeholders.

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## 8 APPENDICES

### Appendix A: Ethical Clearance



Reference: M.011120  
Enquiries: [REDACTED]

20 November 2020



Student name: Ruvarashe Zimuto  
Student number: [REDACTED]  
Brand and campus: IIEVega



#### Approval of Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership Proposal

Thank you for submitting and defending your proposal titled: **Strategic brand communication through a crisis: exploring the risks and opportunities for the Uber brand.**



We are pleased to inform you that the Research and Postgraduate Committee considered and has approved your research proposal. Ethics clearance has also been granted.



The Research and Postgraduate Studies Committee made some further suggestions that can assist you with your study. These should be attended to under the guidance of your supervisor.

The Committee confirms that **Dr F Cronje** and **Prof N de Klerk** have been appointed as your supervisor and co-supervisor.

If you have any questions, please feel free to contact the campus staff or your supervisor directly.

All the best with your research.

Yours sincerely,

[REDACTED]

Dr B. van Wyk  
Dean: Research and Postgraduate Studies  
The Independent Institute of Education



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## Appendix B: Research Participant Consent Form



### **Strategic Brand Communication through a crisis: Exploring the risks and opportunities for Aquila Safari**

I am currently a student at the Vega School Cape Town and completing my research in partial fulfilment of a Master of Arts in Creative Brand Leadership.

Our interview is expected to last about 30 minutes and will help us understand Aquila Safari's crisis communication strategy during the COVID-19 pandemic. Your participation is voluntary, and you can withdraw at any time without penalty. Interviews will be audio recorded. All data will be reported without identifiers. If you have any concerns, please contact my supervisor or me. Our details are provided below:

Ruvarashe Zimuto

Researcher

[Redacted Signature]

[Redacted Contact Info]

Dr Franci Cronjé

Supervisor

[Redacted Signature]

[Redacted Contact Info]

Signature of researcher

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

Signature of participant

\_\_\_\_\_

Date

\_\_\_\_\_

## **Appendix C: Interview Guide**

### **Background and demographic questions**

- What is your name?
- What is your position in the organisation?
- How long have you worked in the organisation?

### **Brand Identity questions**

- **Physique** – How would you describe Aquila Safari as a destination?
- **Personality** – If Aquila Safari were a person, who would it be?
- **Culture** – How can Aquila Safari incorporate their vision and their values into their Big 5 safari experience?
- **Relationship** – What kind of relationship can be created between Aquila Safari and tourists?
- **Reflection** – What image of oneself do you think a visitor of Aquila Safari wants to achieve?
- **Self-image** – How does Aquila Safari want tourists to feel about themselves when they visit Aquila Safari?

### **Discourse of Renewal questions**

#### **Ethical Communication**

- What messages did Aquila Safari communicate to customers in their post-COVID-19 recovery communication?

#### **Learning**

- What lessons did Aquila Safari learn when it came to renewing brand communication after the COVID-19 pandemic?
- What communication challenges did Aquila Safari face in navigating brand recovery after the COVID-19 pandemic?

#### **Effective organisational rhetoric**

- What was the role of leadership in navigating Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 crisis recovery brand communication?

**Prospective rather than retrospective vision**

- Were there any post-COVID-19 crisis brand communication messages focused on the future or moving beyond the crisis?
- What opportunities did you explore during post-COVID-19 recovery?

**Recommendations**

- What brand communication recommendations do you have for Aquila Safari when facing something similar in the future?

**Closing**

- Thank you for spending time with me.
- Is there anything that you want to know before we wrap up?
- How has this interview been for you?

## **Appendix D: Transcript**

**What is your position at Aquila Safari and how long have you worked here?**

Hi, I am the [REDACTED] and I oversee all the [REDACTED] years.

**How would you describe Aquila Safari as a destination?**

When we're targeting the local market, we focus on promoting Aquila Safari as the go-to Big 5 Safari close to Cape Town. For our international audience, we emphasise that we offer a fantastic safari experience right in Cape Town. The key difference is that locally, we highlight our proximity to Cape Town, while internationally, we need to make it clear that we're based in Cape Town and offer a safari adventure.

**If Aquila Safari were a person, who would it be?**

If I had to describe the personality of Aquila Safari, I'd say it's adventurous and adaptable. Even after the lockdown, Aquila Safari continued to shine as an exciting Cape Town destination where guests can enjoy a thrilling Big 5 safari, whether it's a day trip or an overnight adventure. Despite the challenges, we stayed committed to offering amazing experiences and showed our ability to adapt and thrive in tough times.

For example, during the lockdown, we offered vouchers to give people something to look forward to once restrictions were lifted. Our goal was to overcome the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic and ensure that we continued to provide memorable experiences for our guests as we navigated the recovery period.

**How can Aquila Safari incorporate their vision and their values into their Big 5 safari experience?**

When it came to culture, we wanted to show that Aquila Safari is a really welcoming place. We went above and beyond to make sure guests felt comfortable and safe. We set up sanitising stations and took advantage of our open-air environment to naturally support social distancing. Our goal was to create an experience that felt relaxed and inviting, without being too rigid, while still ensuring everyone's safety.

**What kind of relationship can be created between Aquila Safari and tourists?**

When it came to relationships, we focused on using our connection with customers to our advantage. We introduced the Save Now, Safari Later vouchers to give people a bit of hope for the future. These vouchers offered a sneak peek at the exciting Big 5 Safari experience at Aquila Safari they could look forward to. It was our way of giving guests something to be excited about, even during uncertain times.

**What image of oneself do you think a visitor of Aquila Safari wants to achieve?**

People who go on safari are usually adventurous explorers who love discovering new places and trying out exciting experiences. They're driven by the thrill of ticking things off their bucket list and relaxing in new, unfamiliar settings. Going on a safari game drive perfectly captures this sense of adventure and exploration.

**How does Aquila Safari want tourists to feel about themselves when they visit Aquila Safari?**

Even with all the challenges from the pandemic, the core of the Aquila Safari brand stayed strong, focused on offering that amazing Big 5 safari experience close to Cape Town. We made safety our top priority, making sure both our staff and guests were protected. We adapted how we operated to keep everyone safe, all while staying committed to delivering unforgettable wildlife adventures.

**What messages did Aquila Safari communicate to customers in their post-COVID-19 recovery communication?**

Our communication approach was quite varied due to the volume of interactions we managed, the diverse sales mix, and the different channels we operate in as a business. Our communication was customer-facing, business-to-business with our clients, and internal. Additionally, we had industry-related communication that needed to happen as well.

The communication strategy was phased, starting back in December 2019 when the pandemic first emerged in Asia and China. From the beginning, our primary goal was to provide reassurance and build trust across our entire value chain—whether with existing or future visitors, clients, or industry partners.

For our consumers and visitors, our message was clear: we're here, we're not closing, and we'll take care of you. If someone was already at the destination [Cape Town], we assured them we'd help them get home safely and wouldn't hold onto their money. We emphasised that we were a safe business to engage with and encouraged them to keep visiting.

As the crisis deepened and lockdowns were enforced, our focus remained on maintaining confidence in our brand. We communicated that we were still here, and if a booking had been made, their money was secure. Moving into the post-COVID phase, our message shifted slightly, but the core remained the same: 'We're still here, we've grown, and we're ready to welcome you back.'

Throughout the various stages of the pandemic, our communication efforts were centred around building and maintaining trust, ensuring that our brand would emerge strong at the end of the crisis.

**What lessons did Aquila Collection learn when it came to renewing brand communication during the COVID-19 pandemic?**

We've realised there's a wide range of voices out there, and as a brand like Aquila Collection, which isn't limited to a niche market, it's essential to cater to all of them. Although we're a bucket list destination, our appeal goes beyond just one specific group—we speak to everyone. It's crucial to understand the various segments of our audience. One of the key lessons we've learned is that the voice used to attract an international visitor differs from the one that resonates with a local visitor. And even within those groups, there are different nuances—whether it's the softer tone for European visitors or a different approach for others. Domestically, there are also diverse preferences across regions. So, the biggest takeaway for us has been the concept of 'one brand, many voices.'

**What challenges did you face when trying to communicate a unified brand message with many different voices?**

Firstly, it was important to understand the different voices, which was quite challenging because everything was new. No company had ever planned for a pandemic of this scale, so we all had to engage in some serious introspection. In our case, it was particularly interesting because between August and October 2019, we conducted a deep introspection into our company and our customers as we were preparing for a three-year rapid growth plan. This gave us an advantage during the crisis because we already had a thorough understanding of the different voices. However, the challenge we faced was determining the best channels to reach those voices. For example, if you don't optimise your digital channels, you might only have one website to work with. Even today, with the return of international travellers, balancing those different voices remains a challenge. It's like having one shop window—how do you attract everyone? It's still a challenge, and it's not something we've fully mastered yet. We're learning and adapting every day.

**What was the role of leadership in navigating Aquila Safari's post-COVID-19 crisis recovery brand communication?**

Companies that didn't demonstrate leadership during the COVID crisis often didn't make it through. What I've learned is that leadership is absolutely essential, regardless of the direction you take. The key takeaway is that there needs to be clear leadership guiding the company and brand through the crisis. The specific path you choose is less important than having strong leadership in place. For us, it was crucial from the very beginning to put our voice out there, engaging at every level of the value chain, and to communicate clearly: This is how we're handling the situation, and we've got you covered. Follow us, and we'll lead you through the crisis. In any crisis, communication must be clear. Just like in an emergency, if there's a fire and no one gives clear instructions, chaos ensues. The same principle applies in business—communication must be led by clear, concise decisions, whether it's about refunds, cancellations, or any other action. What matters most is clarity and ensuring there are no grey areas.

**How did leadership engage with different stakeholders after communicating your message, and how did your consumers respond to it?**

I think, given the magnitude of the crisis, people were more accepting than they might have been in different circumstances. We saw interesting engagement across the board, as many people understood the gravity of the situation. A lot of individuals paused their lives for a while, so the initial decisions we made, the leadership we showed, and the structures we put in place were generally well received, regardless of the specifics or the audience. It didn't matter who the communication was directed at—it was well received.

However, as time went on and we started emerging from the event, we noticed a shift in behaviour. People began to push back against the policies we had implemented. Initially, during that state of shock when the world seemed to be at a standstill, no one was going anywhere, and that made people more compliant. I think that's why, in the early stages, you saw widespread acceptance—even to the point where people questioned how one president could decide that an entire country couldn't have cooked chicken, as was the case in South Africa. But looking back, that initial acceptance was simply a reflection of where people were mentally and emotionally.

Overall, the engagement was positive because everyone understood the global context. We weren't alone in enforcing new policies or making changes—everyone was facing a similar situation, so there was a shared sense of solidarity in that space.

**Were there any post-COVID-19 brand communication messages that focused on the future or moving beyond the crisis? What strategies did you use during the recovery period?**

We started by taking a deep dive into our product, really understanding the core of what we were selling. We wanted to analyse everything at the most detailed level, down to the nuts and bolts, and consider how it might evolve in the future. Part of this process involved thinking about potential changes, like whether we should continue offering inclusive packages that cover accommodation, meals, and activities, or if it made sense to separate these elements. For instance, we discussed the possibility of removing meals from the packages and instead introducing an à la carte kitchen service.

The key was to understand both the brand and the product we're selling now and what we want to sell in the future. One important lesson we learned was to avoid making short-term decisions that could lead to long-term problems. For example, converting an entire lodge into a self-catering facility might have seemed like a quick fix, but it wouldn't have been appropriate for the long-term market we're targeting in a post-COVID world.

Our focus was on gaining a deep understanding of the brand and product, then future-proofing by exploring various strategies to survive the short term while keeping an eye on our long-term goals. We also realised that no one can fully prepare for a crisis of this scale, but we've gained valuable insights. I believe we now have an unwritten blueprint of sorts. I recently attended a conference that discussed hazard planning for the future, recognizing that it's not just pandemics we need to worry about—anything could happen, like a missile falling in a NATO area during a conflict.

For the first time, there's a global awareness of hazard planning. In South Africa, we experienced the crisis twice: first, with the initial lockdown like the rest of the world, and then again with the emergence of the South African strain. This forced us to develop strategies and learn from the situation, enabling us to implement those strategies immediately. Ultimately, the strategies we focused on were about assessing what we learned during the initial shock and making informed short-term decisions without compromising long-term growth.

**As Aquila Safari began recovering, how did you focus on renewing the brand and looking toward the future? What steps did you take to refresh your brand messaging, brand communication, and overall approach?**

During the hard lockdown, for the first time, we truly engaged with our audience across digital and traditional platforms. Before this, our brand was just out there doing what needed to be done. But with the lockdown, when no one could buy anything or go anywhere, we had the unique opportunity to connect with potential customers on a deeper level. This was an enriching period where we began to understand who these people were and what they wanted. It was a time of learning about the people who engage with our brand.

One of the biggest transformations for us, especially on the marketing side, was realising the inefficiencies in our marketing mix. We had been overly reliant on traditional marketing, but the lockdown period highlighted the effectiveness of digital reach. This shift allowed us to not only support our recovery but also gain a much deeper understanding of the digital consumer. Today, when I consult with other brands, I see that many struggle with their digital content, conversion, and transformation because they don't really know who their consumers are. We were fortunate to have a strong marketing team that remained intact throughout the pandemic, which provided us with valuable insights into our consumers.

This experience led to a significant digital transformation for us. We had to rethink not just the voice of our branding, but also how we communicate directly with the consumer. If I compare our current strategy to what it was back then, it's completely different. We've moved away from traditional marketing entirely, focusing instead on digital strategies that have driven our rebound. While we might achieve similar revenue numbers to 2019, the mix of products, the customers, and the channels we

use have changed entirely. So, rather than seeing this as a recovery or a return to normal, I view it as a rebound into a new normal, where everything looks different from what it was before.

**What brand communication recommendations do you have for Aquila Safari when facing something similar in the future?**

I think it all goes back to the lessons we've learned, and the biggest takeaway for us was the need for a solid, one-time plan specifically for dealing with a pandemic. When the pandemic started, we tried to roll out strategies on the fly, which unfortunately created a lot of market confusion. For example, we initially decided to refund money to Chinese passport holders. However, this didn't account for the fact that someone might not be a Chinese citizen but could still be just as affected if they were on an Air China flight. Moving forward, we plan to develop a clear communication strategy that is relevant to our situation.

Looking at how municipalities handle crises, they usually have a crisis communication plan in place that limits the number of spokespersons, typically to the mayor and the municipal manager. That's something we've realised is crucial. For any future Black Swan event, our goal is to have one unified voice communicating our policies.

The approach to scenario planning varies significantly depending on the crisis. As a marketing team and as a company, we're well-equipped to handle crisis communication. We know how to manage these situations effectively, from distributing communication through our established networks to leveraging our support structures. We've got a solid foundation for dealing with crisis communication.

However, it's important to recognize that each crisis presents a unique scenario. For instance, the target audience and messaging for a rhino poaching incident are vastly different from those for a global pandemic, or a fuel crisis, or even a water shortage. So, while we have a strong base for what needs to happen during a crisis, the specifics of our scenario planning will differ depending on the situation.

**Thank you so much for your time**

## Appendix E: Editing Certificate



DR PATRICIA HARPUR

B.Sc Information Systems Software Engineering, B.Sc Information Systems (Hons)  
M.Sc Information Systems, D.Technology Information Technology

### Editing Certificate

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#### To Whom It May Concern

This document certifies I have copy-edited the following thesis by Ruvarashe Zimuto:

**STRATEGIC BRAND COMMUNICATION THROUGH A CRISIS: EXPLORING THE RISKS  
AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR AQUILA SAFARI**

Please note this does not cover any content, conceptual organisation, or textual changes  
made after the editing process.

Best regards



Dr Patricia Harpur

31 March 2024

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