EXPLORING RHETORICAL USE OF SOCIAL MEDIA IN CORPORATE COMMUNICATION: AN INTERPRETIVE STUDY USING ARISTOTLE'S ETHICAL RHETORIC FRAMEWORK DURING A CRISIS IN AN ODEL INSTITUTION

by

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DECLARATION

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"Trust in the Lord with all your heart, and lean not on your own understanding; in all your ways acknowledge Him, and He shall direct your paths" ~ Proverbs 3:5-6

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the rhetorical use of social media by a large South African open distance and e-learning (ODeL) university, using a governance crisis as a high-pressure context in which institutional credibility (*ethos*) was publicly tested. Rather than analysing the crisis itself, the research treats the episode as a natural laboratory for evaluating Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework in digital communication. The study assesses how institutional statements on Facebook and X performed in terms of *ethos* (credibility), *pathos* (emotional engagement), and *logos* (reasoned argument).

An interpretive qualitative content analysis was conducted on four purposively selected official statements posted between August and November 2023, examined alongside their public interaction threads. While the wider communication environment included substantial platform activity, the analysis focused on rhetorically salient crisis statements to assess how credibility was constructed and received under scrutiny.

Findings indicate that *logos* was the dominant appeal, reflected in structured argumentation and legal referencing. However, gains in *ethos* were moderated by a guarded tone and constrained explanatory depth, while *pathos* was applied narrowly and without dialogic engagement. The uniform, text-heavy approach showed limited adaptation to platform-specific dynamics.

The study contributes by operationalising Aristotle's appeals for social media analysis and by identifying three practical gaps: an emotion-response gap, a platform-adaptation gap, and an ethos-rebuilding gap. The findings suggest that institutional rhetoric under pressure requires balanced integration of credibility, emotional responsiveness, and reasoned clarity to sustain trust in digital public spaces.

KEY TERMS

Corporate communication; Aristotle; ethical rhetoric; open distance learning; *ethos*; *pathos*; *logos*; crisis communication; social media; higher education

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1.1 BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This study investigates the applicability of Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework in a corporate communication setting, using a crisis period at a large Open Distance e-Learning (ODeL) university as an intensified environment in which rhetorical processes become more visible. The crisis is not the object of analysis; rather, it serves as a magnified context that places the institution's communication system under pressure, allowing clearer observation of how *ethos, pathos* and *logos* operate in institutional communication.

In 2022, the Minister of Higher Education appointed an independent assessor to investigate governance concerns at the institution (University of South Africa, 2022). The assessor's report was published in Government Gazette No. 48660 on 26 May 2023 (Department of Higher Education and Training, 2022), and it was highly critical of the university's council and executive management. This study does not analyse the crisis per se; it uses the period only as a high-pressure context to examine how *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* are realised in institutional social media communication.

Tensions escalated on 4 August 2023 when the minister announced his intention to place the university under administration. The university secured an interim High Court order on 24 August 2023 interdicting the minister from acting on this intention, but the minister proceeded with a further notice via Government Gazette No. 49582 on 27 October 2023 (University of South Africa, 2023b). On 3 November 2023, the High Court ordered the minister to retract the notice, which he withdrew on 17 November 2023 (South Africa. Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023). The university publicly acknowledged this withdrawal in a statement released on 20 November 2023 (University of South Africa, 2023a).

During this period, the university relied heavily on its official social media platforms, particularly Facebook and X, to communicate with stakeholders in real time amid heightened uncertainty and reputational (*ethos*) pressure. Although the institution generated a significant volume of social media content during the period, this study does not analyse the entire dataset. Instead, it examines a purposively selected subset of official posts and stakeholder responses that present the clearest rhetorical activity.

For definitional clarity, the analysis draws on Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework, which centres on the persuasive proofs of *ethos, pathos* and *logos*, as outlined in *Rhetoric* Book I (1.2.3–5; 1356a1–20; trans. Kennedy, 1991). To operationalise the investigation, the study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach within an interpretive paradigm. Using purposive sampling, it assesses selected social media posts and stakeholder interactions to explore how institutional credibility was constructed, challenged and negotiated through digital discourse.

1.1.1 Communication From an Organisational Perspective

Organisational communication relies on messages that inform, persuade and maintain relationships with stakeholder groups. Within this process, meaning is negotiated not only through information content but also through how messages are framed, interpreted, and responded to (Mumby, 1989).

This study uses Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework to examine whether ethical rhetorical principles can be applied in a corporate communication setting. This is the central aim of the study. The ODeL institution serves as a practical context in which to explore this question, and the crisis period is used only because it places the communication system under pressure and makes rhetorical activity easier to observe.

Aristotle characterises rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (*Rhetoric* 1.2.1, 1355b26; trans. Kennedy, 1991). This definition underpins the evaluative lens used in the study, guiding the analysis of how *ethos, pathos* and *logos* appeared in the institution's communication. It also supports the study's focus on how communicative choices function under conditions of uncertainty and public scrutiny. In this study, communication effectiveness is understood as the extent to which communication successfully achieves its intended purpose (Sheep, 2022).

The public dispute between the institution and the Minister of Higher Education generated significant attention on social media, with stakeholders expressing strong reactions, questions and concerns. These interactions offer a concentrated setting in which to test whether the institution's responses reflected ethical, responsible and persuasive communication as outlined by Aristotle's model.

The research therefore investigates the extent to which ethical rhetorical principles apply in corporate communication. The ODeL institution is a useful example because the events surrounding the crisis created conditions that highlight rhetorical choices. The key question then becomes whether the organisation's communication under pressure aligned with Aristotle's standard of ethical persuasion. Institutional communication is assessed by its clarity, relevance and perceived credibility, especially when stakeholders face conflicting information.

This section therefore situates the study within an organisational communication perspective, establishing communication as a meaning-making process that is shaped by context, interpretation and audience response. The evaluative focus of the study, based on Aristotle's principles, is discussed in detail in later sections.

1.1.2 Universal Scope and Applicability of Rhetoric

Rhetoric is useful for decision-making in conditions where absolute certainty is unattainable, requiring publics to interpret competing claims and communicators to reason convincingly amid uncertainty. In this regard, Cope (1867) argues that Aristotelian rhetoric provides a useful way to understand persuasive communication across different domains of human decision-making because it attends to judgement in such conditions. Aristotle frames rhetoric as applicable to "all the things we deliberate upon" and to any subject where certainty is impossible, and judgment is required (*Rhetoric* 1.2.1; 1355b–1356a).

Contemporary views support this universality. Scholars note that people routinely use rhetoric to scrutinise or uphold a discourse, to express or defend a position, and to influence

others in everyday and public settings (Furley and Nehamas, 1994; Eyman, 2015). For this study, this universality underscores why Aristotelian concepts remain appropriate for analysing organisational social media communication during a period of heightened scrutiny, where audiences weigh competing claims and institutional messages must persuade responsibly.

The study offers tools for all communicators to guide ethical corporate communication practices, for social media practitioners, public relations (PR) specialists, spokespeople, media professionals, and laypersons. These tools are designed to help develop ethical, responsible and effective communication practices that address fundamental communication needs: truthfulness, reasonability, and the accounting of emotions.

1.1.3 Why Aristotle's Ethical Rhetoric Framework?

This framework is timeless and provides valuable lessons from classical history, having been developed approximately 2300 years ago for ethical discourse (Kennedy, 1991); it remains relevant today and provides a useful lens for analysing modern corporate communication, particularly when the credibility/character (*ethos*) of the institution is at stake. This derives from Aristotle's claim that character "*contains the strongest proof of all"* (Rhetoric 1.2.4, 1356a4–13, cited in Lawson-Tancred, 1991, p. 75).

Aristotle emphasises that communicative persuasion originates from a credible source, and it requires the trust of the audience, and necessitates attentiveness to the emotions expressed by receivers (*Rhetoric* 1.2.5, 1356a14–19). This orientation is particularly relevant in crisis communication, where institutional ethos is under pressure, stakeholder emotions are heightened and trust is fragile.

In the preface to *Aristotle on Truth, Dialogue, Justice and Decision*, the editors write "For Aristotle, truth is intimately connected to the principles of logic and the proper functioning of human reason" (Bombelli, 2023, p. v). While modern crisis communication theories contribute significantly to the strategic management of organisational responses, they devote less attention to the ethical orientation underpinning persuasive efforts. Aristotle's framework adds a complementary dimension by stressing that ethical character, truth and responsible emotional engagement are essential components of persuasive communication when organisations face moral scrutiny.

For example, Coombs' situational crisis communication theory (SCCT's) primary focus offers empirically derived, situational response strategies, for denial, diminishment and rebuilding, but is based largely on the attribution theory (Coombs, 2007) to preserve reputation at all costs, not from a moral responsibility or ethical predisposition.

Another well-known theory is that of Benoit called the image repair theory (IRT), developed to encompass strategies of denial, evasion of responsibility, reduction of the offensiveness of the event, corrective action, and mortification strategies (Zekan, Roje and Tarle, 2025, p. 39) however, a 2025 study by Mutenda (2025) critiques both SCCT and IRT strategies as prioritising reputational management over moral or ethical reflections. When reputation management becomes the central focus, spin is often likely.

While SCCT and IRT remain valuable strategic frameworks for understanding organisational responses to crises, this study employs Aristotle's ethical rhetoric model as a complementary analytical lens. Rather than replacing these theories, the model contributes

an ethical dimension by emphasising credibility, emotional sensitivity, and reasoned argument as key criteria for effective and responsible crisis communication.

Thus, Aristotle's framework integrates ethics with persuasive communication, positioning rhetoric not merely as a technical skill but as a mode of ethical consideration (*Rhetoric* 1.2.3–5, 1356a1–20). It emphasises holistic truth, going beyond propositional correctness to include appropriateness, justice, and practical wisdom (*phronēsis*). This orientation toward ethically sound persuasion relies on the communicator's character, context-sensitive reasoning, and the pursuit of the good, even at the expense of self, offering safeguards against manipulation and helping to prevent the misuse of rhetorical techniques (*Rhetoric* 1.2.6, 1356a20–25).

It stands out again, because it addresses people's fundamental communication needs, the basic needs of truth, rationality and awareness of emotions. Aristotle links these needs directly to the three *pisteis* of *ethos, pathos* and *logos*, that form the core of persuasive proof (*Rhetoric* 1.2.3–5). These needs are met when discourse enables the audience to judge the speaker as trustworthy, and when the speaker presents factual evidence, supported by sound reasoning, showing awareness of the audience's emotional state arising from the situation, and addressing them responsibly.

Therefore the journey through Aristotle's philosophy is an exploration of truth, the bedrock upon which knowledge and understanding are built. This framework is used as a benchmark to evaluate the institution's social media activity during the crisis period faced by the ODeL institution in the handling of its crisis communication on social media.

The crisis provides a fascinating opportunity to examine this deep insight into Aristotelean rhetorical structure, contrasting his era with the modern age, where platforms like X (formerly Twitter), which serves as the contemporary equivalent of Aristotle's *agora* (the civic public forum), and Facebook, which also functions as a digital *polis* (an organised civic community or political body within which public life was conducted) (Nevradakis, 2018), enable public discourse and *ethos* reflective spaces for organisations.

The next important subject is style. This is the manner of expressing oneself, including not only language but manner of expression, encompassing language choice, tone, rhythm, and delivery (Sandys, 1877). Despite its significance, there remains a clear empirical gap in crisis communication research regarding the analysis of tone and style. Existing studies have rarely measured how these variables influence audience perceptions of credibility, trust, or ethical persuasion.

Coombs and Tachkova (2024, p. 7) observe that "very few studies […] examine how emotions influence the way publics perceive and assess crisis situations," highlighting the lack of empirical work on emotional awareness and tone in crisis communication.

Tone and style shape how *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* are received, yet these rhetorical elements are seldom operationalised in empirical research. Most existing research remains theoretical or focuses on surface-level engagement metrics such as reach and impressions, without measuring how tone shapes audience trust or perceptions of ethical grounding (Trunfio and Rossi, 2021, p. 271).

This gap underlines the relevance of Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework, which supports the systematic analysis of communication style, language choice, and rhetorical devices used to construct a message, while also addressing the ontological dimension of effective, responsible, and ethical communication, and how rhetorical choices reflect and shape the nature of credibility, trust, and ethical meaning.

Through this lens, rhetorical choices are understood not merely as strategic tools, but as reflections of institutional credibility, moral orientation, and ethical meaning. Consequently, Aristotle's model offers a theoretically solid basis for analysing whether organisational social media communication during crises demonstrates effective, responsible, and ethically sound persuasive practices, thereby motivating the problem statement and research gap discussed in the following section.

1.2 PROBLEM STATEMENT AND RESEARCH GAP

1.2.1 Problem Statement

The problem statement: This study investigates the limited understanding of whether ethical rhetorical principles can be applied to organisational social media communication in a corporate context, using a crisis period only as an intensified setting that puts the communication system under strain. It does so by applying Aristotle's framework to the 2023 social media communication of a South African ODeL university. The crisis is therefore a context of convenience that amplifies normal dynamics rather than the primary object of analysis.

The crisis surrounding the university created a communicative environment where competing narratives, contested facts, conflicting institutional and governmental statements, and media reporting made it difficult for audiences/stakeholders to determine which account to trust. In such conditions of deductive uncertainty, the credibility of the communicator becomes essential and an important factor for believability, while social media amplifies ambiguity by enabling multiple, simultaneous interpretations of a crisis.

This noise and ambiguity raises the problem of how an institution can communicate effectively, responsibly, ethically, and persuasively, when truth itself is publicly contested. Given this challenge, there is a need for an evaluative framework capable of assessing whether organisational communication practices uphold credibility, rationality, and sensitivity to stakeholder emotions.

Using the university's social media communication during the crisis as an intensified context, the research applies Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework of *ethos* (credibility and character), *pathos* (emotion), and *logos* (method of demonstration) to determine what is effective, responsible and ethically persuasive in corporate social media communication under pressure.

It offers a theoretically sound framework for examining this phenomenon, specifically assessing whether the university's communication met these criteria: projecting credible ethos, advancing rational, evidence-based *logos*, and recognising and appropriately handling stakeholder emotions (*pathos*).

By analysing selected official posts and audience responses, the study aims to determine if alignment with Aristotelian ethical rhetoric supports effective, responsible, and ethically grounded yet persuasive social media communication during times of public uncertainty.

The study investigates the phenomenon in relation to the above:

- Whether the university's social media response during the crisis met the degree of credibility. Credibility is an important measure of truth, ethics and whether the institution is delivering on its promise.

- Whether the university addressed the sentiments and emotions of its stakeholders. A stakeholder is emotionally invested into the university, and social media comments show the stakeholder's emotional concern. Therefore, was this emotional concern addressed directly and adequately during the crisis period?
- Can the university's response during the crisis be considered rational, and did it meet the requirements for logic or appeal to the stakeholder's sense of reason?

In sum, the problem addressed in this study is the lack of clarity on how ethical rhetorical principles operate within organisational social media communication in a corporate setting, and whether Aristotle's framework of *ethos, pathos* and *logos* provides a meaningful evaluative lens. The crisis context is used only to intensify and reveal these rhetorical dynamics, not to shift the focus away from ethical rhetoric as the core of the study.

1.3 RATIONALE AND SIGNIFICANCE

1.3.1 Rationale

In the era of digital communication technology, social media has become a crucial communication channel for organisations, including universities. It has created an opportunity for an organisation to communicate with its stakeholders at lightning speed.

However, the nature of social media is that, while it presents this opportunity, it also presents certain challenges, especially during a period of crisis for an organisation. The channel provides the stakeholder with the ability to react and engage the organisation at the same speed, and it also allows the stakeholder and other digital spectators to express their emotions, whether good or bad, about the organisation publicly without restraint.

This effect, if not responsibly managed, can amplify the negative sentiments about an organisation at a rapid pace, and equally has potential to do the opposite if responsibly handled. Therefore, when an organisation with a national and continental footprint as big and established as the ODeL institution faces crisis, there are bound to be many voices which will form a view of the organisation based on their experience with the organisation.

These many voices express their approval and disapproval as the crisis unfolds. For any responsible organisation these emotions cannot be ignored, and the organisation in response to the crisis must understand and adequately address them. The sentiments equal the vested interest of the stakeholders, and an appropriate and responsible response in accordance with Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework must ensue.

The uniqueness and effectiveness of social media when compared to traditional media, is that the reaction is instantaneous, unmoderated (Buccafurri *et al.,* 2015) and provides the organisation with useful information on where the concerns of the stakeholders may be. This is a unique feature of social media when compared to other forms of media where feedback is delayed; a media statement released via a newspaper does not afford the organisation immediate feedback, a newspaper article does not afford any immediate reaction, a radio or TV interview cannot give you immediate feedback, and a website cannot give you immediate feedback, unless its moderation capabilities are disabled.

The university's crisis provides a convenient opportunity to explore a period of high activity and high stakes, where its most valuable asset, its reputation (*ethos*) is at stake, and the legal tussles its engaged in with the minister are observed through the lens of social media

discourse. Using the university's context during the crisis period we explore social media use in organisational communication (Roshan, Warren and Carr, 2016) and whether it can be subjected to the requirements of Aristotle ethical rhetoric framework.

This crisis provides the opportunity to use the framework to evaluate, if applied, its effectiveness in persuading and reshaping the perspectives of the audience. While the focus of the study is on the university's use of social media, the framework is applicable to all forms of communication. It should not only guide social media communication and its practitioners, but also all forms of communication, facilitated by PR officers, media and communication specialists, commentators or politicians. This is useful where certainty is lacking and opinions are divided (Aristotle, 2008).

1.4 DEFINITIONS OF KEY CONCEPTS

- **Rhetoric:** Aristotle characterises rhetoric as the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion (Amelie, 2011).

- **Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework:** involves three elements, *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* by which Aristotle regarded as essential for persuasion (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy., 2022). These three elements address basic communication needs: the speaker must be perceived as trustworthy and credible to gain the audience's trust (*ethos*), secondly, the communication must be rational, factual and based on logical reasoning (*logos*) and lastly, communication must connect with the audience at an emotional level to persuade effectively (*pathos*) (Cope, 1867). For communication to achieve its intended objective, it must wholly reflect these three means of persuasion.

- ***Ethos*** refers to the communicator's credibility, grounded in virtuous character, practical wisdom, and goodwill. Aristotle held that audiences trust speakers who demonstrate *phronēsis* (good sense), *aretē* (virtue), and *eunoia* (goodwill) (*Rhetoric* 2.1, 1378a6-20). In modern communication, *ethos* denotes the perceived trustworthiness, integrity, and expertise of the message source, or reputation (Herrick, 2020).

- ***Pathos*** refers to the emotional appeal that concerns the psychological disposition of the audience, as it aims at influencing their emotions (Rubinelli, 2018). Aristotle argues that persuasion occurs "through the hearers when they are led to feel emotion by the speech; for we do not give the same judgment when grieved and rejoicing or when being friendly and hostile" (*Rhetoric* 1.2.5, 1356a14-20).

- ***Logos*** refers to the appeal to reason through the use of logical argument, evidence, examples, and coherent structure in order to persuade an audience rationally (Foss, 2004). Aristotle described *logos* as persuasion achieved "through the speech itself, when we show the truth or the apparent truth" (*Rhetoric* 1.2.6, 1356a19-24).

- **Credibility** is the degree to which a communicator is perceived as believable, trustworthy, and expert. Communication scholars identify two primary dimensions: expertise (knowledge/competence) and trustworthiness (honesty and moral intent). It directly shapes how audiences interpret messages, especially in crises settings (Kaplan, 2016; Russell and Cohn, 2012).

- **Intersubjectivity** refers to the shared understanding constructed between individuals during communication. It involves mutual understanding, shared meanings, and coordinated

interpretation of experiences. In communication theory, it is essential to achieve common ground and meaningful interpretation (Grossberg, 1982).

- **Corporate communication:** Corporate communication is the central function of the organisation that manages the communication of the entire organisation. Rather than having many voices coming from various departments of an organisation, the corporate communication organises the organisation's communication to project one single and unambiguous image of what the organisation stands for (Christensen, Morsing and Cheney, 2008).

- **Social Media:** Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) define social media as a collection of internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, enabling the creation and exchange of user generated content.

- **Crisis:** Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2019) describe a crisis as "a specific, unexpected, and non-routine event or series of events that create high levels of uncertainty", allowing the organisation to face both threats and opportunities to its "high-priority goals". Coombs (2012) definition stresses that a crisis is the recognition of an unforeseen event that jeopardises key expectations of stakeholders and can significantly affect an organisation's performance, leading to adverse consequences.

- **Crisis communication:** According to Spradley *et al* (2017), crisis communication is a multidisciplinary area of study that encompasses various practices by which organisations communicate before, during, and after crises to restore normal operations.

- **Stakeholders** are individuals or groups who can affect or are affected by an organisation's activities, decisions, or performance. The stakeholders theory argues that organisations must create value for all stakeholders, including employees, customers, suppliers, government, and communities - not only shareholders (Freeman, 2010).

- **Audience** refers to the group of individuals who receive an organisation's communication messages, whether through traditional channels or digital platforms. In organisational communication, the audience is primarily defined by its role as the recipient of information, regardless of whether communication occurs in one-way or interactive formats (Hartley, 2002).

  In digital environments, audiences may interact with organisational messages through comments, shares, and reactions. However, interactivity alone does not confer stakeholder status. Stakeholders are defined by their vested interest in, or influence over, organisational decisions, whereas audiences remain recipients of communication, even when digitally active. Thus, although stakeholders may form part of the digital audience, the two groups are analytically distinct.

1.5 AIM AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1.5.1 Aim of The Study

The study aims to evaluate the university's crisis-related social media communication using Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework.

1.5.2 Research Purpose

The purpose of this study is to examine the university's crisis-related social media communication and stakeholder interactions to determine the extent to which they reflect Aristotle's rhetorical criteria of ethos, pathos, and logos. This inquiry is conducted within a context where institutional credibility is under pressure and stakeholder perceptions of truth are increasingly contested, making it difficult to distinguish credible information from misinformation.

By analysing selected institutional posts, user responses and patterns of engagement, the study assesses whether the university's communication succeeded in building credibility, managing its own and its audiences' emotions, and maintaining rationality during the crisis, thereby reaching intersubjectivity.

Additionally, the study aims to contribute to the broader scholarship on digital crisis communication by demonstrating how classical rhetorical frameworks are applicable in contemporary organisational contexts, particularly in the development of ethical, responsible, and persuasive communication practices.

It should also provide insights into how the university and other organisations can enhance their overall communication. This includes offering principles to both lay and professional communicators, social media practitioners, PR specialists, spokespeople, media practitioners, and politicians. These principles can assist them in developing effective, ethical, responsible, and persuasive communication that addresses people's fundamental communication needs, grounded in truthfulness, rationality, and proper emotional engagement.

At the same time, the study contributes to understanding how audiences interpret institutional crisis communication in digital environments by highlighting the rhetorical building blocks that shape judgements of credibility, responsibility, and intent. While audiences are not always equipped with the analytical resources or attentive accuracy necessary to evaluate information in fast-moving online contexts (Pennycook and Rand, 2021), this research clarifies the communicative approaches through which institutions may either facilitate or hinder rational public evaluation. In doing so, the study offers this analytical framework that can assist scholars and practitioners in distinguishing responsible, evidence-based communication from strategic or manipulative messaging within digitally mediated crises.

1.5.3 Research Questions

1. **RQ1 Did the university's social media response during the crisis meet the degree of credibility and truthfulness?**
   During the university crisis period, engagements occurred in the form of user comments, reactions, and the university communicating its position. In responding to the ensuing public discourse surrounding the administration of the university, did the university's response quell and dispel scepticism to persuade stakeholders and other digital spectators and establish a position of trust?
2. **RQ2 Did the university and its communicators understand and address their own sentiments and emotions, as well as those of their stakeholders?**
   Stakeholders are emotionally invested in the university, and social media comments reflected these emotional concerns. Therefore, were these concerns addressed directly and adequately during the crisis period? Did the university successfully

connect with the emotions of those who were supportive, indifferent, or opposed to the administration?

3. **RQ3 Can the university's response during the crisis be considered rational or reasonable? Did it meet the requirements for logic or appeal to the stakeholder's sense of reason?**
   In exploring both the university's communication and user comments, the study evaluates the extent to which these can be validated.

1.5.4 Research Objectives

To achieve this purpose, the study pursues the following objectives:

- To identify and categorise the university's crisis-related social media posts and stakeholder responses for qualitative content analysis, employing an interpretative approach (Junjie and Yingxin, 2022) to understand how social media functioned as an organisational communication tool during the crisis.
- To assess the presence and quality of *ethos* in the university's crisis communication, focusing on indicators such as credibility, trustworthiness and perceived integrity.
- To evaluate the extent to which the university's communication acknowledged and engaged with stakeholder emotions (*pathos*), including anger, concern, support or scepticism.
- To analyse the logical coherence and factual grounding of the university's crisis-related communication (*logos*), as reflected in explanations, evidence and reasoning provided.
- To synthesise findings that offer practical guidance for institutions and communicators on developing effective, ethical, responsible, and persuasive communication strategies during crises.

1.6 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1.6.1 Social Media in an Organisational Communication Ecology

Social media has become a central component of contemporary corporate communication, functioning within a broader communication ecology in which various channels (traditional media, email, institutional websites, SMS and interpersonal communication) operate in an interconnected manner (McCosker, 2017). Within this ecosystem, organisations strategically mobilise different channels to engage stakeholders, convey information, and manage emergent issues.

As digital communication technologies have developed, social media has shifted from a supplementary platform to a core communicative infrastructure. Many organisations now maintain dedicated social media teams equipped with specialised competencies in analytics, community engagement, and rapid response. Social media's immediacy and interactivity enable institutions to communicate efficiently during crises, while simultaneously monitoring stakeholder responses in real-time (Coombs, 2007).

This interactive capability enhances the organisation's ability to build credibility, respond to concerns, and demonstrate institutional attentiveness. Stakeholders observe not only what an organisation communicates, but also how promptly, transparently and consistently it responds. In this regard, organisational action or inaction on social media becomes key to

the unfolding crisis narrative and to stakeholders' perceptions of institutional reliability (Testa, 2025, p. 37).

1.6.2 Social Media in Organisational Crisis

Crises manifest in varied and often complex forms, requiring organisations to disseminate accurate, timely and empathetic information to mitigate uncertainty (Spradley *et al.,* 2017). Social media expands the organisation's capacity to meet these expectations by enabling rapid updates, sentiment tracking, and iterative message refinement - capabilities that traditional communication channels cannot match.

Given this dynamic environment, the effectiveness of an organisation's crisis communication is shaped not only by what is said but also by how stakeholders interpret, contest and respond to messages circulating within digital spaces. Social media, therefore, functions as a communicative arena in which multiple voices, organisational, stakeholder, media and peripheral actors interact and influence each other, collectively shaping the trajectory of the crisis discourse.

Insights from rhetorical arena theory (RAT) further illuminate this complexity by conceptualising crises as multivocal arenas where diverse actors, each with varying stakes and agendas, enter the "rhetorical arena" and contribute to the social construction of the crisis. These voices may react differently to the same event, amplify or challenge each other, and generate competing interpretations of both the crisis and the organisation's response (Coombs, T. and Holladay,2023).

In such a contested communicative space, where truth may be obscured by misinformation, emotional responses and competing narratives, social media becomes a critical site where trust can be strengthened or eroded and where organisational credibility is continually constructed and challenged. This complexity underscores the value of an Aristotelian rhetorical lens, which offers a means to assess the ethical character, emotional resonance and rational integrity of crisis communication within this multivocal digital environment (*Rhetoric* 2.1, 1378a6–20).

Crisis communication research emphasises the importance of reputational capital, defined as the relational and perceptual resources an organisation has accrued over time (Coombs, T., 2007). Strong reputational capital can buffer the negative effects of a crisis, while weaker reputations may intensify stakeholder grievances, amplify criticisms, and revive unresolved historical dissatisfaction. During the university's crisis, such dynamics were evident as some stakeholders linked the immediate controversy to previous frustrations with institutional processes.

In the social media environment, where past grievances resurface rapidly and narratives gain momentum through user amplification, reputational capital becomes particularly significant. These dynamics emphasise the importance of assessing not only the strategic content of crisis communication but also the ethical and rhetorical qualities that influence stakeholder perceptions - a point further examined through Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework in the next section (*Rhetoric* 3.1–3.2, 1403b–1404a).

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1.6.3 Instrument of Measure - Aristotle's Ethical Rhetoric Model

Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework, commonly known as the "rhetorical triangle", proposes that effective, responsible, ethical, and persuasive communication rests on three interrelated

forms of appeal: *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. Aristotle introduces these three modes of persuasion in *Rhetoric* 1.2.3–6, 1356a1–24, describing *logos* as proof through reasoning, *ethos* as proof through character, and *pathos* as proof through emotion.

In this study, the Aristotelian model therefore functions both as a measure of communicative quality and as an interpretive lens for understanding the rhetorical construction of *pathos* and *logos*, while institutional *ethos*, is under pressure. The instrument also enhances understanding of less obvious institutional communicative intentions and how they are perceived, and contested during a crisis.

Because rhetorical appeals are inseparable from the moral dispositions of the speaker, careful analysis of *ethos, pathos*, and *logos* can clarify whether a communicator's genuine aim is to bring understanding or merely gain persuasive advantage (Kennedy, 1991).

Ethos concerns the credibility and moral character of the communicator (Aristotle, 2008). In the context of the crisis, the analysis considers whether the university's responses projected trustworthiness and competence, and whether stakeholder reactions indicated confidence or scepticism toward the institution's statements.

Pathos refers to a communicator's ability to recognise and appropriately respond to the emotional states of their audience (Aristotle, 2008). During the crisis, user comments revealed a range of emotions including anger, disappointment, frustration and support. The study evaluates how the university acknowledged or failed to acknowledge these emotions and the degree to which its communication resonated with stakeholders' concerns.

Logos involves the use of reasoning, evidence and factual clarity to support a position. Aristotle notes that persuasion may be grounded in both *truth* and what only *appears* to be true (Rubinelli, 2018, p. 362). Accordingly, the analysis considers whether the university's claims and explanations were supported by verifiable facts and whether stakeholder interpretations aligned with or challenged these factual assertions.

Together, *ethos, pathos* and *logos* provide a solid framework for examining not only the persuasive effectiveness of the university's crisis communication but also its ethical quality. Aristotle's recognition that rhetoric can be used either ethically or manipulatively makes the Aristotelian framework especially suitable for evaluating communication during organisational crises, where credibility, transparency and moral responsibility are closely scrutinised.

While modern theories such as SCCT and IRT offer valuable conceptual background on message strategies and reputational considerations (Benoit, 2000; Coombs, T., 2007) they primarily address what an organisation should communicate in response to a crisis. These theories do not explicitly incorporate the ethical dimensions of credibility, emotional sensitivity or truthfulness, nor do they consider the rhetorical character of the communication itself.

In this study, these modern theories are acknowledged to demonstrate awareness of the broader crisis communication landscape; however, the analytical framework is derived exclusively from Aristotle's ethical rhetoric model. Aristotle's emphasis on credibility, emotional awareness and rationality provides the ethical and interpretive depth required to assess the university's crisis-period social media communication.

1.7 BRIEF OVERVIEW OF METHODOLOGY

1.7.1 Research Paradigm

The study is an interpretive study using Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework to gain insight into social media use in organisational communication during a period of crisis. The research will analyse publicly available social media information, tracing the digital footprint of the university throughout the crisis period. In using qualitative content analysis, it aims to provide a detailed exploration of the interactions during the crisis. It emphasises the importance of context and the subjective experiences of audiences, enabling the research to explore the importance of credibility, reasonability, and emotional appeal in communication. The method connects with an interpretive paradigm, which is useful in exploring subjective understanding of contemporary social dynamics. Through this, the research will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the use of classical rhetorical elements of ethos, pathos and logos to reflect persuasive, ethical and responsible forms of communication.

An interpretivist ontology is relevant as it adopts a relativist view that perceives reality through intersubjectivity by considering meaning in research and understanding of social and experiential aspects (Junjie and Yingxin, 2022). It allows the researcher to derive meaning and motives behind people's actions such as behaviour and interactions with others in society and its culture. This research explores the interactions between the university and its stakeholders during a period of crisis to reflect on the objective of reaching meaningful intersubjectivity (Chowdhury, 2014).

1.7.2 Study Approach and Design

Qualitative research is particularly suited to this study, as it enables the study to gain a deep, contextualised understanding of complex phenomena, of what persuasive, ethical and responsible communication is, and against what criteria it can be measured. Unlike a quantitative approach, which denotes research designs and methods that collect and yield numerical data (Quick and Hall, 2015), the qualitative approach represents the collection of data in a non-numerical form (Gelo, Braakmann and Benetka, 2008). The study will collect publicly available social media information such as posts, comments, and interactions related to the university during the crisis period. The nature of this information is in the form of text, images and videos.

Quantitative research mainly focuses on counting occurrences, volumes, or the size of the extent of associations between entities, while qualitative research aims to provide rich or "thick" descriptive accounts of the phenomenon under investigation (Gelo, Braakmann and Benetka, 2008). In the context of this study, the qualitative approach will enable an in-depth study on the information and how different forms of communication can benefit from applying rhetorical elements of *ethos, pathos* and *logos* to achieve intersubjectivity through persuasive, ethical and responsible communication.

1.7.2.1 Research Design

In using qualitative content analysis, the study provided a detailed exploration of the interactions during the crisis. For data collection, the research collected publicly available social media information such as posts, comments, and interactions related to the university

during the crisis period. This included posts from official university accounts, responses from the public, relevant mentions, and trends during the crisis period.

In sampling, a purposive sampling technique was used to select the most relevant and representative social media interactions during the crisis. This ensured a comprehensive evaluation of reflective rhetoric standards in the communication during the crisis.

The study's primary data sources were the social media platforms X and Facebook. The selection of these platforms was based on their capability to capture immediate user feedback, which enabled a deeper understanding of the subjective experiences of the audience. The user feedback reflected aggregate sentiments during the period and became useful in determining the extent to which the university's communication reflected rhetorical values.

In applying Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework, the study analysed how the university's social media communication established, in the minds of the receiver, the following tripartition:

- Credibility and trust among its students, prospective market, alumni, donor community, general stakeholders, and those digital spectators who may have been observing the discourse.
- The emotional state of the audience, and if those emotions were adequately addressed by appropriately connecting the university's own emotions with those of the audience through the content of its interactions.
- Logic used in the means of persuasion, exploring the rationality and the coherence of facts employed to advance the university's position in those messages.

1.7.3 Study Setting, Study Population, Sampling and Sample Size

The ODeL institution's crisis provides a convenient setting to explore a period of high activity and high stakes, where its most valuable asset - its reputation - is at stake. The legal tussles its engaged in with the minister are observed through the lens of social media discourse. During the crisis, the university's social media timelines were abuzz with user feedback, and this feedback represented a wide range of perspectives and interactions to analyse. The university – as a publicly funded entity – bore a large responsibility to its stakeholders, to engage, communicate with them and ease their fears in the period of crisis as experienced.

If the communication is not handled in a responsible, ethical and persuasive way, the impact of the crisis on the university can be profound, affecting not just immediate students and staff, but also the institution's long-term reputation and trustworthiness. A university without a formidable repute, would concern also an alumnus who holds a degree certificate from that university; in the case of this ODeL institution this stakeholder group numbers over a million alumni (ODeL Institution, 2023). This makes the university an ideal setting in which to study the application of Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework in communication.

The university – the biggest in South Africa in terms of enrolled student numbers, and one of Africa's mega universities – has a significant digital footprint, with an active social media presence across multiple platforms such as X, Facebook, Instagram and YouTube. This provides ample data for qualitative content analysis, including posts, comments, and interactions during the crisis period. This footprint serves as a comprehensive source to

trace the university's social media communication and interaction with the stakeholder during this period.

During the crisis period students and stakeholders used social media platforms to express their sentiments towards the institution. In that period the university's social media platforms had a cumulative audience of 1.3 million. X had 216k followers, Facebook had 1.1million followers, while Instagram had 17k followers. This study focuses only on X and Facebook.

From 06 October 2023 to 20 November 2023 the university's official accounts issued about 194 university posts on Facebook, which garnered 19 991 user comments, while on X the university issued approximately 538 tweets/posts which elicited about 2000 comments, responses, and tweet quotes (retweets with comments). While this digital activity provides important context, only a subset of this material forms the data for analysis.

The general population comprises all the university's social media posts published in 2023, while the target population is derived from all the university's posts published during the period of crisis from 04 August to 20 November 2023. The accessible population includes only those posts specifically dealing with the crisis during this period. Some of these posts are highly active, with up to 75K views and numerous public comments. For qualitative enquiry, purposive sampling (Etikan *et al.,* 2015) will be employed to select a subset of posts that are most relevant to the research objectives.

Selection will be guided by criteria such as relevance to the crisis, thematic content, rhetorical significance, and level of stakeholder engagement. From these selected posts, a corresponding sample of user comments will be analysed to understand the reception of the institution's statements through the lens of Aristotelian rhetoric.

This approach allows the study to remain focused on its central aim: analysing the rhetorical construction of the institution's crisis communication on social media, and the nature of the public's reception of these official statements, rather than analysing the entire volume of social media activity.

Rather than attempting a comprehensive analysis of the 194 Facebook posts and approximately 538 X posts, the study purposively samples a small but rhetorically salient subset of official university posts, together with their directly associated high-engagement stakeholder responses, that most clearly engage the crisis themes and allow meaningful application of the Aristotelian framework.

1.7.4 Data Collection Method(s) and Procedures

The university has official accounts on Facebook, X, LinkedIn, and YouTube. Since the study focuses only on Facebook and X, data collection will be based on these two platforms. The research will gather publicly available social media information to trace the university's digital footprint throughout the crisis period. Using qualitative content analysis, the study aims to provide a detailed examination of these interactions and assess the universal applicability of the three rhetorical elements. The researcher will develop the criteria based on literature that examines rhetorical elements from the communicator's perspective.

1.7.5 Data Analysis Method

The study was approached as an interpretative exploration using qualitative content analysis of social media posts and responses during the crisis period to gain a deeper understanding of the applicability of rhetorical principles to social media communication within an organisational context during a crisis. Using qualitative content analysis, the study analysed

the university's social media responses and its interactions with stakeholders during the period.

The analysis process began with an initial review of the university's social media posts and responses to familiarise the researcher with the content and context. This process entailed reading through the posted content and analysing the interactions to develop an overall understanding of the themes and patterns. Criteria based on the three rhetorical elements (ethos, pathos, and logos) were developed from relevant themes identified in the literature, applied to the data, and comprehensively synthesised into findings that addressed the research questions.

1.7.6 Ensuring Rigour

To ensure research rigour, the researcher spent adequate time analysing the data to gain a thorough understanding of the context. Given the large volume of data, a focused analysis was conducted on an accessible subset to derive meaningful findings. Detailed records of the research process, including raw data, notes, and decision-making processes, were maintained and included as appendices to the research report to enhance transparency and minimise bias. The findings were grounded in the data and literature, ensuring that all perspectives were fairly represented. A qualitative content analysis approach was used, as it aligned with the research questions and objectives and enabled deeper insights into the phenomenon. This methodical approach was consistently and rigorously applied throughout the research process.

1.7.7 Ethical Considerations

The research accessed documents and information available in the public domain, such as social media and website content, ensuring that there were no implications of harm to the institution or individuals. There were no interviews or human participants involved in the research process, as the study solely examined data from these public sources. Given this approach, there were no foreseeable ethical risks that could have been detrimental to any individual or institution. Although the data was publicly available, the researcher respected individuals' privacy and avoided any action that could have led to potential harm or distress. The data was stored securely and accessed only by the researcher to prevent misuse. The findings were grounded in the data and literature, ensuring that all perspectives were fairly represented.

The study aimed to enhance the university's corporate communication by addressing issues that could benefit the institution. Ethical clearance for the study was granted by the University of South Africa (Unisa) through the College of Human Sciences. The researcher remained committed to maintaining research integrity and avoiding conduct that could compromise scientific integrity, including plagiarism, fabrication, and falsification of data. The research was conducted in strict accordance with relevant ethical standards and followed the approved proposal.

1.8 THESIS OUTLINE

1.8.1 Chapter 1: Introduction and Background

Context of the crisis; problem statement and research gap; rationale and significance; aims and research questions; brief theoretical and methodological overviews; thesis structure.

1.8.2 Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework

Classical rhetoric (Aristotle) and contemporary crisis communication (SCCT, IRT); positioning Aristotle as a complementary ethical lens.

1.8.3 Chapter 3: Methodology

Interpretive paradigm; qualitative content analysis design; data sources; sampling; coding scheme; rigour and ethics.

1.8.4 Chapter 4: Findings

Results of the content analysis organised by *ethos, pathos,* and *logos*; illustrative examples from posts and stakeholders' responses.

1.8.5 Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusion

Interpretation of findings; implications for ethical social media practice; how Aristotle complements strategic crisis models; limitations. Summary of contributions, practical guidance for institutional communicators, recommendations for future research.

1.9 RESEARCHER POSITIONALITY

The researcher occupies an insider position within the institution under study, serving as the Manager: Web Services in the Electronic and Web Communication environment. This role involves oversight of the university's web presence and occasional operational support to the social media team when acting on behalf of the Deputy Director: Electronic and Web Communication.

However, the researcher does not create institutional social media messages, does not develop official crisis communication, and does not supervise the communication practitioners responsible for crafting institutional statements. Social media content decisions, message development, and crisis communication strategies fall under the separate communication sub-directorate, which operates under a different management line. As a result, the researcher's influence over message creation or crisis-period content is limited, indirect, and largely administrative in nature.

This positioning provides contextual understanding of institutional communication structures, but it also introduces potential biases associated with insider research, including familiarity with internal processes, organisational culture, and stakeholder dynamics. To mitigate these risks, the study employs several measures:

- Reflexive journaling to monitor assumptions, pre-understandings and interpretive tendencies throughout analysis.

- Peer debriefing with an external academic supervisor to ensure analytical transparency and challenge potential bias.
- Audit trail documentation of coding decisions, category development and analytical steps to enhance credibility and confirmability.
- Negative case analysis to actively identify and consider data that challenges initial interpretations.
- Strict separation between professional responsibilities and research activities, ensuring that data analysis is grounded solely in publicly available content and not influenced by internal operational knowledge.

Through these strategies, the researcher acknowledges their positionality while striving to uphold methodological rigour, transparency and ethical integrity throughout the study.

CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a comprehensive review of the theoretical foundations that inform the study. It develops the conceptual base for analysing organisational crisis communication on social media through Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework. It first situates communication as the creation of meaning within organisations, then narrows to corporate communication and its interaction with social media, where real time engagement and public scrutiny intensify.

It then positions crisis communication scholarship and introduces Aristotle's appeals of *ethos, pathos* and *logos* as the analytic lens. The chapter closes by translating these appeals into operational criteria used later in the study. The sequence links general communication theory to platform dynamics and finally to a practical evaluative scheme that supports the research questions and methodology (Fuchs, 2014; Cornelissen, 2023; Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger, 2019; Kennedy, 1991).

2.1.1 Gaps In The Existing Literature

Four key gaps emerge from the literature, based on both foundational scholarship and recent contributions (2018–2025):

- Most studies overlook the operationalisation and measurement of *ethos, pathos* and *logos* in social media crisis communication. While Aristotle's appeals are widely discussed, there is no widely adopted and consistently applied coding or measurement scheme that reliably operationalises *ethos, pathos* and *logos* for organisational posts and interactions on social platforms during crises. Much of the existing literature remains conceptual or relies on general credibility or trust proxies, with relatively few studies offering replicable coding rubrics. Rubinelli's analysis of *Rhetoric* highlights the interdependence and cognitive dimensions of the rhetorical appeals, but it does not provide empirical measures suitable for social media analysis (Rubinelli, 2018). Classic *ethos* measures exist, such as McCroskey's source credibility scales, but these are general indices of authoritativeness and character and are neither platform-specific nor aligned with Aristotle's triadic rhetorical framework in social media crisis contexts (McCroskey and Teven, 1999). The study develops explicit criteria (sections 2.5; 3.3) for coding institutional Facebook and X posts, demonstrating how Aristotelian rhetorical appeals can be operationalised in organisational social media crisis communication and enhancing the replicability of rhetorical analysis.

- The role of communication style and rhetorical devices in crisis messaging remains under-measured, particularly on platforms such as X and Facebook. There is growing recognition that language choice and tone shape perceptions during crises, but few empirical studies quantify tone/style (e.g., empathy vs. defensiveness) and link them to changes in trust/*ethos* at scale in organisational social posts. A recent review on language and tone in crisis tweets underscores their importance but

remains largely descriptive and calls for more systematic measurement (Wilson, 2023, p. 56).
To address this gap, the study integrates communication style features into its coding to contribute to new, testable indicators.

- Although Aristotle's rhetorical framework remains relevant, relatively few empirical studies systematically combine classical rhetorical theory with digital communication approaches, particularly in analysing social media platforms as rhetorical spaces. There is a gap in methodological integration between rhetorical theory and digital analytics, and limited exploration of platform-specific metaphors such as X as the modern agora and Facebook as the digital polis (Fife, 2010). This research addresses this gap by demonstrating that social media platforms serve as rhetorical spaces with distinct affordances, and that by using classical rhetorical appeals to code digital discourse and also explores these platform metaphors (*agora* vs. *polis*) to frame institutional engagement.

- The literature remains fragmented, with limited Aristotelian analyses on the South African Higher Education crises communication on social media. Literature on South Africa's Higher Education covers protests and student mobilisation and some PR/crisis reflections (Bosch, 2016), but systematic rhetorical analysis on *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos* of official institutional social media responses during legal/governance crises remains limited. Osunkunle calls for stronger PR roles and timely crisis communication in South African universities but does not provide rhetorical coding frameworks (Mutongoza and Hendricks, 2025; Osunkunle, 2023).

Based on the ODeL institution's 2023 crisis, this study addresses these gaps by situating its analysis within the South African Higher Education context and by contrasting institutional social media communication with prior scholarship that has focused primarily on student activism or generic PR approaches. In doing so, the study demonstrates how an Aristotelian ethical rhetoric perspective provides analytically grounded insights into organisational crisis communication, particularly in relation to credibility construction and stakeholder engagement on social media.

2.2 COMMUNICATION

2.2.1 Communication Perspective

Communication is a basic feature of human life and a condition for social organisation. It is woven into routine activities where people act, interpret, and respond to one another in ways that enable collective living and institutional life (Fuchs, 2014). Aristotle also treats communication as rooted in the social nature of human beings, with language serving as the key instrument through which people share thoughts, listen to others, influence attitudes, and are themselves changed through exchange (Thomson and Missner, 2000). From this view, communication is not just transmission; it is the vital means by which relationships are formed, maintained, and tested in public settings.

In classical and contemporary models, communication involves the transfer of a message from a source to a receiver through a medium, with the aim of producing a workable level of shared understanding or intersubjectivity (Fiske, 2010; Klyukanov and Sinekopova, 2019; Cielens and Aquino, 1999). The sender encodes, the receiver decodes, and feedback completes an interaction cycle that allows parties to check meaning and adjust their messages (Waller and Polonsky, 1998; Adey and Andrew, 1996). (Waller and Polonsky, 1998; Adey and Andrew, 1996).

In practice, communication conditions are rarely ideal. Classic transmission theory already recognises that noise can intrude anywhere in the chain, altering or masking the signal that travels from source to destination (Shannon and Weaver, 1964). Beyond the engineering sense of interference, contemporary accounts remind us that disruption can also be semantic or psychological, arising from language, competing meanings, or state of mind during encoding and decoding (Fiske, 2010). As feedback is introduced, a more interactive view emerges in which senders and receivers correct, clarify, or adjust in response to one another, yet even this loop remains vulnerable to mismatched fields of experience and timing (Schramm and Roberts, 1971).

An Aristotelian reading provides a practical way to organise these disruptions: communicative problems often present as deficits of *ethos* (credibility), *pathos* (emotion handling), or *logos* (reasoning). When credibility is doubted, audiences may question motives, resist claims, or dismiss messages outright (McCroskey and Teven, 1999; Hovland and Weiss, 1951). When emotions are inflamed or ignored, frustration may intensify rather than settle (Nabi, 2003). When arguments are unclear or insufficiently supported, understanding weakens and scepticism increases (Chaiken, 1980). In each case, alignment of meaning between the speaker and audience suffers (Grice, 1975).

This diagnostic framing reflects Aristotle's identification of persuasion as dependent upon the effective integration of these three elements (*Rhetoric* 1.2.3–5, 1356a1–20). These patterns later function as interpretive filters in the analysis of social media discourse, where such disruptions are visible and measurable.

Yet even where communicative disruptions are reduced, persuasion is never automatic, and understanding does not imply agreement. Communication creates opportunities to align meanings, but the receiver still decides whether to accept, resist, or ignore the message (Niklas, 2006; Coombs, T. and Holladay,2023). The communicator's influence, therefore, depends on more than message delivery. It depends on perceived credibility, reasonableness, truthfulness, and the handling of emotion, the exact dimensions highlighted in Aristotle's framework and echoed in contemporary persuasion research (Berger, Roloff and Roskos-Ewoldsen, 2010).

In organisational settings, these requirements become practical choices. Achieving intersubjectivity is supported by careful channel selection and message design that consider audience needs and situational demands (Kovaite, Sumakaris and Stankeviciene, 2020; Lamm, Borron and Holt, 2019). During a crisis, for example, a succinct video from an executive may be more effective for external audiences than a long press text, while in-person communication can be more suitable for internal audiences who need assurance and detail. Selection is guided by social norms within the audience, the availability of recipients on particular channels, the urgency of the matter, physical distance, and audience size (George, Carlson and Valacich, 2013; Te'eni, 2001). Interactivity, channel capacity, and adaptiveness further shape outcomes by enabling immediate feedback, richer information signals, and tailored responses (George, Carlson and Valacich, 2013).

Over time, consistent communication aligned with organisational values helps build a positive image in stakeholders' minds. This image reflects repeated interactions that create a reliable link between the organisation and the public, influencing whether people choose to engage or transact with the institution (Grossberg, 1982; Cornelissen, 2023). Social media has made this link more dynamic. Stakeholders are no longer passive recipients; they participate, react, hold institutions to account, and co-construct perceptions of *ethos*. The roles of sender and receiver often switch within the same thread as organisations and audiences engage each other publicly. This interactive pattern emphasises the importance of credibility, empathy, and clear explanation.

Sustaining understanding is therefore an ongoing process. Organisations need to listen, respond, and adjust to feedback in ways that respect their stated values and the lived experience of publics. When there is misalignment between declared values and observable conduct, audiences quickly raise credibility concerns, particularly in digital spaces where interactions are public and persistent (Cornelissen, 2023).

For this reason, responsible communication rests on ethics, factualness, and attention to emotion. Aristotle's approach to rhetoric gives this responsibility a structure. It opposes eristic practice that seeks victory at any cost and instead advocates persuasive efforts shaped by character, truth-seeking, and careful emotional engagement (Amelie, 2011; Gill and Pellegrin, 2006; Corey, 2015; Stacks, Salwen and Eichhorn, 2019). In the context of this study, these principles supply the basis for evaluating how institutional messages function during crises where meaning is contested and trust is at stake.

These communication principles become even more structured when applied within organisations, where communication is formalised into a coordinated function that manages how the institution engages its various publics. This leads to the domain of corporate communication, the central framework through which organisations organise and direct their communication efforts.

2.2.2 Definition of Corporate Communication

Within organisations, the communication principles outlined in 2.2.1 are formalised into a coordinated function that manages how the institution engages its internal and external publics. This coordinated function is widely referred to as corporate communication.

Corporate communication constitutes the integrative, enterprise-level function that coordinates all internal and external messaging to advance organisational strategy, reputation, and stakeholder relationships (Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007; Cornelissen, 2023; Christensen, Morsing and Cheney, 2008).

Derived from the Latin *corpus* (body), the term emphasises the holistic integration of diverse communication disciplines, including marketing, public relations, social media, and internal communication, into a unified strategic framework. In contrast, organisational communication refers primarily to the day-to-day flows of information and meaning that occur within and around the organisation, such as leadership messages, team interactions, and culture-building processes (Van Riel and Fombrun, 2007).

While the two concepts are closely related, they are not interchangeable: the former operates at the strategic, organisation-wide level, whereas the latter focuses on operational and relational processes. This distinction is critical because effective corporate

communication aligns these operational flows with broader institutional goals, thereby strengthening both internal coordination and external credibility.

In short, organisational communication is about communicative processes in organisational life, while corporate communication organises and aligns those processes toward strategic outcomes across audiences and channels (Angelopulo and Barker, 2013; Cornelissen, 2023).

This integration does not collapse disciplinary differences; rather, it coordinates them to ensure alignment and message consistency (Cornelissen, 2023; Christensen, Morsing and Cheney, 2008). Organisations engage diverse audiences with differing expectations, and the integrated nature of corporate communication helps avoid conflicting messages while supporting cogent engagement with stakeholders (Angelopulo and Barker, 2013).

Van Riel and Fombrun (2007) assert that the concept of corporate communication is not limited to business corporations. It is equally applicable to public entities and non-profit organisations. Across both for-profit and not-for-profit settings, organisations aim to present a favourable image and maintain strong relationships with their various stakeholders. A favourable image supports a healthy organisational *ethos*, which increases public trust and credibility and, in turn, strengthens the organisation's persuasive capacity in its communication efforts.

Because this integrated function relies on coordinated action, it is important to examine how communication responsibilities are distributed between senior leaders and practitioners, and how these roles influence credibility in organisational settings.

2.2.2.1 Roles and Responsibilities

Communication roles can be understood using the source–message–channel–receiver model: senior leaders authorise strategic messages, the corporate communication function develops and disseminates them through selected channels, and publics receive and respond (Berlo, 1960; Zerfass and Sherzada, 2014). In practice, decision authority usually rests with the executive (e.g., the vice-chancellor in a university), while corporate communication practitioners translate those decisions into audience-appropriate content, monitor responses, and advise leadership (Heath, Robert and Coombs, 2006; Carrol, 2013).

Leader visibility is especially consequential in high stakes situations, where spokespersons can personify institutional character and strengthen credibility through demonstrable practical wisdom (*phronesis)*, integrity (*arete*), and goodwill (*eunoia)* (Men and Stacks, 2013; Shanahan and Seele, 2015). Even when *ethos* is strained, leader visibility remains important; avoidance often deepens distrust, whereas a visible effort to communicate with openness and ethical responsibility can begin to restore credibility over time.

These roles take on added significance within the organisation's wider stakeholder landscape, where publics now interact with and respond to messages in highly visible digital spaces. The next section, therefore, examines the stakeholders who interpret, respond to, and influence organisational communication.

2.2.2.2 Stakeholders and The Organisational Environment

Corporate communication is relational by design, as its primary function is to manage and sustain the organisation's relationships with its stakeholders (Cornelissen, 2023; Christensen, Morsing and Cheney, 2008). Stakeholders are groups or individuals who can

affect or are affected by the organisation's objectives (Freeman, 2010). Leaders and practitioners must account for stakeholder interests in decision-making because sustained neglect invites reputational loss and operational risk (Bryson, 2007; Demb and Neubauer, 1992).

In this study, the terms *stakeholders, publics,* and *audiences* are treated as overlapping categories rather than strictly distinct constructs. This approach follows communication and public relations scholarship, which conceptualises publics as stakeholder groups that become active around particular issues (Grunig and Hunt, 1984), and recognises that digital platforms increasingly blur the boundaries between stakeholders, publics, and audiences (Heath, Robert, Johansen and Falkheimer, 2018; Rawlins, 2006).

At the same time, social media brings in a wider layer of "networked spectators" who may not be formal stakeholders yet still observe, share, and amplify organisational messages. Digital platforms collapse audience boundaries, enabling incidental or invisible audiences to influence message visibility and meaning (Marwick, Alice and Boyd, 2011; Marwick, Alice E. and Boyd, 2011). These dynamics expand who can affect the organisation's rhetorical situation and how messages circulate.

In higher education, typical stakeholders include current and prospective students, alumni, staff, management, donors, regulators, media, and communities, each with differing levels of salience and influence (Burrows, 1999; Christensen, Morsing & Cheney, 2008). PR scholarship further distinguishes between primary and secondary, internal and external, and active and latent groups, emphasising that contemporary stakeholders engage in two-way interactions rather than serving as passive recipients (Seitel, 2011; Angelopulo and Barker, 2013). Taken together, these categories underscore that organisational communication unfolds within a complex, interactive environment that continually shapes expectations and reconstructs institutional *ethos.*

Given this stakeholder landscape and the dynamics of networked audiences, corporate communication must manage crises as relational tests in which messages are judged in real time by these groups. Because interactive audiences shape meaning and credibility, moving into crisis communication is essentially a shift to managing intensified stakeholder scrutiny.

In short, this complex environment sets the stage for crisis work where organisational messages are assessed instantly against expectations of credibility, reason and care. How these stakeholder groups become visible, amplified or mobilised in online spaces is taken up in Section 2.3.2.2

2.2.2.3 Crisis Communication Within the Corporate Communication Remit

Crisis and issues management sit among the core responsibilities of corporate communication, with strong practitioner accountability for planning, response, and learning (Goodman & Hirsch, 2012; Christensen, Morsing & Cheney, 2008). Because crises place institutional values and credibility under scrutiny, messages must align with stated ethics and observable conduct to maintain trust. Consistency between words and actions supports a durable institutional image and strengthens persuasive capacity in later communication (Cornelissen, 2023; Angelopulo and Barker, 2013). In this sense, a crisis period functions as an intensified test of the organisation's relationships and its rhetorical practice, demonstrated in its communication style.

Because crises intensify scrutiny of both messages and messengers, the next focus is the institutional voice, represented by the vice-chancellor, through whom credibility, reason, and care are made visible.

2.2.2.4 The Vice-Chancellor as the Institutional Voice (University Context)

During the unfolding situation, the institution's *ethos* came under pressure, and scrutiny extended to the vice-chancellor as the face of the organisation. Research in rhetoric and crisis communication indicates that when a leader's *ethos* is questioned because of external events, expectations on communication rise and the persuasive space narrows (Cornelissen, 2023; Coombs, T., 2007).

In universities, the Vice Chancellor often functions as the institution's highest-level spokesperson. Effectiveness depends on audiences perceiving virtue, practical wisdom and goodwill (Shanahan and Seele, 2015). On social media, audiences often address the institution as if they are addressing its leader, and they read leadership communication as a direct expression of the organisation. This "embodied voice" effect means leader *ethos* and organisational *ethos* converge in reception, so messages are judged on the perceived character of both the spokesperson and the institution (Millar and Heath, 2003; Cornelissen, 2023).

Organisations are routinely personified, and credibility assessments transfer between the leader and the institution, especially in public controversies (Ashforth and Mael, 1989; Cheney, 1983). Accordingly, social media posts should make leadership and organisational credibility, reasoning and care for stakeholders visible together, so that communication maintains or rebuilds *ethos* and supports rhetorical efforts to secure acceptance (Men and Stacks, 2014; Angelopulo and Barker, 2013).

Aristotle's account of *ethos* is helpful here. He explains that credibility can be developed in the act of speaking when the message reflects ethos qualities of practical judgement (*phronēsis*), virtue (*aretē*) and goodwill (*eunoia*) (*Rhetoric* 1.2.4–5; 1356a4–25). In this way, the leadership voice, aligned with the institution's, retains an opportunity to reach believability even under pressure, provided the communication clearly shows these *ethos* qualities.

When these qualities are evident, messages are more likely to be accepted, particularly when communication combines clarity in reasoning with proportionate attention to stakeholder emotion(Coombs, T., 2007; Men and Stacks, 2014).

These communicative demands unfold within a digital landscape where social media has become central to how institutions engage stakeholders and how stakeholders evaluate credibility.

2.2.3 Intersection of Social Media and Corporate Communication

Firstly, social media is underscored by new technology that enables a form of digital communication that has disrupted traditional communication models (Rowles and Brown, 2017). It has changed the way people communicate and interact. Organisations that embrace this new form of communication are adapting to the changing external landscape and responding to the changing communication preferences of people. Refusing to move with this preference may spell an existential crisis for the organisation. (Rowles and Brown,

2017) further elucidates that between 2004 – the year Facebook was established – and today, media consumption tastes have significantly changed in favour of digital transformation that gives people (publics) a voice, a gauge on the ever-increasing popularity of the medium.

In the book titled *Online Political Communication*, Giansante (2014) argues that given that social media grants individuals a public voice to be able to communicate globally without the need for the traditional media intermediaries, organisations cannot ignore its ubiquity, and they must adapt in relation to models of audience interaction. (Austin and Jin, 2018) further contend that many stakeholders perceive social media as more credible than traditional media.

In a crisis communication, Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2019) believe that social media can be useful in monitoring what is said about the organisation, anticipate developing crises, and also it is helpful for communication with the audience and those observing in the discourse on the proverbial “digital town square” as the crisis unfolds.

Friedrichsen and Mühl-Benninghaus (2013) regard Facebook and X as intelligent networks, and describes intelligent networks as those networks that can be depicted as systems of communication that organise, transmit and display information with the goal of providing information/entertainment. Friedrichsen and Mühl-Benninghaus (2013) further add that intelligent networks can be useful in providing decision support capability for other social media actors.

What gives a network its unique intelligence are the engagement activities of the people and users on those systems. If social media practitioners in organisations give themselves time to survey and monitor these interactions, they can gain insight on the nature of the interactions, where publics engage with the organisation or with each other about the organisation during a crisis. This can become crucial information for the communicators, to use that insight to develop appropriate responses to address the concerns, sentiments and emotions as they arise.

Traditional communication followed a hierarchical, pyramid-like structure, where information flowed from a single source (the organisation) to the audience (the public) (Angelopulo and Barker, 2013). However, with the advent of social media, organisations can now counteract the negative effects of media coverage through responsible, ethical rhetoric. Social media allows organisations to manage and resolve potential crises before they escalate by providing a direct, efficient way to receive real time feedback from their audience. This shift enables organisations to respond quickly to concerns and adjust their strategies accordingly, strengthening their communication efforts.

Fink (2013) argues that an era when an organisation would meet or encounter its constituents at planned stakeholder engagements, or through press statements, or advertorials – insulated spaces and environments – are long past. Today, the encounter with its constituency occurs daily through social media. Fink further elucidates that the constituency or stakeholder uses every conceivable social media outlet to bring the counter argument to the organisation, sometimes in the most public or private forums imaginable, and during a crisis this can ratchet up the ante considerably.

He further notes that even under normal conditions organisation have enemies, dissatisfied customers, disgruntled current or former employees, or alumni. Therefore in a period where a crisis unfolds and the perception is that the handling of the crisis by the organisation is negative, the numbers may seem intensified, real or imagined. And where each user is

armed with their own social media profiles, with some hiding behind anonymous avatars, with obscure motives, serious damage can be done.

Because social media users often commune together, amplifying each other's messages, other users who associate with these profiles can likely magnify negative sentiments about the organisation, perhaps adding to a negative discourse. In this environment, Mark Twain's famous quote that "A lie can travel half-way around the world while the truth is putting on its shoes" may ring particularly true, as false or exaggerated claims about the organisation can spread much faster than the truth and the organisation's attempts to correct or clarify the situation (Fink, 2013).

It helps for an organisation or corporation to be actively visible, where its constituency is mostly active and vocal. The organisation's social media platforms become the "town-square" where the organisation encounters its stakeholders. Fink (2013) argues that in a period of crisis, the medium offers the organisation a platform to explain the crisis from the organisation's perspective. If the general discourse – in mainstream and social media - is negative, the platform enables the organisation to have their unfiltered voice delivered directly to the organisation's constituency. The organisation may also engage in an online dialogue with its constituents, as it defuses an explosive situation. Social media is therefore a space where brands are built or ruined, It is a shaper of perception and narrative, and discerning organisations carve themselves a digital presence.

Being involved in dialogue concerning the organisation on social media, particularly in crisis, is a form of "healing and strengthening" of those fractured relationships (Smith, 2017). According to Smith (2017) dialogue is useful for four things:

1. Nurture the information exchange between individuals and the organisation.
2. Help communication partners make responsible and mutually acceptable decisions.
3. Revive the original vitality of relationships.
4. Deepen communication relationships.

Smith (2017) notes that social media has made it easier for organisations to engage their publics in a-two-way dialogue. Organisations that participate in such exchanges practise dialogic communication. In this approach, publics are placed on an equal footing with the organisation, so either side can initiate the conversation.

This dialogic capacity is only one dimension of social media's value; its other major advantages are speed and reach. Social media is well-suited to the rapid spread of information. X and Facebook, in particular, thrive on the celerity of messages, widespread popularity, and the concept of virality. Because of this, it is crucial for an organisation to include social media in its response plan in order to reach stakeholders quickly. Other forms of communication are crucial but lack the same utility as social media.

Crisis communication is about getting the right message to the right people at the right time. Its intentional use can help deliver the message timeously to its community and give an organisation some form of control over the discourse, addressing a concern raised by Austin and Jin (2018) that organisations often fail to engage with the public actively and effectively in social contexts. Organisations that engage and actively participate in a public discourse about the organisation itself can steer the discourse in a more positive direction.

While communication channels – like websites, email, SMS, media releases, TV or radio broadcasts, and corporate mobile apps – can deliver messages swiftly, they lack a few characteristics that are found in social media. They are inherently unidirectional, processing information from the communicator to a widespread audience (Bergman *et al.,* 2020), and

lack the ability to facilitate real time conversations or to amplify messages through viral sharing.

The concept of viral sharing was evident on 28 July 2024, when Cape Town International Airport experienced a “power supply challenge” (@capetownint, 2024) that disrupted flight landings and take-offs, leading to widespread chaos and inconvenience. In response, Airport Company South Africa (ACSA) issued a notice via X and Facebook, informing passengers of delays. Without social media, a non-roaming international traveller without SMS, or not subscribed to the ACSA app (the notice encouraged travellers to subscribe to the ACSA mobile app for live flight updates) might miss crucial updates. This incident highlights the limitations of communication efforts without social media, in the era of the digital revolution, and underscores its critical role in ensuring that messages are delivered promptly and reach a broad audience. This underscores the necessity of integrating social media into any comprehensive crisis communication approach.

Given the popularity and use of social media, the chances of a traveller seeing the viral message on social media instead of an email or the website of ACSA are higher; the notice on X garnered 76.3K views. Social media platforms are crucial in such situations; they support the effort of disseminating information rapidly while also engaging directly with the public, addressing concerns, and providing real-time updates. As Fuchs (2014) argues, social media should not be seen as a natural enemy of the status quo, but as suited to making the existing social order more efficient.

Channels of communication that lack bi-directional and swiftness in messaging may leave recipients grappling with uncertainties, searching across various platforms for clarity. Austin and Jin (2018) emphasise that in a crisis, people rely on social media for emotional support, real-time information updates, and to obtain information that they are unable to obtain elsewhere. The need for reliable information from credible sources is a gap an organisation should strive to fill. Published responses can generate further reactions, which can serve as a measure of the emotional impact of the crisis. It is the organisation’s responsibility to monitor, understand and address stakeholders' emotions in these situations. When there is a gap, the organisation is not in control of the discourse, and other sources can overtake them.

2.2.4 Crisis Communication

Jacobsen and Simonsen (2011) define a crisis as a noteworthy business disruption that attracts significant media attention and threatens normal operations (Jacobsen and Simonsen, 2011). Crisis communication, therefore, involves identifying who needs timely information, deciding what they need to know, and ensuring delivery through suitable channels (Angelopulo and Barker, 2013).

Crises are frequent in contemporary society, whether through natural events, human error, misconduct, or technical failure. Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger (2019) argue that no organisation is immune and illustrate this with well-known cases, such as the 2015 Volkswagen’s diesel emissions scandal, which triggered public anger and regulatory action (Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger, 2019). In higher education, a governance crisis can threaten confidence in academic integrity and institutional stewardship, placing long-standing reputations (*ethos*) under pressure.

Ulmer, Sellnow, and Seeger (2019) offer a useful set of criteria to distinguish a true crisis from routine difficulty. A crisis is a specific, unexpected, non-routine event or series of events

that generates high uncertainty and presents both threats and opportunities to high-priority goals. Because it exceeds routine procedures, it compresses decision time, elevates ambiguity, and increases reputational risk while also creating scope for learning and strategic change (Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger, 2019).

From a stakeholder's perspective, crisis communication is fundamentally relational. It seeks to manage the organisation–public relationship in conditions of uncertainty, where failure to understand or address stakeholder emotions and expectations undermines credibility, while responsive engagement can strengthen trust (Diers-Lawson, 2019). In university settings, perceptions of deviation from sector norms and shared values invite intense scrutiny; size alone does not shield an institution from harm, and misalignment between claims and conduct is quickly amplified across media (Angelopulo and Barker, 2013; Booker, 2014).

Mainstream crisis-communication theories provide strategic guidance that this study acknowledges and complements. SCCT links response strategies to attributions of responsibility and reputational threat, offering actionable options such as denial, diminish, rebuild, or bolstering, depending on crisis type and history (Coombs, T., 2007). The IRT analyses message strategies including denial, evasion, reducing offensiveness, corrective action, and mortification to address perceived wrongdoing (Benoit, 2000).

These frameworks remain valuable for planning and evaluating strategic responses. This research does not replace them. Rather, it adds an Aristotelian ethical lens that asks whether the organisation's communication exhibits credible character (*ethos*), sound reasoning (*logos*) and appropriate engagement with emotion (*pathos*) while those strategic choices are being made. In other words, SCCT and IRT help explain what an organisation may choose to say, while Aristotle helps assess how responsibly and ethically those messages are articulated and received.

Seen this way, a governance crisis at a university is not only a test of message selection, but also a test of *ethos*, particularly in a digital arena where stakeholders evaluate reasoning, evidence and emotional stance in real time. The approach in this research, therefore, treats the crisis as an intensified setting that reveals whether institutional communication aligns with widely held values and sector standards, demonstrates clarity and evidence in its claims, and shows care for affected groups. Where these elements are present, credibility is more likely to be maintained; where they are absent, the risk of reputational erosion rises (Angelopulo and Barker, 2013; Ulmer, Sellnow and Seeger, 2019).

With this understanding that credibility is now negotiated in real time within digital arenas, the next section turns to social media itself to explain the medium's origins and features that shape how institutional messages are produced, circulated and judged.

2.3 SOCIAL MEDIA

2.3.1 Genesis of Social Media

The concept of social media began gaining traction as early as the 1990s, but it wasn't until the advent of Web 2.0 – boosted by faster internet speeds and advances in computer technology – that it became widely popular in the 2000s (Corrocher, 2010). Web 2.0 technologies represent an evolution from Web 1.0, designed to create internet applications that support social interaction, community formation, and collaborative processes (Jan, Khan and Mehsud, 2021).

These interactions are based on the concept of information sharing among users, allowing for large volumes of content to be exchanged, as seen on platforms like Facebook, X, YouTube, Instagram, and LinkedIn. Consequently, networks of communities emerge, where users connect over shared interests by liking, commenting, and resharing content.

Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) refer to this phenomenon as user generated content (UGC), defining it as "the sum of all ways in which people make use of social media. They further clarify that for content to be considered UGC, it must meet three criteria (Kaplan and Haenlein, 2010): first, it must be published on a publicly accessible website or on a social networking site accessible to a select group; second, it must demonstrate a certain level of creative effort; and finally, it must be created outside of professional routines and practices.

This marked a fundamental shift from traditional media, where the power of information dissemination moved from the publishers (producers, experts and professionals) to the audience (everyday users – readers, viewers, or listeners). Everyday users were enabled to create profiles on various platforms of interest and generate diverse content to linked communities. As Dudo and Kahlor (2016) note, the advancement of publishing platforms on the internet made access easy for people with the most basic technical know-how and enabled this proliferation of user-generated media, leading to what Olsson (2013) refers to as the web becoming a site of consumer participation.

It must also be stressed that as participation numbers grew, “everyday users” came to include not only lay publics, but also professionals, experts and organisations who saw the benefits, particularly the dialogical model of communication that these platforms supported. This widespread adoption has led social media platforms to become deeply embedded in the fabric of everyday life, influencing informal interactions as well as reshaping institutional structures and professional practices (van Dijck and Poell, 2013)

As social media platforms like Fotolog, Skyblog, and Friendster emerged in 2001, followed by mySpace and LinkedIn in 2003 (Edosomwan *et al.,* 2011), it wasn’t long before Facebook’s notable rise to prominence from 2004 (Zhang, K., 2011). Originally created for American college students to stay connected (Lewis, 2010), Facebook quickly gained popularity, given its versatility and broad appeal, claiming 5.5 million active users by 2005 and reaching 500 million active users by 2011 (Hughes *et al.,* 2011). During this period, it became one of the world’s fastest-growing sites. According to van Dijck (2013), Facebook's ideology and emphasis on sharing, set the standard for other platforms and the broader digital ecosystem. Its leadership in shaping social and cultural norms paved the way for the emergence of other platforms, such as Twitter - which later became X (Stokel-Walker, 2023).

Twitter, a microblogging site, was launched in March 2006, and by September 2011, it was serving billions of messages per week (O'Reilly and Milstein, 2012). By 2022, the platform, changed to X, boasted 152 million daily active users (Laor, 2022). Twitter gained popularity due to its short messaging format, which resonated with users. While numerous social media networks exist today, Facebook and X stand out (Buccafurri *et al.,* 2015) for their massive popularity (Anger and Kittl, 2011) and broad appeal. Their versatility, allowing for the sharing of various forms of content including text, images, videos, and voice, is a key factor in their success. Their dialogical model fosters a robust communication loop, allowing for instant feedback. This study focuses on both Facebook and X to explore what constitutes responsible, persuasive, and ethical engagement between rhetors and audiences (Austin and Jin, 2018) in a corporate communication setting, in line with Aristotle’s ethical rhetoric standards.

2.3.2 Delineating Social Media

Flowing from their concept of UGC, Kaplan and Haenlein (2010) advance a general definition of social media as a group of Internet-based applications that build on the ideological and technological foundations of Web 2.0, and that allow the creation and exchange of UGC. This definition is leaning towards a technical make up of social media, focusing on the mechanical construct of what makes the medium function. While this is a helpful starting point, and as Bergman *et al.,* (2020) highlight, it is important to overcome a technology driven definition and broaden the perspective to consider the communication processes involved, and in doing so answer the question of what the place of human interaction is at the core of these processes (what is the place of human interaction at the heart of the technology?).

To better understand the term "social media", it's essential to examine the construct of the name as pointed out by Caliandro and Gandini (2017), that "media" is simply the plural form of "medium" – a word of Latin origin that refers to a means of intermediation and the creation of a relationship between two or more entities. Caliandro and Gandini (2017) further adds that any form of media invented was inherently designed to be social, thereby connecting people. For example, the telephone was developed to connect people on opposite sides of the Atlantic Ocean, the radio was invented as a communication tool to keep people informed about war news, and television connected audiences in a shared experience.

However Fuchs (2014) argues not all media are social, but only those that support reciprocal communication between humans, in which symbols are exchanged and all interaction partners give meaning to these symbols. This begs the question: can websites, newspapers, and televisions be considered social media?

If we look at the distinct features of the above, we can make the following summary. A television as a medium primarily serves as a one-way communication channel where content is broadcast to viewers without direct interaction. It can incorporate elements of social media (e.g. audience feedback or hashtags), but it is not designed to facilitate UGC or community engagement in the same way that social media platforms do.

Websites serve various purposes, providing information or selling products and services, but they do not typically foster interactive, or a community-driven experience such that can be characterised as social media. Some websites may provide social features for user feedback (such as comment sections or sharing options), however, websites are not inherently social media.

Newspapers focus on reporting news and information through print and some through digital means, however, they do not provide the interactive, UGC environment that is a defining feature of social media platforms. Even when online versions may allow comments, their primary function remains information dissemination rather than community interaction.

Radio functions primarily as a one-way communication medium, broadcasting content to listeners (Cielens and Aquino, 1999). While it may engage with audiences through call-ins or social media promotion, it lacks bi-directional and participatory elements that are central to social media.

Sherman (2011) articulates the distinct characteristics of social media as a web-based service by stating that unlike websites, they allow individuals to construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, and they articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, lastly they view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system.

Therefore, this description elucidates three functionalities that social media introduces: the creation of an online identity, the establishment of relationships between users, and the development of layered communities defined by lists.

In his book *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*, Fuchs (2014) references several definitions of social media from existing research literature. This author exercises judicious selection to use the following:

- Shirky (2008) describes social media as “tools that increase our ability to share, to cooperate with one another and take collective action, all outside the framework of traditional institutional institutions and organisations”.
- Baym and Boyd (2012) emphasise the accessible nature of social media, highlighting that it allows “people who never had access to broadcast media [to do so] on an everyday basis and enables the “strategic appropriation of media tools in this process”.
- Van Dijck (2013, p. 22), points out that when the word “social” is associated with media it should imply that platforms are user-centred and that they facilitate communal activities, just as the term ‘participatory’ emphasises human collaboration (Olsson, 2013). Indeed, social media can be seen as “online facilitators or enhancers of human networks” – webs of people that promote connectedness as a social value.
- Meikle (2024) adds that social media “manifest a convergence between personal communication (to be shared one-to-one) and public media (to be shared with nobody in particular)”.

These perspectives underscore the interactive and reciprocal nature of social media, characterised by active engagement between users who can generate meaning, build and participate in online communities, and share and connect through self-generated content.

This interactivity sets social media apart from traditional media, providing users with the power to shape and influence the organisation or each other. As Baym and Boyd (2012) put it, the interactivity and bi-directionality of social media require directed attention in a way that watching television does not. The nature of social media is such that it engages the individual, and the individual must cognitively participate.

2.3.2.1 Communication Model: Social Media

Building on the general conditions and disruptions outlined in 2.2.1, social media modifies the communication cycle in three ways: rapid role-switching, visible threaded feedback, and algorithmic distribution that shapes reach and visibility. As an interactive model of communication, social media supports a process in which an organisation and its stakeholders become interlocutors who alternate between the roles of sender and receiver to create meaning through the exchange of messages and feedback (Schramm, 1997).

These roles can switch rapidly. The sender receives immediate feedback that helps assess whether a message has been understood, while the receiver gains confirmation that their response has been noticed. This dynamic raises the likelihood of alignment and shared understanding. When feedback surfaces gaps, it signals the need to clarify, reframe or emphasise key points until comprehension is reached.

Unlike traditional one-way models, social media emphasises interaction rather than simple transmission. It creates opportunities for mutual understanding by enabling many short, iterative exchanges. In these exchanges some messages are received, others are missed or misunderstood, and some are rejected or cause confusion. The value lies in the continuing interaction, which increases the chances of reaching the audience’s frame of

reference. In this view, success is not the one-time delivery of a statement, but the achievement of meaningful engagement that strengthens relationships with stakeholders. Communication is therefore an interactional process based on feedback and a social relationship, which social media makes visible and continuous (Bergman *et al.,* 2020).

2.3.2.2 Downside of Social Media

The same affordances that make interaction possible also create challenges. Platform policies and features shape participation, including identity requirements, algorithmic ranking of content, feedback mechanisms, audience controls, and moderation tools. Users can publish updates and images, manage multiple profiles, and rely on functions such as comments, likes, reporting, blocking, deletion and page moderation.

These features structure who can speak, who can be reached, and how interactions are tracked and displayed (Baym and Boyd, 2012). Audiences can also extend beyond those originally intended. Messages can reach incidental or unseen viewers who nonetheless comment, remix or redistribute, complicating audience expectations and the management of organisational voice (Baym and Boyd, 2012).

Consequently, X is the natural next focus, because its emphasis on speed, succinct expression and visible replies amplifies the same dynamics communicators must manage.

2.3.3 X (Social Media Platform)

X's popularity pales when compared to Facebook, but Giansante (2014) maintains that its significance as a powerful communication tool, should not be downplayed. However, against this backdrop, Giansante also cautions that such significance should not be overstated as the platform should not be considered in isolation, but will work optimally when integrated with a network of other instruments in corporate communication strategies.

Weller *et al.* (2014) attribute X's success to its evolution from a niche service into a mass phenomenon, becoming an everyday communication tool suitable for current affairs, crisis communication, marketing and cultural participation. Envisioned at first (as Twitter) to be an instant messaging service, and confining the text character limit to 140, where people connected socially through small talk and mundane status updates, it soon came to be a space where the present, popular, transient, and ongoing issues are discussed. It brings issues of public relevance to the forefront.

Through what are known as "tweets" or posts, status updates are made, forming the basis of interaction (Anger and Kittl, 2011). Those who consume tweets via their timeline can interact with posts of interest by commenting, liking, retweeting, quoting, or sharing even outside the platform. A username is prefixed with an "@" character, called a handle, and every user has one which is unique, for easy identification. When one's handle is used in another's tweet or post, it is known as a mention (Anger and Kittl, 2011), and pulls the mentioned user into a public conversation or dialogue. Fuchs (2014) further adds that on X, users can choose who to follow and which posts they wish to receive. However, they do not have the privilege of imposing their followership on others or ensuring their messages are received by others.

The enduring success of X has been its ability to aggregate – in real time – topical issues into trends, enabling users to monitor and participate in issues of interest to them that are in the public domain. These are arranged according to geographic location and preference,

considering both local and global interests. As Zubiaga *et al.,* (2014) highlight the platform's algorithm can distinguish between regularly popular, mundane topics (like "good morning" or "good night" at certain times of the day) and appropriately elevate topics that have recently seen a surge in activity, thus making them trend.

In 2022, Elon Musk, a South African-born American investor and entrepreneur, acquired Twitter (Jia and Xu, 2022), and rebranded it as X, and outlined the platform's new vision to become "a digital town square where people can, once in a while, change their minds" (@elon_docs, 2024), much like the ancient Greek agora. The agora, literally "gathering place" (Thompson, 1954) were public halls where public discourse and rhetoric thrived, also serving as a focal point of community life in Greek city states. While discourse in ancient Greece occurred in the agora, streets, marketplaces, schoolrooms, and courts of Athens (Furley and Nehamas, 1994), today's discourse unfolds on a global scale, with the focal point of community connectedness being powered by social media networks, like X.

Platforms like X take on the modern-day *agoras*, enabling a "world's town square" where the voices of the many and the wise, the good and the bad, the individual and the organisation, converge in real time (Sherman, 2011), transcending the geographic boundaries of ancient Athens and allowing public dialogue to flourish on a global stage. Organisations use the platform to extend brand visibility and, importantly to communicate with the stakeholder. Often, their followings surpass the number of actual customers, suggesting that an organisation may be followed by individuals outside of its immediate consumer base.

According to Giansante (2014) one of X's enduring useful traits is the opportunity it gives to organisations to be able to listen to conversations at ease, without having to hold townhall mass meetings. The organisation can listen to what people are saying about it in various parts of the country, continent and the world and be able to offer responses. Giansante (2014) notes that, in situations where a response is required, it is preferable for an organisation to respond immediately to shape the narrative and prevent misinformation from escalating.

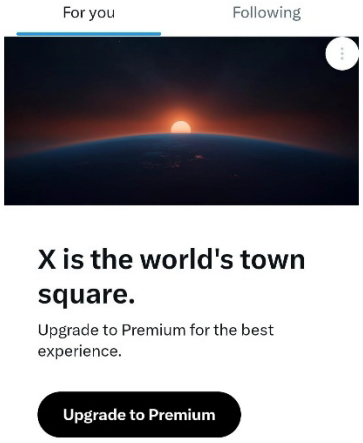

Figure 2.1: Screenshot of the platform's(X) description page
Source: X

While X facilitates rapid, real-time public exchange and immediate response, it is equally important to examine Facebook, whose scale, architecture, and interaction style shape organisational communication in distinct but complementary ways.

2.3.4 Facebook (Social Media Platform)

Facebook is considered the most popular social media network in existence today (Friedrichsen and Mühl-Benninghaus, 2013; Fuchs, 2014). According to Damico (2019), after becoming available to the public outside of colleges and universities in 2006, the number of users grew exponentially. By 2008, approximately 35 million users were reported to be using the platform, and by 2015, this figure had surged to 1.86 billion. Damico further notes that by 2018, Facebook reached approximately 2 billion monthly users.

According to Friedrichsen and Mühl-Benninghaus (2013) Facebook's mission as captured on its company's profile page is "to give people the power to share and make the world more open and connected", and this forms the basis of the network's business model. The value is created by individuals who connect with their acquaintances, who in turn connect to other networks, creating a bulging social grid of interconnected communities.

Friedrichsen and Mühl-Benninghaus (2013) make the proposition that the basis for the network's business model is to harness the power of the internet to help advance an innately human activity, the desire to socialise, and enable communication - a basic social need - that transcends geographic barriers.

In analysing Facebook features, Friedrichsen and Mühl-Benninghaus (2013) illustrate Facebook's various utilities such as the status updates, news feeds, generating opinions and commentary postings, as well as chat or instant messaging. There is also the utility to express likes when reacting to others' posts. Fuchs (2014) advances it as Facebook's ideology of liking, where a user can only like but not dislike, something which critics lament for not allowing expression of negative emotions.

In addition to these functionalities, there are also tools like electronic mail or direct messaging for private engagements. Friedrichsen and Mühl-Benninghaus (2013) see all these features sharing the common goal of enabling the user to maintain a virtual, real-time communication with those individuals who comprise their network of friends, and to support and maintain connections with others. Friedrichsen and Mühl-Benninghaus (2013) depict Facebook as an electronic equivalent of the modern-day café, much like X as an "agora", a modern day gathering place (Thompson, 1954) or a "digital town square".

For organisations Giansante (2014) believes Facebook - like most social media - offers a number of opportunities to connect with a great number of people, and establish and develop relationships of trust with them. As Giansante (2014) highlights the network platform can be used for various communication campaigns, enabling an organisation to also see the impact of its messaging through the functionality of monitoring message effectiveness, to determine which messages attract interest and which do not.

Among some useful attributes that organisations can leverage on using Facebook, Giansante (2014) recommends that it be used to develop relationships with audiences, emphasising that this requires a considerable amount of time to be invested on maintaining the page, as comments must be read and responded to where such is required. Giansante (2014) argues that if this is not done, then the organisation is better off not posting anything at all.

Giansante also suggests that using Facebook optimally requires regular visibility, with a healthy frequency of engagement. In practice, this means planning a consistent posting rhythm, monitoring and replying to comments, and using insights to refine content so that audiences experience the organisation as attentive and present rather than sporadic or reactive.

With these usage principles in mind, it is useful to consider how Facebook and X compare, since their overlapping features and distinct interaction styles shape how institutions plan content and engage stakeholders across platforms.

2.3.5 Different Uses of X and Facebook

X is a micro-blogging platform – a network that connects its users to people, information, ideas, opinions, and news (Pond, 2016). Its service utility includes live commentary, live connections, and live conversations (Ghazzawi, 2024). Its popularity centres on the rapid spread of information, through short messages (posts/tweets), with a character limit – originally 140 characters, now 280 – focusing on immediacy and brevity, notwithstanding its propensity to stir controversy, spread misinformation and harassment.

The power of the network is that it is capable of influencing people, positive or negative, based on the motive and persuasiveness of the communicator. The concept of the digital town square bears a notable resemblance to the ancient village square where Greek philosophers would gather in the *agora* in large numbers (Thompson, 1954). There, they engaged in public discourse, either by listening to or presenting opinions (Fabidun, 2021) on various issues.

This is where Aristotle himself challenged the sophists of the time, on the principles of rhetoric (Aristotle, 2008). Aristotle was aware of the fact that demagogues (sophists) of his time used a certain style of rhetoric to overthrow the democratic order. The sophists were known for making arguments and claims that were not grounded in truth or supported by evidence.

Their arguments often abused the use of persuasive language (Shield, 2003), lacking credibility, yet effective in manipulating and stirring the emotions of their audiences to gain an advantage over their opponents. This mirrors the rhetorical issues present on X today, where it is evident that emotional expressions and X are closely intertwined, allowing some users to exploit or manipulate this dynamic to their advantage.

Facebook, however, by usage volumes far supersedes X with 71% of adults using it as opposed to X's 23% as of 2016 (Eriksson and Olsson, 2016). Facebook is a social networking site aimed at connecting people with friends, family, and communities. It supports longer posts, photos, videos, and a variety of content types, fostering deeper engagement and more detailed sharing but similarly also susceptible to abuse, and any corporate communication activities on it should be measured up with the Aristotelian rhetoric framework.

Although the purpose and use of X and Facebook may slightly differ, there are many similar characteristics. Both share several features that matter for corporate communication. Each supports official brand pages or accounts and identity signals that help institutions publish at scale and be recognisable, consistent with organisational social-media affordances of visibility and association that enable entities to present and maintain an identifiable presence across platforms (Treem and Leonardi, 2013; Kietzmann *et al.,* 2011).

Both provide public comment threads, reactions or likes, and sharing or repost functions that create immediate feedback loops and widen reach through user amplification, aligning with the honeycomb functions of conversations, sharing, relationships, and reputation that

structure large-scale audience interaction (Treem and Leonardi, 2013; Kietzmann *et al.,* 2011).

Their feeds are ranked rather than purely chronological, mixing recency with indicators of relevance so that visibility depends on engagement signals and user behaviour, as shown in academic analyses of platform news-feed curation and the effects of ranking changes on distribution and engagement (Gruen and Townes, 2018; Oremus cited in Gruen & Townes, 2018). Both support multimedia formats such as text, links, images and video, and topic discovery through hashtags or searchable keywords, which makes issues and campaigns easily discoverable and trackable across audiences in the form of “hashtag publics” and related engagement practices (Bruns *et al.,* 2016; Janna, Elaine and André, 2020).

Finally, interactions persist and remain searchable, allowing audiences to assess consistency over time, a dynamic that is central to credibility and institutional ethos in digital publics, reflecting the core affordances of persistence, visibility, and searchability in networked publics and organisational platforms (Boyd, D., 2010; Treem and Leonardi, 2013).

2.3.6 Social Media in Crisis Communication

In the evolving field of crisis communication, there are several theories to consider. First the RAT as articulated by Frandsen and Johansen, (2010) and further developed by Coombs, and Holladay (2023) offers a compelling framework for understanding the multivocal and contested nature of crisis discourse. They posit that the tenet of the RAT and its pivotal contribution lie in its multivocal approach to crisis communication based on the assumption that when a crisis occurs, the social space opens to multiple voices (institutions, opinion makers, media, and the general public) to engage in communication activities, and in meaning-making.

This perspective is particularly salient in the context of digital communication, where social media platforms serve as dynamic sub-arenas that amplify and diversify the voices involved in a crisis. Complementing this perspective is Barbara Warnick’s "Rhetoric Online" (Warnick, 2007), which explores how discourse operates within the architecture of digital spaces such as the web. Warnick argues that online rhetoric is shaped not only by content, but also by hypertextuality, interactivity, and audience agency, highlighting how digital platforms alter traditional rhetorical dynamics where audiences are no longer passive recipients, but become active participants who can respond, remix, and redistribute content.

Similarly, Boyd’s theory of networked publics (Boyd, D., 2010) provides a sociotechnical lens, emphasising how digital publics exist, are sustained, and are mobilised through networked technologies. Boyd’s work underscores the visibility, persistence, and scalability of online discourse, which are critical in understanding how institutional rhetoric circulates and is received in times of crisis.

While these theories provide valuable insights into the interactive and decentralised nature of crisis communication, this study adopts Aristotle’s ethical rhetorical framework as its primary analytical lens. The rationale for this choice is grounded in both the theoretical focus and the ethical imperatives of the research.

Aristotle’s framework offers a systematic and time-tested model for analysing what constitutes responsible discourse. In the context of the ODeL institution’s social media communication during the crisis, this framework facilitates a focused examination of how the

institution sought to construct and project its rhetorical identity, manage public sentiment, and assert its legitimacy through use of *logos*, and how it handled *pathos*, in the face of external scrutiny on its *ethos*.

Therefore, Aristotle's emphasis on the ethical dimensions of rhetoric is particularly pertinent to this study. Given the high stakes nature of the crisis, where institutional autonomy, public trust, and academic integrity were under threat, an ethical rhetorical analysis enables a critical interrogation of the moral responsibilities embedded in the institution's communicative strategies.

Thus, while RAT is acknowledged as a relevant and contemporary theoretical contribution, highlighting the complexity and multiplicity of crisis communication environments, this study privileges Aristotle's framework for its capacity to illuminate the strategic and ethical dimensions of institutional rhetoric. The two frameworks are not mutually exclusive; rather, RAT provides a contextual backdrop that underscores the importance of rhetorical strategy, while Aristotle's model offers the analytical tools to examine that strategy in depth.

2.3.6.1 Rhetorical Appeals in Social Media Crisis Communication

In the book, *Online Credibility and Digital Ethos: Evaluating Computer-Mediated Communication* (Folk and Apostel, 2013), it is explained that ***ethos*** in digital environments, becomes a fluid construct shaped by linguistic cues, visual design, interactivity, and platform features rather than a stable, face-to-face identity. Digital audiences rely on familiar indicators of credibility, embedded in the goodwill, virtue, intelligence, and demonstrated competence of the communicator. These indicators are communicated through responsiveness, transparency, design quality, and evidence-based messaging. In crises times, these elements function as key ethical signals that shape whether publics perceive an institution as trustworthy and community-oriented.

Having said this, however it is important to note that online indicators of intelligence and competence extend beyond digital expression to include the institution's demonstrated operational reliability. Publics assess whether crisis messages align with the institution's historical performance, its responsiveness, consistency, and past follow-through. When an institution's online ethos matches a credible offline track record, digital communication gains persuasive force; when gaps appear between digital claims and lived experience, trust erodes quickly. In this way, institutional competence, both present and historical, functions as a foundational layer of digital ethos, reinforcing or undermining the effectiveness of crisis communication on social media.

According to Scribano (2022), *pathos* in digital environments is networked and collectively shaped, with emotions circulating rapidly through platform affordances such as persistence, visibility, shareability, and searchability. As users engage across social feeds and comment sections, these affordances help turn personal emotion into public, contagious, and community-forming sentiment (Hasell and Nabi,2023). In crisis settings, fear, anger, solidarity, empathy, or uncertainty can spread instantly, reshaping public mood and influencing how institutional messages are interpreted and amplified.

As users engage across social feeds and comment sections, digital platforms transform personal emotion into public, contagious, and community-forming sentiment (Hasell and Nabi,2023). In crisis settings, this means that fear, anger, solidarity, empathy, or uncertainty can spread instantly, reshaping public mood and influencing how institutional messages are interpreted and amplified.

For institutions, these dynamics mean that crisis communication must deliberately cultivate appropriate, ethical emotional appeals. In densely mediated environments such as X threads and Facebook updates, institutional messages inevitably participate in, and shape collective emotional ecologies (Scribano, Adrián and Lisdero, 2019). Effective crisis responses therefore require organisations to evoke stabilising emotions such as empathy, reassurance, humility, and responsibility, rather than amplifying fear, anger, or defensiveness.

Institutions must signal genuine care for affected communities, acknowledge uncertainty or harm, and communicate in ways that validate lived experiences while countering *ethos* collapse and emotional escalation. In this way, *digital pathos* becomes a strategic component of crisis response: institutions must manage not only the informational environment, but also the emotional climate in which publics interpret credibility, trustworthiness, and institutional legitimacy as conveyed through communication.

In social media mediated crisis communication, ***logos*** denotes appeals centred on evidence, factual accuracy, and logical reasoning, which are central to effective public understanding and decision-making during emergencies (Heath, Robert L. and O'Hair, 2020; Kennedy, 1991). Empirical research demonstrates that institutional communicators rely on *logos* by disseminating statistics, expert consensus, and empirically supported content via social platforms (Guidry *et al.,* 2017).

The strength of *logos* in crisis communication therefore depends on how institutions structure messages and cue rational evaluation. However, social media environments often emphasise interaction and visibility, which can shift attention away from analytic processing unless logical criteria are explicitly highlighted (Metzger and Flanagin, 2013).

To counter this *logos* deficiency, institutions can adopt strategies that actively scaffold reasoning, such as prominently displaying sources, simplifying statistical explanations, using visual evidence (e.g., charts and infographics), and offering clear causal narratives that link actions to outcomes (Kim and Liu, 2012; Tindale, 2004).

Research further suggests that subtle accuracy cues, such as reminders about truthfulness or credibility, can recalibrate users' cognitive focus and strengthen evidence-based judgement without reducing message reach (Pennycook and Rand, 2021). From a rhetorical standpoint, these interventions enable institutional crisis communication to optimise logical appeal as the primary framework through which audiences interpret and act upon critical information.

2.4 ARISTOTLE ETHICAL RHETORIC FRAMEWORK

2.4.1 Aristotle, the Philosopher

To understand Aristotle's philosophical background, it is necessary to examine the ancient Greek world of philosophy. Aristotle, born around 384 BC (Natali, 1948) in Stagira, Macedonia, in Northern Greece, Aristotle joined Plato's Academy at around the age of 17. He quickly became one of Plato's outstanding students, In this period, spanning about 20 years in the academy, Aristotle later began to teach and lecture and even composed some dialogues (Thomson and Missner, 2000). When Plato died around 347 BC (Kennedy, 1991) Aristotle left the academy, and Athens; he was 37 years of age.

In 343 BC, Philip of Macedonia invited Aristotle to tutor his son, Alexander, who later became known as Alexander the Great after succeeding his father as king and embarking on his conquests. After this period Aristotle returned to Athens, at the age of 50, and established his own school, Lyceum (Natali, 1948). It was during this mature period of his intellectual life, as described by scholars like Thomson and Missner (2000), that he refined and composed his renowned works – works that would later influence Western Europe, scholars, and society at large.

Scholars speculate on the various reasons why Aristotle went on to open a new school, with some attributing it to doctrinal differences with Plato or a potential falling out, while others suggest his disapproval on the succession of Plato by Speusippus (Natali, 1948) – Plato's nephew who took over the running of the academy after the death of Plato. As Natali (1948) posits, for whatever reason this happened, this was a decisive factor in the preservation of his work, as no complete writings from philosophers outside Athens, including Plato's students, have survived (Natali, 1948).

In addition, this strong will to be independent and break away from the old academic tradition, enabled him to be critical, not only of other sophists – orators of note, who had prominent influence in the educational, intellectual and cultural life of Greece – but also of his own mentor, Plato, and establish his own independence of thought in his inquiry. Furthermore, Plato often had abstract projections on rhetoric, while Aristotle advanced this into more pragmatic theory. In fact, Lawson-Tancred (1991) believes that Aristotle gave attention to both the ideological and practical, which he absorbed into the curriculum of his academy.

To that extent he (Aristotle) established a strong framework for communication that has had enduring relevance in contemporary rhetoric literature and communication as we know it. Dudley (1981) brings out this example of Aristotle in his definition on rhetoric, where he does not follow the lead already given by Plato in *Phaedrus,* nor does he adopt a common view of rhetoric that is prevailing among those rhetoricians of the time. Instead, Aristotle puts emphasis on a tripartite division on aspects of persuasiveness, a view discordant with that of Plato's, who viewed rhetoric primarily as a means to convey truth, while Aristotle emphasised its persuasive power.

Aristotle stressed that proper rhetoric involves the understanding and correct handling of associated emotions, establishing credibility alongside the pursuit of truth. This nuanced understanding of rhetoric reflects a broader shift towards recognising the complexities of human communication and the role of persuasion in public discourse. This shift marked a significant departure from Platonic tradition and allowed Aristotle to construct a more grounded approach to ethics and rhetoric.

While still at the academy, around 360–355 B.C., Aristotle composed a rhetorical manual, sometimes referred to as the *Florilegium*, for use in his lectures. His first literary work, however, was the *Gryllus* – *Concerning Rhetoric* (Chroust, 1973) – a polemic directed against certain rhetoricians who employed a debased form of rhetoric. These works played an important role in shaping our understanding of communication, even though some fragments have been lost over time. Among Aristotle's most admired qualities were his appreciation for empirical evidence and fundamental principles, his widely attested pursuit of truth (Chroust, 1973a), his readiness to defend rhetoric, and his tireless effort to define what constitutes proper rhetoric (Ross, 1959; Chroust, 1973).

Aristotle's world may be vastly different from ours today, but we should not consider his contributions as merely historical. Despite the differences, many of the rhetorical challenges he addressed still resonate with us (Thomson and Missner, 2000). During his time at the

academy and beyond, Aristotle observed many sophists, orators, and masters of rhetoric like Alcidamas and Isocrates (Natali, 1948) – some of the most distinguished orators of the time – who often misused rhetorical techniques with flattering oratory for a set agenda, self-promotion and self-preservation. Rhetoric was used (to exploit emotions) and taught as a skill and profession, usually for a fee and as an art to manipulate and not necessarily in pursuit of truth (Isocrates however, did not accept fees). Aristotle viewed rhetoric not as an art, (even teaching for free) (Natali, 1948), but mostly as a way of life grounded in virtuous character, to also enable an audience to examine the opinion of experts.

Sophists were pivotal figures who focused on manipulative rhetorical techniques with disastrous social consequences. As Tindale (2004), adds they represented an “other” against which the pillars of Aristotelianism stood. Tindale describes how sophists promoted practices that were at odds with those advocated in the dialogues, and which ran in contrast to the understanding and value of “argument”. Sophists were seen to prefer “abject flattery”, for it assisted their malicious and destructive intents to influence common men in whatever object they imagined. Plato accused sophists of seeking power rather than truth through a debased form of rhetoric (Chroust, 1973).

In contrast to the sophists, Aristotle's approach to rhetoric was fundamentally ethical. He believed that effective rhetoric should be rooted in character and aimed at discovering truth rather than merely winning arguments. This perspective is crucial today as it promotes communication integrity when organisations and individuals engage in any public discourse. Aristotle's teachings further encourage audiences to critically evaluate the information presented to them, empowering them to discern truth from flattery. Therefore, contemporary rhetorical issues can look to this ancient Greek intellectualism for civil discourse solutions. Aristotle’s insights provide a valuable framework in evaluating the communication, even in modern contexts, reminding us that communication objectives should ultimately serve the greater good rather than individual agendas.

In an age where misinformation can spread rapidly through various media, the distinction between ethical and manipulative rhetoric remains critical. Just as Aristotle critiqued the sophists for their deceptive discourse practices, contemporary society must navigate the same challenges posed by those who exploit rhetoric for unethical ends. Aristotle's observations about sophists like Isocrates underscore a timeless tension within rhetoric: a delicate balance between manipulation and proper handling of communication. His critique encourages ongoing reflection on how rhetoricians engage in contemporary settings, particularly social media, advocating for a practice rooted in truth and virtue rather than an expedient brand of rhetoric that evokes emotions for a set agenda.

2.4.2 Aristotle’s Ethical Approach to Rhetoric

Aristotle defines rhetoric as “the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion” (McKeon, 1941, p. 1318). Applying three tenets to his rhetoric, he relocates rhetoric from performance to ethically responsible argument (Dudley, 1981; Kennedy, 1991).

In making the subject of rhetoric safe for use in public discourse, Lawson-Tancred (1991) believes Aristotle was compelled to thoroughly explore its fundamentals, as they relate to basic human life and the fundamental human need: for communication. Lawson-Tancred further observes that Aristotle's approach was to analyse three major topics: the psychology of emotions, the use of informal reasoning, and the aesthetics of prose and style.

Other ancient Greek proponents of rhetorical theory had concentrated on the use of flattery, tricks, and other devices for *ad hoc* success. Lawson-Tancred believes this may have inspired Aristotle to examine the very roots of persuasion itself, leading him to reflect on the nature of character (*ethos*), the emotion (*pathos*), and the method of demonstration (*logos*) in the absence of deductive certainty.

Thus, the framework of his rhetoric transcended mere public speaking to become an important applied quality standard for responsible communication. It limits the scope for arbitrary or opportunistic messaging by requiring speakers to justify their claims through the three rhetorical appeals. When adhered to, it imposes clear boundaries on institutional communication, particularly during times of crisis. It requires the rhetor (in this case, the university) to operate within the structure of credibility (*ethos*), rational argument (*logos*), and balanced emotional appeal (*pathos*) (*Rhetoric* 1.2.3–5; 1356a1–20).

This means the rhetor cannot exploit their authority to manipulate emotions or distort facts, nor rely on persuasive tactics when their own reputation is compromised. By closing the space for arbitrary or opportunistic messaging, the framework ensures that every statement aligns with ethical principles.

This emphasis on structured persuasion is inseparable from Aristotle's ethical orientation. For Aristotle, rhetoric is not merely a technical art but a moral practice, requiring the speaker to act in accordance with principles of truth and justice. It is within this context that ethics, understood as systematic reflection on right and wrong, becomes central to rhetorical theory (Schwaninger, 2006).

Ethics centres on human agency, emphasising practical application. The Western tradition, heavily influenced by Aristotle's idea of ethics, is considered a form of "practical" or "normative" theory. In this context, ethics isn't merely about understanding what is good but about "becoming" – knowing how to act and behave properly and decently. Seneca stresses this by stating, "Philosophy teaches one to act, not to talk" (Seneca and Campbell, 1969, p. 77).

2.4.2.1 Ethics and Rhetoric

Ethos, pathos and *logos* are distinctive and systematic aspects of Aristotle's rhetoric, used to operationalise rhetoric within ethical and moral boundaries (Eterovich, 1980). Aristotle viewed rhetoric not as a tool to subvert truth or justice, but as a means to observe, communicate, and discover truth (Aristotle, 1992). The sophistic tradition, which treated rhetoric as persuasion at any price, gave it a contemptuous character (Cope, 1867, p. 28), a view that persisted from the Hellenistic era through the Latin era, propagated by figures like Isocrates and Cicero (Long, 2006).

Through Aristotle, rhetoric and ethics converge, creating a framework that examines the speaker's actions, intentions, and circumstances. Ethical rhetoric reveals human nature, character, habits, and aims, and prescribes rules of conduct that guide responsible persuasion. Flynn (1957) notes that when applied, Aristotle's framework enables analysis of what the speaker does, why they do it, and under what conditions (Flynn, 1957), making ethics central to rhetorical practice (Eterovich, 1980; Cope, 1867).

Aristotle also situates rhetoric in relation to dialectic, particularly in the context of *enteuxis*, the encounter with the audience (Owen, 1968; Anagnostopoulos, 2009). While dialectic concerns logical reasoning among equals, rhetoric addresses persuasion in civic spaces where decisions and judgements are made. Both disciplines share a rational dimension,

inviting methodical approaches to uncover persuasive elements. This rationality, as Lawson-Tancred observes, gave Aristotle's rhetoric its enduring value as a communication standard, guarding against haphazard, value-free persuasion (Owen, 1968; Anagnostopoulos, 2009; Lawson-Tancred, 1991).

In contemporary contexts such as social media, this ethical foundation remains vital. Public platforms expose motives quickly; thus, any attempts to mislead or inflame emotions with minimal facts are easily detected. Institutions must therefore adopt Aristotelian principles that privilege truth, transparency, and goodwill over opportunistic messaging. Persuasion, Aristotle insists, is not "at all costs". When used responsibly, it benefits organisations and communities; when misused, it causes significant harm. The Aristotelian framework thus places moral accountability on the communicator, obliging them to pursue truth against what is wrong, a principle that sets his rhetoric apart from eristic styles aimed solely at winning (Furley and Nehamas, 1994; Tindale, 2004).

Aristotle's ethical doctrines, detailed in works such as *Nicomachean Ethics* and *Eudemian Ethics*, provide deeper philosophical foundation, but this research focuses on their practical application to communication (Hardie, 1968). From this basis, Cope (1867) highlights how Aristotle's systematic treatment of rhetoric, including its analysis of character, motives, and feelings, lends it lasting relevance for both speaker and audience. This ethical function of rhetoric, to defend truth while striving for persuasion, remains a cornerstone for responsible discourse in modern institutional communication (Kennedy, 1991; Cope, 1867).

Having outlined Aristotle's ethical view of rhetoric, the next section explains his artistic proofs (*pisteis*), namely *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, as practical modes of persuasion in public discourse.

2.4.3 Artistic Modes of Persuasion

In *Rhetoric* (350 BC) particularly in *Books I* and *II*, Aristotle introduces the *pisteis*, (which in essence means "proof", or means of persuasion or "belief") for public discourse available to a speaker, through the three modes *logos, pathos* and *ethos* (*Rhetoric* 1.2.3–5; 1356a1–20;). In this work Aristotle hypothesises:

> Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. […] Persuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible. […] Secondly, persuasion may come through the hearers, when the speech stirs their emotions. […] Thirdly, persuasion is effected through the speech itself when we have proved a truth or an apparent truth by means of the persuasive arguments suitable to the case in question (De Jong, 2015, p. 25)

Logos in this context refers to the message or communication detail, concerned with the logical arrangement of facts, and the validity of the argument on the subject or topic of discourse at hand.

By contrast, the other two means of persuasion, while equally important, are not directly concerned with the factual content of the discourse, but have a supplementary function in persuading; they focus on engaging the emotions of the audience (*pathos*) and the representation of the speaker's or communicator's character (*ethos*), and influence the degree to which the audience attaches credibility to *logos* (Furley and Nehamas, 1994).

Aristotle stresses that these three appeals must function as an organic unity for effective, responsible and ethical communication – a principle elaborated in *Book II* of *Rhetoric.*

Persuasion in this context should not be confused with deception or coercion, which Aristotle condemns as sophistic debasement of communication (Smith, 2017). Instead, persuasion grounded in his ethical rhetoric framework enables organisations to present their viewpoint responsibly, aiming to inform, convince, and build understanding rather than manipulate.

This tripartite framework resonates with Johann C. De Wet's theory of persuasive communication. In *The Art of Persuasive Communication* (2009), De Wet argues that persuasion is not merely about influencing opinion but also about ethical engagement, audience sensitivity, and contextual awareness (De Wet, 2017). He emphasises that successful persuasion requires balancing rational clarity, emotional appeal, and credible character – especially in institutional contexts. De Wet's emphasis on relational persuasion aligns with Aristotle's notion of *eunoia*, the goodwill a speaker must demonstrate toward their audience.

De Wet also cautions against manipulative techniques, advocating dialogic communication that respects audience autonomy and dignity. This is particularly relevant in institutional crisis communication, where the goal is not only to inform but also to develop a trust relationship, affirm shared values, and responsibly engage stakeholders.

Thus, De Wet's theory converges with Aristotle on the principle that ethical persuasion is a multidimensional process – one that integrates logic, emotion, and character to develop communal understanding and responsible civic discourse.

2.4.3.1 Reason (*logos*)

Logos refers to the rhetorical statements or arguments that form the content of communication, comprised of facts, evidence, and reasoning in support of a message. Aristotle asserts that persuasive communication must present arguments that are convincing and logically sound, such that they do not easily collapse under scrutiny (De Jong, 2015). The impact of *logos* is felt when recipients can follow and understand the rationale behind what is said; if the argument lacks logical consistency, persuasion fails. Smith (2017) reinforces this by noting that *logos* involves the logical organisation of ideas, focusing on what is said, how it is framed, and the supporting facts and arguments.

As the content of argument, *logos* enjoys universality of application: it can address any subject or problem and, like dialectic, be subjected to systematic examination. Cope (1867) observes that rhetorical argumentation in Aristotle's time spanned political, historical, scientific, and philosophical discourse, even sophistical reasoning (Cope, 1867). Across these contexts, the power of *logos* to effect change and influence, when used effectively, is evident.

Logos serves as a form of proof by demonstration (Lawson-Tancred, 1991). Such demonstration depends on how clearly and logically the available facts are arranged within an argument. Lawson-Tancred (1991) maintains that credibility is strongest when this kind of logical showing is evident, while arguments weak in reasoning lose persuasive force. He further notes that audiences readily accept reasonable messages and speakers, especially in matters where exact precision is unattainable and more than one view can be sustained.

Tindale (2004) identifies two primary uses for *logos*: to describe the world (e.g., reporting timelines, causes, corrective steps) and to influence beliefs and behaviour (e.g., offering

reasons to comply, support, or reassess). For social media crisis messaging, this means pairing a verifiable description with clear practical reasoning that anticipates questions and addresses likely counterarguments.

Accordingly**,** the study specifies practical indicators of *logos* that make its descriptive and persuasive functions measurable across social media posts. Operatively, this study codes *logos* through four indicators: clarity and coherence (plain structure and readable sequence), use of evidence and data (links to reports, statistics, policy citations), argument strength and refutation (cause-effect explanations and responses to alternative views), and consistency across messaging (alignment across posts and channels) (see Table 2.1).

A key component of logical argumentation is the *enthymeme*, which Aristotle calls the "body" of persuasion (*Rhetoric* 1.1.3, 1354a15–18; 1.2.1–2, 1355b25–1356a; Kennedy, 1991). A wrong premise inevitably leads to a wrong conclusion, making examination essential. For instance, invoking the Council on Higher Education (CHE) audit to imply that academic quality guarantees governance integrity extended a valid premise beyond its scope, weakening the argument's logical strength.

Such missteps underscore Aristotle's caution and Cope's (1867) insistence that rhetoric must remain intelligible and accessible avoiding lengthy chains of syllogistic reasoning that ordinary audiences cannot follow. Instead, arguments should rely on principles widely accepted and understood, ensuring reasoning remains clear, current, and persuasive.

In crisis contexts, this means framing arguments in plain, widely accepted terms and avoiding overextended inferences that audiences cannot easily verify.

2.4.3.2 Emotions (*pathos*)

Lawson-Tancred (1991) notes that Aristotle, places a considerable amount of interest on emotions, and his focus is to emphasise the responsibility upon the orator, the speaker, or communicator, who seek to identify, control or produce them. Lawson-Tancred stresses that if Aristotle did not place such emphasis on *ethos*, his work on *Rhetoric* would have ended with *Book I*, to underscore that *logos* on its own cannot produce effective arguments.

Aristotle, in analysing the role of emotions, does not take the approach of a psychologist or philosopher, who seeks to offer a scientific account of their relation to human cognition and behaviour. Aristotle rather, is offering a survey of communicative circumstances that produce various emotions. For instance, to engender or address emotions responsibly, the speaker ought to survey the emotions of the audience; for example if anger is the prevailing emotion in the audience during a crisis, a responsible communicator or organisation will endeavour to produce calm (Lawson-Tancred, 1991). Humans naturally rely on emotions, and responsible communicators must account for this reality.

When Aristotle criticises his contemporaries (sophists and other writers of rhetoric handbooks) he concentrates on emotions – deriding them on the sole use of emotions as the only element of persuasion – where they use the skill negligently to arouse emotions of the audience to advance their agendas (Furley and Nehamas, 1994).

He argues that an audience, much like a judge, should be engaged with demonstrative truth, using logical rules to advance arguments with the aim of genuinely changing their perspectives. The achievement of persuasion using emotions alone amounts to a morally reprobate form of rhetoric. The sophist cared solely about winning and would use any means, any sleight of tongue, to accomplish that goal.

Eminent sophists such as Isocrates, whom Aristotle labelled “falsifiers”, prioritised pleasing audiences over truth, even advising students that “satisfying the audience is extremely important if one is to succeed in public life” (Burnyeat *et al.,* 1995) . This approach, Aristotle contends, undermines rational deliberation and adequate judgement.

Aristotle recognised the influence of emotions on judgement and emphasised the importance of handling these responsibly in an endeavour to persuade (*Rhetoric* 2.1–2.11; e.g., anger 2.2, 1378a–1379b). He saw the effort of using emotions only, to affect judgement on the part of the audience as trying to make a straight ruler crooked (Kennedy, 1991) or an attempt at corrupting, something Lawson-Tancred (1991) refers to as clouding judgement such that they (who should judge) are no longer adequately able to consider the truth.

Aristotle maintained that a proper understanding and handling of emotions is a fundamental aspect of the praxis of rhetoric, and those who must judge should do so free from emotional manipulation. Those who must judge, Lawson-Tancred (1991) explains, ought to make fair judgement and award advantage where necessary, for sound judgement should be based on what is probable, and not considered on the basis of hatred or pleasure.

Kastely (2004) contends that for communication to be effective, it must engage an audience in such a way that they are moved to act (even if that action is only to make a certain judgement), and to do this, it must speak to their ethical and emotional investment in a particular situation. He further argues that rhetoric is rooted in its ability to engage and transform emotions, invoking the classical insight that speech has the power to stop fear, banish grief, create joy, or nurture pity (Kastely, 2004). What makes speech this powerful is its ability to evoke these emotions, and where not responsibly engaged, such power can be open to abuse.

Therefore, ethical rhetoric is about evoking and handling these responsibly. Philosophers such as Kant believe that the power of emotion to move audiences needs to be controlled because, uncontrolled, it endangers ethical autonomy and individuals to manipulation by forces outside of rationality (Kant, Gregor and Timmermann, 2012). Thus when *pathos* is handled responsibly, and working alongside the *logos* and *ethos* of the speaker it creates a powerful triangle of ethical rhetorical proof.

To this end, Aristotle suggested analysing emotions in three dimensions: the state of individuals prone to a specific emotion, the object of that emotion, and the underlying causes of the emotion (Barnes, Schofield and Sorabji, 1979). This speaks to a communicator understanding their audience, much like an organisation must know its stakeholders and engage them in a way that addresses their emotions.

In the context of the university, some of its diverse stakeholder groups include alumni, for instance, who hold specific credentials from the university and who may fear that an impaired brand reputation of the institution may render their certificates worthless. The institution, when dealing with the crisis must appear to be addressing these emotions, as they may differ from those of other stakeholders.

Aristotle’s insistence on responsible emotional engagement highlights that *pathos* cannot operate in isolation or as a manipulative device. Instead, it must work in concert with *logos* and *ethos* to produce ethical results. In crisis communication, this involves recognising stakeholder anxieties, such as fears about institutional stability or credential value, and addressing them with empathy while maintaining factual clarity and credibility. Ethical rhetoric therefore transforms emotion from a tool of exploitation into a means of building constructive dialogue, completing the triad of persuasive proof.

2.4.3.3 Credibility of Character (*ethos*)

Lawson-Tancred (1991) identifies character as one of Aristotle's three modes of proof and argues that credibility must be established before a speaker begins to persuade. Shanahan and Seele (2015) affirm that *ethos* often functions as the controlling factor in communication because character frames both the logic advanced and the emotions engaged. Kennedy (1991) defines *ethos* as moral character reflected in ethical choices that have become habitual, which in turn shape audience judgements about trustworthiness and competence.

Aristotle links moral judgment to the shared values of a community, the commonplaces or topoi, from which audiences derive their sense of right and wrong (*Rhetoric* 2.23; 1397a 1398b;). When communicators align their messages with these shared values they invite judgements of credibility and justice that support acceptance of their claims (Christensen, Morsing and Cheney, 2008). This is equally relevant in regulated organisational environments where codes of conduct and industry standards shape expectations of responsible behaviour (Angelopulo and Barker, 2013).

In Aristotle's account, *ethos* is not a mere reputation effect; it is a moral quality formed by habituated choice and judged in relation to the shared values of a community (*Rhetoric* 2.1, 1378a6–20; Christensen, Morsing and Cheney, 2008; Lawson-Tancred, 1991). This places *ethos* within normative theory: audiences evaluate speakers against standards of what ought to be done, not only what can persuade. Thus, credibility rests on virtue and right action, not only on technique, and institutional communication is assessed against communal notions of fairness, truthfulness and justice (Kennedy, 1991; Smith, 2017).

Classical rhetoric specifies three components of *ethos*: ***aretē*** (virtue), ***phronēsis*** (practical wisdom), and ***eunoia*** (goodwill) (Shanahan and Seele, 2015). ***Aretē*** concerns a disposition toward truth and fairness (*Rhetoric* 2.1.5; 1378a6–20; see also 1.2.4; 1356a4–13). In practice, this includes a willingness to provide complete and accurate information, even when inconvenient, which strengthens perceptions of integrity (Smith, 2017). ***Phronēsis*** concerns expertise, sound judgement, and practical reason. At an institutional level, it appears as competence, consistent decision quality, and the capacity to balance short-term choices with long-term obligations to stakeholders and society (Smith, 2017). ***Eunoia*** concerns goodwill toward the audience. For organisations, this is shown through responsiveness, empathy, and demonstrable care for stakeholder interests, which build a reservoir of trust that can prove valuable in periods of scrutiny (Fink, 2013).

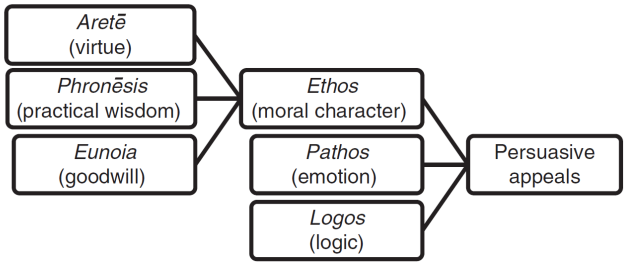

Figure 2.1: Role in of ethos in communication. Source: (Shanahan and Seele, 2015)

Ethos applies to organisations as social actors as much as to individual speakers. Schwaninger (2006) notes that organisational identity, purpose, reputation, and habitual practices collectively constitute an organisational *ethos*. Over time, stable patterns of behaviour become public memory that conditions how audiences receive messages.

Accordingly, reputation can be understood as a manifestation of *ethos* in corporate communication: when an institution is held in high esteem, its messages are more readily granted credence (Steiber, 2014; Wei, 2002).

Ethos can be evaluated both before and during communication (Cope, 1867). Pre-existing reputation influences initial audience judgements, yet credibility may also be formed in the act of speaking through clear structure, appropriate tone, and transparent evidence, which help render the speaker worthy of belief (Lawson-Tancred, 1991; Kennedy, 1991). In practice, organisations strengthen *ethos* through consistent delivery on promises, visible accountability, and alignment between words and actions.

In PR theory, mutual understanding and balanced effects are associated with a two-way symmetrical communication model in which practitioners mediate between organisational and stakeholder interests, using formative and evaluative research to inform decisions and to assess outcomes (Angelopulo and Barker, 2013). This approach supports the development of *ethos* because it treats stakeholders as partners in meaning-making rather than passive recipients of persuasion.

For this study, *ethos* is central to assessing institutional crisis communication on social media. A university must persuade diverse audiences, including students, alumni, funders, government, and the public, of its integrity and competence. Sources perceived as highly credible gain advantages that others do not. They can use emotional appeals and complex information without triggering immediate scepticism because their character is presumed trustworthy (Smith, 2017). Conversely, weak or questionable *ethos* undermines message acceptance, especially during crises. A prior reservoir of goodwill and consistent track record can provide benefit of the doubt, while gaps between claims and behaviour rapidly erode credibility in the digital record (Fink, 2013).

In Aristotelian terms, institutions communicate most effectively when they exhibit *aretē* through honesty and fairness, *phronēsis* through expertise and sound judgement, and *eunoia* through care for stakeholders. When combined with reasoned arguments and responsible handling of emotions, they successfully construct *ethos*, which in turn supports ethically persuasive efforts in crisis communication.

This research views *ethos* as a normative assessment of institutional character that shapes how stakeholders receive *logos* and *pathos* during crisis communication (Smith, 2017; Fink, 2013). This orientation is essential in a digital environment where stakeholders constantly interpret institutional character, meaning their reception of reason and emotion depends not only on what is said but also on who they perceive the organisation to be.

Having established how *pisteis* (proof) shapes the reception of organisational messages, the discussion now turns to Aristotle's three species of rhetoric, which offer a broader framework for understanding how institutions persuade across different communicative contexts.

2.4.4 Three Species of Rhetoric

Aristotle distributes rhetorical proof across three genres: *deliberative*, *judicial* and *epideictic* (*Rhetoric* 1.3, 1358b–1359a; Lawson-Tancred, 1991; Cope, 1867). Cope (1867) notes that such divisions are necessary, given the varying nature of audiences that communicators must address. The taxonomy is particularly relevant in the context of institutional crisis communication on social media, where messages must be tailored to diverse stakeholders,

such as prospective or current students, alumni, media, and the public, each with distinct concerns.

Cope (1867) further argues that every rational and artistic action is guided by its intended end, suggesting that institutional messaging during a crisis should never be random but it must be strategically crafted to achieve specific outcomes, such as restoring trust, managing reputation, or building confidence in the brand.

Applying this taxonomy to institutional messaging, we turn first to deliberative rhetoric, where communicators argue what should be done next and why it benefits the audience.

2.4.4.1 Deliberative

Deliberative rhetoric is used when addressing public assemblies, whenceforth its Latin root, *deliberativum*, which denotes the act of addressing a public audience, which is then asked to evaluate the expediency or inexpediency of future actions (Cope, 1867). Cope (1867) emphasises that the audience in this rhetorical mode is not merely passive but is expected to deliberate, judge, and act based on the speaker's proposals.

In the digital age, social media platforms have transformed this classical notion of public assembly into a spatially distributed, participatory virtual public audience (Staab and Thiel, 2022). This assembly – composed of stakeholders, consumers, and the general public – now engage directly with organisational messages, offering immediate feedback that influences reputational outcomes in an unending conversation.

During crises, organisations use social media to present future-oriented solutions, such as corrective action, tactical or strategic changes, done to appeal to this modern deliberative audience. These messages should anticipate scrutiny, align with public values, and demonstrate practical benefit, consistent with the Aristotelian principle that deliberative rhetoric seeks the good and avoids harm through reasoned discourse.

The next sections consider how this logic differs when communication addresses past conduct (judicial) and presents praise or blame (epideictic).

2.4.4.2 Judicial

Judicial rhetoric, or *genus iudiciale*, concerns past actions and seeks to determine whether they were right or wrong by appealing to principles of justice and legality (Cope, 1867). Traditionally, this mode addressed judges who evaluated evidence and rendered verdicts. It relies on logical argumentation, testimony, and precedent to establish accountability.

In contemporary contexts, judicial rhetoric operates in the "court of public opinion", a metaphorical space where social media audiences scrutinise organisational behaviour. During crises, institutions often issue statements defending their actions, clarifying facts, and presenting evidence to counter accusations. These messages are crafted with the understanding that audiences will evaluate, comment, and react, much like judges deliberating a case. However, the verdict is not legal but reputational, shaped by public sentiment, engagement metrics, and media amplification.

For example, an organisation accused of unethical labour practices may post a detailed response outlining compliance history and corrective measures. The audience then assesses the credibility and sincerity of the message, influencing reputation and future

stakeholder relationships. Judicial rhetoric on social media therefore mirrors its classical function: to justify past actions and restore confidence through reasoned defence. In crisis communication, this mode also interacts with *ethos* and *pathos*, as factual clarity must be combined with a tone that signals accountability and respect for stakeholder concerns.

2.4.4.3 Epideictic

Epideictic rhetoric, or *genus demonstrativum*, focuses on the present and aims to praise or blame (Cope, 1867). In this mode, the audience is not expected to make decisions but are invited to reflect on shared values, celebrate virtues, or condemn vices. Pernot (2015) emphasises that epideictic discourse does not seek immediate action as judicial and deliberative rhetoric do. Instead, it shapes collective beliefs, reinforces accepted norms, and offers lessons on emerging values.

In crisis communication, epideictic rhetoric appears in messages that reaffirm institutional mission, express solidarity, or condemn harmful practices. On social media, this extends beyond core stakeholders to include external observers who may not be directly affiliated with the institution but still form judgements about its character. These judgements contribute significantly to reputational standing in the digital public sphere.

Epideictic rhetoric also interacts with *ethos* and *pathos*. Posts that praise resilience or affirm commitment to fairness signal credibility and goodwill, while empathetic language fosters emotional connection with audiences. In this way, epideictic discourse helps maintain trust and reinforce identity during reputational stress.

In summary, Aristotle emphasises the distinct stylistic and functional roles of each branch, arguing that rhetorical propriety demands each be treated according to its unique purpose. However, in modern contexts such as social media crisis communication, these divisions often converge within a single message. For instance, an organisation responding to a crisis may simultaneously defend its past actions (judicial), propose corrective measures (deliberative), and reaffirm its values or express solidarity (epideictic). This rhetorical blending reflects the dynamic and multifaceted nature of organisational social media communication, where audiences expect transparency, accountability, and emotional resonance in real time.

In practice, these species rely on style and delivery to make credibility, reason and emotion clear and present to audiences in real time. The next discussion, therefore, turns to Aristotle’s guidance on style and delivery.

2.4.5 Style of delivery of Rhetoric

Aristotle stresses that it is not enough to know what to say, but also how to express it effectively (*Rhetoric* 3.1, 1403b–1404a; 3.5, 1407a–1407b). Delivery of communication involves not only the content of what is said, but also voice management and the use of tone and rhythm. He argues that the two main virtues of style are clearness and propriety. Clearness involves linguistic precision, while propriety enhances rhetorical elegance and ornamentation (McKeon, 1941).

Propriety of style lies in it being expressive, ethical, and proportionate to the subject. The first creates a sense of sympathy, and the second reflects character because every life situation and moral habit has an appropriate language. The third, according to Aristotle, is a

warning against handling important topics carelessly or trivial matters with a grand style (Goold, 1926).

Aristotle explains that style should follow a clear and structured approach. A continuous style, which runs on without clear breaks, is hard to follow and less pleasing. A periodic style, by contrast, has a clear beginning and end, making it easier to read and understand. Each sentence should feel complete and not end abruptly. This principle is evident in the statement of 28 October 2023, which uses periodic style in the sentence: *"The university has now approached the court on an urgent basis to challenge the minister's announcement of 27 October 2023."* The sentence is short, logically complete, and ends with clarity, reflecting Aristotle's emphasis on proportionate and structured style for easy comprehension.

This example illustrates how Aristotle's guidance on style remains relevant in contemporary institutional communication, ensuring clarity and proportion in high stakes public discourse.

The discussion now moves from theory to application, specifying measurable indicators that reflect how these Aristotelian principles appear in the institutional posts and interactions.

2.5 DEVELOPMENT AND APPLICATION OF CRITERIA

This chapter examined the core concepts of rhetoric and the evolving role of social media in institutional crisis communication. Social media alters traditional mass communication by enabling real-time interactivity, audience participation, and distributed visibility. Audiences on these platforms are active participants who interact with, assess, and amplify institutional messages (Warnick, 2007; Boyd, D., 2010).

Aristotle's appeals of *ethos, pathos* and *logos* provide a foundational lens for evaluating effective and responsible communication. However, social media adds interactive and cyclical dynamics that require additional attention. One such dynamic is the reputational feedback loop, where audience responses to institutional messages shape public perception and, in turn, influence subsequent communication choices (Coombs, T., 2007).

In practice, an initial crisis post is received and interpreted by a participatory audience. Reactions such as comments, shares, and sentiment offer immediate feedback. This feedback both reflects the effectiveness of rhetorical appeals and contributes to the institution's evolving reputation. Organisations then adjust their messaging in response, producing a continuing loop of communication and perception management.

This loop aligns with rhetorical theory by recognising the audience's role in meaning-making, and it extends that theory by foregrounding the temporal and dialogic character of digital platforms. Unlike one-way communication, social media discourse is iterative, responsive, and co-constructed. The feedback loop, therefore, serves as a bridge between classical principles and the real-time logic of digital crisis communication.

To translate Aristotle's concepts into an empirical framework suitable for social media contexts, this research develops a set of operational criteria derived from *ethos, pathos* and *logos*, and complemented by rhetorical genres and audience-response indicators. The criteria do not modify Aristotelian theory; rather, they render its core ideas observable and analysable within platform-specific conditions.

Table 2.2 outlines these indicators for evaluating the university's posts during the crisis period. The criteria are designed to make rhetorical elements visible and measurable, address concerns about vagueness, and increase the empirical rigour of the analysis.

Table 2.2: Criteria for the evaluation of the social media posts

Rhetorical Mode	**Subcategory**	**Indicators**
Ethos (See section 2.4.6)	*Arete* (Virtue or Moral Excellence)	Transparency: The extent to which the institution provides honest and complete information, including acknowledgement of limitations, uncertainties, and what is known or unknown.
		Alignment with ethical values: The degree to which the message reflects consistency with the institution's stated ethical principles and values.
Ethos (See section 2.4.6)	*Phronesis* (Good Sense)	Demonstrating domain knowledge.
		Demonstrating experience and subject-matter expertise relevant to the industry and crisis.
		Demonstrating sound judgment
		Showing practical wisdom.
		Being perceived as sensible.
Ethos (See section 2.4.6)	*Eunoia* (Goodwill)	Presence of supportive, empathetic, or helpful language in posts/comments.

		Alignment with Audience Values - Congruence between stakeholder values (in their responses) and the institution's messaging. Whether the institution's communication reflects an understanding of and respect for stakeholders' values, priorities, and concerns during the crisis.
Pathos (See section 2.4.5)	Engagement & Audience Response	Audience interaction (comments, shares, reactions) can indicate whether the emotional appeal was effective.
		Call to emotion - Clear emotional call to action, such as encouraging the audience to act (support a cause, donate, raise an alarm, etc.) based on an emotional connection.
		Response to audience comments.
Pathos (See section 2.4.5)	Audience Empathy	Demonstrating understanding of the audience's challenges, needs, or desires (e.g., addressing stakeholder pain points, showing empathy in response to negative comments).
Logos (See section 2.4.4)	Logical Appeal	Clarity and Coherence - Are the messages logically structured, free from ambiguity, and following a clear line of reasoning. Clarity of the message, logical structure, and evidence are used to support claims in the posts.
		Use of Evidence and Data - Presence of

		statistics, references to reports, research citations, or institutional data in messaging. Does the institution support its claims with factual evidence, data, or references to authoritative sources.
		Argument Strength and Persuasiveness – Evaluation of argumentation techniques, including cause-and-effect reasoning, analogies, and counterargument anticipation. Does the message anticipate and address counterarguments or alternative viewpoints?
		Consistency across messaging - Messaging remains logically consistent across different posts, responses, and communication channels. No contradictions present between statements made at different times.
Deliberative	Message directed to the public to exhort, recommend, dissuade toward some action.	Proposes solutions or actions
		Encourages or discourages towards any particular action
		Uses forward-looking language (e.g., “we will,” “moving forward”)
Judicial	Past-oriented; defends or accuses based on past	Explains the causes of the crisis

	actions. Addressing past events with justification or accountability	Justifies institutional decisions
		Accepts or denies responsibility
		Use of evaluative language (e.g., “we regret,” “we acted appropriately”)
Epideictic	Present-oriented; praises or blames to reinforce values	Celebrates resilience
		Condemns harmful behaviour
		Uses emotive or value-laden language (e.g., “we stand together,” “this is unacceptable”)

Table 2.2

While the criteria are organised around Aristotle’s rhetorical appeals and genres, they are applied in a flexible manner. This flexibility allows audience responses to be treated as part of the rhetorical situation rather than as background noise. In doing so, the framework connects classical rhetorical theory with the interactive nature of contemporary social media communication and prepares the ground for the methodological procedures that follow.

2.5.1 Rhetorical Disruptions and Interpretive Filters

In social media crisis communication, rhetorical appeals are not received in neutral conditions. Audience interpretations are shaped by a range of contextual, emotional, and reputational factors that can disrupt, weaken, or amplify the effectiveness of *ethos, pathos* and *logos*.

Drawing on classical communication models of noise and filters (Waller and Polonsky, 1998; Adey and Andrew, 1996), as well as rhetorical theory, this research analysis conceptualises such disruptions as interpretive filters that influence how institutional messages are received and evaluated on social media platforms. These filters inform the development and application of the coding criteria in Table 2.2 by identifying conditions under which rhetorical appeals may be undermined, contested, or reinforced in crisis communication contexts.

For analytical clarity, these interpretive filters are organised according to Aristotle’s three rhetorical appeals: *ethos, pathos,* and *logos*.

1. **Noise or Filters in *ethos* (credibility)**
   - **A. Distrust in the Speaker** – If the audience doubts the integrity or expertise of the communicator, they may dismiss the message outright.
   - **B. Pre-existing reputational perceptions that condition audience trust in institutional messaging** – A history of unethical behaviour may function as a filter that inhibits audience acceptance of the message.

C. **Lack of Authority or Expertise** – If the speaker lacks recognised credentials, their message may not be taken seriously.
D. **Conflicting Messages from the same source** – Inconsistencies in past and present communication reduce credibility.

2. **Noise or Filters in *pathos* (emotional appeal)**
   A. **Emotional Resistance** – If the audience has pre-existing biases or strong emotions against the communicator, they may reject the message.
   B. **Inappropriate tone** (the manner of expressing oneself and the delivery) (Sandys, 1877, p. 2) – If the message is too aggressive, dismissive, or lacks empathy, it may alienate the audience.
   C. **Cultural or Social Misalignment** – Messages that do not align with the audience's values may not be well received.
3. **Noise or Filters in *logos* (logical appeal)**
   A. **Information Overload** – Too much data or complex jargon can confuse the audience.
   B. **Logical Fallacies** – If the argument is based on weak reasoning (e.g., hasty generalisation, straw man arguments), it loses effectiveness.
   C. **Contradictory Evidence** – If the audience has access to counterevidence that contradicts the message, it can filter out the intended meaning

The criteria and interpretive filters developed in this section operationalise Aristotle's rhetorical appeals for the analysis of organisational crisis communication on social media. By accounting for audience interaction and reputational dynamics, the framework enables systematic and replicable analysis of institutional messaging. Chapter 3 outlines the methodological procedures through which this framework is applied.

2.6 SUMMARY

This chapter highlights the foundational role of communication as a vital human activity, embedded in social structures and integral to organisational practice. Recognising organisations as dynamic entities that adapt, grow, and respond to internal and external change, the literature review examined how organisations leverage social media as a central site of public engagement and meaning-making during crises.

A central focus of the chapter is the ethical and responsible use of social media in organisational crisis communication. Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework is examined in depth as a solid theoretical tool for analysing responsible discourse, based on the integrated appeals of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*. Although developed in classical antiquity, the framework remains relevant for evaluating contemporary digital communication contexts characterised by heightened scrutiny, emotional volatility, and contested truth claims.

The chapter further explores how social media platforms such as Facebook and X function as interactive rhetorical spaces that enable real-time dialogue between organisations and stakeholders, while simultaneously amplifying reputational risk. In response to identified gaps in the literature, particularly the lack of operationalised rhetorical measures, the chapter develops a set of analytical criteria that translate Aristotelian rhetorical principles into observable and measurable indicators suitable for empirical analysis.

By integrating classical rhetorical theory with contemporary crisis communication scholarship and digital media dynamics, this chapter establishes a clear conceptual and analytical foundation for the methodological approach outlined in Chapter 3.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the research methodology used to investigate the university's rhetorical use of social media during a crisis, with reference to Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework. The study adopts an interpretive paradigm, recognising that meaning in social media communication is socially constructed, context-dependent, and shaped through interaction. To examine how the university's posts reflect the Aristotelian rhetorical elements, the study employs a qualitative content analysis approach that focuses on meaning, interpretation, and communicative intent (*Rhetoric* 1.2.3–5, 1356a1–20; 2.1, 1378a6–20).

The chapter presents the research design, coding procedures, and development of analytical criteria that operationalise Aristotle's rhetorical principles into measurable indicators. It also explains the data sources, sampling strategy, and the use of Facebook and X as the platforms from which institutional posts and audience responses were collected and analysed. The overall methodology is guided by deductive reasoning, testing the applicability of classical rhetorical theory within a contemporary digital crisis communication environment.

3.2 RESEARCH PARADIGM

The ways in which organisations communicate through social media, and the ways audiences interpret and respond to these messages, involve processes of meaning-making. Understanding these subjective and context-dependent meanings requires an approach that goes beyond numerical measurement. For this reason, the study adopts an interpretive paradigm to analyse the university's rhetorical strategies during the crisis through Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework.

Interpretivism holds that social reality is constructed through human experience, language, and shared understandings. It assumes that communicative behaviour cannot be meaningfully captured through quantitative measures alone but must be examined through the analysis of intentions, perceptions, and contextual meaning (Gichuru, 2017). Interpretive social science therefore seeks to understand how individuals and groups make sense of events, and how their beliefs and motivations shape those interpretations. Citations to Aristotle use Bekker pagination for precise locations across editions; translations follow Kennedy (2007).

Adair-Toteff (2021) notes that interpretivism views the social sciences as offering explanations of meaning through qualitative methods (Adair-Toteff, 2021). This makes the approach well-suited to studying crisis communication on social media, where interactions are shaped by subjective interpretations and shifting audience perspectives. In this study, the interpretive paradigm guides the analysis of qualitative data drawn from the university's social media posts, enabling the researcher to examine how rhetorical meaning is constructed through the institution's engagement with its audience during the crisis.

Interpretive research rests on the premise that meaning emerges through both subjective and intersubjective processes. It therefore allows the researcher to explore how communicators and audiences co-create understanding within a social and institutional

context (Pervin and Mokhtar, 2022). Through this lens, the study seeks to interpret the rhetoric embedded in the university's crisis communication and to uncover how meaning is produced, negotiated, and interpreted within this digital environment.

3.3 RESEARCH APPROACH

This study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach to examine how the university's social media posts communicate the rhetorical appeals of *ethos, pathos* and *logos* during the crisis. Content analysis is defined as a careful and systematic examination and interpretation of a body of material (Lune and Berg, 2017) and is suited to making valid inferences from texts and other meaningful matter to the contexts of their use (Krippendorff, 2019).

The method enables deep, contextualised interpretation of complex social media content, including text, images, documents, reactions, and other symbolic elements. Such multimodal material is considered "meaningful matter" because it communicates beyond what is visibly present. Content analysis therefore supports an inquiry into the social and rhetorical work performed by posts and audience interactions, enabling the researcher to interpret patterns, intentions, and communicative meaning within a crisis communication environment.

In social media environments, visibility does not necessarily equal resonance. A post may attract high impressions yet limited engagement, which signals the need for nuanced interpretation of form, tone, and audience response. Content analysis allows the researcher to look beyond the physical form of text and images to the communicative work they perform within a specific crisis context and stakeholder ecology (Krippendorff, 2019).

In this study, the unit of analysis is the individual institutional post on Facebook or X, examined alongside its immediate interaction thread, where relevant. Each post is analysed as a discrete text that may include written content, attachments, and public responses. The analysis focuses on how the post expresses or omits the appeals of *ethos, pathos and logos*, and how audiences respond to those appeals through interaction patterns. This approach aligns directly with the research questions concerning credibility, emotional engagement, and reasoned argument in crisis communication.

To ensure consistency, content analysis is operationalised through a codebook that translates Aristotle's appeals into indicators and decision rules. Indicators used in this study are grouped under *ethos, pathos* and *logos* as follows:

I. ***Ethos*** – Representing institutional credibility and trustworthiness, defined and measured through the following indicators:
   A. ***Arete*** (virtue or moral excellence)
      - Transparency: The extent to which the institution provides honest and complete information, including acknowledgement of limitations, uncertainties, and what is known or unknown.
      - Alignment with Ethical Values: The degree to which the message reflects consistency with the institution's stated ethical principles and values.

   B. ***Phronesis*** (good sense)
      - Demonstration of domain knowledge relevant to the crisis.
      - Demonstration of experience and subject matter expertise.
      - Demonstrating sound judgements.
      - Evidence of sound judgement and practical reasoning.

- Perception of the institution as sensible and competent.

C. ***Eunoia*** (Goodwill)
   - Evidence that the institution shows genuine care for stakeholders' well-being through its social media communication during the crisis.
   - Presence of supportive, empathetic, or helpful language in posts and responses.
   - Alignment with Audience Values – The degree to which institutional messaging reflects understanding of and respect for stakeholders' concerns and priorities.

II. ***Pathos*** – Measured through emotional engagement and audience response, assessed through the following indicators:

A. **Engagement and Audience Response**
   - Audience interaction (comments, shares, reactions) as indicators of emotional resonance.
   - Call to emotion – Clear emotional call to action, such as encouraging the audience to act (support a cause, donate, raise an alarm, etc.) based on an emotional connection.
   - Institutional responsiveness to audience comments.

B. **Audience Empathy**
   - Demonstrating understanding of the audience's challenges, needs, or desires (e.g., addressing stakeholder pain points, showing empathy in response to negative comments).
   - Evidence of empathetic tone, particularly in response to negative or critical comments.

III. ***Logos*** – Focusing on logical consistency, clarity, and rational argumentation in the social media data, assessed through the following indicators:

A. **Logical Appeal**
   - Clarity and Coherence – Are the messages logically structured, free from ambiguity, and following a clear line of reasoning? Clarity of the message, logical structure, and evidence used to support claims in the posts.
   - Use of Evidence and Data – Presence of statistics, references to reports, research citations, or institutional data in messaging. (Does the institution support its claims with factual evidence, data, or references to authoritative sources)
   - Argument Strength and Persuasiveness: Evaluation of argumentation techniques, including cause-effect reasoning, analogies, and counterargument anticipation. Does the message anticipate and address counterarguments or alternative viewpoints?
   - Consistency Across Messaging – Messaging remains logically consistent across different posts, responses, and communication channels. No contradictions present between statements made at different times.

3.3.1 The Coding Process

The primary units of analysis in this study are individual social media posts and their associated interaction threads. Each post is examined as a discrete text, which may include verbal content, visual elements such as images or attached documents, and interactive features including replies, comments, and reactions.

A deductive coding scheme was developed to categorise rhetorical elements according to Aristotle's appeals of *ethos, pathos* and *logos*. The coding framework was applied only to posts published on Facebook and X during the crisis period, and only to those posts that directly addressed the crisis. For each post, the researcher assigned codes according to predefined indicators, and these codes were recorded systematically on a coding sheet.

Coding progressed through iterative cycles. The initial coding was followed by a review phase in which discrepancies, ambiguities, or overlapping categories were identified and resolved. This refinement process strengthened the reliability of the coding scheme by ensuring that decision rules were applied consistently across the dataset. Where necessary, category descriptions were clarified, and additional notes were captured to guide subsequent coding. The final coding process enabled a coherent and systematic analysis of the rhetorical content in the institutional posts.

3.4 RESEARCH DESIGN

This study follows an exploratory, qualitative design within an interpretive paradigm to examine how the university used social media rhetorically during a crisis, with specific attention to Aristotle's triad of *ethos, pathos* and *logos*. A research design is a plan that guides the collection and analysis of data so that findings address the study's aims with attention to validity and procedural soundness.

It provides control over potential threats that may compromise the quality of conclusions (Haque, 2022). Research design also involves explicit theoretical, ontological, and epistemological choices that link the research questions to suitable methods of data generation and analysis (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012).

3.4.1 Rationale for an Exploratory Qualitative Design

An exploratory qualitative design is suitable because the study seeks to understand rhetorical meaning as it is produced and interpreted in a specific crisis context. Qualitative designs are effective for examining attributes, motives, and communication practices that are not easily captured in numerical terms.

They support in-depth exploration of how and why messages are created and received in particular settings, which is essential for crisis communication on social media (Dubey and Kothari, 2022; Willig and Rogers, 2017). The design complements the interpretive paradigm by prioritising meaning, context, and interaction rather than measurement alone.

3.4.2 Alignment of Design to Research Questions and Data

The design links the research questions to data drawn from the university's official Facebook and X accounts during the defined crisis period. Posts that directly addressed the crisis form the primary dataset. The design enables analysis of how each post expresses or omits *ethos, pathos* and *logos*, how audiences respond, and how these interactions relate to credibility, emotional engagement, and reasoned argument. This alignment ensures that design choices directly serve the analytical aims of the study.

3.4.3 Design Choices Specific to Social Media Research

Social media communication is iterative, participatory, and publicly visible, which requires attention to platform affordances and data features. The design, therefore, treats each post together with its immediate interaction thread as the analytical unit, and it recognises the audience responses as part of the rhetorical situation.

In line with standard practice in social media research, the study specifies platform scope, time windows, and sampling rules, and it documents any constraints that can affect access, completeness, or comparability of data across platforms. The *SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* highlights the importance of transparent sampling criteria, clear documentation of platform features, and explicit reporting of data access pathways for credibility and replicability in qualitative social media studies (Sloan *et al.,* 2017).

3.4.4 Procedures at a Glance

1. Define the crisis period and select platforms used by the institution for crisis communication.
2. Apply purposive sampling to identify posts that directly reference the crisis.
3. Use qualitative content analysis to code rhetorical appeals and related indicators.
4. Examine interaction threads to interpret audience responses as part of the rhetorical event.
5. Compare cases across the crisis period to identify patterns in credibility, emotional engagement, and logical appeal.

3.4.5 Role of Limited Quantitative Indicators

Limited quantitative indicators such as counts of reactions, comments, and shares are considered only as contextual signals of reach and attention. They help identify posts that attracted notable interest, but do not substitute for interpretive analysis of rhetorical meaning. The primary analysis remains qualitative and text-centred.

3.4.6 Design Quality and Trustworthiness

To support trustworthiness, the study applies the following strategies:

- Credibility: iterative coding with a refined codebook, memoing of coding decisions, and constant comparison within the dataset.
- Dependability: a documented protocol covering sampling rules, inclusion criteria, and coding procedures.
- Confirmability: an audit trail that records code definitions, revisions, and rationale so that interpretations can be traced to the data.
- Transferability: thick description of the institutional context, crisis timeline, and platform features so that readers can judge relevance to similar cases.

These practices are consistent with recommended procedures for qualitative and social media research design (Schwartz-Shea and Yanow, 2012).

3.4.7 Ethical and Procedural Considerations

Only publicly available posts and interaction threads from the institution's official accounts are analysed. User handles are not reproduced in reporting. Where quotations are essential, wording is paraphrased or anonymised to reduce identifiability. The institution is anonymised throughout as "The ODeL institution" in line with ethics clearance. The study follows platform terms of service and recommended practices for public social media research that emphasise proportionality, anonymisation, and transparent procedures (Sloan *et al.,* 2017). Data handling procedures are documented to ensure secure storage and responsible use.

Taken together, these design choices provide the foundation for the deductive strategy outlined in section 3.5.

3.5 DEDUCTIVE REASONING

This study uses deductive reasoning to examine whether Aristotle's rhetorical appeals of *ethos, pathos* and *logos* help to explain responsible and effective institutional crisis communication on social media. In deductive designs, inquiry proceeds from general theory to specific observation so that conclusions follow logically from established premises (Soiferman, 2010). In applied research, deduction typically moves from theory to propositions, from propositions to operational indicators, and from indicators to empirical assessment (Creswell and Clark, 2007; Haque, 2022).

In this study, the deductive chain is as follows:

1. **Theory**
   Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework holds that persuasive and responsible communication rests on the integrated use of credibility, responsible emotional engagement, and reasoned argument with evidence.

2. **Propositions for this Context**

   - First proposition – *Ethos*: Crisis posts that show integrity, practical wisdom, and goodwill are more likely to be judged as credible than posts that omit these elements.

   - Second proposition – *Pathos*: Crisis posts that acknowledge stakeholder's emotion and project proportionate empathy are more likely to reduce confusion and hostility than posts that ignore or inflame emotion.

   - Third proposition – *Logos*: Crisis posts that present clear structure, reasons, and verifiable evidence are more likely to invite fair judgment than posts that lack clarity, reasons, or support.

3. **Operational Indicators**
   Each appeal is translated into observable criteria for coding.

   - *Ethos* includes transparency, alignment with stated values, and signs of practical wisdom in decisions and explanations.

   - *Pathos* includes empathetic acknowledgement of concerns and a measured tone in replies and posts.

- *Logos* includes clear structure, stated reasons, links to evidence, and anticipation of likely objections.

The indicators are specified in the codebook and summarised in Table 2.2.

4. **Empirical Assessment**
   The indicators are applied to sampled posts from the institution's official Facebook and X accounts during the crisis period, together with their immediate interaction threads. Data sources and sampling are explained in Sections 3.4 and 3.6; coding procedures and refinement are detailed in 3.3.1 and 3.7.

5. **Inference**
   Patterns in the coded data are used to evaluate the propositions and to consider how far the theory explains the observed communication. Findings may confirm expected patterns, reveal limits, or suggest refinements to the practical application of the theory in contemporary digital contexts (Haque, 2022).

Figure 3.1. Steps in a deductive design applied in this study.
Source: adapted from (Haque, 2022).

This approach treats Aristotle's framework as a structured set of expectations that can be examined against real posts and responses. It clarifies how theory informs the creation of indicators, how those indicators are applied to data, and how conclusions are drawn about the role of *ethos, pathos* and *logos* in a modern social media crisis environment.

3.6 DATA SOURCE

This study draws on publicly available content from the ODeL institution's official accounts on Facebook and X during the defined crisis period. Social media provides multiple data forms, including textual posts, images, video, profile and page metadata, and interaction traces such as replies, comments, reactions, shares, and quoted posts. Treating these as "meaningful matter" is standard in content analysis, which permits valid inferences from texts and related artefacts to their contexts of use (Krippendorff, 2019).

In line with recommended practice for social media research design, platform-specific planning and scoping were undertaken before data collection. This included clarifying the unit of analysis, time window, platform features that shape what can be captured, and any access constraints that could affect completeness or comparability. Such advance planning is advised because choices at collection time have downstream effects on analysis and interpretation (Mayr and Weller, 2017; Sloan *et al.,* 2017).

Regarding source and access, only material posted on the institution's official Facebook and X pages within the crisis window was considered for collection. No private content, direct messages, or content gated behind authentication were accessed. This aligns with guidance

to document data sources, access routes, and any platform limitations that may shape the dataset (Sloan *et al.,* 2017).

For each eligible post, the dataset records the post text; any attached documents, images, or videos; basic platform metadata; and the immediate interaction thread where relevant, including public comments or replies and high-level engagement counts (for context only). Capturing both message content and interaction traces reflects the view that audience response forms part of the communicative event on social platforms (Krippendorff, 2019).

Facebook and X were selected because they were the channels the institution used for crisis-related announcements and updates in the relevant period, and because their public-by-default posting affords traceable, time-stamped discourse suitable for qualitative content analysis. The *SAGE Handbook* highlights the importance of declaring platform choices and their affordances since these shape what can be collected and how it should be read (Mayr and Weller, 2017; Sloan *et al.,* 2017).

The data were accessed and exported through Hootsuite, a digital analytics and reporting tool that retrieves publicly available social media content and associated engagement metrics. Hootsuite was used to extract institutional posts and high-level engagement indicators in accordance with platform terms of service, and to ensure consistent collection across the defined time window.

Following best practice, the study recognises that platform interfaces, API policies, and rate limits can influence what data are retrievable, which in turn can influence findings. The data source description therefore, records platform scope, the public access route, and the defined time window so that readers can judge the bounds of the dataset (Sloan *et al.,* 2017).

3.6.1 Theoretical Study

A theoretical foundation is necessary to justify the use of social media data in qualitative analysis, particularly when examining organisational communication during a crisis. Social media content is produced within a dynamic communicative environment where meaning is shaped by platform structures, audience participation, and evolving situational contexts. Because posts and their associated interactions arise from real-time public discourse, they function as naturally occurring traces of communication behaviour, making them suitable for empirical examination (Mayr & Weller, 2016; Sloan & Quan-Haase, 2017).

In this study, institutional posts and selected public responses are examined not for their technological form but for the communicative work they perform within a crisis setting. The *SAGE Handbook of Social Media Research Methods* emphasises that social-media texts are embedded within networks of interpretation, and that researchers must account for how audiences respond, contest, or reinterpret organisational communication (Sloan *et al.,* 2017). This aligns with qualitative inquiry more broadly, which holds that meaning must be interpreted in relation to the social context that produces it (Gelo, Braakmann and Benetka, 2008).

Theoretical guidance also cautions that social-media data cannot be separated from the conditions under which they are generated. Boyd and Crawford (2012) argue that digital traces require careful contextual analysis, as they are shaped by users' motivations, platform affordances, and the wider social environment. For this reason, the present study interprets posts alongside relevant interaction threads to capture how institutional messages were received, supported, challenged, or reinterpreted by audiences during the crisis.

Together, these perspectives establish the theoretical basis for treating social-media posts and associated interactions as meaningful material suitable for qualitative content analysis. They justify the analytic focus on rhetoric, credibility, emotional engagement, and reasoning, and they provide the conceptual grounding for the data-collection and coding decisions detailed in the sections that follow.

3.6.2 Social Media Networks

This study focuses on Facebook and X as the only platforms through which the ODeL institution communicated formally about the crisis. Although the institution maintains a presence on other social media channels, these were not used for crisis-related messaging and were therefore excluded to maintain alignment with the research focus.

Facebook and X are widely recognised in research literature as key environments for organisational communication and crisis engagement. Facebook supports extended message formats and sustained public discussion, allowing organisations to publish detailed updates that remain visible over time (Fuchs, 2014; Friedrichsen and Mühl-Benninghaus, 2013).

X, by contrast, operates as a fast-paced, time-sensitive platform that facilitates rapid circulation of information, making it suitable for monitoring unfolding events and institutional responses (Weller *et al.,* 2014; Gligorić, Anderson and West, 2018). These complementary communication characteristics support the study's aim of analysing how institutional messaging and public reaction unfolded across platforms with different affordances.

Data were collected from the institution's official Facebook and X pages covering the entire crisis window, from 04 August 2023 to 20 November 2023. For contextual understanding of platform activity during the most intense phase of the crisis, the institution posted 194 times on Facebook between 06 October and 20 November 2023, attracting 19 991 public comments.

Over the same period, 538 posts on X generated approximately 2 000 public interactions. While these figures illustrate the volume and visibility of activity, the analysis does not attempt to process all posts. Instead, the study uses purposive sampling (Etikan *et al.,* 2015) to select posts that are directly relevant to the crisis.

From the accessible population of crisis-related posts, a subset of four official statements was selected. These posts were chosen because they addressed central crisis themes and offered sufficient rhetorical substance for analysis. Selection was guided by three criteria:

1. Timeframe – Only posts published between 04 August 2023 and 20 November 2023 are included.
2. Content relevance – Only posts that contain at least one of the following crisis-related keywords or phrases – such as "court order", "administration", "administrator" or "interdict" – were selected.
3. Channel scope – The analysis is limited to the institution's official Facebook and X accounts, excluding other platforms such as Instagram, LinkedIn, and YouTube where the institution has an official presence.

This sampling approach enables a focused rhetorical examination of institutional communication during the crisis without diluting the analysis through unnecessary volume. It also ensures that the material selected is directly aligned with the research aim of evaluating the institution's use of Aristotle's rhetorical framework in its crisis responses.

3.7 DEVELOPMENT OF CRITERIA

A coding framework was developed to apply Aristotle's appeals of *ethos, pathos* and *logos* to the institution's crisis-period social media communication. Category design and indicator wording were informed by established guidance on qualitative content analysis and by applied rhetorical scholarship, with explicit attention to writing clear category definitions and decision rules for consistent use across cases (Krippendorff, 2019; Sloan *et al.,* 2017; Mayr and Weller, 2017).

A preliminary codebook was tested on a small, representative set of crisis-related posts. This pilot coding identified ambiguities and overlapping categories, which were then revised to improve clarity and reliability. Repeated refinement of categories and decision rules is recommended for trustworthy qualitative content analysis (Schreier, 2012; Krippendorff, 2019).

In terms of operational indicators, the final framework defines indicators for each appeal that guide assessments of (a) presence or absence, and (b) function within the post and, where applicable, its immediate thread. Aligned with the rubric in Table 2.2:

- *Ethos* includes *aretē* (transparency and alignment with stated values), *phronēsis* (demonstrated domain knowledge and context-appropriate judgement), and *eunoia* (care for stakeholders and empathetic wording).
- *Pathos* focuses on acknowledgement of stakeholders' concerns, proportionate tone, and evidence of emotional attunement. Audience interaction is treated as contextual feedback rather than a proxy for meaning, which reflects guidance in social-media methods literature to avoid over-interpreting counts without context (Mayr and Weller, 2017; Sloan *et al.,* 2017).
- *Logos* considers clarity of structure, stated reasons, verifiable evidence, anticipation of likely objections, and consistency across related posts over time (Krippendorff, 2019).

Items commonly noted in communication and social media theory, such as responsiveness, audience engagement, ethical responsibility, and sensitivity to the crisis setting, are retained as contextual lenses that inform interpretation of the core appeals without expanding the primary coding scheme (Sloan *et al.,* 2017).

The codebook records short definitions, inclusion and exclusion notes, decision prompts, and one-line examples for each indicator. Treating posts together with their immediate threads as the unit of analysis aligns with content-analysis guidance to relate manifest textual features to communicative context (Mayr and Weller, 2017; Krippendorff, 2019).

Table 2.2 presents the final rubric, mapping each appeal to its indicators and associated decision rules for application to the sampled posts and their high-engagement replies.

3.8 RHETORICAL ANALYSIS OF THE SOCIAL MEDIA CONTENT

Aristotle's principles, originally devised for persuasive speech in political discourse, encompass ethical and logical ideas (Wilkins, Livingstone and Levine, 2019). In this study, they are used not only as tools for persuasion but also as benchmarks for ethical, responsible, and effective communication. Consequently, any form of communication can be assessed using Aristotle's framework to determine how well it satisfies the needs of its

audience. Audiences want to be assured that the communication they receive is truthful, that the speaker is credible, that their feelings are recognised, and that the message content is rational.

The rhetorical functions of social media use by corporates, institutions, or organisations remain inadequately understood. By analysing the rhetorical principles employed by the ODeL institution on social media, this study explores the need to balance all communication with elements of ethical rhetoric, such as those mentioned above, truth, credibility, emotional resonance, and logical reasoning, to achieve effective and responsible engagement during a crisis amid the noisy social media landscape.

By seeking to understand, during a crisis, what constitutes ethical, responsible, and effective social media communication, the following research questions, as formulated in Chapter 1, will be addressed:

A. **Did the university's social media response during the crisis meet the required level of credibility and truthfulness?** (Must an entity's social media response to a crisis conform to the standards of credibility and truthfulness outlined by the ethical rhetoric framework?) Does credibility enhance communication and dispel any form of scepticism to establish trust with stakeholders and other digital audiences?
B. **Did the university and its communicators understand and address their own sentiments and emotions, as well as those of their stakeholders?** (Did the university and its communicators handle these responsibly, as well as evoke the appropriate emotions out of their stakeholders?) If people are emotionally invested in the entity (whether in support, opposition, or indifference), what is the responsible way to address and properly manage those emotions?
C. **Can the university's response during the crisis be considered rational or reasonable?** Did it meet the requirements of logic or appeal to the stakeholder's sense of reason? Does an entity's response to a crisis need to be rational and reasonable to meet logical standards or to appeal to the stakeholder's sense of reason? Does the use of facts, logical arguments, and reason foster sensibility and validation in the audience's mind?

By addressing the research questions, the analysis clarifies how Aristotle's rhetorical framework applies to communication on social media and in other contexts, and how it informs crisis communication in particular. The framework remains applicable across different settings, including print, digital, interpersonal, and public communication, because audiences evaluate messages in terms of credibility, recognition of emotion, and logical explanation (Cope, 1867).

Accordingly, Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework serves a central function in this study. It guides the interpretation of findings through the criteria developed in section 2.5 and provides the lens through which the three research questions from Chapter 1 are examined. In doing so, the analysis is positioned to address the main research problem in a clear and systematic manner.

3.9 SUMMARY

Chapter 3 presents a comprehensive methodological framework for analysing institutional crisis communication through the lens of Aristotle's ethical rhetoric. By adopting an interpretive and qualitative approach, the study seeks to understand how rhetorical strategies

manifest in social media posts and whether they meet the ethical standards of credibility, emotion handling, and logical reasoning.

The chapter establishes a structured coding scheme based on Aristotle's triadic appeals of *ethos, pathos* and *logos*, and applies it to selected social media content from the university's official accounts. The methodology is designed to answer three core research questions related to credibility, emotional engagement, and rationality in crisis communication. Through this approach, the study aims to generate insights into the ethical dimensions of digital rhetoric and contribute to the broader understanding of responsible institutional communication in times of crisis.

CHAPTER 4: ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

4.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter presents a detailed rhetorical analysis of the university's social media responses during a period of institutional crisis, applying Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework as the primary lens. The chapter explores how the university communicated across platforms, specifically Facebook and X, and evaluates the ethical and rhetorical effectiveness of four official statements issued during the crisis.

Aristotle's framework, rooted in the triadic appeals of *ethos* (Rhetoric 2.1, 1378a6-20), *pathos* (*Rhetoric* 1.2.5; 1356a14–24), and *logos* (*Rhetoric* 1.2.6; 1356a25–30), provides a robust foundation for assessing whether the university's communication met the standards of ethical discourse. These appeals are not merely stylistic devices but also essential components of effective, responsible public communication, especially in contexts where institutional *ethos* is under pressure and at stake.

The chapter begins with a brief overview of Aristotle's rhetorical principles and then applies them to each of the four statements. The analysis is guided by three core research questions:

1. Did the university's social media response during the crisis meet the degree of credibility and truthfulness as envisaged by the ethical rhetoric framework?
2. Did the university and its communicators understand and address their own sentiments and emotions, as well as those of their stakeholders, in a responsible way?
3. Can the university's response during the crisis be considered rational or reasonable? (Did it meet the requirements for logic or appeal to the stakeholder's sense of reason?)

Through this analysis, the chapter aims to uncover the strengths and limitations of the university's rhetorical strategy, assess its ethical implications, and offer insights into how institutions' communicators can better navigate public crises in the digital age.

4.2 ARISTOTLE ETHICAL RHETORIC FRAMEWORK OVERVIEW

Rhetoric like communication is as old as human language and intellect. If not handled responsibly, it can negatively affect or destroy the relationship of trust between the communicator and the recipient. Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework is primarily found in his seminal work Rhetoric, particularly in Book I, where he gives rhetoric – a form of public discourse, vulnerable to abuse by sophistical rhetoricians who were using it for trickery and chicanery – a distinctive and systematic character. He presents his scientific exposition of three modes of proof *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, which must be wholly met for communication to meet the threshold of ethical discourse or responsible communication. (Cope, 1867)

The framework was introduced and discussed in Chapter 1 and was addressed in all the relevant sections of the literature review.

The following sections summarise the three rhetorical proofs, after which these proofs are applied to the social media content of the ODeL institution, thereby directly addressing the three research questions of this study.

4.2.1 *Ethos*

According to Aristotle ***ethos*** resides in the character of the communicator or speaker, where their credibility and moral character is under study. A positive balance of credibility and moral character becomes an advantage in gaining an audience's trust. The character of the speaker is built on how the speaker demonstrates intellectual virtue or practical wisdom, especially on the subject matter (***phronēsis***); secondly, on moral virtue or integrity of character which inclines one to truth (***aretē***); and thirdly, good intentions (***eunoia***) towards the audience.

Aristotle argues that an audience is inclined to place trust more readily and to a higher degree on persons whose character is credible, and especially in doubtful cases where opinion differs, or there is too much noise, and no exact certainty is attainable, and notwithstanding the importance of truth and facts.

In relation to the crisis, the university's *ethos* – its credibility and moral character – is under pressure, making its communication efforts, when viewed through an Aristotelian rhetorical lens, particularly challenging. The institution's reputation is being publicly questioned, as the crisis narrative frames the university as incapable of managing its administrative affairs, thereby justifying the proposed intervention by the Minister of Higher Education.

4.2.2 *Logos*

Logos, according to Aristotle, is the demonstration of truth through the content of the message being advanced. It is also the connected chain of logic and reasoning in the communication, with apparent link of evidence and facts. In a responsible communication, *logos* involves clear and logical arguments advanced by the speaker using sound reasoning to present those ideas. The claims made should be supported by factual evidence and/or even historical information while maintaining logical connection. In doing so the speaker should ensure it is presented in an understandable way for the audience.

4.2.3 *Pathos*

Pathos refers to how feelings and emotions are produced in the audience when a speech is delivered or presented. Aristotle maintains that different decisions are given under influence of different emotions. Joy, anger, grief, love, gratitude, shame or hatred can influence and produce different kinds of decisions on the side of the communicator and the audience. The audience and those watching the discourse, much like a judge in a court of law, demonstrate their decisions in criticising, questioning, contradicting, censure and apportioning of blame, or in encomium, supportive, in agreement, or neutral, seeking further clarification or enquiry. The speaker has a duty to address these emotions while managing them correctly and responsibly.

4.3 ANALYTICAL QUESTIONS

The institution employed a rhetorical strategy to issue a single statement, disseminated across platforms X and Facebook, targeting different audiences with one unified message. In total, four distinct statements were released, each repeated on both platforms. While the

content remained the same, each platform elicited a unique set of responses as it engaged the different audience segments. All social media statements received comments; however, the institution adopted a non-engagement response strategy, refraining from replying to any feedback – whether supportive, critical, or neutral, and regardless of whether the comments sought clarification on the crisis or addressed other institutional matters.

4.3.1 Did the University's Social Media Response During the Crisis Meet the Degree of Credibility and Truthfulness as Envisaged by the Ethical Rhetoric Framework?

Does credibility enhance communication and dispel any form of scepticism to achieve a position of trust with the stakeholder and other digital spectators?

As explored in Criteria 6-8, credibility is enhanced when the speaker demonstrates transparency, presenting honest, complete information, and disclosure of limitations, while acknowledging the known and unknowns. They must also align themselves with the declared organisational ethical values they subscribe to. It must be very evident in the messages they convey; Aristotle summarises this as *arete*. In addition, the speaker must demonstrate domain knowledge, experience, and subject-matter expertise relevant to the industry or crisis they face, thereby demonstrating sound judgements and being perceived as sensible (*phronesis*)

4.3.2 Did the University and Its Communicators Understand and Address Their Own Sentiments and Emotions, as Well as Those of Their Stakeholders in a Responsible Way?

If there are people who are emotionally invested (whether in support, contradictory or indifferent) in the entity, what is the responsible way to address and adequately handle those emotions?

4.3.3 Can the University's Response During the Crisis Be Considered Rational or Reasonable and Did It Meet the Requirements for Logic or Appeal to the Stakeholder's Sense of Reason?

Does the use of facts, logical argument, and reason generate sensibility and validation in the mind of the audience?

4.4 THE INSTITUTIONAL SOCIAL MEDIA POSTS

4.4.1 Statement on the ODeL Institution Welcoming the High Court Order Interdicting the Minister from Placing the University Under Administration

4.4.1.1 Introduction

The statement issued by the ODeL institution on 6 October 2023 responds to a legal development that temporarily halts the Minister of Higher Education from placing the university under administration. The university uses this opportunity to reaffirm its position, defend its institutional integrity, and reassure stakeholders. This communication is a strategic rhetorical act aimed at preserving credibility, calming public concern, and asserting autonomy. The full statement is included as Annexure A.

4.4.1.2 Platform-Specific Data

- **Facebook –** The statement was published on 06 October 2023 at 13:10 SAST via Facebook, receiving 100 reactions, 20 comments, and 6 shares. The reactions included 58 likes, 36 loves, 3 care, 2 laughs, and 1 sad, with no angry emojis. These reactions were made using Facebook's Reaction feature, which allows users to express affective responses through ideograms such as 👍 (like), ❤️ (love), 😢 (sad), and 😡 (angry).

- **X –** On X it was published at 18H36 SAST, and garnered over 57 000 views with 27 comments, it was retweeted 114 times and liked 296 times. X does not have a direct equivalent to Facebook Reactions. X uses a single "Like" button, represented by a heart ❤️, the equivalent of Facebook's "love" however there are no emoji-based reaction features such as with Facebook's "care", "angry" or "laugh". Users can respond more expressively by replying with emojis, posting GIFs, or using "Quote Tweets" to convey tone or emotion.

  Table 4.2: Engagement and reaction metrics for the organisational statement published on 06 October 2023

Platform	Icon	Metric	Value
Facebook		Likes	58
		Love	36
		Care	3
		Laugh	2
		Wow	0
		Sad	1
		Angry	0
		Shares	6
		Comments	20
X		Views	57000 +
		Replies	27
		Repost	111

	Like	291
	Bookmark	10

Table: 4.2

Emojis are employed in textual communication to compensate for a lack of ability to portray a certain posture, gesture, tone of voice, or expression (Arafah and Hasyim). They are ideograms, a form of standardised language, increasingly becoming popular on social media platforms (Ge and Gretzel, 2018).

In *Rhetoric*, Book II, Aristotle defines *pathos* as the speaker's deliberate use of emotion to influence the audience's judgement. In traditional rhetorical settings, the audience's emotional response was immediate and observable through facial expressions, body language, applause, or vocal reactions, allowing the speaker to adjust their delivery in real time. The speaker had direct control over the emotional appeal and could gauge its effectiveness through visible feedback.

In contrast, on social media platforms, the audience is dispersed, asynchronous, and mediated by technology. Emotional responses are not directly visible in the classical sense but are conveyed through user-generated content such as text, images, and emojis, which serve as substitutes for physical cues, and help compensate for the lack of face-to-face interaction.

This emotional resonance should not be regarded as organically occurring or neutral. Rather, it is shaped by platform-specific affordances, including algorithmic amplification, the visibility of reactions, and engagement-driven design (Papachirissi, 2015). Emotional engagement on social media thus reflects a dynamic interplay between audience sentiment, technological mediation, and institutional messaging. It is not merely the direct result of the speaker's emotional appeal, but a mediated response influenced by the platform's structure and logic.

For instance, on Facebook and X, posts that generate higher emotional engagement, such as reactions, likes, reposts, or shares, are promoted more widely, not necessarily because they are rhetorically effective in the Aristotelian sense, but because they align with the platform's algorithmic priorities for visibility and virality.

On Facebook, emotional reactions (e.g., "love", "care", "angry") increase a post's reach through engagement-based ranking, while on X, emotionally charged content is often amplified through reposts and trending algorithms that prioritise immediacy and volume over rhetorical nuance.

4.4.1.3 Integrated Rhetorical Analysis: *ethos, pathos, logos*

4.4.1.3.1 Statement's *ethos*: Projecting Institutional Character

"*Once more [the] ODeL institution wishes to assure the public that the academic programme [of the] university remains intact and its finances are healthy. In May, the Council on Higher Education issued an Institutional Audit Report that affirms ODeL's institution's academic programme and quality assurance systems are largely intact and governed according to the norms and standards of the sector*". This statement positions the institution as aligned with the rule of law, academically sound, and operating well within its public mandate, and stands as a credible institution that is simply resisting what it sees as premature and harmful interference.

This alignment with societal and sectoral values reflects Aristotle's concept of *topoi* – a shared reservoir of common beliefs, norms, and values that speakers draw upon to make their arguments resonate with their audience. By invoking these shared values, the university attempts to strengthen its rhetorical appeal and create identification with its stakeholders.

- In terms of ***aretē***, the statement references the CHE audit to emphasise the institution's commitment to academic freedom and autonomy, which are widely recognised principles in higher education governance literature (Kori, 2016). This move aligns university practices with notions of responsible governance advanced by sector bodies such as the CHE and Universities South Africa (USAf) (Universities South Africa, 2020), thereby reinforcing institutional integrity.

- ***Phronesis*** is demonstrated through references to legal processes and institutional audits. By invoking the CHE audit, the institution implies subject matter expertise in teaching and learning, verified through independent evaluation. However, it does not demonstrate experience or expertise in managing the specific nature of the crisis itself, which limits the depth of its rhetorical authority.

  The tone of the statement, however, may be perceived as defensive. Phrases such as "*fundamentally flawed*" and "*totally misplaced*" suggest an overreliance on emotional rhetoric (*pathos*), potentially invoking audience indignation or urgency rather than relying on logical argumentation or institutional credibility.

  In crisis communication, such overuse of *pathos* can signal defensiveness or biasness, especially when not balanced with evidence (*logos*) (Coombs, T., 2018). Additionally, the statement anticipates negative outcomes, "*may only serve to harm the university*" without acknowledging any merit in the opposing view. This framing risks portraying the university as a victim, which may come across as a pre-emptive justification rather than a balanced risk assessment.

- The closing paragraph demonstrates ***eunoia*** by encouraging students to focus on their final examinations and expressing hope for a smooth academic transition into 2024. This reflects an understanding of student priorities and attempts to reduce anxiety during a period of institutional uncertainty.

  However, this gesture of goodwill also intersects with *pathos*, as it appeals to the emotions of students by offering reassurance and stability. While this emotional outreach is rhetorically effective, its placement at the end of the statement and lack of broader stakeholder inclusion (such as staff, alumni, or the public) suggests that empathy was not a central rhetorical approach, but rather a supplementary one.

Taken together, the statement projects a character that is institutionally grounded and legally assertive, but occasionally undermined by emotional defensiveness and limited transparency. A more balanced integration of *ethos* with *logos* and *pathos*, particularly through clearer articulation of the university's position and wider stakeholder engagement, would enhance its rhetorical effectiveness in crisis communication.

- ***Ethos* strengths:**
  - **Alignment with legal and sectoral norms –** References to the High Court order and legal review processes reinforce institutional legitimacy.
  - **Reference to CHE audit –** Citing the CHE's Institutional Audit affirms academic quality and regulatory compliance.
  - **Tone of reassurance to stakeholders –** Efforts to calm students and affirm continuity of academic programmes support a responsible public image.
- ***Ethos* limitations:**
  - **Defensive tone undermines credibility –** Phrases like "*fundamentally flawed*" and "*totally misplaced*" are emotionally reactive rather than professionally reasoned.
  - **Lack of transparency about the report's flaws -** The statement critiques the independent assessor's report but does not provide specific counter evidence or engage with its findings.
  - **Potential erosion of trust –** The institution's credibility is already under scrutiny due to the crisis; overly assertive self-defence may deepen scepticism.

4.4.1.3.2 Statement's *pathos*: Emotional Resonance and Restraint Appeal

The university did not engage in audience interaction on either platform; it did not mention, like, share nor give a response to any of the comments, whether they were supportive, oppositional or in need of clarity. Such absence of visible public or private engagement or follow-up responses suggests a limited dialogic orientation, which weakens emotional reciprocity between the institution and its audience.

The lack of interaction is a missed opportunity for emotional amplification. Emotional amplification through interaction is essential to manage and guide public sentiment. Its absence can silence those who are most supportive, affirm those who are most critical, deepen disappointment of the most sceptic, erode trust of the most optimistic, and undermine the rhetorical effort.

While the statement lacks an explicit emotional call to action (such as an invitation to support the university, share the message, or express solidarity), it does contain implicit emotional appeals. For instance, the phrase "*...the institution of an Administration is not necessary and may only serve to harm the university...*" subtly evokes concern and positions the university as a potential victim of unjust administrative action. This framing invites the audience to feel protective or empathetic toward the institution, and to trust its internal governance over external intervention. The emotional appeal here is understated but present, relying on the evocation of harm and injustice to generate sympathy.

This restraint in emotional rhetoric can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, it avoids unethical manipulation; Aristotle cautioned that *pathos* must be used judiciously and in balance with *logos* and *ethos*, lest it appear defensive or coercive (Cope, 1867). On the other hand, the lack of emotional culmination, such as a call to action or broader stakeholder engagement, weakens the rhetorical closure of the message. Emotional appeals are most

effective when they lead to action, whether advocacy, support, or engagement. The absence of such direction leaves the audience without a clear emotional pathway.

Importantly, the closing paragraph, which encourages students to focus on exams and expresses hope for a smooth academic transition into 2024, reflects a moment of emotional goodwill. This gesture intersects with both *pathos* and *eunoia*, showing empathy and attempting to reduce anxiety during a period of uncertainty. However, as noted in the *ethos* analysis, this goodwill is limited in scope and timing, suggesting it was not a central rhetorical intention, but rather a supplementary one. A more integrated emotional appeal, addressing a wider range of stakeholders and acknowledging the complexity of the crisis, would have strengthened the institution's rhetorical position.

- ***Pathos* strengths**
  - **Empathy toward students –** Acknowledging exam stress and affirming support shows sensitivity to student concerns.
  - **Appeal to institutional pride –** Welcoming new students and affirming the ODeL institution's role as a national university taps into collective identity and loyalty.
- ***Pathos* limitations**
  - **Emotionally charged language –** Terms like "*harm the university*" and "*totally misplaced*" may evoke defensiveness rather than calm authority.
  - **Risk of appearing manipulative –** Overuse of emotional appeals without balancing evidence (*logos*) can reduce perceived sincerity.

4.4.1.3.3 Statement's *logos*: Reasoning and Evidence

The university's argument follows a logical sequence structured around key legal and procedural milestones. It references key legal process dates and decisions, specifically the High Court orders of 24 August and 6 October, to support its central claim: that the university opposes being placed under administration and considers the independent assessor's report flawed.

Logical appeal is reinforced through references to two authoritative sources: the High Court ruling, which reaffirms a previous decision, and the CHE's Institutional Audit Report, which affirms the institution's academic quality. These references serve as external validation of the university's position and contribute to its rhetorical strength.

However, the statement does not quote or summarise the audit's findings, nor does it explain how the CHE's Institutional Audit Report invalidates the rationale for administration. This limits the depth of evidentiary support and weakens the logical foundation of the argument.

The statement dismisses the independent assessor's report as "*fundamentally flawed*" but does not present an analytical rebuttal or citation of specific errors. While the statement asserts the university's position, it does not substantiate it with empirical evidence or detailed critique. In rhetorical terms, *logos* is strengthened by reasoned argument and factual support, and the absence of such substantiation diminishes the effective power of the message.

The statement's logic is further supported by the argument that legal processes should be respected before implementing any recommendations. This reflects a commitment to procedural fairness and institutional autonomy.

Despite these limitations, the statement maintains consistency in tone and aligns with the institution's broader public positioning as a legally compliant and academically credible entity. This consistency reinforces the logical coherence of the message, even if the argumentation lacks full analytical depth.

- ***Logos* strengths**
  - **Legal reasoning and procedural clarity –** The statement outlines the court's decisions and the legal basis for opposing administrative intervention.
  - **Structured timeline of events –** Referencing specific dates and legal actions adds coherence and factual grounding.
- ***Logos* limitations**
  - **Limited engagement with opposing arguments –** The statement does not address the content of the independent assessor's report or offer counter-analysis.
  - **Absence of data or evidence -** No quantitative or qualitative evidence is provided to support claims of institutional health or the flaws in the report.

4.4.1.4 Audience Responses and Handling

The choice to post the statement on both X and Facebook reflects an effort to reach distinct audience segments. On X, the post garnered significantly higher visibility and engagement, with over 57 000 views, 114 retweets, and 296 likes. This indicates that X's audience was more responsive to the unfolding crisis, likely due to the platform's real-time, engagement-driven nature. In contrast, despite the university's larger following on Facebook (approximately 1.2 million compared to 228 000 on X), the post received fewer reactions and shares.

Interestingly, the emoji reactions on Facebook were largely positive, dominated by "love," "care", and "like", with no "angry" emojis recorded. However, this surface-level positivity contrasts sharply with the tone of the comments, which revealed significant frustration, anger, and disillusionment. The institution did not respond to any of these comments, nor did it acknowledge audience feedback on either platform.

The university's communication approach demonstrates a cautious and institutionally defensive posture. This restrained approach is visible through the non-engagement stance demonstrated, choosing not to respond to any comments or feedback on either platform. It reflects a prioritisation of institutional legitimacy; that is, the preservation of the university's formal authority, procedural correctness, and reputational standing within the higher education sector.

By maintaining a one-directional communication flow, the institution signals its intent to assert control over the narrative and avoid public debate or emotional escalation. However, this approach comes at a rhetorical cost as dialogic engagement is expected and valued on social media. Silence is interpreted as evasive or indifferent.

4.4.1.5 Thematic Breakdown of Facebook Comments

A thematic analysis of the comments in this statement reveals six dominant themes:

I. **Operational Frustration:** Users criticised technical failures, poor communication, and lack of student support.
"*Your system always down just like the one of Home Affairs…"*

II. **Distrust in Leadership:** Comments expressed scepticism toward both the ODeL institution and the minister, citing corruption and maladministration.
"*Victory for corruption, nepotism, discrimination…"*
III. **Ambivalence Toward the Court Ruling:** Some questioned the value of the legal victory, suggesting the ODeL institution needs reform.
"Why is this a good thing? ODeL institution is a circus…"
IV. **Emotional Disillusionment:** Sarcasm and cynicism were common, reflecting deep disappointment.
"We shouldn't be celebrating this thing…"
V. **Politicisation of the Crisis:** Users linked the ODeL institution's issues to broader political failures, including National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) and ANC governance.
"Minister should be focusing on NSFAS and free education…"
VI. **Calls for Reform:** Despite criticism, some users urged the ODeL institution to improve its systems and accountability.
"Get your house in order…"

4.4.1.6 Conclusion

4.4.1.6.1 Overview of Rhetorical Effectiveness within the Aristotelian Framework

In summary, the university's statement demonstrates a deliberate attempt to project institutional credibility using rhetorical appeals centred on *ethos, pathos* and *logos*, consistent with Aristotle's framework of responsible communication. Ethically, the institution aligns itself with sectoral norms and legal frameworks, drawing on shared values to reinforce its legitimacy. The use of judicial references and academic achievements reflects a strong appeal to *ethos*, projecting a character of procedural correctness and institutional competence.

Emotionally, the message is restrained, offering limited engagement and empathy. While at certain points it evokes concern for students through references to examination stress and appeals for calm, it lacks deeper emotional resonance and fails to directly address stakeholder frustrations. This weakens the *pathos* dimension, which Aristotle views as essential for building trust (Aristotle, Roberts and Bywater, 1984)

Logically, the statement is structured and coherent, referencing authoritative sources such as court orders and graduation statistics to support its claims. However, its *logos* appeal is somewhat diminished by limited use of data to support claims of institutional health, and lack of counter-analysis of the independent assessor's report.

Although the statement maintains consistency in tone and institutional positioning, its rhetorical effectiveness is uneven. The defensive posture, limited transparency, and absence of dialogic engagement deviate from Aristotle's ideal of ethical rhetoric, one that reflects balanced use of all three appeals. A more integrated and interactive approach, one that considers emotional resonance and invites stakeholder dialogue, would enhance the institution's credibility and communicative impact in times of crisis (*Rhetoric* 1.2.3-5, 1356a1-20).

4.4.1.6.2 Platform-Specific Dynamics and Emotional Mediation

The statement's dissemination on Facebook and X reveals how platform affordances shape rhetorical impact. Comparing engagement metrics, X's 296 likes and 114 retweets versus Facebook's 100 reactions and 6 shares illustrate how each platform amplifies content differently. X's higher number of likes and retweets reflects its real-time, broadcast-oriented nature, while Facebook's diverse emoji reactions ("love", "care") provide more nuanced emotional feedback.

On Facebook, positive surface reactions contrast with critical comments, exposing a disconnect between apparent sentiment and deeper frustration. The institution's non-engagement with audience feedback across both platforms undermines Aristotle's principle that persuasion depends upon understanding and engaging the audience's emotional disposition (*Rhetoric* 2.1, 1377b20–1378a30). This silence limits emotional reciprocity, a key component of ethical rhetoric, by failing to address audience concerns or to engender dialogue, risking perceptions of indifference.

4.4.1.6.3 Strengths and Limitations Through Aristotelian Lens

The statement's ethos aligns with Aristotle's concept of *arete* by citing the High Court order and the CHE's audit, reinforcing institutional credibility and alignment with sectoral norms. *Phronesis* is evident in references to legal processes, though limited by the absence of crisis-specific expertise.

Pathos is ethically employed through restrained appeals to student concerns (e.g., exam focus), reflecting *eunoia*, but its scope is narrow, excluding broader stakeholders. *Logos* is strengthened by a structured timeline of legal events but weakened by the lack of substantive evidence rebutting the independent assessor's report. Aristotle cautions that ethical rhetoric requires balance; the statement's defensive phrases (e.g., "fundamentally flawed") and lack of transparency risk an unethical overreliance on *pathos*, undermining credibility and reasoned communication.

4.4.1.6.4 Audience Sentiment and Ethical Implications

Thematic analyses of Facebook and X comments reveal operational frustration, distrust in leadership, and disillusionment, with users politicising the crisis or demanding reform. This audience feedback suggests that the institution's communication did not sufficiently engage the emotional and psychological dispositions that, according to Aristotle, shape persuasive judgment (*Rhetoric* 1.2.5, 1356a4–25; 2.1, 1377b20–1378a30).

The institution's limited engagement with these responses further departs from Aristotle's view that persuasion depends on attentiveness to the audience's character and the demonstration of goodwill (eunoia) toward the hearer (*Rhetoric* 2.1, 1378a6-20). By maintaining a largely one-way communication approach, the institution risks weakening the reciprocal foundation upon which ethical persuasion rests.

4.4.1.6.5 Broader Implications for Ethical Communication

The ODeL institution's response underscores the challenges of translating Aristotle's ethical rhetoric to digital platforms, where algorithms and user interactions mediate emotional engagement. While the statement upholds *ethos* through legal and academic credibility, its limited *pathos* and *logos* fall short of Aristotle's balanced ideal, particularly in failing to engage dialogically.

Ethical rhetoric, per Aristotle, avoids manipulation and fosters mutual understanding; the institution's cautious, non-responsive posture misses this mark, prioritising control over connection. Future crisis communication should integrate Aristotle's principles by balancing robust evidence (*logos*), inclusive emotional appeals (*pathos*), and transparent engagement (*ethos*) to meet digital audiences' dialogic expectations.

4.4.1.6.6 Final Reflection

The ODeL institution's statement reflects a strategic but rhetorically imperfect attempt to navigate a crisis within Aristotle's framework. Its strengths anchored in legal credibility, academic validation, and student empathy, align with ethical rhetoric's emphasis on trust and goodwill. However, its defensive tone, limited transparency, and lack of audience engagement deviate from Aristotle's call for balanced, adaptive communication. In a social media era where emotional and dialogic expectations are amplified, the institution must adopt a more dynamic, transparent, and responsive approach to embody Aristotle's ethical rhetoric, rebuild stakeholder trust, and enhance its rhetorical effectiveness.

4.4.2 ODeL Institution's Statement on the Appointment of an Administrator by the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation

4.4.2.1 Introduction

The statement responds to the Minister of Higher Education's decision to place the ODeL institution under administration for 24 months, effective 27 October 2023. The ODeL institution challenges the legality of this action, citing previous court orders that interdicted such a move. The statement also expresses concern about the timing of the announcement, which coincides with student examinations, and the execution of six graduation ceremonies which were set to take place and calls for calm among stakeholders. The full statement is included as Annexure B.

4.4.2.2 Platform-Specific Data

- **Facebook –** The statement was published on 28 October 2023 at 17:07 SAST via Facebook, receiving 146 reactions, 66 comments, and 15 shares. The reactions included 100 likes, 36 loves, 5 care, 2 laughs, 1 Wow, and 2 sad, with no angry emojis.

- **X –** On X it was published simultaneously at 17H07 SAST, and garnered over 76 000 views with 46 replies, it was reposted (retweeted) 230 times and liked 319 times.

  Table 4.3: Engagement and reaction metrics for the organisational statement published on 27 October 2023

Platform	Icon	Metric	Value
Facebook		Likes	100

		Love	36
		Care	5
		Laugh	2
		Wow	1
		Sad	2
		Angry	0
		Shares	15
		Comments	66
X		Views	76000 +
		Replies	46
		Repost	230
		Like	319
		Bookmark	27

Table: 4.3

4.4.2.3 Integrated Rhetorical Analysis: *ethos, pathos, logos*

4.4.2.3.1 Statement's *ethos*: Projecting Institutional Character

In this statement, the ODeL institution attempts to establish credibility through legal references, appeals to institutional autonomy, and calls for calm. The university asserts that the minister's announcement is "*in contempt of the Court Order of 06 October 2023 by Justice Kooverjie*" and further reinforces its position by stating that "*The same Order reaffirms the earlier Order of Justice Adams of 24 August 2023*." These references to judicial authority project a character which has due regard for legal and procedural correctness.

Additionally, the statement closes with a direct appeal to composure and academic focus: "*…Management appeals to all stakeholders / epistemic communities, especially staff and students, to remain calm and continue working hard*." This reinforces the institution's image

as responsible, composed, and committed to the continuity of the academic project, aligning with both ethical values and stakeholder expectations.

- In terms of ***arete,*** the statement refers to two court orders and acknowledges that the legal matter is still before the court. However, it does not disclose the university's internal challenges or limitations, nor does it acknowledge the broader stakeholders' concerns raised in public discourse (e.g., NSFAS delays, certificate issues). This limits the perception of full transparency.

  The statement aligns with values of legality, autonomy, and academic integrity. The phrase, "all citizens need to be guided by the prescripts of the law of the country", reflects a commitment to constitutional principles, and projects a character which believes in the rule of law, values espoused by its audience, and positions the university as a defender of democratic norms.

- In terms of ***phronesis*** the statement demonstrates legal and procedural expertise, referencing specific court orders and timelines, and the fact that in all those instances the institution succeeded against the minister's legal action. In addition, this sentence, "indeed, an anti-climax to the fact that the university has just graduated more than 50 thousand graduates (with 6 ceremonies still to take place) in this year", reflects awareness of academic processes and stakeholder priorities, denoting domain knowledge and experience.

  The university critiques the timing of the minister's announcement as "*ill-timed*" and "*insensitive*". By highlighting the disruptive potential of such an announcement during an examination period, the university demonstrates an understanding of the emotional and operational impact on students. This reflects a sensible and empathetic approach to crisis management, portraying the institution as attuned to the lived realities of its stakeholders. Here, *phronesis* intersects with *pathos*, as the institution's practical wisdom is expressed through emotional sensitivity.

  Additionally, invoking the CHE audit, the institution implies subject matter expertise in the higher education landscape, and it suggests that the quality of the university's academic functions is independently verified, sound, and aligned to national standards. This contributes to both *phronesis* and *logos*, reinforcing the institution's credibility through evidence-based claims.

  The mention of the recent graduation of over 50 000 students "*…the university has just graduated more than 50 thousand students…*" is rhetorically significant. It serves to underscore the university's scale and success, projecting it as a high-performing institution whose achievements are not easily paralleled nationally or continentally. This reinforces the image of a competent and resilient university.

- ***Eunoia*** is demonstrated through empathetic language, particularly in the appeal, "*Management appeals to all stakeholders / epistemic communities, especially staff and students, to remain calm and continue working hard.*" This reflects concern for calm, stability and academic continuity for the epistemic community, students and staff.

  However, *eunoia* is undermined with little to no engagement with stakeholder concerns. The university's message doesn't fully connect with what people are worried about. It talks about legal matters and calls for calm, but it doesn't show that it

understands or cares about the everyday frustrations students and staff are expressing. That gap weakens the message's appeal.

Ultimately, the statement's *ethos* is constructed through a blend of ethical credibility (*arete*), practical wisdom (*phronesis*), and emotional goodwill (*eunoia*), but its effectiveness is uneven. A more integrated approach, one that acknowledges stakeholder concerns while maintaining legal and institutional integrity, would enhance the university's rhetorical positioning in this crisis.

- ***Ethos* strengths**
  - **Legal and Procedural Expertise:** The statement demonstrates familiarity with legal processes, citing case numbers and court timelines.
  - **Academic Competence:** Mentioning the graduation of over 50 000 students and upcoming ceremonies highlights operational success and institutional scale.
  - **Sectoral Knowledge:** Reference to the CHE audit implies compliance with quality assurance mechanisms in higher education, reinforcing credibility.
  - **Crisis Sensitivity:** The critique of the minister's timing during exams shows situational awareness and concern for academic continuity.
- ***Ethos* limitations**
  - **Lack of Transparency:** The statement does not acknowledge internal challenges or controversies (e.g., NSFAS delays, certificate backlogs), which may undermine perceptions of honesty and openness.
  - **Insufficient Stakeholder Engagement:** The statement lacks direct acknowledgement of students' frustrations, which are widely expressed in public discourse
  - **Structured timeline of events:** Referencing specific dates and legal actions adds coherence and factual grounding.
  - **Emotional Disconnect:** While the tone is composed, it may come across as detached or overly formal, missing an opportunity to build emotional solidarity with affected stakeholders.

4.4.2.3.2 Statement's *pathos*: Emotional Resonance and Restraint Appeal

The statement demonstrates a calculated use of emotional appeal, aiming to resonate with its stakeholders while maintaining institutional composure. This is significant as Aristotle maintains that a speaker ought to be able to manage their own emotions as well as manage those of the audience. The emotional tone is shaped by both direct appeals to empathy and subtle expressions of institutional concern, reflecting a strategic balance between resonance and restraint.

The communication evokes empathy by highlighting the timing of the minister's announcement, stating it occurred "*in the middle of examinations*" and describing it as "*ill-timed and insensitive*". This framing is likely to resonate with students and staff who are directly affected by academic pressures. The mention of "*more than fifty thousand graduates*" and ongoing ceremonies further amplifies the emotional stakes, appealing to pride, achievement, and the disruption of personal and institutional milestones.

The statement also uses emotionally charged language such as "*premature*" and "*in contempt*" to frame the minister's actions as unjust and legally inappropriate. These terms carry moral weight and are designed to elicit a sense of indignation and urgency among readers who value fairness and due process.

Despite these emotionally resonant elements, the statement maintains a tone of restraint and professionalism. It avoids inflammatory rhetoric and instead emphasises legal process and institutional stability. For example, it states that the matter "*has not been finalised and is still before the court*", reinforcing a commitment to procedural resolution rather than emotional escalation or assessment by court of public opinion.

The call for calm, "*The ODeL Management appeals all stakeholders… remain calm and continue working hard*", further reflects an effort to contain emotional volatility and preserve academic continuity. This appeal to collective responsibility and composure helps position the university as a stabilising force amid uncertainty.

While the emotional appeals are effective in highlighting the human impact of the crisis, there is a risk that terms like "*totally misplaced*" and "*harm the university*" may come across as defensive or overly assertive. Without accompanying evidence or engagement with the opposing report, these phrases could reduce the perceived sincerity of the emotional appeal.

Nonetheless, the statement's overall tone remains measured and responsible, using *pathos* to mobilise empathy and solidarity without compromising its legal and ethical posture.

- ***Pathos* strengths**
  - **Empathy toward students:** The statement acknowledges exam stress and affirms support, to show sensitivity to student concerns.
  - **Appeal to institutional pride:** Referencing graduation milestones and the university's national role taps into collective identity and loyalty.
- ***Pathos* limitations**
  - **Emotionally charged language:** Terms like "*harm the university*" and "*totally misplaced*" may evoke defensiveness rather than calm the audience.
  - **Risk of appearing manipulative:** Emotional appeals are not consistently balanced with evidence, which may reduce perceived sincerity.

4.4.2.3.3 Statement's *logos*: Reasoning and Evidence

The university's statement employs *logos* by presenting a structured, fact-based argument to contest the minister's decision to place the university under administration. The reasoning is built on legal precedent, procedural critique, and appeals to institutional integrity.

Firstly, the statement references specific legal rulings to support its position. For example, it cites: *"the Court Order of 06 October 2023 by Justice Kooverjie, that interdicted him from placing the university under administration".*

This reference to a court order provides concrete legal evidence that the university believes the minister's action is not only premature but also in contempt of court. The statement further strengthens its argument by noting that: *"The same Order reaffirms the earlier Order of Justice Adams of 24 August 2023…"*

By invoking multiple legal decisions, the university constructs a logical chain of judicial authority to justify its opposition, appealing to the audience's sense of legality and procedural fairness.

Secondly, the statement uses temporal reasoning to lament the inappropriateness of the timing: *"at the time when our students are in middle of the examinations is ill-timed and insensitive".* This argument appeals to rational judgement by pointing out the disruptive

consequences of the minister's decision on the academic calendar, thereby reinforcing the university's stance as one that prioritises student welfare and institutional stability.

Additionally, the statement references recent institutional achievements to counter the narrative of dysfunction: *"Indeed an anti-climax to the fact that the University just graduated more than fifty thousand graduates…".* This serves as evidence of operational success, suggesting that the university is functioning effectively despite the administrative scrutiny, and thus does not warrant such drastic intervention.

Finally, the university emphasises its adherence to legal process by writing *"The university now approached court on an urgent basis to challenge the minister's announcement…"* This reinforces the institution's commitment to lawful resolution rather than confrontation, appealing to the audience's respect for due process.

In summary, the statement's *logos* is constructed through legal citations, rational critique of timing, evidence of academic success, and a commitment to judicial recourse, all of which aim to communicate to the audience reason and factual grounding.

Even as the university's statement demonstrates legal and academic expertise through its references to court orders and procedural timelines, it falls short in addressing the broader practical implications of the minister's decision. The statement outlines the legal basis for opposing administrative intervention but does not explain how such a move would concretely affect ongoing examinations, graduation ceremonies, or administrative operations. This omission weakens the logical appeal for stakeholders seeking clarity on how the crisis might disrupt academic continuity. A more comprehensive *logos* strategy would include an operational impact assessment data to reinforce the university's position with tangible evidence.

- ***Logos* strengths**
  - **Legal References as Evidence:** This use of legal documentation strengthens the university's position, grounding its claims in judicial authority, which appeals to logic and rule of law.
  - **Chronological Reasoning:** The statement outlines a timeline of events, showing that the matter is still before the court. This sequencing helps the audience understand the procedural context and why the university views the minister's action as premature
  - **Appeal to Rational Timing:** The university argues that the announcement disrupts academic activities. This is a logical appeal to the consequences of the decision, reinforcing the idea that timing matters in crisis communication.
  - **Evidence of Institutional Functionality:** The statement highlights recent achievements. This serves as evidence that the university is operational and productive, countering any implication of dysfunction
- ***Logos* limitations**
  - **Limited Explanation of Disruption Claims:** The statement asserts that the minister's announcement is *"ill-timed and insensitive"* due to ongoing examinations. However, it does not explain how the announcement might disrupt exams. For example, will administrative uncertainty affect exam logistics? How will staff or students be impacted by the governance shift? Is there a risk of student unrest or confusion? Without clarifying the mechanism of disruption, the claim remains speculative and weakens the argument's logical force.
  - **Ambiguity in the Nature of the Legal Challenge:** The university states that it has approached the court to challenge the minister's announcement.

This raises a legal dilemma: if the university is not opposing the minister's responsibilities, what exactly is being contested? Is it the timing, the legality, the process, or the interpretation of the court orders?

4.4.2.4 Rhetorical Classification: Judicial Rhetoric in Institutional Defence

The university primarily employed *judicial* rhetoric, as defined by Aristotle in *Rhetoric* 1.3. *Judicial* rhetoric is concerned with past actions and used in contexts of accusation or defence (Garver, 2009). The statement focuses on defending the university's actions by referencing prior court rulings (24 August and 6 October 2023), asserting the illegitimacy of the minister's intervention, and framing the institution as a law-abiding entity.

This retrospective orientation aligns with the classical forensic mode, which seeks to establish justice or injustice based on prior events. The strength of this rhetorical choice lies in its ability to reinforce institutional credibility (*ethos*) and logical consistency (*logos*) through legal citations and procedural clarity (Gross and Walzer, 2000; Braet, 1992).

However, the exclusive reliance on *judicial* rhetoric reveals certain limitations. Firstly, the statement lacks *deliberative* rhetoric, which Aristotle describes as future-oriented discourse aimed at policy direction and decision-making (Sullivan, 1993), leaving stakeholders without reassurance of institutional reform.

Secondly, it omits *epideictic* rhetoric, which communicates communal identity and praiseworthy standards**,** an omission that reduces the emotional and communal resonance of the message (Bartlett and Behnegar, 2023). Moreover, its emotionally restrained communication style and absence of stakeholder engagement, particularly on social media, undermine its *pathos* appeal.

Scholars argue that emotional impact and interactive responsiveness are essential in crisis communication, especially digitally (Brinton, A., 1988; Ndlela, 2019). The university's one-way, media-release-style communication, devoid of comment interaction, further emphasised institutional detachment (Coombs, T. and Holladay,2023; Morrison and Milliken, 2000).

Johann C. De Wet's *The Art of Persuasive Communication* offers a strategic corrective to this imbalance, De Wet (2017) emphasises that effective communication depends on rigorous audience analysis and an integration of ethical character, logical clarity, and emotional impact.

His process-oriented model urges communicators to tailor messages to audience expectations and societal context, advocating a shift from mere legal argumentation to a multimodal, dialogic approach (De Wet, 2017). In the context of the statement, De Wet's framework would support enhancing *ethos* with relational credibility, *logos* with stakeholder-relevant reasoning, and *pathos* with considerate handling of stakeholder views, particularly through responsive social media interaction.

Improving Statement 2 would involve reintegrating judicial strengths while adding deliberative elements (e.g., future commitments, consultation processes), epideictic appeals (e.g., shared values, institutional unity), and *pathos*-driven engagement (e.g., acknowledging student and staff concerns). De Wet's audience-centred perspective suggests that social media discourse should not just inform but also actively involve audience dialogue to sustain rhetorical efficacy (Seeger, 2006; Jongbloed *et al*., 2018).

4.4.2.5 Audience Responses and Handling

On X, the post attracted intense and politically charged reactions, with users expressing strong opposition to the minister's actions and framing them as part of broader systemic corruption. The tone is confrontational, with accusations of looting, political purging, and disregard for legal processes dominating the discourse.

In contrast, Facebook comments revealed a more nuanced and varied response. While some users echoed the political frustration seen on X, others expressed concern about the university's internal governance, referencing the independent assessor's report and questioning the institution's transparency. Several students raised practical concerns about the impact of the crisis on their academic progress, asking whether they could still register, graduate, or complete their exams. These comments suggest a deeper engagement with the implications of the statement beyond its legal framing.

Despite the volume and diversity of responses, the university did not engage with any of the comments on either platform. This non-engagement stance reflects a rhetorically cautious posture and institutionally defensive posture, prioritising information dissemination over dialogic interaction. By maintaining a one-directional communication flow, the university signals its intent to avoid public debate and emotional escalation.

However, this approach on social media carries risks, as silence is often interpreted as evasiveness or indifference. Unlike traditional crisis communication platforms, social media affords institutions the opportunity to affirm, agree with, or reject public views, especially those that are factually incorrect or emotionally invested. It also allows for the affirmation of supportive voices, which can strengthen institutional legitimacy and build a sense of solidarity with stakeholders.

The university's decision not to respond to any comments, whether supportive, critical, or misinformed, meant missing key opportunities to clarify its position and reinforce accurate narratives. Supportive voices are left unacknowledged, despite their emotional investment in the institution, and misinformation is allowed to circulate unchecked.

This absence of engagement weakened the university's rhetorical impact and left its credibility vulnerable to public scrutiny. By not affirming allies or correcting misconceptions, the university forfeited a chance to reinforce its message. In a digital environment where dialogic engagement is both expected and valued, the lack of interaction risks alienating stakeholders and undermining the institution's authority at a time when clarity and responsiveness are most needed.

4.4.2.6 Thematic Breakdown of Facebook Comments

A thematic analysis of the comments in this statement reveals five dominant themes:

I. **Governance Transparency:** Users expressing concern over internal governance and questioning the university's accountability.
"*While I am opposed to the minister's action… I am also concerned with the findings of the independent assessor report… it's of concern seriously"*

II. **Academic Disruption:** Comments expressed scepticism toward both ODeL institution and the minister, citing corruption and maladministration.
"*Can students still register for studies next year? What's happening?"*

III. **Legal Concerns:** Focused on the legality of the minister's actions, referencing contempt of court and the rule of law
"My confusion is, so the minister doesn't care about the rule of law anymore? How do you try to correct something by further breaking the law?"
IV. **Politicisation of the Crisis:** Crisis was interpreted through a political lens, with criticism directed at the minister, the ruling political party, and broader government interference.
"*It has not been a secret that all SA universities are 'captured'… Minister cannot get his dirty hands on university*"
V. **Support for University:** "*I support your decision to approach the court. Thank you.*"

4.4.2.7 Thematic Breakdown of X Comments

I. **Politicisation of the Crisis**: Most comments on X were politically charged, expressing distrust in the minister and the ruling party.
"government is hell-bent on destroying and privatising everything before next year's election…"
"*A Looter continua for ANC and its cadres. Cry my beloved institution*"
II. **Governance Transparency**: Some users questioned the motives behind the minister's actions, linking them to broader issues of corruption and misuse of state resources.
"*He wanted cash for elections via NSFAS… now he wants to loot university.…"*

4.4.2.8 Conclusion

4.4.2.8.1 Overview of Rhetorical Effectiveness within the Aristotelian Framework

The statement employs a balanced use of *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos*, which collectively enhance its effectiveness. This balance is particularly significant given the public interest associated with the crisis and the emotions in the public discourse that it attracts.

The statement establishes the institution's *ethos* through communication of its legal grounding and institutional integrity. By referencing specific court orders and judicial processes, the statement positions the institution as a credible, law-abiding institution acting within the bounds of constitutional governance. This credibility is essential in countering public scepticism about its own governance processes. *Ethos*, as Aristotle defined, refers to the speaker's character and credibility, which is crucial in ethical communication.

Pathos is employed through the communication's appeal to fairness and student welfare. The statement laments the timing of the minister's announcement during student examinations. This element evokes empathy and concern, allowing the university to connect emotionally with its audience without resorting to sensationalism. *Pathos,* as Aristotle argued, is essential for engaging the audience's emotions and values (Aristotle, Roberts and Bywater, 1984).

Logos is evident in the structured reasoning and legal evidence presented. The statement outlines a clear sequence of judicial decisions and procedural steps, offering a rational and coherent narrative that supports the university's position. The use of *logos* establishes a clear

logical structure and reinforces the factual basis of the argument, thereby strengthening the overall persuasiveness of the communication (Gross and Walzer, 2000).

The statement is rhetorically effective within the Aristotelian framework. It successfully integrates *ethos*, *pathos* and *logos* to defend the university's position, engage stakeholders, and maintain institutional credibility. Some of its strongest rhetorical elements, in a space where public trust is fragile, are logical clarity, and presenting a well-structured, reasonable argument.

Reputationally, it reinforces the university's credibility as a law-abiding institution, an institution acting responsibly and within its rights. In *pathos* use, it applied restraint, appealing to emotions without sensationalism or overuse. The use of *pathos* is measured and strategically placed, showing empathy toward students, as it highlights the likely effect of the crisis amid examinations, which could cause increased stress to students. It also appeals to institutional pride, referencing the graduation of over 50 000 students and affirming the university's national role, which taps into collective identity and loyalty.

4.4.2.8.2 Platform-Specific Dynamics and Emotional Mediation

The statement was published simultaneously on Facebook and X, and the engagement data from both platforms reveals distinct patterns in how audiences emotionally responded and interacted with the message.

The emotional tone of the reactions on Facebook was largely positive or empathetic, with 58 likes, 36 loves, and 3 care emojis, and notably no angry reactions. This suggests that the statement's tone of reassurance, especially its appeal for calm and its emphasis on student welfare, resonated well with the platform's audience. The relatively low number of shares and comments indicates a more contained and reflective engagement, where users processed the message within a community-oriented context rather than amplifying it for broader debate.

This means that Facebook's platform structure and user behaviour tend to promote more personal, thoughtful, and emotionally supportive engagement. On Facebook, users often engage with content in ways that reflect shared affiliations, emotional support, and personal relevance. Unlike platforms such as X, which prioritise speed, virality, and public debate, Facebook emphasises relational engagement, where users interact within groups, follow institutional pages, and respond with reactions that signal empathy or solidarity (Jost *et al.,* 2018).

In the context of crisis communication, this design encourages users to process institutional messages more reflectively, often responding with supportive sentiments rather than immediate critique. For example, reactions such as "love" or "care" emojis, and comments expressing concern or encouragement, are more common on Facebook than on X, where discourse tends to be more politicised and confrontational (Zeitzoff, 2017).

This difference in platform dynamics has important implications for how institutions like the ODeL institution should craft their messaging. As (Coombs, T., 2018) emphasises, effective crisis communication must consider not only the message content but also the communication context and audience behaviour.

On X, the statement garnered over 76 000 views, 46 comments, 230 reposts, and 319 likes. The significantly higher visibility and repost count suggest that the statement was amplified within a more dynamic and politicised environment. X's structure facilitates rapid

dissemination and public debate, often leading to polarised and emotionally charged responses (Zeitzoff, 2017). The platform's emphasis on brevity and virality means that institutional messages are often interpreted through ideological and political lenses, as reflected in the thematic breakdown of comments.

The emotional mediation of the statement varied by platform; on Facebook, the emotional proof was received with empathy and a sense of loyalty to the institution, aligning with the platform's more personal and community-driven tone.

On X, the emotional restraint in the statement is interpreted as tactical defence or evasive, prompting more critical and politicised responses. This contrast highlights the importance of platform-specific rhetorical strategies in crisis communication. While the statement maintained a consistent tone across platforms, its emotional impact and public interpretation were shaped by the norms, expectations, and user behaviours unique to each space.

4.4.2.8.3 Strengths and Limitations through the Aristotelian Lens

The statement successfully employs Aristotle's rhetorical modes of *ethos, pathos* and *logos* to enhance its persuasive impact. While each mode is used effectively to a certain degree, they also reveal limitations that affect the overall strength of the message.

Ethos, or the appeal to credibility, is a notable strength. By referencing High Court orders and the CHE audit, the university aligns itself with legal and regulatory norms, reinforcing institutional legitimacy. This aligns with Aristotle's view that *ethos* is effective when the speaker appears trustworthy and authoritative (Aristotle, Roberts and Bywater, 1984). However, the credibility is partially compromised by a defensive tone and the omission of direct engagement with the independent assessor's report. Singh (2020) stresses that, *ethos* must be supported by transparency and openness to maintain trust.

Pathos is used to build empathy and pride, notably through references to student welfare and graduations of 50 000 students. Yet, emotionally charged language such as "*totally misplaced*" risks alienating some audiences and may appear reactive. Zhang (2013) argues that emotional appeals in crisis communication must be carefully balanced to avoid undermining credibility.

Logos is the most structurally developed. The statement presents a clear timeline and legal reasoning to justify its stance, reflecting Aristotle's emphasis on rational argument through enthymemes and deductive logic (Aristotle, Roberts and Bywater, 1984). However, it falls short by not addressing the broader implications of the crisis, such as the impact on exams, remaining graduations and administrative continuity (Stucki and Sager, 2018) – content that evidence-backed *logos* enhances both rational and ethical appeals, an element that is notably absent here.

4.4.2.8.4 Audience Sentiment and Ethical Implications

Public responses to the university statement across X and Facebook reveal a crisis of trust and highlight the ethical risks of institutional social media silence. While X was dominated by politically charged criticism, Facebook offered a more nuanced discourse, including concerns about governance, student welfare, and transparency. Despite this diversity, the university chose not to engage with any comments, reflecting a one-directional communication strategy.

This silence, however, carries ethical implications. As Morrison and Milliken (2000) argue, organisational silence can erode stakeholder confidence. In crisis contexts, silence is likely to be perceived as evasiveness or indifference, especially when stakeholders seek clarity and reassurance. Coombs (2007), through SCCT, emphasises that active engagement is essential to protect reputational assets and maintain credibility during crises.

Moreover, Ndlela (2019) stresses that stakeholder-oriented crisis communication, particularly on social media, should involve dialogic interaction to affirm support, correct misinformation, and build solidarity. The university's lack of response forfeited these opportunities, weakening its rhetorical impact and leaving its credibility vulnerable to unchecked public interpretation.

In an era where digital engagement is both expected and valued, ethical crisis communication demands not just structured messaging, but responsive interaction. Institutions must recognise that silence, while sometimes strategic, can also signal disengagement and undermine trust when transparency is most needed.

4.4.2.8.5 Broader Implications for Ethical Communication

The university statement and its handling of public discourse underscore critical lessons for ethical communication in institutional crises. In an era of digital transparency, ethical communication extends beyond message construction: it demands responsiveness, accountability, and stakeholder engagement. The university's decision to adopt a one-directional communication strategy, particularly on social media, reflects a traditional model of crisis management that may no longer suffice in participatory public spheres.

As Ndlela (2019) maintains, ethical crisis communication must be stakeholder-oriented, involving dialogic interaction that affirms support and corrects misinformation. Similarly, Coombs (2007) highlights that reputational resilience depends on timely and appropriate engagement with affected publics. The absence of such engagement weakens rhetorical impact.

Moreover, Morrison and Milliken (2000) caution that organisational silence creates an atmosphere of distrust. In the context of higher education, and public institutions where credibility and public trust are foundational, ethical and responsible communication must prioritise transparency, especially when addressing contested issues like governance, accountability, and student welfare.

Ultimately, the broader implication is clear: institutions must evolve from a posturing perceived as defensive or indifferent, to proactive, dialogic communication models that reflect ethical responsibility and engagement.

4.4.2.8.6 Final Reflection

The university statement demonstrates a thoughtful integration of Aristotle's rhetorical proofs of *ethos, pathos* and *logos*, which collectively support the objective to reach intersubjectivity. *Ethos* is established through legal references and institutional integrity, *pathos* through empathy for students, and *logos* through structured reasoning. This balance is commendable, especially in a context of heightened public scrutiny.

However, the effectiveness of rhetorical construction must be matched by ethical responsiveness. In the digital age, credibility is not only built through message content, but also through engagement. The university's silence on social media, despite widespread public concern, weakens its *ethos* and risks alienating stakeholders. Responsible and ethical

communication today demands not just clarity and structure, but also openness, accountability, and dialogic interaction.

4.4.3 ODeL Institution's Statement on the Pretoria High Court Judgement of 3 November 2023

4.4.3.1 Introduction

This statement was issued by the university following a significant legal ruling by the Pretoria High Court. It addresses the dismissal of an appeal by the Minister of Higher Education, concerning the potential placement of the ODeL institution under administration. The university uses this communication to clarify the outcome of the legal proceedings, reaffirm its institutional independence, and maintain a cordial tone in its engagement with the Ministry, despite the ongoing dispute. The statement reflects a rhetorical approach aimed at building public confidence and preserving institutional autonomy, while presenting the university not as opposing the minister, but as committed to operating within the framework of legal processes in response to the minister's actions. The full statement is included as Annexure C.

4.4.3.2 Platform-Specific Data

- **Facebook –** The statement was published on Friday, 03 November 2023 at 18:23 SAST via Facebook. It received 125 reactions, 19 comments, and 11 shares. The reactions included 90 likes, 32 loves, 2 laughs, and 1 care, with no sad or angry emojis used. These reactions were made using Facebook's Reaction feature, which allows users to express affective responses through ideograms such as 👍 (like), ❤️ (love), 😢 (sad), and 😡 (angry).

- **X -** The statement was published simultaneously on X, on the same day and time (03 November 2023, at 18H23 SAST). It garnered over 28.2K views with 17 comments, 77 reposts/retweets, and 157 likes.

  Table 4.4: Engagement and reaction metrics for the organisational statement published on 03 November 2023

Platform	Icon	Metric	Value
Facebook		Likes	90
		Love	32
		Care	1
		Laugh	2

		Wow	0
		Sad	0
		Angry	0
		Shares	11
		Comments	19
X		Views	28000 +
		Replies	17
		Repost	77
		Like	157
		Bookmark	4

Table: 4.4

The university's statement generated moderate engagement across Facebook and X, further reflecting each platform's differing affordances and audience behaviours. On Facebook, the predominance of positive reactions such as likes and loves, reflect a supportive sentiment among users, consistent with findings that social media reactions serve as affective cues in public discourse (Jost *et al.*). The absence of negative reactions (e.g., sad or angry emojis) indicate either approval or a lack of emotional divergence among the audience.

Van Kleef (2009) proposes that emotional expressions in social contexts serve as cues that influence observer behaviour and attitudes. In simpler terms, people use others' emotional signals to guide their own responses, whether in face-to-face interactions or on digital platforms.

Applying this to the university's Facebook statement, the dominance of positive reactions (likes and loves) suggests that early users responded favourably, and their emotional cues may have influenced subsequent users to react similarly. This pattern reflects a form of social signalling, where visible emotional responses help shape collective interpretation of the message, potentially leading users to view the university's legal stance as justified or responsible.

On X, the statement recorded over 28.2K views, indicating substantial visibility on the platform, although comparative reach data from Facebook is unavailable. Nonetheless, there are fewer direct interactions such as likes, comments and reposts.

The relatively low engagement rate, at approximately 0.56% of 28.2K, suggests that while the university's statement reached a wide audience, it did not elicit strong emotional responses or active endorsement from most viewers.

This is consistent with research showing that X functions primarily as a broadcast medium, where users consume information passively rather than engage emotionally, facilitating rapid information dissemination rather than deep emotional engagement (Zeitzoff, 2017).

The platform's algorithmic structure and real-time nature contribute to high visibility, especially during crisis events, making X useful for strategic communication during crises. Users may view, share, or monitor content without expressing sentiment through likes or replies, especially in politically or legally sensitive contexts.

Overall, the data reflects a strategic use of platform-specific features to maximise reach and impact. Facebook enabled more expressive, sentiment-driven engagement, while X served as a tool for broader dissemination and visibility – an approach consistent with best practices in crisis communication (Coombs, T., 2007).

4.4.3.3 Integrated Rhetorical Analysis: *ethos, pathos, logos*

4.4.3.3.1 Statement's *ethos*: Projecting Institutional Character

The statement, issued in response to the Pretoria High Court judgement, reflects a carefully constructed *ethos* that blends ethical credibility, rational clarity, and emotional restraint.

- In the university's statement, ***aretē*** is projected through its alignment with legal processes and affirmation of institutional integrity. The statement opens with a factual and restrained tone:

  "The ODeL institution notes the decision of the Pretoria High Court…"

  In Aristotelian rhetoric, *aretē* refers to the speaker's moral excellence as perceived through the speech itself. This includes traits such as honesty, integrity, and consistency with ethical values. *Aretē* is not an abstract ideal but the embodied credibility of the speaker, demonstrated through discourse that reflects truthfulness and integrity (Barlow, 1996).

  This phrasing avoids triumphalism and instead signals a commitment to lawful conduct and institutional decorum. By choosing to "*note*" the decision rather than celebrate it, the university adopts a principled stance, choosing respectful engagement over triumphalism, and demonstrating integrity in its institutional posture. and the judicial outcome.

  The absence of self-congratulatory language and the presence of respectful engagement reflect a consistent ethical stance. These rhetorical choices align with Coombs and Holladay's (2023) SCCT, which emphasises that perceived ethical conduct and transparency are essential to maintaining public trust during crises.

  Moreover, the university's emphasis on legal compliance and its respectful tone toward the Ministry, despite the disagreement demonstrates commendable moral virtue.

  "…relationship with the Ministry remains cordial, despite the contestations".

This sentence is particularly rich, as it reflects all three dimensions of Aristotelian *ethos* as demonstrated below.

- The reaffirmation of its relationship with the Ministry, despite the legal disagreement, also reflects ***phronesis,*** a tactful handling of conflict, balancing legal assertiveness with diplomatic restraint. This projects the university as sensible, emotionally intelligent and institutionally mature.

  Secondly, by referencing multiple court decisions (e.g., Judge Kooverjie's ruling and Judge Adams' earlier order), the university demonstrates its engagement with the legal process over time. This reflects institutional experience, not reacting impulsively but acting based on legal precedent:

  "…the High Court ruled that the decision made by Judge Adam was a court order… after the Minister and the ODeL institution had entered into an agreement where the Minister undertook not to appoint an Administrator for the ODeL institution, pending the outcome of the court application by the institution to review and set aside the report".

- The sentence, *"…relationship with the Ministry remains cordial, despite the contestations"* also demonstrates ***eunoia*** showing an effort to extend goodwill and avoid escalating conflict, and to reflect respect for institutional relationships and public stakeholders.

  The statement demonstrates a desire to maintain harmonious ties with the Ministry, and reassure stakeholders of the university's cooperative intent, which contributes to a perception of goodwill.

  Lastly, by communicating the outcome of the court case clearly, the institution is keeping stakeholders informed, which can be seen as a gesture of transparency and respect for public interest.

- ***Ethos*** **strengths:**
  - **Alignment with legal and sectoral norms:** The statement underscores the university's commitment to legal processes, reinforcing its respect for the rule of law by referencing multiple court decisions to shows the university as a responsible actor in the Higher Education landscape.
  - **Professional and Restrained Tone:** The use of phrases like "*notes the decision*" instead of celebratory language reflects the institution's commitment to decorum and humility. The deliberate avoidance of inflammatory or accusatory language contributes to a perception of responsible communication, reinforcing the university's credibility as a principled actor during the crisis.
  - **Respectful Engagement with the Ministry:** The phrase "*relationship with the Ministry remains cordial despite contestations*", reflects a commitment to maintaining institutional relationships, even amid legal conflict. This rhetorical choice signals moral virtue and a deliberate effort to avoid escalation, reinforcing the university's image as a principled and cooperative actor.

- **Transparency and Public Reassurance:** Clear communication of legal outcomes shows respect for stakeholders and a desire to keep the public informed. This contributes to perceived honesty and openness.

- ***Ethos* limitations**
  - **Perceived Overemphasis on Legal Success:** The phrase *"fourth consecutive decision in favour of ODeL institution",* may unintentionally convey a tone of self-congratulation, which can be problematic in a crisis communication context. While intended to demonstrate consistency and legal credibility, this emphasis risks being interpreted as celebratory or competitive, potentially undermining the institution's posture of humility and cooperation.

    The focus on court victories may suggest defensiveness or self-preservation rather than accountability or institutional learning. It risks portraying the university as more interested in vindication than reform.
  - **Limited Empathy Toward Stakeholders:** The statement does not directly address students, staff, or the public, missing an opportunity to show concern or solidarity. This weakens the relational dimension of *ethos*.
  - **Absence of Internal Reflection:** No mention is made of steps toward institutional improvement. This could be seen as a lack of introspection or transparency.

4.4.3.3.2 Statement's *pathos*: Emotional Resonance and Restraint Appeal

The statement evokes a sense of institutional vindication through the phrase, *"fourth consecutive decision in favour of the ODeL institution"*. This sentence reinforces a narrative of justice and persistence, aligning with the principles of SCCT, which posits that organisations try to protect their reputation during a crisis by focusing on positive legal or official outcomes that show they acted properly or were treated fairly (Coombs, T., 2007).

Furthermore, the reaffirmation of a *"cordial relationship with the Ministry"* functions as a rhetorical gesture of reassurance, aimed at calming stakeholders and projecting institutional stability. The statement's avoidance of inflammatory language reflects a deliberate stratagem of restraint, to develop credibility, an essential component of *ethos* in Aristotle's rhetorical framework. When combined with the logical structure of legal references (*logos*) and subtle emotional cues (*pathos*), the statement demonstrates a balanced rhetorical approach (Pinho, 2018).

Despite this restrained tone, the statement subtly conveys emotional tension and institutional frustration. The emphasis on *"…no prospects of success"* and repeated legal victories imply dissatisfaction with the minister's continued legal challenges. The phrase, *"despite contestations…"* confirms a sense of unresolved conflict, hinting at deeper issues between the university and the Ministry.

Additionally, the absence of empathetic language or acknowledgement of the impact on students, alumni, and the wider public creates emotional distance, potentially alienating stakeholders who expect more human-centred communication. Mossner and Walter (2024) believe that empathy in digitally mediated interactions is critical for meaningful engagement, and that institutions must design communication strategies that scaffold emotional understanding in online spaces in sensitive or crisis situations.

Additionally, the statement does not engage with the audience in ways that would enhance emotional resonance. It lacks interactive elements such as responses to public comments or indicators of audience reactions, features that are increasingly used to measure the effectiveness of emotional appeal in social media-based crisis communication (Bukar *et al.,* 2022).

In the context of social media, audience interaction (such as likes, shares, and comments) serves as a feedback loop that strengthens emotional connection and rhetorical effectiveness (Swani and Labrecque, 2020; Trunfio and Rossi, 2021). The absence of such engagement in the statement suggests a one-directional communication approach, which limits its resonance with stakeholders.

Ideally, the institution's statement should have considered or responded to earlier public reactions, comments, or concerns. In a social media context, effective crisis communication involves two-way interaction, not just issuing statements, but also responding to feedback, clarifying misunderstandings, and addressing stakeholder concerns.

Research shows that social media platforms extend traditional crisis communication by enabling dialogue between the institution and the public, which strengthens emotional connection (Bukar *et al.,* 2022).

There is also no clear emotional call to action, such as encouraging support, solidarity, or advocacy, which limits its ability to mobilise stakeholders or establish a sense of collective identity. According to Mahé and Martel (2023) emotional calls to action are vital in institutional crisis communication, as they help activate community support. Without these elements, the statement misses an opportunity to convene the support through participatory communication – an approach that has proven effective in enhancing stakeholder alignment during crises (Liu *et al.,* 2022)

- ***Pathos* strengths**
  - **Sense of Vindication:** The phrase, *"fourth consecutive decision in favour of the ODeL institution"* evokes pride and justice, reinforcing institutional resilience.
  - **Reassurance and Stability:** The mention of a *"cordial relationship with the Ministry"* helps calm stakeholders and maintain public confidence.
  - **Professional Tone:** The use of formal and measured language helps the institution appear composed, while also preventing emotional escalation or conflict.
  - **Institutional Confidence:** The emphasis on legal success projects strength and control, appealing to supporters and internal stakeholders.
  - **Subtle Emotional Control:** The statement avoids dramatisation, which can be seen as a mature and composed response during a crisis.

- ***Pathos* limitations**
  - **Emotional Distance:** The lack of empathetic language may alienate students, staff, and the public who expect more human-centred communication.
  - **Unresolved Tension:** Phrases like *"despite contestations…"* hint at conflict but do not address emotional impact or resolution.
  - **No Acknowledgement of Stakeholder Impact:** The statement does not mention how the situation affects prospective or current students, alumni, or staff, missing an opportunity to connect emotionally.

- **Implied Frustration:** The repeated emphasis on legal victories and the dismissal of the minister's appeal subtly suggest dissatisfaction with the ongoing legal challenges. This could be interpreted as a restrained expression of irritation, potentially coming across as passive-aggressive to some audiences.

4.4.3.3.3 Statement's *logos*: Reasoning and Evidence

The statement demonstrates a strong use of *logos*, the rhetorical appeal to logic and reason, by presenting a structured account of legal events and decisions. This approach supports the institution's position through factual detail.

Firstly, the statement cites specific dates, 24 August 2023, 6 October 2023, and 3 November 2023, and references rulings by Judge Adams and Judge Kooverjie. This chronological precision lends logical clarity and evidentiary weight to the communication. It allows the audience to follow the legal progression and understand the basis of the university's position. Braet (1992) stresses that Aristotelian *logos* is most effective when it presents enthymematic reasoning – arguments grounded in facts and logic that relate directly to the issue at hand.

Secondly, the statement outlines the legal context and procedural developments, including the minister's application for leave to appeal, the agreement entered into between the minister and the university, to not appoint an administrator, and the court's dismissal of the appeal. These details reflect adherence to due process and demonstrate the legitimacy of the university's stance.

The mention that the agreement was *"made an order of court"* upholds the institution's claim, that the minister's actions were premature, more so that the agreement is further backed by the court. This emphasises the importance of evidence-based communication when protecting organisational reputation during crises (Coombs, T., 2007).

Additionally, the outcome-based reasoning, highlighting that the minister's application was dismissed *"with costs"* and had *"no prospects of success"*, validates the institution's position and strengthens its legal argument. This mirrors the principle mentioned by Sheep (2022) that, for an argument to be considered effective, it must be based on procedural detail and factual evidence.

The statement, however, is not without limitations. It does not explain the wider implications of the ruling for students, staff, or university governance, which leaves those audiences with little context on the crisis without a clear understanding of its significance. Additionally, the use of legal jargon may alienate non-legal audiences, reducing the accessibility and impact of the message.

Furthermore, the statement relies solely on legal outcomes and does not incorporate additional forms of evidence, such as audience perspectives or institutional data, which could enhance its persuasive power. The brief mention of the independent assessor's report lacks detail, weakening the logical foundation for contesting its findings.

In summary, while the statement effectively uses legal reasoning and structured evidence to support its position, its rhetorical impact could be strengthened through wider contextualisation and the inclusion of more diverse forms of evidence.

- ***Logos* strengths**
  - **Use of Specific Dates and Judicial References:** The statement cites exact dates (24 August 2023, 6 October 2023, and 3 November 2023) and references rulings by Judge Adams and Judge Kooverjie. This chronological precision enhances the statement's logical clarity and evidentiary weight.
  - **Legal Context and Procedural Detail:** By explaining the legal process, the statement provides a clear rationale for the institution's position. This aligns with the principles of rhetorical *logos*, where reasoning is supported by verifiable facts and procedural transparency.
  - **Reference to Legal Agreements:** The mention of the agreement between the institution and the minister, which was made an order of court, adds legitimacy and reinforces the institution's adherence to due process.
- ***Logos* limitations**
  - **Lack of Broader Contextual Explanation:** While the statement is legally detailed, it does not explain the implications of the ruling for students, staff, or implications of the governance change. This limits the accessibility of the reasoning for non-legal audiences.
  - **Absence of Supporting Evidence Beyond Legal Rulings:** The statement relies solely on court decisions and does not include data, reports, or stakeholder perspectives that could further substantiate the institution's position.
  - **Minimal Explanation of the Assessor's Report:** A clearer explanation of why the report is being contested would strengthen the logical appeal.

4.4.3.4 Rhetorical Classification: Judicial Rhetoric in Institutional Defence

The statement constructs its argument by referencing past legal events, including court rulings, procedural timelines, and agreements made an order of court. This retrospective orientation, coupled with its focus on establishing the justice or injustice of the minister's actions, is characteristic of judicial rhetoric.

The institution positions itself as a respondent in a legal dispute, using evidence and structured reasoning to assert that it has acted within the bounds of due process.

However, while the statement is rhetorically coherent within the judicial mode, its exclusive reliance on this form limits its wider effectiveness and impact. In a university setting, where communication must also address diverse audiences including students, staff, alumni, donors and the public, an overemphasis on legal defence can appear detached or unresponsive to emotional and ethical concerns. Weinrib (1988) warns that legal formalism, while internally sound, can risk detachment from the social and moral dimensions of justice if not balanced with other communicative ethics.

Thus, while the statement fulfils the technical demands of judicial rhetoric, it may fall short in addressing the relational and reputational dimensions of institutional crisis communication.

The statement could have been strengthened by incorporating elements of ***deliberative*** and ***epideictic*** rhetoric. Deliberative rhetoric, which is future-oriented and concerned with decision-making and policy outcomes, would have allowed the institution to communicate its vision for resolving the crisis, restoring stability, and rebuilding trust. By outlining proactive steps or reforms, the university could have reassured stakeholders that it is not only defending its past actions, but also committed to future improvement.

Similarly, the inclusion of epideictic rhetoric, which focuses on values, praise, and blame, could have helped the institution affirm its core principles, celebrate the resilience of its community, and acknowledge the challenges faced by some students. This rhetorical mode is particularly effective in reinforcing institutional identity and solidarity during times of uncertainty. As Aristotle noted, epideictic rhetoric plays a crucial role in shaping public perception by appealing to shared values and collective memory.

4.4.3.5 Audience Responses and Handling

The public response to the university's statement, as reflected on Facebook and X, reveals a high level of engagement and emotional investment from stakeholders. On Facebook, the post received 125 reactions, 19 comments, and 11 shares, with the reactions comprising 90 likes, 32 loves, 2 laughs, and 1 care, and notably no sad or angry emojis.

On X, the statement garnered over 28 200 views, 17 comments, 77 reposts, and 157 likes. These metrics indicate that the statement reached a wide audience and stimulated significant interaction, yet the nature of the comments suggests a disconnect between the institution's messaging and the lived experiences of its stakeholders.

A dominant theme across both platforms is frustration with operational inefficiencies, particularly regarding system outages, exam access, and allowance disbursements.

Comments such as *"You can't keep your systems online. Maybe you do need to be under administration."* highlight frustration with service delivery. These operational concerns overshadow the legal clarity presented in the statement, suggesting that the audience prioritises institutional functional reliability over institutional legal reasoning. Coombs (2007) theorises that people will judge how well an organisation handles a crisis based on how responsible they believe the organisation is and how well it performs during the crisis.

4.4.3.6 Thematic Breakdown of Facebook Comments

A thematic analysis of the comments in this statement reveals six dominant themes:

I. **Operational Frustration:** A dominant theme across both platforms is frustration with operational inefficiencies, particularly regarding system outages, exam access, and allowance disbursements.
"*Your system always down just like the one of Home Affairs…"*
II. **Scepticism Toward Institutional Integrity:** Some users question the university's credibility and the validity of its defence against administration
"*ODeL institution is badly managed…"*.
III. **Emotional Appeals and Stakeholder Impact:** Some comments express emotional distress, particularly from students affected by administrative delays and system failures. *"These games you're playing involve people's lives".*

4.4.3.7 Thematic Breakdown of X Comments

I. **Operational Frustration:** Users criticised technical failures, poor communication, and lack of student support.
"*Your system always down just like the one of Home Affairs…"*

I. **Distrust in Leadership:** Comments expressed scepticism toward both the ODeL institution and the minister, citing corruption and maladministration.
"*This is an attempt by Minister Nzimande (Fake Communist) to divert funds to ANC Election Campaign.…"*

II. **Marginalised Voices and Identity Politics:** One notable comment frames the university's legal challenge as a symbolic act of resistance: *"ODeL institution's recent move to challenge the minister's decision in court symbolises a significant stand: using the existing system tools to liberate and amplify the black female voices in academia***"**

The audience responses reveal a gap between the university's use of *logos* and the public's demand for service delivery. While the statement is legally sound, its rhetorical effectiveness is undermined by its failure to address the practical and emotional realities of its stakeholders. Future communications should consider integrating stakeholder perspectives, operational updates, and empathetic messaging to enhance credibility and trust. Coombs and Holladay (2010) stress that effective crisis communication is audience-centred and responsive to maintain reputational resilience.

4.4.3.8 Conclusion

4.4.3.8.1 Overview of Rhetorical Effectiveness within the Aristotelian Framework

The university's statement demonstrates a deliberate and structured application of Aristotle's rhetorical appeals, particularly *logos*, to assert institutional *ethos* as it defends against an administrative intervention. Through chronological precision, legal citations, and procedural detail, the statement effectively constructs a logical narrative that supports the university's position.

However, the statement's rhetorical effectiveness is limited by its narrow focus on legal reasoning, with minimal engagement in *pathos* (emotional appeal) or *ethos* (credibility and moral character). The absence of empathetic language, stakeholder perspectives, and contextual relevance weakens its resonance with some audiences, particularly students who are directly affected by operational disruptions and governance concerns.

Audience responses on social media platforms such as Facebook and X reveal a significant gap between the institution's messaging and stakeholder expectations. While the statement achieved notable engagement – 125 reactions, 19 comments, and 11 shares on Facebook, and over 28 200 views, 17 comments, 77 reposts, and 157 likes on X – the qualitative nature of the comments indicates some frustration, scepticism, and emotional distress. These reactions underscore the missing link of *pathos* and *ethos* into this crisis communication to establish empathy, and institutional credibility.

While the statement succeeds in presenting a legally coherent and logically sound defence, its rhetorical impact is constrained by its limited appeal to emotion and character. To enhance its effectiveness within the Aristotelian framework, future communications should adopt a more holistic rhetorical strategy, one that balances *logos* with *pathos* and *ethos*, and actively engages with the lived realities and emotional concerns of its stakeholders.

4.4.3.8.2 Platform-Specific Dynamics and Emotional Mediation

The rhetorical impact of the university's statement is shaped not only by its content, but also by the platforms through which it was disseminated. Facebook and X serve as distinct communicative environments, each mediating emotional and discursive responses in unique ways.

On Facebook, the engagement was marked by 125 reactions, 19 comments, and 11 shares, with a predominance of positive emotive responses – 90 likes and 32 loves, and no sad or angry emojis. This suggests a relatively supportive or neutral reception, though the comments themselves revealed deep frustration with system failures, exam access, and student allowances.

Facebook's interface, which allows for longer comments and emotive reactions, tends to support community-based discourse and emotional expression (Hitlin and Kwon,2016)**.** At times users use this space to articulate personal grievances and appeal to institutional empathy, as seen in comments demanding system fixes and expressing distress over academic disruptions.

In contrast, X generated over 28 200 views, 17 comments, 77 reposts, and 157 likes, indicating broader visibility and virality. However, the tone on X was more politically charged and critical, with users questioning the credibility of all actors, the independent assessor's report, the university's governance, and the minister's motives.

X's fast-paced, public-facing format encourages brief, reactive, and often confrontational discourse, which can amplify dissent and politicise institutional messaging (Kruse, Norris and Flinchum, 2018). The platform's algorithmic structure also facilitates the spread of emotionally charged content, particularly outrage or scepticism, which can escalate reputational risk during crises (Papachirissi, 2015).

The emotional mediation across platforms reflects divergent stakeholder priorities: Facebook users emphasised student-centred concerns, while X users engaged more with governance and political accountability. This bifurcation underscores the need for platform-sensitive communication strategies. As Veil, Buehner and Palenchar (2011) argue, effective crisis communication must adapt to the affordances of each medium, balancing transparency, responsiveness, and emotional resonance.

In this case, the university's statement, while legally robust, did not sufficiently tailor its messaging to the emotional and discursive norms of either platform. The absence of empathetic language and stakeholder engagement limited its ability to mediate emotional responses and build trust.

4.4.3.8.3 Strengths and Limitations through the Aristotelian Lens

The statement's primary strength lies in its structured use of *logos*. It presents a chronological sequence of legal events, references judicial rulings, and cites procedural developments to support the university's position. The clarity and precision of the legal narrative enhance the institution's rational appeal, which is particularly effective in formal or policy-driven contexts (Heath, 2010).

However, the statement underutilises *ethos*, the appeal to character and credibility. It does not sufficiently demonstrate qualities essential for building trust during institutional crises (Coombs, T. and Holladay,2023). The absence of direct engagement with the independent

assessor's report, as well as the lack of acknowledgement of student concerns, weakens the institution's rhetorical stance.

Similarly, *pathos* is largely absent. The statement does not address the emotional realities of its stakeholders, which are evident in this and the previous statements dealing with the crisis, which refer to students facing system outages, uncertainty, or concerns about institutional stability.

The imbalance among the rhetorical appeals suggests a technocratic communication approach, one that prioritises procedural correctness and legal defensibility over emotional impact. It also prioritises one-directional communication over relational engagement. While this may satisfy regulatory or judicial audiences, it risks alienating segments of the university community who seek empathy, clarity, and inclusion. Duska (2014) stresses that effective communication in institutional contexts requires a synthesis of logic, credibility, and emotional intelligence.

4.4.3.8.4 Audience Sentiment and Ethical Implications

Audience sentiment across both Facebook and X reveals an emotional landscape marked by frustration, scepticism, and tension. While the statement received a relatively high volume of engagement, especially on X, with over 28 000 views, many comments expressed dissatisfaction with the university's operational challenges, such as system outages and delayed allowances. These sentiments suggest that the audience's primary concerns lie not in legal technicalities, but in the tangible impact of institutional dysfunction on their academic and personal lives.

The ethical implications of this sentiment are significant. By focusing narrowly on legal reasoning, the university risks appearing indifferent to the lived experiences of its stakeholders. Ethical communication in crisis contexts requires more than procedural correctness, it demands transparency, empathy, and responsiveness to those most affected (Coombs, T. and Holladay,2023)**.** The absence of such engagement may erode trust and deepen reputational damage, particularly among vulnerable student populations.

Ultimately, the institution's ethical responsibility extends beyond defending its position in court. It must also acknowledge and address the emotional and material realities of its community. A more ethically attuned communication strategy would integrate stakeholder voices, demonstrate institutional accountability, and foster a sense of shared purpose during times of uncertainty.

4.4.3.8.5 Broader Implications for Ethical Communication

The analysis of this statement highlights a critical lesson for institutional crisis communication; ethical effectiveness is not achieved through logic alone. While legal and procedural accuracy is essential, it must be complemented by a responsive and emotionally intelligent messaging. In higher education, where diverse stakeholders are directly impacted by institutional decisions, ethical communication requires a balance between defending institutional interests and acknowledging the lived realities of students and the broader public with vested interests in the institution.

Moreover, the case underscores the importance of audience-centred communication ethics, a principle that prioritises listening, responsiveness, and relational accountability. As public trust in institutions becomes increasingly fragile, especially in digitally mediated environments, universities must adopt communication strategies that not only inform, but also

build and sustain trust. According to Tichavakunda (2024) ethical engagement in higher education must reflect the lived experiences of vulnerable communities and establish inclusive dialogue. This involves engaging with criticism, addressing emotional concerns, and demonstrating a commitment to shared values and social responsibility.

4.4.3.8.6 Final Reflection

This analysis reveals that while the university's statement is legally coherent and logically well structured, its rhetorical and ethical effectiveness is uneven. By prioritising *logos* and procedural correctness, the institution communicates strength in legal reasoning but misses opportunities to build trust and emotional connection with its stakeholders. Audience responses across platforms underscore the need for more empathetic, inclusive, and dialogic communication, particularly in times of institutional crisis.

Ultimately, ethical communication in higher education must go beyond defending institutional legitimacy, it ought to reflect a commitment to relational accountability, and the lived experiences of its community. Balancing *logos, ethos*, and *pathos* is not only a rhetorical ideal but a practical necessity to reach intersubjectivity and sustain credibility and trust in a rapidly evolving public sphere.

4.4.4 ODeL Institution Welcomes Minister Nzimande's Withdrawal of Notice to Place It Under Administration

4.4.4.1 Introduction

This statement, released in the aftermath of a Pretoria High Court order, constitutes the fourth and final communication in a series of crisis-related messages issued by the university. It announces the minister's withdrawal of the notice to place the institution under administration, signalling a moment of institutional affirmation and legal vindication following a protracted legal dispute between the minister and the university. The statement also reaffirms the university's commitment to the rule of law. Its communicative objective appears to be the restoration of public confidence and institutional legitimacy through legal and procedural validation. The full statement is included as Annexure D.

4.4.4.2 Platform-Specific Data

- **Facebook –** The statement was published on Friday, 20 November 2023 at 10:03 SAST via Facebook. It received 205 reactions, 37 comments, and 17 shares. The reactions included 120 likes, 50 loves, 31 laughs, 2 care, 2 sad, with no angry emojis used.

- **X –** The statement was published on X, on the same day, 20 November 2023 at 10:01 (almost simultaneously as the Facebook statement). It garnered over 77.4K views with 65 comments, 225 reposts/retweets, and 489 likes.

Table 4.5: Engagement and reaction metrics for the organisational statement published on 20 November 2023

Platform	Icon	Metric	Value
Facebook		Likes	120
		Love	50
		Care	2
		Laugh	31
		Wow	0
		Sad	2
		Angry	0
		Shares	17
		Comments	37
X		Views	74400
		Replies	65
		Repost	225
		Like	489
		Bookmark	6

Table: 4.5

The university's use of social media platforms Facebook and X demonstrates a calculated approach to crisis communication, leveraging reach towards its massive followership on both platforms to reinforce its message. The statement was published almost simultaneously on both platforms, suggesting a coordinated release designed to maximise visibility and control the narrative.

From a rhetorical perspective the university's communication employs *ethos* by referencing a High Court ruling and the minister's formal withdrawal, thereby reinforcing institutional credibility. This is consistent with Coombs (2015), who argues that organisations should

protect and rebuild credibility during crises by relying on verifiable evidence and external validation.

The high number of reposts (225 on X) and likes (489 on X, 120 likes and 50 loves on Facebook) suggest public approval.

On *pathos*, and while the statement itself is terse and formal, audience reactions, particularly on Facebook, reveal emotional engagement. The presence of “love” and “care” reactions, and the absence of “angry” responses, suggest that the message is positively received by the audience. Interestingly, the 31 “laugh” reactions may indicate nuanced public sentiment, perhaps that of relief or irony.

With regards to *logos,* the statement’s reliance on legal facts and procedural outcomes appeals to reason. It frames the resolution as a triumph of law and order, which is rhetorically effective in restoring institutional legitimacy.

The contrast between platforms is also telling. Facebook, with its more expressive reaction options, reveals emotional distinction, while X serves as a high-reach amplifier of the message. This dual-platform usage empowers the university to balance emotional engagement with informational dissemination, enhancing the overall rhetorical impact of the communication.

4.4.4.3 Integrated Rhetorical Analysis: *ethos, pathos, logos*

4.4.4.3.1 Statement’s *ethos*: Projecting Institutional Character

The statement demonstrates a deliberate rhetorical objective to strengthen institutional *ethos*, projecting itself as a lawful, principled institution, and aligned with democratic values.

The statement begins with *“The ODeL institution welcomes minister’s withdrawal of Notice to place it under administration.”* This opening projects ***eunoia***, or goodwill toward the audience and stakeholders, by acknowledging the minister’s decision respectfully. It avoids confrontation and instead frames the outcome as a shared institutional victory.

Further, the statement asserts *“The ODeL institution believes that this decision by Minister … is correct and affirms the sacrosanctity of the courts and the rule of law.”* This reflects ***phronesis***, or practical wisdom. By grounding its message in legal authority and procedural correctness, the university demonstrates sound judgement and alignment with constitutional principles, key elements of institutional credibility in a democratic society and a shared value with the audience.

The reference to the “*sacrosanctity of the courts*” also invokes ***arete***, or moral excellence. It positions the university not merely as a legal entity, but also as a principled actor committed to justice and the rule of law. This rhetorical move aligns with Aristotle’s view that ethos is most persuasive when the speaker demonstrates virtue, wisdom, and goodwill (Braet, 1992).

- ***Ethos*** **strengths:**
  - **Affirmation of Democratic Values:** By stating *“...affirms the sacrosanctity of the courts and the rule of law”,* the university projects moral excellence and alignment with constitutional principles, showing its ethical credibility.
  - **Avoidance of Blame or Retrospection:** The statement does not assign blame or revisit past tensions, which projects a dignified institutional image.

This approach avoids reigniting controversy. However, the absence of reflection or acknowledgement of past challenges may be perceived by some stakeholders as evasive or lacking transparency.

- ***Ethos* limitations**
  - **Limited Emotional Connection:** The terse tone comes across as impersonal or detached. Lack of direct engagement with affected stakeholders reduces perceived empathy.
  - **Ambiguity in Responsibility**: The statement avoids discussing the university's role in the events leading to the crisis. Absence of reflection or accountability weakens trust among critical audiences.
  - **Risk of Misinterpretation Due to Brevity:** The formal brevity could be read as dismissive or overly calculated.

4.4.4.3.2 Statement's *pathos*: Emotional Resonance and Restraint Appeal

The statement begins by welcoming the announcement, using the phrase *"welcomes the announcement"* to convey a positive emotional response to the developments. This suggests relief or satisfaction at the likely closing of the ongoing legal tussle.

The statement's reference to the Pretoria High Court ruling and the withdrawal of the administrative notice evokes a sense of relief and resolution "…*is correct and affirms the sacrosanctity of the courts and the rule of law*". This phrase appeals to the audience's sense of justice and institutional stability, which are emotionally resonant themes, especially in a prolonged crisis. Aristotle acknowledged that emotional appeals are legitimate when they support rational persuasion and reinforce shared values (Brinton, A., 1988).

The statement's terse nature avoids overt emotional language, which may seem emotionally distant, but also serves a purpose. Konat, Gajewska and Rossa (2024) reckon that emotional appeals in public discourse can be subtle. Not all emotional communication is loud or dramatic. In contexts such as official statements, emotions can be conveyed indirectly through structure, timing, or what is left unsaid. In this case, the university's restraint is interpreted as eagerness to close the chapter of the crisis rather than escalate it.

Additionally, in affirming the rule of law and avoiding inflammatory rhetoric, the university appeals to the audience's desire for stability, fairness, and closure. This reflects Aristotle's view that *pathos* is most effective when it supports the ethical and logical dimensions of a message (Brinton, L. J., 1988)

- ***Pathos* strengths**
  - **Sense of Vindication**: The phrase *"believes that the decision…is correct and affirms the sacrosanctity of the courts"* conveys a sense of institutional vindication. It serves as a public confirmation of the university's stance throughout its dispute with the minister, reinforcing its belief in the legitimacy of its position and the legal process that supported it.
  - **Restraint as Emotional Maturity:** The statement avoids dramatic or emotive language, which may be interpreted as a sign of professionalism and maturity.
  - **Appeal to Shared Values:** By affirming the rule of law, the university taps into shared societal values of fairness and justice, which strengthens emotional connection with the public.

- ***Pathos* limitations**
  - **Limited Direct Emotional Expression:** The statement's terse style may come across as emotionally distant to some audiences. Lack of empathetic language or acknowledgement of stakeholder concerns may reduce emotional impact.
  - **Risk of Misinterpretation Due to Brevity:** The concise nature of the message could be perceived as dismissive, potentially undermining emotional connection.
  - **Absence of Acknowledgement or Reassurance:** The statement does not directly address affected groups such as students and alumni, missing an opportunity to express solidarity or empathy.
  - **Mixed Public Sentiment:** The presence of "laugh" reactions on Facebook suggests that some audiences may interpret the message with irony or scepticism, indicating that emotional impact was not uniformly positive.

4.4.4.3.3 Statement's *Logos*: Reasoning and evidence

The statement demonstrates a careful use of *logos*, which is essential in institutional crisis communication. Such use is evident in several ways: first it uses verifiable evidence by referencing specific government publications:

"*...published in Government Gazette No.49727, which confirms his decision to withdraw the notice published in Government Gazette No. 49582...*"

This citation of official documentation serves as non-artistic proof (McAdon, 2007), in Aristotelian rhetorical theory, non-artistic proofs refer to types of evidence that the speaker does not invent, but instead draws from an external source, basing the university's claims on publicly accessible and legally binding records. Such references enhance the credibility and transparency of the communication.

Secondly, the statement logically connects the minister's decision to a judicial ruling by stating "*...this decision by Minister Nzimande, which has been occasioned by the Order of the Pretoria High Court of 06 October 2023...*"

This causal link reflects the rhetorical structure of an enthymeme, where the audience is expected to infer the underlying premise (Kennedy, 1991). By attributing the minister's withdrawal to a court order, the institution reinforces the validity of its interpretation and supports its reasoning with legal precedent.

The statement concludes with a principled affirmation *"...affirms the sacrosanctity of the courts and the rule of law".* This appeal to foundational democratic values situates the university's response within the general institutional and ethical framework.

The statement is brief, factual, deliberately devoid of emotive language, a rhetorical choice in crisis communication. While the absence of emotional language may support perceptions of objectivity and professionalism, it can also limit the message's ability to engage stakeholders empathetically or convey institutional remorse or solidarity – elements often critical in restoring trust during crises.

A pure factual tone is likely to be interpreted as detached or bureaucratic, especially in emotionally charged contexts, potentially undermining efforts to credibility recovery (Turner and Stets, 2006).

The rhetorical use of *logos* not only informs stakeholders of the legal and procedural developments, but also projects the institutional commitment to governance, transparency, and judicial respect. This approach aligns with scholarly models of effective crisis communication in higher education, where logical appeals are crucial for sustaining public confidence.

- ***Logos* strengths**
  - **Credibility through Legal Referencing:** The statement's use of government gazette numbers and reference to the Pretoria High Court order serves as *non-artistic proof*, grounding the message in verifiable legal documentation
  - **Clarity and Objectivity:** The factual aspects of the statement avoid ambiguity and speculation, which allows the university to present itself as a rational actor committed to due process and governance.
- ***Logos* limitations**
  - **Lack of Emotional Engagement:** The absence of emotive language may be perceived as detached or bureaucratic, especially in a context where stakeholders may expect empathy or reassurance.
  - **Missed Opportunity for Solidarity:** The statement does not express concern for affected stakeholders (e.g., alumni, students), which may limit its effectiveness in demonstrating institutional care.
  - **Lack of Wider Contextual Explanation:** While the statement is logically sound, it lacks a contextual explanation regarding the university's future direction. The absence of forward-looking content, such as reassurance, institutional recovery plans, or implications of the minister's withdrawal, limits the statement's capacity to fully address stakeholders' concern.

4.4.4.4 Rhetorical Classification: Judicial Rhetoric in Institutional Defence

The statement predominantly employs judicial rhetoric. Judicial rhetoric focuses on past actions, typically used in contexts of accusation or defence (Kennedy, 1991) . In this case, the university responds to a legal development, the Pretoria High Court's ruling and the minister's withdrawal of the notice to place the institution under administration. The statement defends the university's position by affirming the correctness of the legal outcome and the legitimacy of its governance, aligning with the forensic nature of the crisis.

This rhetorical choice is appropriate given the legal and reputational stakes involved. By referencing official gazettes and court orders, the university reinforces its credibility and institutional legitimacy. Judicial rhetoric, in this context, consolidates the university's defence by anchoring claims in the court's ruling and the minister's formal withdrawal. It presents the statement as a record of adjudicated facts that supports institutional credibility under review.

The statement, however, does not incorporate *deliberative* rhetoric, which focuses on future actions and policy decisions. Nor does it engage *epideictic* rhetoric, which celebrates values or creates communal bonds. These omissions limit the statement's ability to reassure stakeholders or establish emotional solidarity. In emotionally charged crises, the absence of *pathos* and forward-looking content can undermine long-term trust building (Stephens, Malone and Bailey, 2005; Sullivan, 1993)

4.4.4.5 Audience Responses and Handling

The statement was published on 20 November 2023, almost simultaneously on Facebook (10:03 SAST) and X (10:01 SAST). On Facebook, it received 205 reactions, including 120 likes, 50 loves, 31 laughs, 2 care, and 1 sad, with no angry reactions. It also garnered 37 comments and 17 shares. On X, the statement reached 77.4K views, with 65 comments, 225 reposts, and 489 likes.

The Facebook reactions suggest a generally positive or neutral reception, with a majority expressing approval or affection. However, the presence of laugh reactions and comments such as "*Eating a humble pie*" and "*Big mistake!"* indicate a layer of sarcasm, scepticism, or irony, possibly reflecting mixed interpretations of the statement's brevity or implications.

Several users questioned the motives behind the minister's withdrawal, expressing concern about the university's challenges, and the need for restoration of reputation "*…To think the ODeL institution was respected back in the day when we were students there*". Others highlighted ongoing issues of their lived experiences such as book allowances, and student discipline, suggesting that the statement did not fully address their institutional concerns.

On X, the discourse was more critical and politically charged. Comments ranged from accusations of cadre deployment and corruption: "*The aim is to issue degrees to all cadres*" to expressions of confusion and frustration ("Can someone explain what 'under administration' means?").

Some users questioned the minister's intentions, while others mocked the statement's authorship or tone. A few comments reflected extremely negative sentiments, which, while not representative of the majority, underscore the volatile nature of public discourse on open platforms. Importantly, user's voices on both platforms expressed a lack of clarity and reassurance, with one user stating, "*Those of us that are students have no idea what's happening anymore."*

From a rhetorical perspective, the statement's *logos* driven focus may have contributed to its perceived effectiveness but was limited by its lack of emotional awareness. As noted by Coombs (2007) and Stephens, Malone and Bailey (2005), effective crisis communication should not only inform, but also engage and reassure, especially when public trust and institutional identity are at stake. The lack of *deliberative* rhetoric (future-oriented messaging) and *epideictic* (affirmation of shared values) rhetoric, Cope (1867) may have constrained the institution's ability to fully capitalise on the legal victory and rebuild *ethos*.

4.4.4.6 Thematic Breakdown of Facebook Comments

A thematic analysis of the comments in this statement reveals four dominant themes:

I. **Scepticism Toward Minister's Motives:** Several users questioned the rationale behind the withdrawal and the minister's intentions.
"Who visited him and made him change his mind?"
"Why is he withdrawing?"
II. **Legal and Procedural Uncertainty:** Some users acknowledged the legal process but remained cautious.
"The recall is to allow court proceedings… Anything still possible let's wait and see!"

4.4.4.7 Thematic Breakdown of X Comments

I. **Distrust in Ministerial Intentions:** Many users questioned the minister's motives and credibility.
"The Minister had no good intentions… but to gain power over the institution's purse."
"This Minister just wanted attention."
II. **Confusion and Lack of Clarity:** Some users expressed confusion about the meaning and implications of the statement.
"Can someone explain… what does put under administration mean?"
"Those of us that are students have no idea what's happening anymore…"

The thematic analysis of Facebook and X comments reveals a consistent pattern of scepticism, confusion, and cautious engagement from the public. On both Facebook and X, users expressed concern over the minister's motives and the procedural clarity of the withdrawal, with comments such as *"Why is he withdrawing?"* and *"Anything still possible, let's wait and see!",* reflecting uncertainty and a lack of closure.

The reactions on Facebook suggest that while the statement may have achieved legal clarity, it fell short in addressing stakeholders' expectations and providing future direction. In her thesis, Tella (2023) finds that dialogic communication and relationship renewal are essential in social media crisis communication to rebuild *ethos* and strengthen stakeholder relationships.

On X, the discourse was more critical and politically charged, with users questioning the minister's credibility and expressing confusion about the implications of the statement. Comments such as "This Minister just wanted attention" and "We have no idea what's happening anymore" highlight a disconnect between institutional messaging and public understanding. These insights reinforce the importance of strategic crisis communication frameworks that incorporate not only factual clarity, but also emotional engagement and forward-looking reassurance (Slabbert and Barker, 2011). Without these elements, institutions risk alienating their audiences and undermining the relational repair necessary for long-term legitimacy.

4.4.4.8 Conclusion

4.4.4.8.1 Overview of Rhetorical Effectiveness within the Aristotelian Framework

Evaluated through Aristotle's triadic framework of *ethos, pathos* and *logos*, the university's statement shows moderate rhetorical effectiveness.

On *ethos*, it establishes institutional credibility by referencing authoritative sources and legal documents. On *logos*, it is logically structured, presenting a clear sequence of events and legal justifications that appeal to reason through citations of official documents and outcomes.

On *pathos*, however, the statement relies on affirming terms such as "*welcomes*" and "*correct*" but offers little empathetic or community-oriented language, limiting personal connection with stakeholders. Aristotle noted that emotional resonance is essential in persuasion, especially in public discourse (Kennedy, 1991).

In summary, the statement is strong on *ethos* and *logos* but underuses *pathos*, which helps explain the mixed reactions on social media. A more emotionally inclusive and forward-looking message would likely build greater solidarity with stakeholders.

4.4.4.8.2 Platform-Specific Dynamics and Emotional Mediation

The rhetorical impact of the statement varies significantly across platforms, revealing how platform-specific cultures mediate emotional responses and shape public discourse.

On Facebook, responses tended to be more reflective and conversational, with some users expressing their concerns over the minister's actions "*He should be funding postgraduate qualifications and stop threatening us, we need to study but we can't afford we not employed but we have qualifications...".* In the process they engaged in dialogue among themselves, asking questions and offering interpretations, which suggests a platform culture that supports deliberative engagement and emotive expression (Sinaceur, Heath and Cole, 2005).

Facebook's design allows users to interact freely and equally, making it easier for people to share their thoughts and emotions. This structure supports empathetic and community-oriented engagement, especially during institutional crises.

Reactions were sarcastic, fragmented, and politically charged on both platforms, however, they were more prominent and direct on X. On Facebook the political critique is less direct and less frequent, often embedded in wider concerns about governance, student challenges, and institutional integrity.

On X, comments such as *"Minister and the comrades were licking their lips"* and *"Good job, the aim is to issue degrees to all cadres"* reflect a tone of cynicism and satire. The brevity and virality of X posts encourage emotional immediacy and polarised expression, often amplifying distrust and frustration, in this case towards the minister's action.

Research by Stieglitz and Dang-Xuan (2013) confirms that emotionally charged X messages are reposted more often and more quickly than neutral ones, suggesting that emotional intensity drives visibility and engagement on the platform.

4.4.4.8.3 Strengths and Limitations through the Aristotelian Lens

Evaluating the university's statement through Aristotle's rhetorical triad of *ethos, pathos and logos* reveals both strengths and notable limitations in its communicative impact.

One of the key strengths lies in the use of *ethos*, where the statement builds institutional credibility by referencing authoritative figures such as the Minister of Higher Education and citing legal documents like government gazettes and court rulings. This aligns with Aristotle's view that persuasion is strengthened when the speaker is perceived as trustworthy and competent (Self, 1979).

Additionally, the statement demonstrates a strong logical appeal (*logos*) by presenting a clear sequence of events and legal justification, supported by official sources. This reflects Aristotle's emphasis on rational argumentation as a foundation for ethical and effective communication (Halloran, 1982).

However, the statement shows limitations in its use of *pathos*, or emotional appeal. While it uses affirming language such as "*welcomes*" and *"correct",* it lacks deeper emotional

resonance. Aristotle cautioned that emotional appeals must be used ethically and effectively to influence judgement without manipulation (Brinton, A., 1988). The absence of empathetic or community-oriented language hinders the statement's ability to connect with stakeholders on a personal level, especially during emotionally charged crises.

Furthermore, the statement's reliance on *ethos* and *logos*, without balancing *pathos*, undermines its rhetorical flexibility. Finally, despite affirming legal correctness, the statement neither engages unresolved concerns nor outlines next steps. This omission narrows its ethical appeal, contrary to Aristotle's view that persuasion should be joined to moral responsibility (Self, 1979).

4.4.4.8.4 Audience Sentiment and Ethical Implications

The public response to the university's statement, as reflected in comments on Facebook and X, reveals a complex mix of emotional reactions, ethical concerns, and expectations for accountability. Such sentiments were expressed towards both the minister's intentions and the university's standing. These sentiments highlight the importance of ethical framing in crisis communication, not only to clarify institutional positions, but also to address stakeholder emotions and moral expectations.

Ethical communication in crises requires more than factual accuracy; it demands sensitivity to audience values and perceptions. As Xu and Li (2013) argue in their study of Foxconn's suicide crisis, failure to recognise stakeholders as moral agents can lead to reputational damage and public backlash. Similarly, Bauman (2011) emphasises that an ethic of care, which prioritises empathy, transparency, and responsiveness, is often more effective than purely strategic messaging in managing public sentiment during crises.

In the case of the university, while the statement affirms legal correctness, it does not fully engage with the ethical dimensions of the crisis, such as student challenges, transparency in decision-making, or future commitments. This omission may explain the mixed emotional tone of audience reactions, ranging from sarcasm and satire on X, to concern and confusion on Facebook. As Reamer (2012) notes, ethical crisis communication must balance institutional interests with public expectations, offering not just information but also moral clarity and emotional reassurance.

4.4.4.8.4 Broader Implications for Ethical Communication

The analysis of the statement highlights key lessons for ethical communication in institutional contexts, particularly within higher education. In times of crisis, ethical communication must extend beyond legal compliance and strategic messaging; it should engage with the values, emotions, and expectations of diverse stakeholders. This involves acknowledging public sentiment and demonstrating, through meaningful dialogue, a genuine commitment to supporting stakeholders or providing solutions that align with their emotional and ethical expectations.

As Seeger (2006) argues, ethical communication in crisis situations should not only inform, but also negotiate differences between public and private interests, offering clarity and practical wisdom to guide institutional responses. Similarly, Xu and Li (2013) emphasise that ethical crisis communication must recognise stakeholders as moral agents, whose concerns and dignity deserve respect and meaningful engagement.

Moreover, the ethical use of digital platforms in crisis contexts carries significant implications. Crawford and Finn (2015) caution against the uncritical use of social media data, noting that while platforms like X offer real-time insights, they also raise concerns about privacy, consent, and the representation of public sentiment. Institutions must therefore adopt communication strategies that are not only effective, but also ethically sound, balancing transparency with sensitivity, and strategic goals with public accountability.

In the context of higher education, ethical communication is essential for maintaining institutional legitimacy and a solid *ethos*. As Jongbloed *et al*. (2018) argue, evolving media and governance environments require institutions to make themselves transparent, accessible, and responsive to stakeholder needs through communication. This includes engaging with criticism, addressing ethical concerns openly, and embedding a culture of dialogue rather than defensiveness or evasiveness.

4.4.4.8.5 Final Reflection

The university's decision to communicate the statement via social media platforms such as X and Facebook reflects a strategic communicative intent towards more immediate and accessible public engagement. However, this also places greater ethical responsibility on the institution, to ensure that its messaging is not only legally accurate, but also emotionally attuned and publicly accountable.

In this case, while the statement affirms respect for legal processes and institutional autonomy, it offers limited emotional engagement with stakeholders. This underscores a wider challenge for higher education institutions, to find the right balance between formal, authoritative messaging and empathetic, inclusive communication that sustains positive *ethos* and reinforces shared values during periods of uncertainty.

4.5 BRINGING THE FOUR(4) STATEMENTS TOGETHER

4.5.1 What We Learn From Statement 1

Overall, the statement projects institutional credibility through references to legal rulings and academic audits, aligning with Aristotle's concept of *arete* and *phronesis*. However, the communication tone is occasionally defensive, using emotionally charged phrases like "*fundamentally flawed*" and "*totally misplaced*", which counteracts the institution's own efforts on credibility.

The analysis notes that while the university attempts to reassure stakeholders, particularly students, it fails to engage with broader audiences and does not respond to public comments on social media. This lack of dialogic engagement weakens the emotional reciprocity and risks creating trust deficit, a key component of ethical rhetoric.

From a logical standpoint, the statement is coherent and references authoritative sources like the High Court and the CHE. Yet, it lacks detailed rebuttals to the independent assessor's report and does not provide empirical evidence to support its claims.

The rhetorical analysis concludes that while the university's communication is legally grounded and institutionally assertive, it falls short of Aristotle's ideal of balanced, ethical rhetoric due to limited emotional engagement and transparency. For future crisis

communication, a more integrated approach – one that combines credibility, emotional resonance, and logical clarity – would enhance rhetorical effectiveness.

4.5.2 What We Learn From Statement 2

The second statement, responding to the Minister of Higher Education's decision to place the ODeL institution under administration, reflects a more assertive and legally grounded rhetorical posture. It continues to employ Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework of *ethos*, *pathos*, and *logos*, but with a slightly more refined balance than the first statement. The institution positions itself as a defender of legal integrity and academic continuity, while attempting to reassure stakeholders amid heightened tensions.

Ethos is strongly projected through references to two court orders, reinforcing the university's legal credibility and procedural correctness. The statement emphasises institutional autonomy and academic achievement, notably the graduation of over 50 000 students, which serves as evidence of operational success.

However, the analysis points out that while the university demonstrates *phronesis* in legal matters, it fails to acknowledge internal challenges as highlighted by the audience's comments, reflecting stakeholder concerns. The appeal to *eunoia* is present in the call for calm and academic focus, but it lacks depth, as it does not fully engage with the emotional realities of students and other audience actors.

Pathos is more effectively employed than in the first statement, particularly through the critique of the minister's timing during examinations, which evokes empathy and concern. The emotional appeal is restrained and professional, avoiding sensationalism while still highlighting the human impact of the crisis. However, the absence of a direct emotional call to action or broader stakeholder inclusion weakens the emotional closure. The statement's tone is composed, but may be perceived as detached, missing an opportunity to build solidarity with affected groups.

Logos is the strongest rhetorical element, with the statement presenting a clear sequence of legal events and procedural reasoning. It references judicial decisions and institutional achievements to support its position, appealing to rational judgement. Yet, the analysis notes that the statement does not fully explain how the minister's decision would disrupt academic operations, nor does it provide a detailed rebuttal of the independent assessor's report. This limits the depth of its logical appeal and leaves some stakeholder concerns unaddressed.

4.5.3 What We Learn From Statement 3

The third statement, issued in response to the Pretoria High Court's dismissal of the minister's appeal, marks a rhetorical shift toward institutional affirmation and legal vindication. It continues to apply Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework, *ethos, pathos,* and *logos*, but with a more restrained and formal communication style, reflecting a desire to close the chapter on the crisis while maintaining public confidence.

Ethos is carefully constructed through legal references and institutional decorum. The statement avoids triumphalism, using phrases like "*notes the decision*" and "*cordial relationship with the Ministry*", which project professionalism and moral virtue (*aretē*). It demonstrates *phronesis* (practical wisdom) by referencing multiple court decisions and maintaining a respectful tone despite ongoing contestation.

However, the analysis notes that the statement lacks direct engagement with affected stakeholders and does not reflect on internal challenges or future reforms. This limits its relational credibility and weakens *eunoia*, especially toward future students, current students and alumni.

Pathos is subtly present but underutilised. The statement evokes a sense of vindication through the phrase *"fourth consecutive decision in favour of the ODeL institution",* which may resonate with institutional pride. Yet, it avoids emotional escalation and does not acknowledge the emotional impact of the crisis on stakeholders. The absence of empathetic language or a call to action creates emotional distance, alienating audiences seeking reassurance or solidarity. The analysis suggests that while emotional restraint avoids manipulation, it also limits the statement's ability to build trust and connection.

Logos is the dominant rhetorical mode, with the statement presenting a structured legal narrative supported by specific dates, judicial references, and procedural clarity. It uses non-artistic proofs (external evidence) such as court orders and government gazettes to validate its position. However, the analysis highlights that the statement does not explain the implications of the ruling for students or staff, nor does it address the independent assessor's report in detail. This limits the logical depth and stakeholder relevance of the message.

4.5.4 What We Learn From Statement 4

The fourth and final statement, issued after the minister's withdrawal of the notice to place the ODeL institution under administration, reflects a moment of institutional relief and rhetorical closure. It continues to apply Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework*, ethos, pathos* and *logos,* but with a notably terse and stern tone. This brevity suggests a strategic pivot from crisis defence to reputational restoration and also reveals underlying tensions and missed opportunities.

The statement projects *ethos* by affirming the university's respect for legal processes and constitutional values. Phrases like *"affirms the sacrosanctity of the courts and the rule of law"* signal moral excellence (*aretē*) and alignment with democratic norms. The institution demonstrates *phronesis* (practical wisdom) by avoiding inflammatory language and maintaining composure.

However, the communication tone also implies subtle irritation, an implicit *"we told you so"* sentiment, suggesting the university seeks to quickly move past the crisis. This rhetorical posture reflects a desire to avoid further engagement, as a longer or more detailed statement could invite scrutiny or prolong public discourse. Such avoidance undermines *eunoia* (goodwill), as it fails to acknowledge stakeholders' emotions or offer reassurance.

Emotionally, the statement is restrained to the point of detachment. While it conveys relief and closure, it avoids deeper emotional engagement. The absence of empathetic language or a call to action creates emotional distance, especially in a context where stakeholders – students, alumni and the general public – may expect acknowledgement of their concerns.

The terse tone may be interpreted as professionalism but also risks appearing dismissive. Papachirissi (2015) notes, in today's digital communication landscape, that the way institutions express emotions in their public messaging plays a crucial role in shaping how audiences perceive them. Emotional mediation, which is how messages convey empathy, concern, or solidarity, is not just a stylistic choice but a strategic necessity.

When institutions fail to express emotions responsibly, especially in digital spaces, they risk triggering emotionally charged feedback loops that magnify public frustration. This is evident in the audience reactions to the statement, where confusion and scepticism emerge in response to the emotionally flat message.

According to Lu and Huang, (2024) this failure contributes to negative networked emotions, which can amplify negative reactions, escalating into collective dissatisfaction. Similarly, Coombs and Tachkova (2024) stress that emotionally disengaged crisis responses tend to intensify moral outrage, prolong reputational damage, and undermine *ethos*.

The statement's *logos* appeal is its strongest rhetorical element. It references government gazettes and court orders, providing non-artistic proofs (external evidence) to validate the university's position. The logical structure is clear and factual, reinforcing commitment to due process. However, it misses a critical opportunity to inform stakeholders about future recovery plans, reforms, or lessons learned.

As Coombs (2019) argues, effective crisis communication should not only defend but also guide, offering a vision for recovery and change. The university's silence on these fronts limits the statement's practical relevance and leaves audiences uncertain about what the resolution means for them.

4.5.6 Comparative Overview of the Four Statements

Table 4.6 Comparative analysis of the four crisis statements (Source: Author's own compilation)

Aspect	Statement 1	Statement 2	Statement 3	Statement 4
Ethos	Strong legal and academic references, defensive tone, limited stakeholder inclusion.	Reinforces credibility via court orders and graduation stats, lacks transparency.	Professional tone and legal decorum; lacks introspection and empathy.	Affirms rule of law and democratic values; respectful but lacks reflection.
Pathos	Limited emotional engagement, student reassurance only; no empathy for others.	Highlights exam stress, empathetic tone, lacks broader emotional inclusion.	Subtle emotional cues; emotionally distant, no direct outreach.	Minimal emotional engagement; terse tone, no stakeholder reassurance.
Logos	References court orders and audits; lacks detailed rebuttal and clarity.	Strong legal reasoning; lacks operational impact analysis.	Chronological precision and legal clarity; fails to explain implications.	Clear legal references; lacks future-oriented messaging and context.

Communication Style	Defensive and assertive; lacks openness.	Composed and empathetic; more balanced.	Restrained and formal; judicial rhetoric.	Terse and factual; closure focused.
Social Media Engagement	No engagement missed emotional reciprocity.	No engagement better emotional framing.	No engagement audience confusion noted.	No engagement sarcasm and scepticism persist.
Rhetorical Branch Used	Judicial rhetoric with a defensive tone.	Judicial rhetoric with assertive tone.	Judicial rhetoric with a restrained tone.	Judicial rhetoric with a closure-focused tone.

Collectively, the four statements demonstrate a consistent effort to uphold *ethos* and *logos*, but underutilise *pathos*, particularly in stakeholders' emotion handling and responsiveness. The institution's communication strategy during the crisis seems to prioritise legal correctness and reputational defence over relational accountability. While this approach reinforces procedural legitimacy, it risks alienating stakeholders who seek empathy, clarity, and inclusion.

The absence of dialogic engagement, especially on social media, limits emotional reciprocity and undermines Aristotle's ideal of ethical rhetoric, which requires a balanced integration of character, emotion, and reason. In the digital age, where public discourse is shaped by immediacy and emotional resonance, ethical communication must evolve to include transparency, responsiveness, and stakeholder dialogue.

To strengthen future crisis communication, the institution should do the following:

- Balance legal reasoning with emotional intelligence
- Engage stakeholders directly and empathetically
- Provide operational clarity and future-oriented messaging
- Respond to public sentiment on social media platforms

This would not only enhance rhetorical effectiveness but also rebuild trust and affirm shared values – core tenets of Aristotle's ethical rhetoric and essential for institutional credibility in times of crisis.

CHAPTER 5: CONCLUSION

5.1 OVERALL ANALYSIS AND CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the university's social media communication during a period of institutional crisis, applying Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework to assess the ethical and rhetorical effectiveness of these four official statements released through Facebook and X.

The analysis reveals a complex interplay between institutional credibility, emotion handling, and logical reasoning, each shaped by the affordances of digital platforms and the expectations of diverse stakeholders. Here is how the four statements respond to the research questions and the problem statement.

5.1.1 Credibility and Truthfulness: Did the University Meet the Standards of Ethical Rhetoric?

Aristotle's concept of *ethos*, which is the speaker's credibility, moral character, and goodwill, is central to ethical communication. In the context of institutions, *ethos* is closely tied to reputation, which reflects the public's perception of the institution's integrity, competence, and alignment with societal values (Coombs, T., 2007)

Across all four statements, the university consistently invoked legal rulings, government gazettes, and institutional audits to establish credibility. These outcomes, which ultimately favoured the university, projected an image of an institution possessing *aretē* (virtue or moral excellence) and aligning with democratic and legal processes.

In times of crisis, the public expects institutions to uphold legal principles and demonstrate procedural fairness. The resolution of the legal dispute in the university's favour served to vindicate it in the eyes of stakeholders who value constitutional integrity and ethical governance. This strategic use of legal discourse strengthened the university's institutional *ethos*. This aligns with Aristotle's view that the speaker must not only aim to make their argument convincing and credible, but also ensure their character appears proper and put their audience, who are to decide, into the appropriate frame of mind (McKeon, 1941).

In addition, the university's appeal to legal norms and democratic principles, culminating in its vindication, effectively draws on Aristotle's concept of *topoi*, the shared values or commonplaces that speakers use to make their arguments resonate with audiences. Cope (1867) and Rubinelli (2009) explain that *topoi* serves as an aspect of the discourse that people are likely to accept, on the basis of shared beliefs, values, or assumptions. A matter successfully ventilated through the courts becomes one such accepted discourse.

This appeal also demonstrates *phronesis* (practical wisdom), by presenting the university as law-abiding, procedurally anchored, and emotionally contained in its public discourse. These are key elements in sustaining institutional reputation and counteracting trust deficit with stakeholders. The university's rhetorical restraint, evident in its careful choice of words and its composed writing style during a tense legal dispute, reflects emotional intelligence and strategic maturity.

As Coombs and Holladay (2002) argue, effective crisis communication requires not only factual clarity, but also emotional awareness and ethical responsiveness. Aristotle's *phronesis* involves the ability to make sound judgements in complex situations, balancing reason with ethical sensitivity. In this case, the university's communication style projected

institutional wisdom and a commitment to democratic norms, reinforcing its credibility in the eyes of the public.

This rhetorical approach aligns with Cope's (1867) interpretation of Aristotelian *ethos*, which emphasises the speaker's character as revealed through speech. Cope underscores that *ethos* is not merely a static trait but a dynamic quality that can be constructed through deliberate rhetorical choices. The university's measured style of communication exemplifies this construction of *ethos*, portraying the institution as rational, principled, and trustworthy. Such rhetorical self-fashioning is essential in moments of public scrutiny, where institutional legitimacy hinges on the perception of moral and intellectual integrity.

However, credibility was occasionally undermined by a rhetorically insular approach (a communication style closed off from external perspectives or critique), and a self-protective rhetorical stance (a focus on shielding itself rather than engaging openly). These rhetorical shortcomings are particularly significant in the context of the research question: *Did the university's social media response during the crisis meet the degree of credibility and truthfulness?*

A self-protective stance characterised by posts that emphasised institutional justification while avoiding substantive dialogue can erode institutional *ethos*, which Aristotle defines in *Rhetoric*, Book I as the speaker's character revealed through discourse (Kennedy, 1991).

The posts, even with an opportunity to do so, did not substantively address the external perspective of the independent assessor's report or provide evidence-based counterpoints, limiting public understanding. Moreover, the absence of direct engagement, such as responding to comments, acknowledging dissenting audience views, affirming supportive ones, or facilitating dialogue, is a missed opportunity to demonstrate ethical responsiveness and democratic accountability.

According to Badu, Kruke and Saetren (2023) and Coombs and Holladay (2002), effective crisis communication on social media must have tenets of openness, responsiveness, and emotional intelligence.

Lawson-Tancred's (1991) interpretation of *phronesis* in Nicomachean Ethics further supports this critique, emphasising that wise action involves not only knowing what is right but also communicating it appropriately within the context of public scrutiny.

In conclusion, the university's communication during the crisis demonstrates a strategically constructed *ethos*, aligning with several Aristotelian principles such as *aretē*, *phronesis* , and the use of *topoi*.

Through its composed tone, legal framing, and appeals to democratic norms, the institution projected a strong credibility and moral character. However, according to Aristotle's rhetorical framework, ethos must not only be constructed, but also perceived through active engagement and ethical responsiveness.

The university's rhetorically insular and self-protective stance, marked by limited or minimal interaction with dissenting views, suggests that its *ethos* was not fully actualised in the eyes of the public. Therefore, while the institution succeeded in presenting itself as principled and procedurally sound, its social media strategy fell short of meeting the full degree of *ethos* credibility expected in democratic institutional discourse.

5.1.2 Emotion Handling: Did the University Understand and Address its Own and Stakeholders' Emotions Responsibly?

While some statements acknowledged student stress and expressed goodwill, the overall communication style remained emotionally restrained, disconnected and procedurally focused. The university's response during the crisis demonstrated limited emotional engagement, both in communication tone and interaction. Aristotle emphasised that *pathos* ought to be used ethically to reverberate with the audience's emotions without manipulation (Goold, 1926).

The university did not respond to comments (crisis-related or otherwise) on its Facebook or X pages, nor did it address these concerns in subsequent crisis-related messaging. This omission represented missed opportunities to affirm supportive voices, clarify misunderstandings, and respond to emotional distress.

Classical rhetoric identifies memory as one of the five canons, referring to the speaker's capacity to recall and organise material for effective communication (Herrick, 2020). Today, technology has changed the way we interact with information. Memory is no longer only internal but also external, networked, and persistent (Wang and Hoskins,2025). It is digital, shared, and stored online rather than held solely in our minds.

Comments and feedback, therefore, form part of a communicative record and should be acknowledged within the crisis communication process to inform subsequent messaging. By monitoring response themes and incorporating them into a continuous thread of follow-up communication, the university can demonstrate recognition of stakeholder concerns and emotional distress.

The absence of dialogic interaction nor acknowledgement of these inputs weakened emotional reciprocity and undermined public trust. According to Stacks, Salwen and Eichhorn (2019), emotional expressions on social media during crises serve as coordination mechanisms and influence public sentiment, making responsiveness essential. Overlooking these emotional expressions, the institution misses the chance to guide public sentiment constructively and foregoes an opportunity to participate in this coordination process, which can help in shaping the emotional climate of its digital audience.

Ndlela (2019) asserts that ethical crisis communication must acknowledge stakeholders lived experiences through empathetic and inclusive messaging. Tichavakunda (2024) further emphasises that institutions must move beyond one-directional messaging and develop emotional connection, particularly in digital spaces where public sentiment is visible and immediate and is afforded by the platforms.

The university's emotionally contained posture may have reflected internalised emotional restrain, but it lacked the responsiveness and emotional intelligence necessary to meet the expectations of its digital audience.

This critique echoes with Chroust (1973) and Kastely (2004) view that Aristotle's treatment of emotion in rhetoric is not merely stylistic but also deeply ethical, requiring speakers to engage affectively and responsibly with their audiences. Therefore, while the institution managed its own emotions with composure, it did not adequately address the emotional needs of its stakeholders, falling short of Aristotle's ethical standard for *pathos* and the contemporary principles of emotionally responsible crisis communication.

5.1.3 Rationality and Reasonableness: Was the University's Response Logical and Appealing to Reason?

The university's use of *logos*, seen in structured reasoning, legal citations, and factual references was the strongest rhetorical element across all statements. Each communication followed a logical sequence, referencing court orders, procedural timelines, and institutional achievements.

This reflects Aristotle's discussion of enthymemes and non-artistic proofs as central tools of rational persuasion (*Rhetoric* 1.2, 1355b35–1357b). According to Cope (1867), *logos* is most effective when it appeals to shared reasoning and is supported by verifiable facts, allowing the speaker to construct persuasive force through clarity and coherence.

This logical framing is also stressed by Chroust (1973), who argues that Aristotelian rhetoric must be fundamentally ethical, requiring that reasoning be both sound and contextually appropriate. The university's reliance on legal documentation and procedural correctness reinforced its institutional rationality and projected a commitment to due process.

The finality of the matter in the university's favour, and the withdrawal of the minister's gazette, served not only as vindication but also as a rhetorical reinforcement of its reasoning, transforming legal outcomes into persuasive proof.

According to Cope (1867), such use of non-artistic proofs, facts, laws, and documents forms the backbone of *logos*, especially when strategically selected to align with audience expectations and shared values. Aristotle distinguishes non-artistic from artistic proofs in *Rhetoric* I.2 (1355b35–1356a) and later lists their types in I.15 (1375a–1375b). In line with this, he also cautions that *logos* must be more than technical correctness; reasoning must be intelligible and relevant to the audience's lived experience, not merely formally valid.

Kennedy (1991) similarly notes that the effectiveness of rationality loses its strength when it fails to connect with the practical concerns of the audience. In this case, while the university's reasoning was procedurally sound, it occasionally lacked operational clarity and failed to address the direct implications of the crisis for students, alumni and the wider impacted university community.

Lawson-Tancred (1991) reminds us that rationality must be exercised with practical wisdom and contextual sensitivity. Across all communication instances, *logos* was the university's strongest rhetorical asset. The communication consistently structured reasoning, legal citations, and factual references to project institutional rationality and reinforce the institution's commitment to due process.

However, while the response was logically sound and legally validated, its appeal to reason cannot be argued as fully utilised. The absence of operational detail and limited attention to the lived realities of students weakened the practical relevance of its reasoning. Thus, although *logos* anchored the university's rhetorical strategy, its effectiveness was somewhat diminished by a lack of stakeholder-centred framing and communicative accessibility.

5.1.4 Synthesis: Rhetorical Balance and Ethical Implications

The university's communication strategy demonstrates a deliberate effort to uphold *ethos* and *logos*, but underutilises *pathos*, particularly in emotional engagement and responsiveness. This rhetorical imbalance limits the institution's ability to fully embody

Aristotle's ethical rhetoric, which demands a harmonious integration of character, emotion, and reason. According to Cope (1867), rhetorical effectiveness depends not only on the presence of these appeals but also on their proportional balance.

The statements predominantly employed judicial rhetoric, focusing on past actions and legal defence. While appropriate given the context, this mode limited the university's ability to engage in deliberative rhetoric (future-oriented messaging) or epideictic rhetoric (affirmation of shared values), both of which are essential for rebuilding trust and institutional identity.

Lawson-Tancred(1991), in his commentary on *Nicomachean Ethics*, expands the concept of *phronesis* beyond practical wisdom to include moral discernment and ethical timing, the ability to judge not only what is right, but also when and how it should be communicated. In the context of the university's four statements, this means recognising the emotional and ethical needs of stakeholders during moments of uncertainty and responding with sensitivity and timeliness.

For example, while the university's legal vindication was clearly articulated, it was not accompanied by messaging that acknowledged the emotional toll or practical consequences for students and other external stakeholders. This absence of ethical timing weakened the institution's overall rhetorical balance of the three appeals.

Therefore, the university's response showed rhetoric unevenness, due to its limited use of *pathos,* and narrow rhetorical mode constrained its ability to fully meet the ethical and persuasive standards of Aristotelian rhetoric. The imbalance between rational appeal and emotional engagement reveals a gap in ethical responsiveness, particularly in a digital environment where public sentiment is immediate, visible, and morally charged. To meet the full ethical demands of crisis communication, institutions must not only reason well, but also respond wisely and empathetically.

5.1.5 Platform-Specific Dynamics and Emotional Mediation

The analysis reveals that Facebook facilitated more expressive, community-driven engagement, while X amplified politicised and confrontational discourse. The university's failure to adapt its messaging to these platform-specific norms further weakened its rhetorical impact. As Veil, Buehner and Palenchar (2011) and Zeitzoff (2017) emphasise, effective crisis communication must consider the emotional and discursive dynamics of each medium.

The university's crisis statements were largely one-directional, resembling traditional press releases rather than interactive social media content. This approach overlooks the dialogic nature of platforms like Facebook and X, which are designed for two-way engagement.

5.1.5.1 Formatting for Platform Expectations

Each social media platform has its own communicative norms. Facebook favours longer, community-oriented posts with visuals, while X thrives on brevity, hashtags, and real-time updates. The university's uniform, text-heavy statements did not adapt to these expectations.

5.1.5.2 Leveraging Multimedia and Visual Rhetoric

Visual content enhances both emotional and logical appeals. The university relied solely on

text, missing the persuasive potential of multimedia. Short videos from leadership, infographics summarising legal outcomes, or visual timelines could have strengthened both *logos* and *pathos.*

5.1.5.3 Conclusion

In responding to the crisis, the university's communication did not fully meet the expectations of digital era rhetorical engagement. While it maintained legal clarity and institutional credibility, it failed to embrace dialogic communication, engage the emotions adequately or utilise platform-specific formatting and visual rhetoric. These gaps weakened its alignment with Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework and limited its persuasive and responsible impact. Effective crisis communication today requires not only rhetorical balance, but also the ability to navigate the digital space effectively.

5.1.6 Broader Implications for Ethical Communication in Higher Education

This case study underscores the evolving nature of ethical communication in digitally mediated institutional contexts. In times of crisis, ethical communication must go beyond legal correctness and strategic messaging to engage on the basis of values, emotions, and expectations of diverse publics. As Seeger (2006) and Jongbloed *et al*. (2018) stress, institutions must adopt transparent and emotionally intelligent communication strategies.

In addition, the ethical use of digital platforms requires institutions to balance visibility with sensitivity, and the need for control with openness. While institutions must remain transparent and accessible, they also need to exercise care and respect toward stakeholders, facilitating dialogue rather than attempting to control the discourse.

Drawing on Aristotle's foundational framework, institutions today must integrate *ethos, pathos and logos* into their digital discourse. Aristotle described rhetoric as "the faculty of observing in any given case the available means of persuasion" (McKeon, 1941, p. 1318), encompassing credibility, emotion, and logic. In digital spaces, these appeals must adapt to new forms of interaction, whether through moderated dialogues, emotionally relevant messaging, or visually engaging content.

Finally, Aristotle's concept of ethical rhetoric emphasises the moral responsibility of the speaker (or institution) to use communication not merely for winning arguments, but also for achieving communal good. Godwin (2025) suggests, Aristotle's virtues, such as sincerity, moderation, and respect, are increasingly relevant in online communication, where the dangers of rhetoric abuse, and emotional manipulation are common. Therefore, ethical digital rhetoric in higher education must seek to balance authenticity with empathy, logic with truth and transparency, and authority with humility.

5.1.7 Final Reflection

The university's social media communication during the crisis reflects a rhetorically uneven effort to navigate public scrutiny. While the statements demonstrate legal coherence and institutional alignment with democratic values, they fall short in emotional engagement, dialogic responsiveness, and ethical transparency.

In the digital age, ethical communication is not solely about defending legitimacy; it must foreground relationship-building, affirm shared values, and demonstrate responsiveness to the lived realities of the university community (Seeger, 2006; Ndlela, 2019).

Across the four statements, the university consistently foregrounded *logos*, using legal citations, procedural timelines, and judicial outcomes to assert its position. This aligns with Aristotle's concept of enthymeme, where reasoning is built on shared premises and factual evidence (Braet, 1992).

However, the overreliance on *logos* came at the expense of *pathos* and *ethos*. Emotional appeals were restrained, often limited to brief gestures of goodwill toward students. Yet, the absence of stakeholders' considerate language, acknowledgement, and dialogic engagement weakened the emotional impact of the messages. Aristotle cautioned that *pathos* must be ethically employed to reflect understanding of an audience's emotional state (Kennedy, 1991; Brinton, A., 1988)

The university's *ethos* was constructed through references to legal compliance, academic audits, and institutional autonomy. These moves projected moral excellence (*aretē*) and practical wisdom (*phronesis*), but were occasionally undermined by defensive undertones. The omission of introspection or acknowledgement of internal challenges, such as NSFAS delays or system outages, limited the perception of sincerity and goodwill (*eunoia*) (Singh, 2020; Coombs, T. and Holladay,2023).

From a rhetorical classification perspective, the statements predominantly employed one rhetoric branch, *judicial* rhetoric, focusing on past actions and legal vindication. While appropriate given the nature of the crisis, this mode excluded other forms of rhetoric such as *deliberative* rhetoric, which could have outlined future reforms, and *epideictic* rhetoric, which affirms shared values and institutional identity. Aristotle emphasised that effective public discourse must adapt to context, and combine rhetorical modes to address both reason and emotion (Sullivan, 1993; Kennedy, 1991).

A key limitation was the university's reliance on media-release style communication on social media platforms. This one-directional, formal approach inhibited dialogue and emotional connection. Research shows that social media thrives on dialogic engagement, emotional responsiveness, and real-time interaction (Zhang, P., 2013; Eriksson, 2018).

Media releases, while suitable for traditional press, are ill-suited to the participatory nature of platforms like Facebook and X, where audiences expect acknowledgement, clarification, and empathy. The absence of comment responses across all four statements suggests that the university's communication was inwardly focused, prioritising institutional self-preservation over meaningful stakeholder engagement.

Social media affordances further complicated the rhetorical landscape. Facebook facilitated emotionally expressive engagement through reactions and comments, while X amplified visibility yet generated politicised and confrontational discourse.

The university's silence, its refusal to engage with supportive or critical comments, is interpreted as evasiveness, and potentially undermines its *ethos* reconstruction efforts. As Coombs (2007) and Morrison and Milliken (2000) argue, organisational silence during crises can deepen reputational damage and alienate stakeholders.

To fully embody Aristotle's ethical rhetoric framework, future institutional communication must do the following:

- Balance *logos* with *ethos* and *pathos*, integrating logical clarity with emotional intelligence and dialogic engagement.
- Employ all three branches of rhetoric, *judicial, deliberative,* and *epideictic* to address past actions, future commitments, and communicate shared values.
- Adapt to platform-specific affordances, using social media not just for dissemination but for meaningful interaction
- Recognise stakeholders as moral agents, whose concerns, emotions, and dignity deserve acknowledgement and engagement (Xu and Li, 2013; Tichavakunda, 2024).

This balance is not merely rhetorical, it is essential for constructing and sustaining *ethos*, and ethical responsibility in higher education. As Jongbloed *et al*. (2018) emphasise, evolving media and governance environments require institutions to be transparent, accessible, and responsive and stay ahead of the curve when it comes to digital communication.

Ethical communication must reflect institutional interests, as well as the emotional and moral expectations of the public and ultimately, the university's crisis communication must evolve from a posture of defensiveness and procedural correctness to one of relational accountability and inclusive dialogue. In doing so, it can reconstruct its *ethos*, reaffirm its public mandate, and embody the Aristotelian ideal of rhetoric used not for self-preservation, but for communal good.

5.2 STUDY LIMITATIONS, IDENTIFIED GAPS, AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

5.2.1 Limitations

This study used content analysis of the university's public statements on Facebook and X. By design, content analysis privileges textual patterns and does not capture lived perceptions without additional data sources such as interviews or surveys (Neuendorf, 2017; Krippendorff, 2019).

The dataset was confined to four official statements within a defined period, and the analysis did not incorporate platform analytics such as impressions, reach, or delivery patterns. Engagement was observed but there was no scaled sentiment analysis of comments, reactions, or shares per statement. A mixed-methods design would have enabled triangulation of message features with audience perceptions, which is recommended when researchers seek to link text patterns to stakeholder meaning.

5.2.2 Gaps Identified by the Findings

The results indicate an emotion–response gap. Posts were composed and procedural, yet the absence of dialogic replies left open how audiences felt, what they needed clarified, and whether acknowledgement might have shifted sentiment. Dialogic communication research shows that response practices and a "dialogic loop" matter for relationship quality in online settings (Kent and Taylor, 1998; Kent and Taylor, 2002).

There is also a platform adaptation gap. The content resembled media releases and did not fully align with Facebook or X's norms in format, timing, or cadence. Reviews of social media crisis communication highlight the need to tailor message type, timing, and interaction to each platform's logic (Eriksson, 2018; Cheng, 2016).

Finally, an *ethos* rebuilding gap remains. The analysis could not isolate which specific elements of tone, acknowledgement, or concrete commitments best support credibility repair after legal vindication, a question that requires designs which combine message analysis with audience data

5.2.3 Directions for Future Research

Future studies may extend this research in four interrelated ways. First, combine scaled sentiment analysis of comments, reactions, and shares for each statement with audience reception methods to test how institutional rhetoric is received, resisted, or reinterpreted in real time, using validated tools such as VADER and SentiStrength to quantify emotions at scale (Hutto and Gilbert, 2014; Thelwall, Buckley and Paltoglou, 2011). This would connect rhetorical intent with public response and strengthen claims about ethical effectiveness (Eriksson, 2018).

Second, undertake comparative designs across universities and crisis types to identify recurring patterns and ethical risks, and to judge whether the tendencies observed here reflect sector norms or institution-specific strategies (Cheng, 2016; Kim, Chon and Miller, 2014).

Third, add network and diffusion analyses to trace how posts travel, who amplifies them, and which communities shape attention peaks, alongside longitudinal tracking from escalation to resolution and post-crisis reflection to see whether strategies adapt in response to stakeholder feedback (Tsugawa, 2019; Ross et al., 2018).

Fourth, examine the ethical implications of institutional silence in social media settings where emotional expression and accountability are visible, treating silence not as absence, but as a communicative choice with reputational effects (Coombs and Holladay, 2014; Eriksson, 2018). Across these strands, mixed-methods approaches could combine scaled sentiment analysis with complementary qualitative techniques to link message features to perceived clarity, fairness, and care, without relying exclusively on interviews or focus groups (Creswell and Clark, 2007).

5.2.4 Conclusion

Taken together, these limitations, identified gaps, and proposed directions for future research clarify both the scope and the contribution of this study. While the analysis provides a structured application of Aristotle's ethical rhetoric to institutional social media communication during a crisis, it is necessarily bounded by its textual focus, limited dataset, and absence of scaled audience measurement.

The findings nevertheless establish a foundation for more integrated designs that combine rhetorical analysis with sentiment metrics, network tracing, and comparative institutional studies. In doing so, future research can extend the evaluative potential of Aristotelian appeals in digital environments and refine understanding of how credibility, emotion, and reason interact in higher education crisis communication.

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ANNEXURES

ANNEXURE A – Statement issued on 6 October 2023

UNISA university of south africa

Unisa welcomes high court order interdicting Minister Nzimande from placing the University under administration

1. The University of South Africa (Unisa) welcomes the High Court Order that interdicts the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation (the Minister) from placing the university under administration. The Order, which reaffirms the earlier Order by Justice Adams on 24 August 2023, was handed down today on Friday, 6 October 2023 and is effective immediately.

2. On the 24th of August 2023, the same Court ordered 'that pending the finalisation of the urgent application herein and the urgent application under case number 2023-082535, the first respondent undertakes not to take any decision pursuant to the report entitled "Report of the Independent Assessor into the Affairs of the University of South Africa (UNISA)", dated 31 March 2023, prepared by the second respondent, published in the Government Gazette 48660 (Government Notice 3461) of 26 May 2023.'

3. Unisa has always maintained that the Report of the Independent Assessor is fundamentally flawed, and its recommendations totally misplaced. For that reason, the university has taken the Report on legal review to be set aside. Until the side of the university is properly heard in a legal review, in a court of law, the university believes that it is premature for the Minister to implement the recommendations of the Independent Assessor. Unisa also believes that the institution of an Administration is not necessary and may only serve to harm the university.

4. Once more, Unisa wishes to assure the public that the academic programme of the university remains intact, and its finances are healthy. In May 2023, the Council on Higher Education (CHE) issued its Institutional Audit Report that affirms that Unisa's academic programme and quality assurance systems are largely intact and governed according to norms and standards of the sector.

5. We hope that our students will be afforded the opportunity to focus on their final examinations which are currently underway, without any form of anxiety or disturbance. The academic programme must be hoisted and protected all the time. Further, we look forward to welcoming all our new students in the new academic year 2024 and appreciate their choice to study at the University of South Africa – the university of the land.

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ANNEXURE B – Statement issued on 28 October 2023

UNISA university of south africa

Unisa statement on the appointment of an Administrator by the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation

Date: 28 October 2023

The University of South Africa (Unisa) has taken note of the announcement by the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr BE Nzimande, in the Government Gazette No. 49582, Vol.700, that he has placed the university under administration for a period of 24 months, with effect from 27 October 2023.

The university remains firm on the view that the Minister's announcement is premature and in contempt of the Court Order of 06 October 2023 by Justice Kooverjie, that interdicted him from placing the university under administration. The same Order reaffirms the earlier Order of Justice Adams of 24 August 2023, which ordered the Minister not to take any decision pending the finalisation of the interdict application by Unisa (Case Number 2023-082535) and the Minister's undertaking not to take any decision until the application to review and set aside the Independent Assessor's report would have been heard. This matter has not been finalised and is still before the court.

The university is also of the strong view that the announcement of the Minister's decision at the time when our students are in the middle of the examinations is ill-timed and insensitive. Indeed, an anti-climax to the fact that the University has just graduated more than 50 thousand graduates (with 6 ceremonies still to take place) in this year. It must be made clear that the University is not fighting the Minister and the responsibilities that he has, however, the university is also of the view that all citizens need to be guided by the prescripts of the law of the country.

The university has now approached the court on an urgent basis to challenge the Minister's announcement of 27 October 2023.

The Unisa Management appeals to all stakeholders / epistemic communities, especially staff and students, to remain calm and continue working hard to ensure that the academic project remains intact and continues to thrive unabated.

Further communication will be shared with the university community following the court process.

/Ends.

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ANNEXURE C – Statement issued on 3 November 2023

UNISA university of south africa

Unisa statement on the Pretoria High Court Judgement of 3 November 2023

Date: 03 November 2023

Today, 03 November 2023, Judge Kooverjie of the Pretoria High Court made a ruling in favour of the University of South Africa (Unisa) regarding the application for leave to appeal Judge Kooverjie's order of 6 October 2023 which was brought by the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr Blade Nzimande. This was the fourth consecutive decision in favour of Unisa on whether the university can be placed under administration by the Minister.

On 6 October 2023, the High Court ruled that the decision made by Judge Adams on 24 August 2023 was a court order. This was after the Minister and Unisa had entered into an agreement where the Minister undertook not to appoint an Administrator for Unisa, pending the outcome of the court application by Unisa to review and set aside the report of the Independent Assessor, Professor Themba Mosia, which agreement was made the order of court.

After listening to both parties, Judge Kooverjie dismissed the application by Minister Nzimande for leave to appeal her judgment of 6 October 2023, with costs because, the Minister's application had no prospects of success, among other reasons.

Unisa notes this decision by the Pretoria High Court, and reaffirms that its relationship with the Ministry remains cordial, despite the contestations around the report of the Independent Assessor.

–Ends–

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ANNEXURE D – Statement issued on 20 November 2023

UNISA university of south africa

Unisa welcomes Minister Nzimande's withdrawal of Notice to place it under administration

The University of South Africa (Unisa) notes and welcomes the announcement by the Minister of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, Dr Blade Nzimande, published in Government Gazette No.49727, which confirms his decision to withdraw the notice published in Government Gazette No. 49582, which announced the decision to appoint an Administrator for the university.

Unisa believes that this decision by Minister Nzimande, which has been occasioned by the Order of the Pretoria High Court of 06 October 2023, is correct and affirms the sacrosanctity of the courts and the rule of law.

/Ends.

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