



# SPEAKING DISTRESS OUT OF BEING:

An Exploration of Memes and Expressive Phrases as  
Jokes and Coping Mechanisms for University  
Students

Under the supervision of:

Dr. Helen Macdonald

University of Cape Town

Dissertation submitted in partial fulfilment of the  
Masters degree in Social Anthropology

**By Roxanne Mathobie**

The copyright of this thesis vests in the author. No quotation from it or information derived from it is to be published without full acknowledgement of the source. The thesis is to be used for private study or non-commercial research purposes only.

Published by the University of Cape Town (UCT) in terms of the non-exclusive license granted to UCT by the author.

---

## **Acknowledgments**

Doing research during a pandemic circled with uncertain times is a heavy load to bear. I would like to thank my supervisor Dr. Helen Macdonald for being patient and understanding with me whilst I worked through finding the stability to carry out this research project. Her efforts, compassion, and guidance motivated me to continue and reassured me through any doubts that arose. I am eternally thankful for the support she has provided me from the very begging of my academic career as each conversation that took place to get me to this place has been invaluable. I would also like to thank the Humanities Faculty who funded my registration and fieldwork in 2021 through the faculty completion grant. Without this contribution carrying out this research would not have been possible. I would like to thank each participant who offered up their invaluable time and narratives as this research would be nothing without each one of you. Your willingness to participate through all uncertainties and instabilities of the pandemic is greatly appreciated. A special Thanks to Olivia Jones who helped me find my voice amongst the chaos, who repeatedly read and spoke with me through any anxieties whilst constantly reminding me of the importance of doing research. Lastly, I would like to thank my friends and family for their constant support throughout this time.

---

## **Abstract**

Shorthand phrases and meme culture have become rampant among university students when expressing their experiences in institutional spaces. This thesis explores the use of such phrases and memes among students as they navigate the various pressure and stressors of being undergraduate students during the Covid-19 pandemic. Based on the findings of this fieldwork I argue that the use of memes and phrases are central to students coping in this space as it allows for light humor and joking around the often tense and stressful circumstance. This use of humor offers up a release that while not changing the circumstance at hand allows for a suspension of tension just enough to allow students to keep going (pushing and working) through the semester. Aside from being useful as a release and breath through the tense time the use of memes and shorthand phrases has also allowed for the creating of space and community online during a time when many students have been isolated and physically distanced, unable to create new friendships. Overall, this research has found that among the

nine participants use of memes and phrases such as ‘in the pits’ allows for a distancing of the emotions and personal from the stressful circumstances phased, leaving enough room for light sharing that does not cost the user or listener further strain.

# Contents

## Chapter 1:

### *Introducing the research*

<i>1.1 Background</i> .....	2
<i>1.2 Research Methodology</i> .....	6
<i>1.3 Ethical Considerations</i> .....	9
<i>1.4 Meeting the participants</i> .....	10
<i>1.5 Limitations</i> .....	12
<i>1.6 Thesis Outline</i> .....	13

## Chapter 2:

Navigating distress .....	14
---------------------------	----

## Chapter 3:

<i>Resilience in the face of distress: A Passive Joke</i> .....	26
---	----

## Chapter 4:

<i>“Breathing through a fire”: Panic Humor and a Break from Academic Pressures</i>	37
--	----

## Chapter 5:

<i>Conclusion</i> .....	49
-------------------------	----

Bibliography .....	54
--------------------	----

Plagiarism Declaration .....	58
------------------------------	----

## Chapter 1

### Introducing the research

During my period of fieldwork in 2018, my initial encounters with Samantha were long but light. I recall her sharing that things were ‘hectic’<sup>1</sup> but we proceeded to speak, laugh, and share our thoughts on being university students. We started each session in a similar manner, sharing how far we had come with assignments, sharing a joke or two about how it felt like we were on a never-ending rollercoaster, and lastly with Samantha saying that it felt like things were bubbling up but that was it. Every time I probed, she simply responded “it’s been ‘hectic’” and we’d speak about what this felt like, but never what was actually happening. Then it happened. On a Tuesday afternoon Samantha and I were walking to the bus stop when she asked if I had a minute to spare. For the first time, she went beyond the short but meaningful ‘hectic’ and let me in on what she had been facing. Within seconds she was in tears, and I put down my researcher’s hat and comforted her. While clearly a peak moment for my research, this was different, it was sensitive. Neither Samantha nor I were in the position to start to think through and theorize this so, I saved it. Looking back through fieldnotes and what I can recall of the day, it was mind-boggling that a simple smile, shrug, and use of the term ‘hectic’ was able to keep all the emotion that spilled up that day neatly bottled and distanced from the surface just enough for us to keep lightly treading around the stress and pressure that had been building.

Reflecting on this encounter sparked my interest and turned my attention to the way we as students communicate and express our emotions and experiences in university spaces. Out of curiosity, I began to casually use a few phrases such as ‘in the pits’<sup>2</sup> and ‘gowishing’<sup>2</sup> outside of my university context among family members. It was no surprise that their reaction was to either gaze at me as though I was losing my mind or to ask me to explain what this meant. When sharing the same phrases among friends and peers I was embraced with a laugh and a knowing look as though they understood, empathized, and knew not to push any further. What later became clear was that the use of the term ‘hectic’, rather than a full detailed sharing of

---

<sup>1</sup> Urban dictionary definition – ‘wild, ridiculous, crazy’

<sup>2</sup> Urban dictionary definition – ‘Something that sucks’

<sup>2</sup> Urban dictionary definition - South African term for ‘Going through the most’

what was happening, somewhat made the experience easier to digest. While I, the one in the dark, could only imagine what it had meant (based on my own experience of being distressed and making use of similar phrases), Samantha was in it, living it and covering it with the smile and shrug which eased the pressure but did not change the reality of the situation.

With this experience in mind and knowledge that students often shy away from help-seeking in university contexts (Mathobie, 2018) I became curious as to how to better begin to identify and understand when our peers, or students we encounter in our classrooms need assistance. Thus, in furthering my honor's research my topic of interest was centered around language use and expressions of stress and emotion by university students. In this dissertation, I argue that students embody their experiences of stress and pressure through humor. I argue this is achieved linguistically through their use of humorous memes, statements, and phrases of emotions as ways to express their distress in a manner that is lighthearted and can be laughed off. This ensures they do not become burdens to their peers but also distances them far enough from their emotions so that they can laugh it off and keep moving. I focus on 'distant/distancing/distance' conceptually and how it intersects with humor. In this way language, through humorous memes and phrases, should be understood as a coping mechanism for university survival that plays on the varying expressions of resilience and agency utilized by students (Wasserman, 2020).

### *Background*

Bakhtin (1981) argued that language is important because the things we say, whom we said it to, and how we choose to say it (in this case comical phrases or memes) play a fundamental role in the making of who we are, choose to be and how we come to experience the world. By dictionary definition 'language' is a means of communication and signaling system that relies on sound and rules of pronunciation and utterance (Barber, 1964). In taking this conceptualization further, Ahearn (2011) states that, beyond being a medium of communication, we should understand that language and expressions of being are a practice and set of practices that are socially embedded. When we start to view language and expressions in this way we begin to understand, as argued by Barber (1964), that above all else language is a tool that has and continues to make all forms of human culture possible. As such

every social interaction that takes place has been mediated by language in its varying forms, be it verbal, written, and non-verbal actions and expressions. Thus, as Ahearn (2011) has suggested, the act of speaking and communicating in all its forms is a form of social action.

Tohidian (2008) states that the power within language is located within its ability to influence not only the way in which people think about and perceive the world but also how they are able to act and position themselves within it. The relationship at play here works both ways, in that, just as language may influence the way we then think, the way in which we think also determines the way in which we will adopt and use language, and the choices we will make when speaking and using varying words, phrases and in this research, context-based witty memes and phrases. Ingold (2016) highlights that when addressing speech, it is less about the physical sound of utterance but rather attention is drawn to the meaning behind each utterance which conveys and delivers distinct feelings, contexts, and meanings. While the central theme here is the use of language among students, this research has sought to home in on specific key words and forms of communication. Thus, when discussing or referring to things said/ shared by students I will be making use of the words: expressions<sup>3</sup>, phrases,<sup>4</sup> and terms<sup>5</sup>, interchangeably dependent on the context and tense of the sentence.

The phrases and words we choose to use influence us not only in terms of what it allows us to think but also because of what the words, phrases, and playful memes oblige us to think about. In this situation, rather than limit what students think and say and how they are able to do this, the language used invokes particular understandings and thoughts. Therefore, when a student expresses that they are 'in the pits' it is not because they are unable to imagine their circumstances differently but because using this phrase conjures up particular understandings and images of what the student may be experiencing and feeling, i.e., stress, anxiety, being overwhelmed. Thus, an unpacking and exploration of language through the lens of anthropology may be understood as vital in that it forms a path upon which to begin to understand how it is that the things we say and how we chose to say them shape our actions whilst simultaneously being shaped by our actions (Ahearn, 2011). The exploration of

---

<sup>3</sup> Act of making one's thoughts or feelings known

<sup>4</sup> Grouping of words that stand together as a unit

<sup>5</sup> Words used to express or describe a context

language use among university-attending students facing various levels of distress (and thus vulnerabilities) is crucial for the understanding of what it means to be a student. Additionally, it aids in the manner through which we (lecturers, tutors, researchers, and parents) are able to communicate with and negotiate with vulnerable and distressed students often in need of guidance/ assistance. Understanding the ways in which students use emotion phrases (language) to express thoughts, feelings and experiences then become central to the breaking down of various barriers causing stagnation in tertiary education.

Being that language is broad in nature and can be examined from various perspectives it is important to distinguish the aspects, attributes, and contexts being explored through this research. To do so, I highlight Ahearn (2011), who explained that to understand the essence of language use, one needs to pay attention to the particular social context in which the humorous phrases and memes exist and become used. In supporting Ahearn, Bakhtin (1981) stated that each phrase and meme utilized holds within it the ‘taste’ of a particular context through which it has lived or is living a socially charged life. Each phrase then carries a sense and understanding which become meaningful and socially charged within isolated spaces and places. Here again, it indicates that the use of particular phrases such as ‘in the pits’ by students only holds value within the particular contexts that they inhabit as students.

What was previously the university campus and surrounds are now also inclusive of online spaces, such as Twitter, Instagram, and WhatsApp to name a few, where students are able to engage with one another. As this research was conducted during the time of the Covid-19 pandemic use of this online space was prominent as it allowed for brief moments of shortening the emotional distance between students who were sent home to continue their studies. Importantly, these terms however useful in creating a community for students during this time may be discarded of their meaning in spaces outside of these communities, i.e., at home among parents and/or other older relatives. Thus, the context within which this research has been contextualized and conceptualized is that of emotional language and expression of distress among university-attending individuals during distance learning and the covid-19 pandemic. University attending individuals have been known to face higher levels of mental health and stress-related challenges which indicates that emotional language and expression may be a large area of focus and conversation in this community (Eisenberg *et al*, 2007).

Emotions play a central role in the making of our social relationships and experiences as our emotional behaviors affect others just as much as the emotional behavior of others impact us (Fischer, Rotteveel & Manstead, 2004). Therefore, in spaces and circumstances where individuals and groups are exposed to the identical or similar sets of emotional events the individuals may become emotionally congruent to one another. They may then be found to express and experience similar emotional actions and behaviors; this shared experience of emotion languages and behaviors then create a shared world and community of communication among the group. This shared experience and use of communication then bridges the gap between the student making use of them and they are able to build relationships and friendships with one another.

Fisher, Rotteveel, and Manstead (2004) state that emotional displays (in whichever form of expression they take) allow for a provision of information of its user to the audience and persons listening to them—through their expression one may begin to discern parts of what they think, who they are and how they feel. Language and expression of emotion is important on another level in that it may be viewed as a tool which allows its users to hide or display judgment about others, convey nuanced emotions and sever and/or reinforce social bonds (Ahearn, 2011). The way it becomes used allows for a conveying of the ideologies about various objects and people (Limlamai, 2018). It is important to refer to the reader back to Barber (1964) who explained that language and its expressions host within its infinite possibilities of utterance, thus indicating that at any point what is said can be significant or of no use at all (mean everything or nothing at all). Again, it is essential to locate the exploration of language and expression use within spaces that have become communities with shared experience. It is for this reason that the area of this research easily locates its field of exploration among university-attending students who are found to make use of tools of humor when expressing their emotions.

As Eisenberg *et al* (2007) explained, university-attending individuals are of particular interest to fields of study because of the vast array of stressors they face, not only with the ‘coming of age’ but also by association with students in the pursuit of a successful future. Thus, they create the perfect stage upon which to create a newer form of language and expression centered around their shared emotions and experiences of being students. This is further supported by Dyson and Renk (2006) who argued that students often begin to change their usual behaviors

when entering institutional spaces in favour of those behaviors, expressions, and languages that aid in their adaption to and coping within their new environment. This transitioning and adapting of new behaviors and languages which are better ascribed to the university space should be understood as the students following suit of the rites of passage and change within this space (Turner, 1969). It is a transition often necessary for their efforts in becoming socially embedded and charged within the university space and among peers. However, when addressing, exploring, and making sense of these changes in behavior, thinking, and speaking, it is important to note that based on the meanings students themselves attribute to their words and the situations at hand, what they identify as being significant, stressful or of value may vary. These variations are dependent on but not limited to factors such as, individuality, institutions, and cultural values. Thus, in exploring the emotional language of students it is important to understand that these very 'loaded' (meaningful, strong) phrases may simultaneously mean everything and nothing, they may be positive and negative, and above all, they may easily transcend any boundaries of categorization. This research, therefore, explores the ways in which students' 'stressful' experiences and accompanying emotions of university life become mediated by and embodied through the words and statements they utilize to make sense of and navigate the distance that was present within the online learning period of 2020- 2021.

### *Research Methodology*

The fieldwork for this project ran as a series of interrupted segments from May 2020 to July 2021 due to Covid-19 pandemic and various lockdown periods. Being that I, a student myself, experienced varying emotions and levels of stress trying to conduct a masters research project during this time, I served as the first research participant for this study undertaking the method of autoethnography and self-reflection. Autoethnography is described by Steeg and McCarty (2012) as being a self-narrative that is reflexive. It uses the personal experience of the author for analysis and interpretation. For the process of autoethnography, I relied on a journal I kept from 1 July 2020 to 31 May 2021 as I made sense of my own experience and expressions of stress/ distress and change in my life due to the pandemic and distance learning. While I do not rely heavily on my own experience for the final write up of this project this method proved useful in that it afforded me deeper levels of connecting and understanding with the students who took part in this research.

My first attempt at working with students was in July of 2020 where six students all registered to the University of Cape Town were recruited. These students were recruited from my first semester tutorial group for a second-year course, as well as two students from my tutorial group in second semester of 2019. Due to Covid-19 regulations at the time all learning was done via a method called distance learning in which students engaged in their daily classes and academic tasks online. Resultantly this fieldwork for this research project had to be gathered online via platforms such as WhatsApp, and Microsoft teams where available. During this time with only these two forms of communication at hand a WhatsApp group titled Research 2020, was relied on for group conversations. To promote conversation in this group students were asked to reflect and respond to pictures, humorous memes, or texts sent daily. This method was used as many students now being 'at home' did not have as much access to data and WIFI to seek out memes or hold lengthy discussions via Microsoft teams. While at first, this method proved useful, after the first two weeks one participant dropped out after sharing feelings of being overwhelmed and unable to keep up with both online learning and partake in a research project. The loss of the first participant created a sense of uncertainty and panic among the rest of the participants who anticipated that the experience of distance learning would not get any better. By week five two more participants dropped out due to unfortunate deaths in their families.

By this point I was left with three participants yet conducting field work did not come any easier. Due to a lack of data and long hours of academic responsibilities participants were unable to fully commit to planned interviews and group conversations on WhatsApp. This resulted in on and off somewhat surface research for the remaining two months in which fieldwork was conducted. During this time, I would often only be able to get one response to a prompt and a single interview per month. After a discussion with one of the remaining participants about how stressful it truly was to function academically during this time, we decided to part ways. With two remaining participants who were rarely able to reply to a WhatsApp message, I decided to cut my losses and paused the research for the year of 2020 on November 6<sup>th</sup>. Throughout this time, I continued to write in my journal, this time focusing on the loss of control and inability to carry out and complete my master's degree in the way I had hoped to. I was also having conversations with my peers around how heavy it felt to request time and participation from students when I was also struggling and unable to fully commit to anything other than running tutorials as well as being present and active for my tutorial

students. Simplifying and operating at a minimum allowed the uncertain time to feel a little less chaotic as it allowed for smaller portions of responsibilities that were easier to maintain control of.

After what felt like a period of mourning for myself and my research I started again in March of 2021. During this time the field work was carried out from 10 March 2021 up until 30 July 2021 with nine university students. Again, all students were registered to the University of Cape Town and due to distance learning, the field site for this research took the form of online platforms of student engagement such as Instagram, Twitter, and WhatsApp. This offered up a field that could be considered multi-sited and dynamic which allowed for greater connections and understandings of language use among students in a manner that was more visible, across all the similarities and differences between each student's expression of their experience of stress (Marcus, 1995). The entirety of this research was conducted remotely and therefore online access to students' social media posts allowed insight into their daily lives throughout this period. Students consented and provided access to their WhatsApp statuses, and Instagram stories as well as sharing when and if they got involved in debates on Twitter or on the university's 'meme' profile known as 'UCT Justkidding'.

To conduct live interviews and group discussions, platforms such as Zoom, Microsoft Teams, and WhatsApp video calls were utilized and recorded. Where necessary, interviews were also conducted via WhatsApp chat. The interviews used were a combination of structured and unstructured conversation, while the use of video cameras aided in the promotion of building relationships with my participants (Lupton, 2020). Additional methods for data capturing included the sharing of humorous memes, gifs, and songs. While a WhatsApp group titled Research 2021 was created, participants felt more comfortable speaking one on one or via the Microsoft Teams platform for group discussion. For this reason, the group was opened but utilized for scheduling rather than a space for discussion.

Going into the second round of data collection/ conducting research I was more aware of some of the struggles I would face and was, therefore, more flexible and able to work through the hiccups and interruptions that occurred. While no dropouts were experienced the second time around, field work was often interrupted and paused as needed by participants and me. Allowing for these breaks at times meant that I was sometimes reliant on asynchronous

conversations and interviews on WhatsApp. Throughout the period of fieldwork breaks were offered when students were overwhelmed and unable to participate as well as when a student or myself experienced a loss in the family.

On the 18<sup>th</sup> of April 2021, a wildfire spread from the forest around the institution and destroyed one of the historic libraries as well as damaging several residences (Davids, 2020). The university had to evacuate thousands of students who had been staying in residence offering temporary accommodation around the central city. During this week the university executive suspended the academic program to allow for the start of damage control and restoration to the affected areas/ buildings. While fieldwork for this week took a pause the following weeks of research took a central focus on this fire and the ways in which students and staff made sense of what had occurred. While clearly a tragic event, this moment captured and strengthened the argument made throughout the following thesis. In brief, the fire and what played out after allowed for an ethnographic glimpse into ways in which students came to express, make sense of and speak through what they experienced.

### *Ethical Considerations*

My priority in carrying out this research was to ensure that all those who were involved were protected from any harm. It is for this reason that this research was conducted using the guidelines as stipulated by not only UCT's code of ethics but also that of the Anthropology Southern Africa association (2005). Upon my initial virtual meeting with all those who participated, I spoke to them through my research including both my interest in it and the process through which it would be carried out, emphasizing that their choice to participate was entirely voluntary and that at any point if they wished to do so they could pull out. Through our initial conversation, verbal consent was established via Microsoft teams with those who preferred this platform and via text for those who opted for WhatsApp conversation. Further, after the initial session with each participant an email and WhatsApp message containing a copy of the consent form was sent to each participant who was then asked to carefully read through and sign the form should they decide they were still willing to partake in the research.

The next step in ensuring safety for all those involved was to ensure that anonymity was provided. The participants were informed that none of their names would be used within the final write up nor recorded in the raw data of this research. To ensure this, every recorded

conversation which took place via Microsoft teams was saved under a different name and the names of participants were blocked out on the saved WhatsApp conversations leaving next to it the same name that was used on those participants' recorded interviews. Once the fieldwork portion of this research was completed, participants were offered the opportunity to pick their own pseudonyms which were used to save the raw data. As student dropout was experienced during the first portion of fieldwork in 2020, with their permission, the data collected during this time was kept and when utilized in this write up are referred to as peers rather than participants with names. This decision was made due to their requests to not be formally listed as participants in the research.

Aside from protecting the students' identities, it was also important that each participant felt comfortable and at ease during our sessions. For this reason, data collection for this research all took place online via WhatsApp, phone calls, Microsoft teams, and Zoom. Each participant was allowed the option to pick the platforms they felt the most comfortable with and were not required to engage in others unless they chose to do so. Further, as conversations around expressions of emotions and distress were sensitive, attention was paid to any cues the student were expressing that showed discomfort. This allowed me to navigate the conversation and ensure that no harm was caused to the student. Due to often sensitive and uncertain times occurring through the period of research, breaks/pauses in the research happened as needed when either myself or a participant needed some time away from participation. Altogether these methods allowed me to ethically navigate this research throughout the time of the Covid-19 pandemic.

### *Meeting the Participants*

To obtain participants for this research an advertisement was posted on all the university's anthropology undergraduate student websites. Although I posted the advert, I also presented my research idea to one of my EDL (extended distance learning) students in the previous semester who then became my first participant. The EDL program was developed by the university to aid all those students falling behind or at risk of failing because of lack of access to the resources and infrastructure necessary to complete their academic year in 2020. This program set out to provide one on one distanced tutoring and guidance for these students as well as offering printouts and data, so students were able to continue their studies from home,

as during this time the university was still unable to allow students to return to residence due to the national Covid-19 restrictions and lockdown. Nathi, a 22-year-old black woman from Springs, was my first participant and ex-EDL student. She is currently in the third year of her B. Soc. Sci degree and is majoring in anthropology and social development. Throughout the time of this research project, Nathi transitioned from home in Springs to being invited back to campus residence, as she was identified as an at-risk student requiring the university residence infrastructure to work remotely. After our initial conversation around the research project, Nathi introduced me to two of her friends, Palesa and Nandi whom she thought would be perfect candidates for this research. Palesa is a 21-year-old black woman from Botswana in her third year of study. Majoring in politics and law, she was also invited back to university residence to continue her studies. Palesa was interested in joining the research project as she had noticed being home for most of 2020 that the way she communicated with her family was starkly different to the way she would with her peers and even this had changed when she was home and did not have as much access to data to continuously speak to her friends from campus. My third participant was Nandi, a 21-year-old black woman from Johannesburg in her third year. She is a BA student majoring in law and historical studies who was already back in residence at the time we were introduced. My fourth participant was Cindy, a third-year student aged 21 from Cape Town, majoring in psychology and sociology. Cindy responded to the advert posted on her student portal and was returned to residence at the time of our first meeting.

My next five participants were students who responded to the advertisement posted onto their student portals. First, Ariel is an 18-year-old black woman first year student majoring in psychology and anthropology who resides in university residence. Ariel had expressed she was curious about the research as she had heard some of the terms before and was beginning to make use of them herself. My next participant was Lebo, a 20-year-old black woman from Durban, in her first year of study majoring in history and anthropology. Next came Justine, a 21-year-old first year woman from Kenya majoring in anthropology, EGS (environmental & geographical sciences, a field that combines aspects of natural and social sciences), and economics. Justine was interested in partaking as this was not her first degree but being a foreign student, she felt she may be able to both learn and share an interesting perspective on navigating university experiences. Staying in residence, this was her second year in Cape Town but her first year officially registered to the university. My eighth participant was Nadia

a 19-year-old black woman from Johannesburg in her first year of study, majoring in politics and sociology. Staying in a university residence, with no roommate Nadia responded to my advert as she thought it may be a good way to meet students who share similar experiences. My last participant was Thando, a 19-year-old first year woman majoring in philosophy and politics. Thando is also from Johannesburg and stayed in university residence to complete her studies

While all nine participants were invited back to residence to complete their studies their transition to online remote learning was not easy. While those in their third year had already established a network of support and friends the first-year students struggled to form bonds and connections with classmates remotely, which resulted in them befriending and communicating mostly to their roommates or friends from home/high school. Towards the end of the fieldwork, many of them had managed to make friends in their classes but they had still shared that the university meme page for a large part was the space in which they found community and comfort. In what follows I draw on their stories and experiences to think through the ways in which students have embodied and navigated their stress and distress throughout the pandemic and the additional stressor of the fire that swept through campus and residences.

### *Limitations*

While this thesis tells a necessary story about the language use and statements of emotion expressed by students, it may be important to note that this research paper is potentially limited. Due to difficulty in conducting research online during a global pandemic the method of convenience sampling was used to obtain participants for this study which, Marshall (1996) states may result in a lack within the intellectual credibility of the research. Further, given that I worked with nine female Humanities (with a number of them majoring in Anthropology) participants the work I am presenting is not a representative nor exhaustive study on the expressions of distress and university experience among students. Rather, through my thesis, I am presenting a qualitative project that is an in-depth examination of some students' experiences of language use which, may not necessarily be fully representative of all experiences on campus more widely.

## *Thesis outline*

In this thesis, I argue that the use of humorous expressive phrases, memes, and gifs take on a central role in the participant's ability to navigate the often-stressful realities and of being students. I argue this due to the way in which utilization of these expressions allowed for an easing of pressure and creating community across varying layers and levels of distances among students. Chapter two of this thesis serves to set the stage of inconsistencies, uncertainties, and distance as it were during the covid-19 pandemic. It introduces the university as a field site and traces the ways in which relationships and community were altered and shifted to alternate online platforms straddling distance as a physical, emotional, and mental hurdle throughout this time. Chapter three explores the narratives of students as they expressed their use of humorous memes, phrases, gifs, and statements of emotions as tools through which to navigate their stressful experiences. I argue that while students are often aware of their varying levels of distress, they discuss and share these as forms of passive jokes that both allow them to unload but do not hold any further obligation for action or change. Chapter four takes the form of an ethnography in which students were able to make sense of, find relief and a break within the time of a fire. This chapter delves deep into the context of specific realities of shared community and experience which allow students to make meaning of an event that was otherwise embodied as trauma.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Navigating ‘distance’: The break and reconnection of shared community for students during distance learning**

On the 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2020, South Africa’s President Cyril Ramaphosa announced a 21-day country wide lockdown to contain the spread of Covid-19. This period of lockdown was set to run from the 26<sup>th</sup> of March to the 16 April 2020 but as covid-19 infections grew so did the period of lockdown along with its varying regulations. The following chapter aims to frame this lockdown and the various responses made by the University of Cape Town to continue the academic year and support students at the time. It further serves to show how the new distanced approach to learning further disconnected students not only from campus and its infrastructure but from one another and therefore any form of mutual support and understanding offered by existing in this community. Throughout this chapter I use the concept of ‘distance’ to think through the University’s use of the word and how students experienced ‘distance’ and being ‘distant’ in different ways. Through this method, I show how these concepts within a particular context begin to shorten or lengthen in meaning in significant ways as they are being experienced. I draw on the following concepts as defined in the Oxford English Dictionary:

Distance/d: The physical extent of space between objects.

Distant: To be emotionally separated or apart.

Remote/ness: Being situated far from the main centers of interaction or population.

I argue that in being distanced not only did students face further constraints to their studies but that lack of access to conversation between peers lead to further frustration, distant feelings, stress, and difficulty for the students with whom I worked. In so doing, I show that due to distance and remoteness many students, first years, in particular, were unable to socially position themselves within the university space.

#### ***The Consequence of Lockdown and Ruptured Communities of Understanding***

Although the official call for lockdown was announced mid-March, many students had already stopped attending class, due to being nervous and unsure of what was to unfold. I remember having a conversation with my fellow tutors and then with our course convenor sharing our anxiety around being in enclosed spaces with 15-20 students each. At this point, we knew that

the covid-19 virus was airborne, and we all feared contracting and further spreading it to our loved ones. At the time we did not realize that the day before this conversation would be our last day on campus for at least a year, and for others even more. While there was yet to be any official statements around the severity of this virus, panic had already started to manifest among many who became hesitant to interact beyond their homes. By the following week, President Ramaphosa had announced the country wide shut down which restricted movement to all but essential workers. Under these new restrictions, residents were instructed to remain home and away from work, school, and their daily duties unless they were, considered essential employees who were approved to work during this time. At the time essential workers included healthcare professionals, sole proprietors who provided essential goods as well as small scale farmers (South African Government 2020). Regulations were strictly upheld, and workers had to show proof of permit to move to and from work daily.

Consequent to this lockdown announcement and due to academia not being considered essential at the time, an immediate and indefinite shutdown of university residences was called for by the President (Davids, 2020). This meant that students residing in university accommodation had to return home. For many, this meant not only vacating the campus grounds but having to travel beyond the western cape and for others even the country. At first, this period was somewhat enjoyed as Palesa stated:

*“It was nice to be back home for a bit also comforting to be around my family while things were so ‘hectic’, it was an added bonus that it was a bit of a break away from academics”.*

Amidst the anxiety then, the countrywide shutdown proved to have been positive as it offered up a time and space for many families to reconnect with one another but as the time prolonged many a consequence arose. For the purpose of this chapter, I will only be focusing on the consequences that arose for the university and students with whom I worked. As this lockdown slowly lengthened with the introduction of varying alert levels and regulations the university had to come up with contingency to ensure that the academic year would not be lost completely (Davids, 2020). On the 19<sup>th</sup> of March 2020, Professor Lis Lange the Deputy Vice Chancellor, hereafter DVC, of UCT announced that as a preemptive measure to save the academic year, the institution had to come up with alternative teaching methods. These alternative methods included implementation of remote learning that was to take place online. This was applied to

all undergraduate courses barring the health science faculty who needed further practices to be put in place. While remote learning was an obvious response to containing the academic year within the limits of the lockdown regulations an issue that arose among varying others, was that as Montashana *et al* (2021) argued, being home greatly impacted the ability for students to continue learning as their homes were not conducive environments for online learning.

What returning home and distance learning meant for students was that they had to take on and juggle many a role aside from being students. Nandi shared that it was tough to adapt to balancing academic and home life in stating:

*“My family, especially my mum did not understand the pressure I was under, so while home, alongside studying I had to cook, clean and do all sorts of household responsibilities. If I even tried to complain or explain that I was busy I was shut down, because sitting in front of a computer all day was not considered working to my mum. I had no choice but to go with it while I was home, I was a daughter which meant I had chores and responsibilities to my mum and our household, I had to carry my weight”*

Nathi echoed this experience adding that:

*“It was hard, I had to take on so many extra responsibilities that I wouldn’t face on campus. Not to mention sometimes feeling bad or struggling to keep up. I even felt guilty for having to say I cannot watch TV because I was busy. I think being home but still not having much time for my family hurt them.”*

The narratives shared by Nathi and Nandi did not exist in isolation but rather were a common pattern among my participants. For them, being home meant assuming the role as daughter, sister, caregiver, and student in ways that differed to anything they had done before. Students were not only physically distanced from campus and their peers but through the multiple roles required they became further distanced from their academic tasks and ‘student lives’ both emotionally and mentally. Cindy remarked:

*“It’s not hard because I have to do all these things and I only have 24hrs in a day, but I also need to try to keep sane because of the pandemic and it’s intense. I really hope I’ll be invited back to campus soon”.*

However, in thinking through the concept of ‘distance’ there is also a shortening of distance. All three conversations point to immediate contact to family and chores. Being on campus distances them from these domestic situations, providing a ‘distance’ from these responsibilities. As such, the physical distance from campus, in contrast to the distancing effect of being on campus, ironically ‘shortened the distance’ to being able to learn.

Further than creating excess strain due to the multiple roles’ students had to take on being home another factor causing stress and pressure was a lack of access to the necessary infrastructure to learn (Montashana *et al* 2021). While being on campus ensured that each student had access to facilities like the library and the computer labs to do their work and assignments, distance learning introduced an issue of infrastructure as not all students had the necessary tools to shift to the online platform. As a recourse, the University of Cape Town sourced and provided laptops to all financial aid students and those who did not and could not access computers during the lock down period (Lange, 2020). This roll out and allocation of laptops was aimed at leveling the playing field for completing the year and soon too, included the allocation of data and use of low-bandwidth connections. While necessary and useful for all, what this rollout did not account for was that many first-year students still struggled due to lack of computer literacy (Montashana, 2021). Whilst students now had access to laptops, some lacked the skills to make full and meaningful use of this technology as they had never been taught or exposed to it in their secondary years of school (Prensky, 2009). In response to the allocation of laptops Nadia shared:

*“It’s been tough. I am struggling academically because of this online learning. I lack computer literacy so this whole online learning thing kind of exposed and demotivated me. I don’t even know who to ask for help, my parents don’t know and nor do my friends from high school, so I just feel vulnerable.”*

For Nadia, not having made friends at university in the short time on campus before students were sent home, meant she felt alone in her struggle to adapt to online learning. Having no one

to assist and not knowing which way to turn added a layer of distress which under normal circumstances may have been prevented sitting in a lab where a lab tutor or peer is able to assist. Nadia, however, was not the only student who felt isolated as many students shared that they felt isolated and distanced from their peers as they did not have the necessary data to keep up and speak to them. Thando explained: *“I was definitely more stressed while home. I could not speak to my friends as much and I wouldn’t dare vent to my family, I was so stressed”*. Justine took this further when stating:

*“It sucked not to talk to my peers, I needed them. I can’t share this pressure with my mum because I don’t want her to worry but I can’t speak to my peers because they are all so far and we don’t really have data or airtime to have long phone calls”*.

Here, they indicated that a distancing from campus not only meant being distanced from lecture halls but also being distant from peers and the support that often aided in student’s adaption to university spaces. In similar conversation with peers around the skills necessary to work remotely, I recall a friend saying,

*“I know it’s hard, I came here from a village, but I was lucky my school had computer lessons that my parents could afford so I knew how to use the computers in the lab. Once while working in Leslie Social<sup>6</sup>, I had to help someone switch the computer on, she didn’t know how and she was so embarrassed, but it made me realize the ability to use computers is not inherent you need to be taught, exposed to it. Not everyone has this privilege”*.

This statement shows that the remoteness of online learning not only distanced students from their classrooms but further created a distancing of support to make up for the differing skills levels each student had. While the inability to meaningfully use the laptop clearly shows how the laptop became redundant and further isolated the student, a further factor faced by another was the ability to make use of the computer due to power supply.

Along with lockdown and being sent home under strict covid-19 restrictions, South Africa also faces a problem of load shedding<sup>8</sup>. While load shedding follows a scheduled framework

---

<sup>6</sup> The undergraduate computer lab situated in the Leslie Social Science building at UCT <sup>8</sup>  
An interruption in electricity supply

meaning that residence may be aware of and able to work around their designated two and a half hours without power, this is not true for all. Many households and areas faced lengthier power cuts often outside of the listed schedule. Further for Lebo, being home and load shedding were not the only issues. In the town where Lebo resides, the electricity transformer had exploded, a problem which she stated often occurred and left her stranded without power a few days at a time. When speaking about it she shared:

*“It’s annoying because my phone is dead and so is the laptop so I cannot work, I’ve been trying to do all I can, but I’m limited. Right now, luckily my convenors understand but I mean I cannot have indefinite extensions so it’s annoying”*. With the lack of necessary infrastructure, students faced greater burden in trying to complete their academic work.

Knowing that distance learning further exacerbated the inequalities evident in institutional spaces (Universities South Africa, 2020) UCT made further allowances to ensure a fair chance to all students. Part of this was the creation of an extended distance learning program which allowed for one-on-one online contact for ‘vulnerable’<sup>7</sup> students. Convenors were asked to compile lists of students who had either not been engaging online or had shown signs of struggling to adapt (Lange, 2020). Nathi was one of these students. I was assigned to work with her through one of her undergraduate courses. While this worked for some students who were now able to catch up with work and pass, it was still a struggle for those who lacked the literacy and in some cases power supply to log in and engage with their work. For this reason, UCT set up a further outreach which I became a part of. Part of this second outreach was the hiring of students to conduct care calls to students on the vulnerable list, to gain information on what their hinderances were and how UCT could assist. Through this effort UCT was again trying to shrink the varying layers of distance students were experiencing. This implementation led to the printing out and postage of multiple course packages to help students continue with their studies despite the varying technological struggles. These packages included course readers, lecture notes, assignment and course outlines which allowed students to work without the use of computers when needed. Students could then either submit their assignments online or compile hard copies of their work and post it back to the university at set pick up dates.

---

<sup>7</sup> Students who were struggling with academic work and needed more assistance. I was aware of a definition of ‘vulnerable’ due to working for the care calling project. However, communications put out by the DVC mentioned and spoke loosely about ‘vulnerable’ students.

Due to the pandemic and remote learning being a time of uncertainties, the various methods and responses made by the University as outlined above materialized through various efforts of trial and error. In 2020 at the start of the need for online learning, the university set out with an Emergency Remote Teaching strategy which was aimed at continuing the teaching practice remotely. Teaching here is defined as ‘the act of communicating knowledge’ (Oxford English Dictionary). The issue within this method was that the physical distance at play in this scenario did not allow for the communication necessary for teaching at the time. This we see in the students’ lack of access to resources at the time. In attempts to rectify or solve this the next integration of online learning towards the second semester of 2020, was EDL (Extended Distance Learning) which acknowledged ‘learning’ rather than ‘teaching’ thereby shifting its focus from those that teach to those that learn. This effort saw what was lacking in the interplay of teaching remotely and aimed to provide the students with the resources they could, such as the laptops, data, print outs of course work in order for students to take on and continue ‘learning’ in their own capacities. Learning here referring to ‘the act of acquiring knowledge through studying’ (Oxford English Dictionary). In this way, students were then able to make use of resources on offer to continue their studies. By 2021 the university had remained its strategy of Physically Distanced Learning, here acknowledging that students were still distanced from their education but that this distance was geographical. In this, the university was unable to recognize or even take measures against the distancing that had been and is taking place across categories of relationships and responsibilities. It is in this distancing that exceeds physicality that we begin to make sense of the ways in which distance was lengthened and shortened across contexts for many students. It was in this instant and oversight that we begin to see the breaks and shifts in community for many students.

The university did all it could to curb the various issues that arose during the time of distance learning and physical isolation for students. What could not be resolved at the time was access to the relationships and conversations which would foster community formation among students (Cohen, 2013). For second- and third-year students, this may have been less of an issue in that they had already formed these support systems during their time on campus in 2019 and years before while for first years it became increasingly isolating and lonely. For first year students it then became clear that due to this distancing and lack of conversation with peers they were unable to position themselves socially within the university student community

(Tohidian, 2008). Regardless of year(s) of study, a number of participants shared that they struggled immensely due to the absence of these relationships and outlets and as a result felt all the more stressed. Nathi shared:

*“We spoke less and less as lockdown extended; I couldn’t exactly ask my parents for extra data, they didn’t have money for it. UCT allocated data but I had to reserve this for my schoolwork and sometimes sharing with family who needed access, also not everyone had access to WhatsApp, so it was hard”.*

While students may have been able to speak to and ‘vent’ with family members it was not the same as lack of shared experience meant a lack of understanding and ability to meaningful communicate in the way one would with a peer (Ingold, 2016). In this instance, we see that while students were physical close to their families, they were distant from forms of shared experienced which lead to a lack of understanding and eventually an absents of sharing. To this regard Palesa expressed:

*“I could not speak to my family because they would not understand {laughs}, they have never been in this situation. I lacked the words to share my experience in a way that they could understand. My friends would just get it if I said ‘ah go-ish-ing, it’s eating me here’ my parents would not. So, I didn’t speak to them because I did not know how”*

As a result, the break in communication and access to one another led to a break in community and support available between peers which often left students feeling not only isolated and distant but also distressed as they experienced a lack of understanding and support in their immediate circles. Importantly then, what being on campus offers students is a distancing from family and domestic chores and a shortening of the distance and distant feelings of academic learning and shared communities of support. When they were at home during the time of online learning what is witnessed is a shortening of the distance to family and household obligations which in turn, lengthens their distance from learning and shared understandings of stress along with the support this offers.

## *The Regroup and Rebuild of Communities of Understanding through Shared Language*

These efforts by UCT previously discussed greatly aided in the students' abilities to keep working. As restrictions and alertness levels changed the university made the decision to start inviting vulnerable students back to campus (Swingler, 2020). All nine participants who took part in this study were invited back to campus and expressed being excited and eager to return. In relation to this invite Ariel shared:

*"I am excited to get back to campus, I was scared I would not get the real university experience and being in res will make working online easier".*

Nathi, Palesa and Nandi expressed an excitement for the fact that they would now be able to catch up and spend time chatting. While being invited back clearly sparked joy for my participants in that they were no longer burdened with extra chores and distractions, having adapted to being isolated meant that this transition was not as smooth for everyone. This was seen with Nadia who exclaimed:

*"I think I am more frightened now; I did not make friends in time for lockdown and now being back I see that everyone already has their people. I can't just intrude so I am still alone. I just fetch my food come back up to my room and spend the day here".*

Being first year meant that Nadia did not return to campus with connections and community that was already formed but rather that she still needed to build these. Indicating that she was still in the liminal phase of her transition to becoming a university student (Turner, 1969). For my other participants who had already made friends before lockdown, the return was easier. While all students were clearly distanced not only physically from campus, but from their peers and the relationships and support necessary for their time at university, a further distance evident in this time was a distance from their own voices. This was a distance and result of remoteness that the university despite all its efforts was not able to counteract until regulations allowed for the university grounds and accommodations to be reopened. For Palesa, Nathi, Nandi, Thando, Cindy, Ariel, Justine, Lebo and Palesa the simple fact of being physically back on campus was enough for them to regain their voice and reconnect with their peers and communities of support. For Nadia this was different. Having not had the time to make friends

before lockdown along with the further and extended period of isolation due to remote learning meant that, once returned Nadia was not as easily able to reconnect and join in conversation in the same way. This indicates that first years experienced an added layer of distance.

Ahearn (2011) stated that the importance within language and any form of expression and practice of communication is that they are socially imbedded. For Nadia, who at this point had not been able to easily adapt and find her footing/space as a student within the university, this act of becoming socially imbedded through shared language and expression was not yet developed. While some students were allowed back on campus and in residence, due to covid and existing regulations space was limited, and many students were still working from home. Those invited back were first required to isolate in their rooms for a week and once this period was over, they were able to make use of the residence cafeteria and study rooms but needed to be socially distanced and wear masks at all times unless they were consuming food. Due to discomfort of constantly wearing masks, my participants shared that they often preferred working and eating in their rooms. Those who had friends would often take turns hosting one another in their rooms for lunch and dinner. This meant that Nadia had very rare and limited opportunities to interact with students in her residence as well as students who shared the same classes. As a result, she would need to try and create friendships online to which Nadia responded:

*“I know I need to make friends but it’s not that easy. There are some students who I notice take multiple classes with me, but it would be weird to just randomly send them a private message mid- zoom class.”*

While it was clear that Nadia then struggled with finding friendships and community within her residence, being back on campus with access to WiFi meant that she could access online communities of students. Once back on campus Nadia began to follow and engage with the online student page called ‘UCT just Kidding’ - an Instagram page where humorous memes are shared and often a space where students are able to share their thoughts on university issues/ have discussions and debates that range from lighthearted laughter to serious conversation. Interestingly, while useful in that it offers up a space that allows a student to feel understood based on the memes shared as well as making them feel heard based on the conversations and debates held on its status, this space did not necessarily foster face-to-face connections and

friendships. However, what it did offer to Nadia and many others was a taste of the student life and context of university.

Students were not necessarily making best friends through the page as what they did there was share funny memes, like or react to memes and partake in debate through directly messaging the pages Instagram inbox. While this interaction was useful it never left space for meeting or building relationships with any specific bodies other than allowing for a space of general community and non-specific engagement. However, what this online space did allow for was a place in which community was able to be built just enough to allow students to begin to socially embed themselves within the university context. This occurred as existing and partaking within this space and exposed them to the particular language and forms of expression often used among peers which in turn allowed them to confidently participate in discussion and meme creation which held the particular 'taste' and context which is socially charged and valued within a student space (Bakhtin, 1981). While still not physically in use, being active or even just keeping up with the page and conversations happening allowed students and Nadia the capital and tools necessary to become socially active within the space. For Nadia this materializes in chapter 4 when she started to build in person friendship and found community based on a shared experience for which she already held the communication practices necessary to navigate it.

Thus, in conclusion, what this chapter has shown is that the distancing that resulted as consequence to the spread of covid-19 branched far beyond being just physical. Rather, it distanced students, emotionally, physically, and mentally not only from the university and their studies but from one another and the necessary university and peer support systems. This further distanced them from their own voice and through their voice, their particular language which was found to be necessary for their adaption and settling into the university space. Being home, they were not able to share and take up their roles as students in the way they are able to while on campus and in, in-contact classes. This distancing caused varying additional stressors across all the above-mentioned categories which for many students greatly interfered not only with their ability to continue their studies but also their ability to cope with the realities they were facing. The University of Cape Town throughout this time did all it could to reduce the distance in many ways, but these efforts only became fully meaningful to my participants once they were able to return to campus and rebuild their communities of support through

conversation and shared space and experience. In the following chapter, through the community that was rebuilt, I explore the ways in which students communicate with one another through the shared language of humorous memes, gifs, and phrases as coping mechanisms

### Chapter 3

#### Resilience in the face of distress: A Passive Joke

:” I think, if we allow it to be as deep and real as it really is, I don’t know... it would take a lot out of us. I just don’t think we are ready for that, so we laugh” (Interview with Justine, 2021)



Douglass (1999 as cited in Plester, 2009) stated that within the carefully controlled and filtered everyday lives and actions of individuals use of jokes and humor under stressful circumstances allows for a breaking through of the unconscious. This is a break that leaves way for a moment of freedom and even enjoyment which however briefly, distances its user and audience from the buckling pressure of whatever stress and anxiety they may be feeling as well as breaking the tension of the need to portray a well put together image of strength. This moment of brief relief and intervention does not take away from the extremity of the circumstance but rather allowing for a breath, a break, and a moment to become lighter amidst the tension. When Palesa, spoke of her use and understanding of various witty memes, phrases, and gifs among herself and peers she expressed that:

*“It’s easier to make jokes about it with your peers, you just laugh it off. We are so used to feeling so stressed out I’d say we’ve become numb to it but being numb doesn’t help, so we*

*laugh we joke at the face of crisis and maybe it is a real crisis or maybe you just want your friend to feel better either way, it helps to poke light at it”.*

Through the following chapter I explore students use of various humorous memes, phrases, and gifs as a tool for navigating their experiences. I argue that often aware of their varying levels of distress students utilize these forms of language, communication, and expression as ‘passive jokes’. In so doing the students allow for a space for breath, an unloading and expression of their circumstance in a manner that does not create greater burden for themselves nor their peers. The space being referred to here, being defined as in the Oxford English Dictionary, as an area that is free from tension. Additionally, it plays on and refers to the concept of distance which in this circumstance signifies a shortening of distant feelings for students. Further, I argue that the use of these memes, phrases, and gifs that are humorous, both in close conversation and shared across social media platforms, fosters a community of understanding. For students this community forms a safety net that ensures them that they are not alone, they are understood, that their experiences are shared, and that they are able to persevere. By sharing in the joke or reacting to them students allow themselves and others a laugh, a pause, and a brief release of the tension which aids in their abilities to ‘keep pushing’ in the absence of any direct obligation to take action or make a change in response to their distress. Throughout this chapter when making use of the term humor I will be reliant on the definition as outlined by Romero and Cruthird ( 2006), humor is any form of communication that produce for its users and audience positive emotions and cognitions.

Eisenberg *et al* (2007) explain that students at tertiary level of education are known to face higher levels of stress and pressure ranging from prospects of ‘coming of age’ and being in the pursuit of a successful career and future. Morey and Taylor (2019) take this further in stating that the particular sources of stress for students often include factors such as appearance, finances, relationships as well as school and family pressures. The previous chapter has shown that above these expected pressures at this level of education, the students who took part in this research faced further stress and pressure as a result of distancing and isolation caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. This excess level of stress and pressure is a large cause for concern among students as their experiences of stress has been found to transcend emotional and mental pressure often becoming physical in the form of muscle pressure (Morey & Taylor, 2019). This transcending from emotional and mental pressures to a physical pain or ailment in the

body further creates a moment of distance as students in this way become physically distanced from duties and work. This as they become ill and are required to rest and step away from their studies a physical distancing that they are not often prepared to take but have no choice but to respond to. During the period of distance learning and working from home Palesa texted:

*“It’s much more than saying that things are ‘in the pits’ it’s physical too. I was soooooo sick a month ago I had a fever and migraine that would not go away so I went to the doctor. I didn’t have time to be sick I needed to bounce back. Can you imagine my shock when he prescribed me rest and some vitamin C! I was feeling so horrible, but the truth was my body had just taken all that it could at that point and what I really needed was a break.”*

In the case, above we see as Ingold (2016) suggested, that when it comes to the things we say, it is less about the actual sound of utterance and word but rather attention should be placed on the meaning behind the term (in this case phrase) which delivers distinct feelings, contexts, and meanings. In Palesa’s case, the literal meaning of being ‘in the pits’ meant that she had become so overly stressed that it had materialized physically in her body as a form of a fever. However, the context, feeling, and meaning conveyed by this phrase to many students may be understood less physically but mentally as Nathi stated:

*“When my friends tell me they are ‘in the pits’ I just know they are going through a lot, they are under so much pressure and it’s possibly feeling like an uphill battle. I can’t explain it, but I just get it, it just resonates with me I can almost feel it too because I am or have also been there. So, no I don’t know how this looks for them, but I can understand the feeling. It’s also just easier than explaining the full detail I think like I get it without needing to know too much because I know, you know.”*

Thus, as Plester (2009) states use of humorous phrases, memes, and gifs in place of detailed explanations of situations at hand does not change how stressful and serious the circumstance may be. Rather the use and substitution of these key phrases become central and important in the specific context of students as it makes the circumstance feel more bearable. When speaking about the use of phrases such as ‘Gowishing’ Cindy responded:

*“I learned to make use of this here at university. It’s weird to my family I guess, and I could see that, but it works for me because it just made it easier for me to share my experience and when I feel stressed out. My friends just understood and its nice.”*

Dyson and Renk (2006) explain that this adaption of language to suit the university environment is normal for students. They explain that when entering these new spaces students often change their usual behaviors in favor for those expressions, behaviors, and languages that will aid in the ability to adapt to and cope within the institutional environment. In relation to this change/ adaption of speaking and sharing in particular ways, it may be central to understand as Tohidian (2008) highlighted, language is an interesting and important tool as it hosts the ability to influence both the way in which people think about the world and how they then position themselves within it. For my participants speaking and sharing in this way was helpful as it allowed them to feel a sense of relief, in that they would be able to power through the circumstance at hand. Regardless of the stress at hand, the lighthearted nature of speaking in this manner allowed for a distancing from the mental and emotional aspects of the stress which provided for a communication and sharing that came with a comfortable sense of ease. Further, Nandi stated:

*“I like the memes and things we use here because it’s funny. I have never not at least smiled when seeing it not because the stress is funny but because it’s become funny ways of expressing our emotions. I like that I am not just stewing in my stress but that I can share a laugh about it with my friends. I guess it’s bad for those who don’t understand us though and even for us because I know when I share how I feel in this way, and it’s not taken seriously it’s like my feelings and emotions are being disregarded or invalidated.”*



### **Memes shared by Nandi**

The above two images were shared by Nandi when explaining the way, she had been feeling during the time of our interview. The image on the left she explained was what she felt going into the assessment period of her courses and the image on the right expressed the way in which she and her peers reacted to the many memes making the rounds at the time. What the above two memes offer is a humorous visual of digestibility and ease that is offered when expressing student emotions and stress. While the image of the broken-down car is startling at first gaze the students are able to make sense of it as embodying their experiences of being battered and exhausted mentally but still needing to power through. It further allows then a space in which to laugh about the context but in a manner that is not hurtful nor invalidating of their realities. As Nandi explained:

*“It’s funny because it is somehow exaggerated just enough to make my situation not seem too bad but also real enough to portray the reality of being a student. It’s messy funny and real but in all the right ways”*

Plester (2009) highlighted that use of tools of humor in these forms of memes, gifs, and phrases allows for a space and manner in which to discuss matters and events that are often painful and personal in formats that reduce the anxiety and distress associated with them. While for students the conversation would often not go much deeper than sharing in and responding to these images there was no need to push or go further as based on shared experience this form of expression was something they understood. This form of language has become a form of

communication that for students should be understood as being socially embedded in their experiences as students (Ahearn, 2011). Additionally, as Mercer (2002) argues, this use of language by students should be understood as their attempts and efforts at thinking through their problems (in this case stressors and pressures) together. While they may not always have the tools and time to solve for these pressures what this form of communication offers the students is some form of exercise of control, however, light over the circumstance (Mercer, 2002).

Although used as a response and form of expression in stressful circumstances it is useful to highlight as did Westwood and Rhodes (2007), that humor should be considered a highly meaningful aspect of not only student life but human life as a whole. Plester (2009) takes this further when explaining that sharing in humor with our peers or in the workplace contributes to wellbeing in that it aids in managing stress. While it may not work as a tool to fully alleviate the stress and tension present what it did do for my participants was offer a moment of laughter which helps to release small bits of the tension. To this end, Ariel expressed in text:

*“It is funny it really is but... Sometimes we use it like an escape from the reality coz like, when something is really difficult to deal with or even think about you don’t really want to have to focus on the hard part, you’d rather escape it through just laughing about it. I think or rather I know, I don’t know if I read it somewhere or was told but like it helps you know it’s a real way of making sense of the situation.”*

Wasserman (2020) supports this claim in arguing that humor and laughter could be understood as a coping mechanism. Viewed as a coping mechanism, the use of laughter should not take away from the stress at hand but could rather be seen as a way to nervously laugh about the lack of control over the situation or prospect of regaining the control. Thus, in making sense of or addressing the memes, phrases, and jokes used by students it is important to understand that they should be viewed as symbols of a student’s agency and resilience in matters and circumstances that are otherwise unbearable (Wasserman, 2020). What these tools of communication in this case offer the students is a manner in which to escape and distance themselves from the circumstance momentarily. When speaking through use of social media and UCT justkidding during the time of remote distance learning Thando shared:

*“I think our best tool throughout this period has been social media and the jokes and memes. We are literally keeping each other going by making each other laugh. Like sometimes my belly aches from laughing at these things and situations I am in. I needed it; I think we all do. It is hard to be isolated when under so much stress and pressure. I like that I can laugh about it and I like that I can make my friends laugh because I know how stressed they must be feeling too.”*

Lebo echoed this feeling in stating:

*“I have a group chat with some of my peers, we share academic related memes, it’s very funny but more than being funny it’s appropriate because everyone is in the same boat. I appreciate it so much because it reminds me that it’s not just me. Like, it’s not really on me you know, I am not doing something wrong to be going through this, we are all in the same boat. We take different subjects, we go to different institutions, but we are all facing high stress levels we all go through it, it is not just me.”*

Later she continued:

*“Imagine not having the comfort of these phrases and memes, we’d be so isolated we’d drown by ourselves. It’s sad to say but messy loves company, it’s easier to be stranded at sea with peers than it is on your own. Imagine doing this alone {laughs}.”*

These statements made by the students indicate the argument made by Moran and Hughes (2006), that humor becomes important as it houses the ability to enhance communication and facilitate social support for those who make use of it. Plester (2009) agrees in explaining that humor is an important tool as sharing in jokes and laughter with peers creates positive effect which aids in building relationships. For students who are under immense pressure and stress joking about these situations creates a space in which they are able to bond and this aids in their building of friendships. It was the lack of the space to communicate and bond with peers in this way that left Nadia isolated and unable to meaningfully position herself within this space while working from home and before the devastating fire that forced momentary disruption of regulations that allowed her to make friends (further discussed in chapter 4).

Wasserman (2020) highlights that humor may often be useful in stressful uncertain circumstances to convey that although things are horrible or that it is ‘absurd’ to be feeling that particular way, things are ok because we are not in it alone but rather, we are all in it together. In this way, we then begin to understand that these often witty and humorous phrases, memes, and gifs become useful tools for students not only because they offer a softer manner in which to share heavy circumstances, but further because they allow for an easing of tension at the moment which further allows for a bonding and building of relationships and communities of support. This particular form of communication and jokes between peers can then be considered useful in shortening the distance and distant feelings students were facing through the time of the pandemic. These jokes however do not take away from the circumstance at hand but rather build a community in which to harness the necessary energy and motivation to continue to push through. We see this when Thando expressed:

*“We laugh in order not to cry but jokes aside it also just makes you feel like you’re not feeling this alone and we need that, it’s how you keep going. Don’t get me wrong it’s good to cry but we don’t always have the space and time also it’s a lot harder to come back from a cry than it is a laugh, you know, you laugh and then you keep going.”*

Palesa agreed stating:

*“They are definitely useful because they are easy not only to use but to hear so it creates a sort of safe space for us to come together and share and listen in ways that are not too heavy on anyone. Like I don’t feel like I’m burdening my friends. It’s just a safe space like speaking and sharing in this way does not create further harm to anyone so you feel comfortable to come in and share.”*

Interestingly Nathi takes this further in exclaiming:

*“They are jokes and they are funny, but they are not just jokes, they are passive jokes. They are passive jokes because they’re sort of made from real life stress and we can all so clearly relate to them. But we cannot do anything about the situation at least not right in that moment or any time soon, so we just laugh it off.”*

Taking this notion into consideration we begin to understand that students are aware that partaking in meme and gif sharing and speaking through use of phrases such as ‘in the pits’ does not offer a direct solution to the matter at hand. Rather what is offered to the student through these tools of language and communication is a release of tension, a creation of community, and a manner in which to live through and speak of the experience in ways that will not allow for a disruption of their daily tasks. In addressing notions of burden among students it is important to understand the term as not only referring to a heavy load (Oxford English Dictionary); but in conversation as something that may become taxing or encumbering on peers. In this way, the lighter-hearted nature and laughter of these memes and phrases as opposed to detailed explanation allows for a sharing of emotion and experience with just enough distance for both parties as to not create or allow space for their capacities to be further impeded. In understanding the rules of utterance students then lean into the notion of being passive in accepting that the circumstance is a part of the experience that need not be acted on right in that moment. Importantly, this use does not mean that students are not looking to work through and solve the stress at hand but rather that these tools form short term releases from tension to keep the students functioning. This as Justine shared:

*“We received emails saying that we could book online counselling sessions, this was a while back though. I decided to do it but at the time they were fully booked, which made sense. A few weeks ago, I received a call that I can now book my session, so I did. I attended that one session and not a single one since. It’s not that I think I don’t need it because I do, I just don’t have the time or space to deal right now I have so many tests this week. And it’s odd, like things I thought I was fine with all came bubbling up not just in the session but for a week after and I had to just make the decision to set it aside because I can’t right now, I just can’t. I thought I might try revisiting all of that during vac, but I don’t think vac offers enough time for me to deal and I cannot afford to come back already crumbling under all of these things. {laughs} So, I guess it’s something I’m saving for when I have time, space energy and I guess the finances to afford a breakdown, I just can’t right now.”*

Palesa further added:

*“I think although funny, what we say and the way we choose to say it should be taken seriously. I mean, you don’t have a whole community of people relating to just one image because it’s funny. It’s serious we all clearly face bigger deeper issues or let’s say stressors. For now, it helps that sharing in understanding creates a moment to laugh which feels good and I know I cannot take on anyone else’s stress and nor do I expect them to take mine on but at some point, someone has got to realize we are not always ok, we’re pretending”*

The above shows that behind each phrase, meme, and gif (especially those pertaining to university contexts and stress) is a reality that students have expressed they are not always able to address at the given time. Frustratingly, they have shared that due to making jokes and laughing about their various pressures their realities are often taken for granted or ignored because of the way in which they have come to poke light at it. It, therefore, becomes important for all those who surround institutional spaces and students to take note of and validate the experience of students even if their expressions come in the form of playful and witty memes. This is supported by Wasserman (2020) who put forth that if we understand how students make use of humor to allay their stress and fears it is easier for us to find appropriate responses to their concerns, circumstances, and calls for help.

Thus, in conclusion, it was found that students’ use of humorous memes, phrases, and gifs are useful not only as shorthand ways to convey their experiences, but they are also useful tools in offering students the ability to speak about their stress and pressure in ways that are easier to ‘digest’, discuss and make sense of. This as their form of language and communication through, phrases, gifs, and memes allow for a distancing from the personal anxieties surrounding their stress. Which provides for an ease and comfortable manner through which to share their experiences in conversations, in which they both contribute to and find a digestibility within what they share, say, and respond to. Use of humor through these forms of communication also allow for a building of community and relationship between peers which aid in the release of tension. Friends are then able to share in laughter around the matters at hand that allow them the break, breath, and motivation necessary to keep going throughout the semester. The following chapter takes the form of an ethnography detailing the fire that occurred in April of

2021. It provides a glimpse of the way in which the language discussed in this chapter was utilized to navigate and breathe through a traumatic experience.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Breathing through a Fire<sup>8</sup>: Panic, Humor, and a Break from Academic Pressures**

On April 18<sup>th</sup> devastation hit Cape Town as a fire broke out on Table Mountain. Big gusts of uncontrolled flame not only burned through some of the mountain range but also destroyed the iconic Rhodes Memorial restaurant as well as damaged areas of the University of Cape Town campuses (Walters, 2021). Immediate action taken was to evacuate all hikers and persons within the vicinity and nearby areas. This evacuation included those students and their residences on and around the University of Cape Town. This chapter takes the form of an ethnography, firstly detailing this experience for various students through a single narrative that serves to bring together all their voices and panic. Secondly, it reflects on the experiences of each participant to show how this moment of fire and suffocation, while traumatic, provided a breath, a lightness and a freshness to students who were already suffocating under the pressure of academics and online learning. In entering this space, it may be useful to note that the humor expressed through this chapter falls under the category of psychoanalytical humor (Plester, 2009 p.90). This is a category of humor coined by Freud (1905) as encompassing elements of repression and suppression, created around stress and tension with the aim of offering a sense of relief and release. I argue that while everyone experiences and deals with trauma in differing ways, what was useful for many students during this time was giving in to the humor amongst the smoke. I further argue that the expressions and laughter shared should be viewed as a way to make sense of and cope with the event that took place (Wasserman, 2020).

I recall smelling the fire first, at a distance<sup>8</sup>, before all went awry; I remember thinking “hmm I wonder who was prepping a fire for lunch”. Within seconds it went from smelling like someone getting ready to have a chilled Sunday to smelling like burning. I cannot even describe it—it was deep, woody, and dark—and by the time I shuffled to my window, all I saw was smoke. It felt far but somehow it was ‘in my room’. I don’t even recall who spoke to me first, but I can still hear the siren of the intercom announcing that we should evacuate and some Screams, and then just silence. I don’t know if the scream I heard was sheer panic or if it was the type of excitement and shock, the kind that plays around when one has no idea what is happening yet having to quickly gather your thoughts and belongings. After this, it all played

---

<sup>8</sup> The physical space between the upper campus residence and the fire which was growing on the mountain side

out over social media. Everyone's status was covered in thick grey smoke—you could smell it, taste it, and really feel the heat from watching the play-by-play images and texts across social media. In hindsight, it may be because I was actually in it. It all happened very quickly from noticing the fire to being evacuated to various areas around Town. We went from seeing and suffocating amidst the smoke to seeing and suffocating from the sight of our peers' sitting on roads and buses full of unsure people about what would happen next. Some students had time to get a few personal belongings, and some had nothing but the clothes on their back. I don't know how else to describe it other than to say that the scene looked like the materialization of panic. Students were crying, some buried deep in their phones. Others were sitting on street curbs completing assignments. It was like the end of the world was called forth and we didn't really know how to react. I don't really think we had time to react and while speaking about this now makes it feel like this all happened within minutes, if not seconds. The duration of this panic lasted hours yet felt like years at the time. Those who could sought out friends in the nearby area but soon these areas were evacuated, and we were back to where we started, stranded awaiting some form of resolution.

It felt long at the time but based on the number of students displaced, I think placement and aid came fairly quickly. UCT and the City of Cape Town came together in a way I had never seen before. Pretty soon the loud sound of speaking and helicopters flying above simmered down to murmurs in the hotel waiting rooms as conversations and friendships built and solidified. Pretty soon those of us who were able went from being panicked and afraid for ourselves to helping those around us who needed it. I think we needed that; it was good to feel somewhat capable in a helpless situation. We were loaning our phones, helping students contact and locate their friends and peers whom they had been separated from during the hustle and bustle of moving around and finding a place to sleep. This took all night. Luckily, most students were settled and safe by the early hours of Monday morning. It had been quite an ordeal and you could still hear shivers of panic, not only in the various accommodations but within the social media posts. We all monitored the fire and updates from our departments like our lives depended on it and in a way it did, academically at least. As a matter of fact, I don't recall sleeping that night, nor do I recall even calling my family to let them know what had happened. I was stuck somewhere between generally forgetting and not wanting to alert, and therefore panicked my mother. I laugh, as I am writing, at the way I am so calmly speaking about the happenings and heroics of the event when I am pretty sure my lack of calling and sleep were a direct result of the panic I felt. A heaviness, I think for a minute there I felt just as dark, heavy, and scary as I

must have choked several times and not just because of being caught in the fire. Because I was not, the university and rescue teams acted fast, and I was out before the fire actually hit the campus and residents. While I am aware that a few students aided in putting out the fire at Fuller Hall, a student residence, I wasn't one of them. So, the choking could not have been due to being lost and caught up physically in the smoke, but rather those few moments where my panic and helping of others slipped from being unsure and scared to the reality of how serious this situation was and what could have happened.

I choked the way I am sure so many fire fighters and students choked, unable to breath for maybe seconds, for others minutes. I did not want to choke so I remained occupied. In this moment we see the physical and emotion efforts of students to distract and distance themselves from the trauma and uncertainties which ensued from the experience of the fire. Being occupied only lasts so long. So, while I was safe and in a beautiful hotel, I still panicked. I struggled to make sense of what had happened and what was happening. I think I finally caught my breath on Tuesday evening. As the fire was slowly controlled and eventually completely contained, I think our emotions spilled over awaiting guidance, resolution, some form of anything from the university. The fire again happened swiftly but I think when you shift your focus from the reality of a fire and displacement to the fact that we were still students with tests and deadlines, it was easy to become panicked and stressed again in another way. I think this one hit worse than a fire. A fire can be contained. It was contained and although scary that wasn't on me or on us: *"you know, we would be alright, we would be looked after"*. I cannot say the same about my academics. *"That falls on me if I miss a deadline if I fail a test—that's on me and I bear the consequences"*. In a way, although chaotic, the period of fire offered a shield from the stress of academic pressure. For a minute, there we were stressed about our lives, our belongings, our peers, and then our academics. This brief moment of pause and reconfiguration of priorities echoes a statement made by Rambo (2015), that life following a traumatic and overwhelming event is often fundamentally changed. Although momentarily for these students as they soon resumed concern over their studies, what this reconfiguration shows was a distancing from students' usual priority and understanding of being a student before anything else (see Mathobie, 2018). For this short time concerns, stressors and priorities shifted to the personal when usually, it's academics first, everything else after. This sentiment was echoed by Nandi at the start of this field work when she shared:

*“We’re stressed, we know we are distressed but we have no choice but to focus on our academics and neglect our emotional and mental health. We are basically just meeting deadlines and it’s too much to handle but we cannot afford easing up”.*

So, heavier than a fire that rampaged on the mountain, campus, and areas beyond this was a suffocation that impacted me deeply, directly, and personally. It did not matter that the fire was outside of my control, it did not matter that I was panicked, unsettled, and displaced, what mattered was my ability to complete my academic responsibilities. The reality was like a wave crashing on the coastline—hard fast and beyond containment. And just like that, I was no longer ok. It was stressful in many ways; we were all obviously concerned for ourselves but then also concerned for those who now had no way to complete work as they could not take their books or laptops, nor did they have access to campus labs. I think we also found some form of comfort in this. As many students had no access this meant, by some grace of human nature and concern, we needed to be offered some sort of concession but until this was made official, we were stuck. Feelings shifted, as with all things we tried to focus on anything outside of the sheer panic of academic demise.

This attempt at a change in focus brought us to the first joke around this fire, it read; “I never knew hell could burn down”. I remember laughing to the point of tears when I saw it, crying because of the sheer stupidity of the joke but also because I understood every bit of it - word for word. Laughing about this offered some relief but it was also somewhat contested as many students’ and faculty also experienced various emotions of loss due to the damage which was found to occur on campus. Monday and parts of Tuesday were covered in all sorts of emotion. It was hard to decipher which counted for more, but it was clear that it all contributed to panic and lack of communication. Then it happened. It was announced that the normal running of class and academic activities was to be suspended for the week while the damage was being assessed. Suddenly, we found ourselves in hotels with the easing of academic responsibilities, and restaurants all over Cape Town offered us warm meals three times a day. I’d say that’s when things really changed, soft life emerged, and it was like this event that so clearly devastated so many suddenly offered up a break for many UCT students. Again, in this instance what is noted is another form of distance interplay for students. As they were now offered a physical distance from campus, their studies and stress whilst being comforted and cared for by the City

of Cape town, the university and many residents of the area offering help. All you needed was a student card and you had access to a lifestyle beyond usual conception.



**Image obtained from UCT just kidding Instagram account**

The above image encapsulates the transition that occurred from panic and concern to being calm, relaxed, and cared for in many hotels and venues across Cape Town. While for many staying in a hotel was not that grand or new, for others this was a first. Couple that with meals all around town, we were offered a chance to be tourist in a city which we usually occupied as students, stressed out and unable to make use of in this way. This traumatic event quickly shifted from a stressful and debilitating event to a break, a breath, a much-needed escape from the academic pressure we were all under. In this instance, students were then distanced from campus and their studies while being offered a closer experience of Cape Town and a space in which to build relationships, which highlights a shortening of the distance between students which offered for more spaces for friendship creation. With this in mind, while Sunday was grey and heavy, and covered in smoke and stress, ushering in a Monday that was chaotic and full of emotion, by Tuesday afternoon the sky was bluer, brighter. The sun was out, and we could finally breath. So, maybe we had inhaled a bit of smoke and ash to get here but, here, was great and worth it to many.

While the narrative above unveils a somewhat seamless adjustment in emotion from the breakout of the fire to its containment, for many UCT students the reality and shift from this

moment to varying emotional reactions over the week did not happen seamlessly. Ariel and Nadia were the first two participants I received responses from on Sunday evening. Both still rattled at the time, they shared that while safe they were scared. Nadia expressed:

*'I am safe, but I am not ok. I am trying to find some humor in this to be sane, but I am struggling. I am finally at the hotel now, but we have been sitting here for hours, the hallways are full, the place is just packed with hundreds of students. I have not eaten today we are still awaiting word of where we will be sleeping tonight, its 20:30 right now seems it will still be hours.'*

For both students, this was particularly stressful as they are first year students and in Cape Town for the first time. Nadia had yet to make any friends and was reliant on her friends from home for comforting words while she sat in the full buzzing hotel waiting area. A week after the fire, Ariel texted:

*"The fire was very scary for me; I was lucky to have friends with me and family who supported me and tried to cheer me up, but it was traumatic. I was not able to take any of my things I was so scared I laugh at the jokes I see about it because I understand and it was nice to have a break from campus, but the truth is I am actually speaking to someone at student wellness because it was too much for me."*

While various conversations that took place on Sunday and even Monday followed this same tone, by Tuesday a turn in focus started to appear. On Tuesday morning Nathi, finally responded by sharing a meme she had seen on the UCT just kidding Instagram page.



**Image taken from UCT just kidding Instagram page.**

This was the second of many jokes and memes that were shared across many platforms among peers. The most popular at the time were witty memes that played on the use of UCT student cards to access ‘soft life’ in and around the city:



**Image taken from UCT just kidding Instagram page**

‘Soft life’<sup>9</sup> here referred to the lack of stress and academic responsibilities, coupled with the experience of luxury and leisure of staying in 3–5-star hotels in and around the City of Cape Town, with access to multiple sites and restaurants free of charge all with the flash of a UCT student card. It’s important to note that these offers were reserved for UCT students who were directly impacted by the fire (residence students). It was the effort of the university, and many vendors around Cape Town to help provide support and relief to the students in distress. What the humor of these various memes at the time offered students was the ability to lighten the mood and distress caused by the circumstance of the fire (Romero & Cruthird, 2006). Further, it allowed for a psychological distancing from the traumatic event which allowed them to lean fully in to celebrating the allowance of a break from academic pressures (McGraw *et al*, 2012).

The memes and start of ‘soft life’ also started a trend of students sharing and creating their own playful memes depicting the various things they were partaking in, in, and around the city. The tagline #softlife became prominent at this time and shifted the focus from jokes around having campus burn to the luxury lifestyle made accessible due to the fire. Along with this shift came a focus on the academic break offered by the university. Rather than spend time stuck in hotel rooms students made use of this time as a full escape from their academic responsibilities which allowed for easing of the anxiety they had felt. But as students experienced and expressed this relief sharing jokes about the event more freely, many a resident outside of the university who had their homes burn or their property damaged expressed a lack of support and disappointment in the humor shared by students. It thus becomes central to highlight as Plester (2009) stated, that the use of humor in stressful or traumatic times does not affect necessary change to the extremity of the event but rather makes it feel more bearable. For students this use was of particular importance as speaking and joking in this way is found to be socially embedded in their experience with and navigation through being university students. Grugulis (2002) further supports this, stating that the use of humor allows the users to distance themselves from the emotions involved in the circumstance. This distancing and use humor filled language and phrases were something offered to students through the shared experience and social media access that helped to mediate and guide a wide array of emotions experienced by hundreds of students and faculty members. During not only this time but the period of distance learning the UCT just kidding platform proved to be a central tool in creating a community for students.

---

<sup>9</sup> Urban dictionary definition: A stress free and expensive lifestyle which only requires spending money and looking good.

Various participants agreed with this stating that they were unsure where or what this time would have been without the jokes and comfort spread across the social media platform. When asked about the page Justine texted:

*“UCT just kidding is doing the most hey. Like I think they are holding us together because I know I am falling apart, and it helps to be able to take a break from the stress and see how everyone can relate. THEY ARE CARRYING US!!”*

What the platform offered students not only during the time of fire but throughout distance learning was a space in which to feel understood. When expressing sentiments of being held together and carried by the platform students express that it was a space in which they were able to distance themselves from the anxieties that surrounded their stress whilst shortening the distance between one another and relationships of shared experience. In so doing they were able to laugh, to breathe, and experience a few moments of relief as this platform formed a space in which they were able to fall back on knowing they could stand back up and keep going. The sense of community stirred up in this space highlights what Wasserman (2020) said, that while jokes do not change the situation at hand what they offer up is an easing of the ‘sting’ present in the stressful situation.

Once students were able to look beyond the physicality of the fire, they were able to see it as a symbol and newer form of distancing by means of a break, relief, and in this case a breath amidst the smog and stress of their everyday lives. Shortly after the fire in a conversation, Justine exclaimed:

*“To be honest, if I looked out the window and there was another fire, I wouldn’t mind at all. It was scary but it really provided a necessary break in a way no midsemester vac would ever be able to. I know the way we joke about it is not comfortable for everyone, but I think people should make more of an effort to see it from our side”.*

When asked about how appropriate it was to speak about the fire as having been a positive for many, Nathi stated:

*“In a different context it would probably be ludicrous to even imagine joking about or wishing for another like WHAT!?”*. However, based on an understanding of the context and the relief it offered she felt it shouldn’t really be taken too seriously in stating, *‘It’s not like we are plotting to start a fire. We are laughing about what has occurred we are grasping at every little bit of air still left in the memory of the fire’*”.

In expanding this reasoning Lebo explained:

*“I think it’s ok to joke about because while scary, no one was hurt, and because the university already had the infrastructure to work online, we got a break and bounced back pretty quickly. So offensive, or not, it happened perfectly. At any other time, it may have been even more devastating which may have changed things, but the time and place just worked.”*

Aside from the clear break and breath offered to the many affected students, the fire created a stage upon which many students could create friendships. For first year students, this proved to be the most central impact of the fire. This as the shortening of the distance between friendships allowed for greater ease and navigation of not only the stress and trauma of the fire but also the experience of online learning for students. This was particularly meaningful for Nadia who, at the start of fieldwork had expressed she is struggling with adjusting to campus as she had no friends and hardly ever saw anyone other than in passing when collecting her meals: meals which she, due to lack of wanting to be seen alone, often ate by herself in her residence room. While there were multiple students in the same predicament in her classes online learning meant that they were not only distant but distanced from engaging with one another as online learning was limited to logging on, attending tutorials, and watching pre-recorded lecture videos in isolation. Due to the pandemic as well as the room she was assigned, she had no roommate, and the one friend she had made upon moving in, was moved to a different residence leaving her isolated once again. As a result. Nadia expressed feeling alone and that before the fire she was considering dropping out and going back home as the pressure all felt ‘too much’. In this instance, we see that the distancing from home coupled with being distanced and feeling distant from peers resulted in Nadia feeling unable to meaningfully locate herself within the space. While friends and family from home were able to plead for her to stick it out a bit longer, the real saving grace arose with the fire and displacement.

On the evening of Sunday, the 18<sup>th</sup>, Nadia shared that she was stressed, scared, and not mentally and emotionally ok. Once settled into a room and after having had a meal we spoke again. She stated: that she felt comforted in the support and company of the students she was surrounded by. By this point, we witness that a shortening of the distance between peers began to create a sense of ease for Nadia. Like many others, Monday was still somewhat stressful as she waited for the last of her departments to communicate the action they would be taking. Most of this day she shared was spent in the hotel room speaking to her roommate whom she had then befriended. By Tuesday afternoon, once she was sure she had no further academic responsibilities, her roommate had introduced her to some more students, some of whom she later learned were registered in the same classes. For the remainder of the week, Nadia and her group of friends explored Cape Town, relaxed by the hotel poolside, and participated in the sharing of various of the #softlife trends.

During the week and with the help of her newfound friends, after two months of discomfort, Nadia finally settled into Cape Town and university culture. Sharing that although the fire at first had put her in a worse position than just being alone at university, she was thankful that it had happened. However stressful, it had helped in offering a space in which she could bond and meet people on common grounds outside of the pressure of distance. In this regard she shared:

*“It felt organic, I didn’t have to try hard to fit in or bond it just happened they understood, I understood, and we just clicked.”*

This shift in focus aided in her shifting away from viewing the event as a stressful difficult time to being one that was light and positive in that it afforded her so much in return. Within the first week of the fire Nadia shared various memes and jokes around what had happened, later exclaiming that while stressful at first, the fire and as a result displacement offered her a chance to meet up and become comfortable in an unknown space, which consequently led to her decision to stick out her time as a student at UCT. Through this encounter and navigation, we see that the psychological distancing from the traumatic incident that left way for the use of humor facilitated the mediation of reducing the threat that was experienced on the day of the fire (McGraw, Warren, Williams & Leonard, 2012).

In conclusion, this chapter has detailed how a moment of trauma, devastation, and breathlessness allowed for a break and a moment of release and breath for many UCT students affected in the fire. This chapter has shown the transition from panic at the outbreak of the fire and start of evacuations to a focus on the stress of academic responsibilities among those displaced. Once safely settled in accommodation and news of the containment of the fire was announced, another shift of focus was described as students went from being stressed and scared to making jokes and poking light at the outbreak of the fire and its reach to various areas of the campuses. Amidst this relief, the complexity of emotion was also expressed as many experienced a mourning and loss for the parts of campus impacted by the fire. Further, it has shown that the stress and pressure ensued due to the fire again shifted when students were given the week off from academic responsibilities. The relief was presented/expressed through many social media post, memes, and jokes, and eventually the #softlife trend. Beyond being a moment of relief, the fire also allowed for a space for many students to connect and create friendships. In this moment changing the various constraints and possibilities allowed for through changes in distance. Overall, through the mix of emotion, pressure, and stress this chapter has ethnographically detailed a necessary pause and break made possible through the fire yet made sense of through memes and jokes that allow for student culture and community.

## **Chapter 5**

### **Conclusion**

Making sense of and navigating institutional spaces along with the stress and pressure of being in pursuit of a successful future is not an easy adjustment for all. What this thesis has done was to explore the ways in which students are able to make sense of and navigate their varying emotions and stress through a particular language and code they have picked up and make use of in this space. Overall, through this thesis, I have argued that students often embody and make sense of these ranges of distress linguistically through their use of memes, gifs, statements, and phrases of emotion as ways in which to express their distress and mediate these experiences through humor. In this way use of this particular language and humor should be understood as a coping mechanism for the students. The use of humor or passive jokes as they have been deemed by the students further ensure that they do not become a burden unto one another. Further, based and built on shared experience, emotions, and understanding it provides a community and safe space in which students are able to enter share and with which students are able to meaningful embed themselves within the institutional spaces. On a personal level, it was also found to allow for a distancing from the anxiety of the stress or circumstance that offers the student the necessary space to laugh and then keep moving.

The importance of communication and community building through this practice of language use and expression was highlighted in chapter 2. The covid-19 pandemic disturbed and caused a distancing that left students isolated, increasingly stressed, and unable to access their communities of support. This disruption and distancing worked on multiple levels as it not only distanced students physically from the campus spaces but created further distance from peers and support which resulted in a break of community and loss of language and expression among students. Once regulations change and students were able to regain a proximity to campus, we saw the emergence and importance of the online community for students. Overall, this chapter through exploring the various distance and distant feelings highlighted the importance of relationships and communities of understanding for students as these become important spaces and sites with which to navigate and create meaningful experiences for university students.

Building from this chapter and paying particular attention to the online community which was formed and the way in which students spoke of and expressed themselves we are introduced to

chapter 3. Through this chapter, I argued that students make use of shorthand phrases, statements of emotions, humorous memes, and gifs as a coping mechanism to navigate their distress and the institution environment. In this way, students are often aware of their distress but utilize these tools of language to passively joke through and make sense of their experiences in a way that is not too taxing and allows them the distance necessary to continue working. Importantly, the use of jokes and humor allowed for a positive effect in relationship building and creations of communities of understanding. While laughing through and about their various pressures and stress did not change the circumstance at hand - what it did allow the students was moments of relief amidst the tension. Through this chapter, we also begin to see the importance of the university's online meme page UCT just kidding, which in many ways throughout this period allowed students to straddle the distance and distant feelings they were facing. Overall, this chapter argued and showed that making use of this form of communication is essential to the students' abilities to position themselves with the institutional space.

Chapter 4 then took the form of an ethnographic glimpse into how this form of communication materialized and became useful for the students to navigate the trauma of the April 2021 fire. While detailing the events that took place on the day and throughout the week of this fire, I have highlighted the interplay of humor in allowing for a shift of focus which allowed students a necessary break and moments to breath. In this chapter, we saw that students often actively sought humor in stressful events and times in attempts to regain some form of control and sanity amidst the smoke (Mercer, 2002). Further through close examination of Nadia's narrative and experience of the fire (although traumatic) we begin to see how this particular use of language and humor aided in the building of friendships and solidifying of belonging within the institutional space. In this moment changing the various constraints and possibilities of navigating and making sense of the fire allowed changes in distance which aided in the student's ability to shift focus from stress and panic to a break, breath and relaxation during this time.

This dissertation has contributed to scholarship by focusing on the intersection between humor and distance as theoretical concepts. The culturally embedded use and understanding of humorous memes and gifs, and the use of distress laden phrases is something that students sought out to both create and consume in order to provide distance while simultaneously shrinking distance. Covid's lockdown distanced many from this humor and for first years

distanced them from forming community. Distance both lengthened and shortened in specific ways as remote learning placed students in direct contact with family and domestic obligations. Family could not understand the humor or the phrases of distress, leading to a distancing from loved ones (despite proximity) and desire to return to campus. On another level, the chaos of the wildfire and its ability to suffocate well after the smoke had cleared allowed different humor to be created and a distance from academic stress. This allowed students a break and shrinking of the distance between peers. In breaking the rules of the covid-19 regulations and bringing the students physically closer in proximity to one another this distancing from campus (due to the fire and emergency responses) allowed for the creation of new friendships which were found to be of utmost importance to students' abilities to adapt to the university space. The use of humor through memes, phrases, and gifs is found to be a central aspect to taking on the stress and pressure of being a student as these tools not only aided in the navigation of distance but further assisted in allowing moments of relief and release of tension for its users.

Overall, this research and exploration into the ways in which students communicate and make sense of their experiences and various levels of pressure and stress become important when trying to address and assist students at this vulnerable stage and pursuit of a future. While students through use of this humor are able to support of one another and gain some networks and skills necessary to navigate their experiences enough to get them by; it is essential that their peers, educators, and families have a real understanding of what they are going through. While it was clear that students are not in the position to always provide detail it then becomes important that those around them are able to validate and understand the concerns and emotions mediated by the use of a simple meme. Students are known to often shy away from help seeking behaviors, due to lack of time and/ or understanding of which circumstances warrant further assistance (Mathobie, 2018) which makes it difficult to offer or provide assistance to those in need. Thus, it becomes important that we are able to understand how it is that the students make use of these memes, humorous gifs, and distress laden phrases to ally their stress and fears as this would allow for a creation of appropriate responses to the students concerns, circumstances, and calls for help (Wasserman, 2020). In this way and with more understanding of the use and importance of this form of expression for students we may begin to bridge the gap of access and success for all who enter university spaces regardless of background.

This is the purpose and backbone upon which this research was built and explored and although finite in this regard, it should be considered a steppingstone in reaching this goal. This research has its limits and can in no way be considered a general reading for all student experience but rather provided a detailed view of nine women through which to begin to think with and work through the various issues faced by university attending students. In taking this research further it may be useful to recruit students across institutions and beyond undergraduate levels to explore the ways in which what was found here may be a shared experience as well as explore further avenues for creating safe spaces and assistance for the students who need it.

As this thesis explored the language use of students as they navigated distance and stress through the covid- 19 pandemic, I leave the last word to seven of my participants as they contemplate the year and inevitable pressure ahead of them:

*“I think I'm less stressed about this year, right now, because I have just spent time with my family, so I feel refreshed and ready for the academic year. I think it's that thing of people saying once you've been out of the stress and pressure long enough you forget how hard it was but I'm hopeful. Also, I know what to expect academically because it's now my second year and I have learned a lot about the university atmosphere last year so it's not entirely like coming from high school to a new environment”*

*“There is a bit of anxiety because now I'm going to be writing ALL my exams on campus and I also have to attend classes regularly. But I'm also excited because that means I'll get to meet more people and spend time outdoors instead of staring at my laptop for hours (which was somehow what caused my stress). We went through a lot last year; I can't imagine it getting worse, or can it?”*

*“I feel excited to continue with my studies in UCT. I've told myself I'm ready for whatever challenges I'm gonna face here this year...be it academic challenges or mental health issues. I've prepared myself emotionally and mentally to deal with everything. It's also nice to have support the best thing that happened for me last year was making friends when I did. They made this pressure bearable.”*

*“I am not going to lie, going into last year I was very stressed before classes started, I had no idea what to expect and I did not know if I could handle the pressure and learning online. But despite everything I made it, so I think starting out this year I feel somewhat alright. I know I’ll have more work and I know while happy now and that soon things will become too hectic for me to even remember this lightness, but I have my friends and if last year taught me anything it's that I’ll survive.”*

*“I’m very optimistic for this year. It’s my last year of university. I’ll be stressed and I’ll probably cry and laugh a bit too, but this is my 4<sup>th</sup> year. I think I or I hope I’ve covered enough ground to not let the stress knock me too hard. If it does though, I’m sure I’ll get back up again. Whether online or in person I just need to end this so I’m optimistic.”*

*“I anticipate so much stress pressure and change because we are expected to be back in physical classes this year. Honestly, I’m really happy that we’re going back to in person stuff. I feel like I will manage course better on campus and also now that I know how to approach and organize my coursework, I’m quite optimistic. But this is possibly because I’ve just returned home from being on campus for face-to-face plaza day for the first time. It’s just such a good vibe! And it’s made me so optimistic for what this year with in person engagements will be like, we were missing this last year and I think it showed.”*

*“I feel positive for the year ahead. It will be a challenging year as each year has its obstacles. This year it will be going back to class in person. This is stressful as I do struggle with social interaction since COVID-19 arose as I am high risk and unable to receive the jab due to medical complications. There are many things that can arise at any moment and the thought of this is scary. Ultimately, it does not help to stress about what might happen though so I’m trying not to, so perhaps I am trying to be positive but lowkey this year is about to be hectic!. But I am trying to just take this year along with its pressure’s day by day. Academia is intense and overwhelming, and it doesn’t help me to stress before the semester has even begun.”*

## Bibliography

- Ahearn, L. M. (2011). *Living language: an introduction to linguistic anthropology*. Vol. 7. John Wiley & Sons, Ch.1
- Anthropology Southern Africa. (2005). Ethical Guidelines and Principles of Conduct for Anthropologists. *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 28 (3&4). P 142-143
- Bakhtin, M. (1981). *Discourse in the novel. The dialogue imagination*. University of Texas Press.
- Barber, C. L. (1964). *The Story of Language*. Cavey Place, London: Pan Books Ltd.
- Cohen, A. P. (2001). *The symbolic construction of community-key ideas*. ed. sl.
- Davids, N. (2020). UCT's approach to emergency remote teaching and learning. University of Cape Town News. [online]. Available from:  
<http://www.news.uct.ac.za/features/teachingandlearning/-article/2020-08-12-uctsapproach-to-emergency-remote-teaching-and-learning>
- Dyson, R., & Renk, K. (2006). Freshmen adaptation to university life: Depressive symptoms, stress, and coping. *Journal of clinical psychology*, 62(10), 1231-1244.
- Eisenberg, D., Gollust, S. E., Golberstein, E., & Hefner, J. L. (2007). Prevalence and Correlates of Depression, Anxiety, and Suicidality Among University Students. *American Journal of Orthopsychiatry*, 77(4), 534-542. DOI: 10.1037/00029432.77.4.534
- Fischer, a. H., Rotteveel, M., Evers, C., & Manstead, A. S. (2004). Emotional assimilation: How we are influenced by other's emotions. *Current Psychology of Cognition*, 22, 223246.
- Freud S 1905. In: Richards A trans. 1991. *Jokes and their relation to the unconscious*. London, Penguin.
- Grugulis I 2002. *Nothing serious? Candidates' use of humour in management training*.

Human Relations 55(4): 387–405.

Ingold, T. (2016). *Lines: a brief history*. Routledge.

Limlamai, N. (2018). What language communicates: Surfacing language ideology with high school students. *English Journal*, 107(6), 69-74. Retrieved from <https://search.proquest.com/docview/2076932465?accountid=14500>

Lupton, D. (editor) (2020) Doing fieldwork in a pandemic (crowd-sourced document).

Available at:

<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cIGjGABB2h2qbduTgfqribHmog9B6P0NvMgVuiHZCl8/edit?ts=5e88ae0a#>

Marcus, G. (1995). Ethnography in/ of the World System: The Emergence of Multi-Sited Ethnography. *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 24(1). P. 95-117. Available: DOI:10.1146/annurev.an.24.100195.000523.

Marshall, M. N. (1996). Sampling for qualitative research. *Family practice*, 13(6), 522-526.

McGraw, A. P., Warren, C., Williams, L. E., & Leonard, B. (2012). Too Close for Comfort, or Too Far to Care? Finding Humor in Distant Tragedies and Close Mishaps. *Psychological Science*, 23(10), 1215–1223. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23355517>

Mercer, N. (2002). *Words and minds: How we use language to think together*. Routledge.

Monatshana, B., Ilibagiza, G., & R Mathobie, R. (2021) “I have everything I need, but on the other side, these things are redundant”: A photo-essay on transitioning during remote learning at North-West University, *Anthropology Southern Africa*, 44:3, 155-160

Moran, C. C., & Hughes, L. P. (2006). Coping with stress: Social work students and humour. *Social Work Education*, 25(5), 501-517.

- Morey, T., & Taylor, N. (2019). Understanding how undergraduate students experience and manage stress: Implications for teaching and learning anthropology. *Teaching and Learning Anthropology*, 2(2).
- Plester, B. (2009). Healthy humour: Using humour to cope at work. *Kōtuitui: New Zealand Journal of Social Sciences Online*, 4(1), 89-102
- Prensky, M. (2009) "H. Sapiens Digital: From Digital Immigrants and Digital Natives to Digital Wisdom," *Innovate: Journal of Online Education*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 3 , Article 1. Available at: <https://nsuworks.nova.edu/innovate/vol5/iss3/1>
- Rambo, S. (2015). Spirit and Trauma. *Interpretation*, 69(1), 7-19.
- Romero, E. J., & Cruthird, K. W. (2006). The Use of Humor in the Workplace. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 20(2), 58–69. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4166232>
- South African Government (2020). Covid -19: About alert system. Retrieved from: <https://www.gov.za/covid-19/about/about-alert-system>
- Steeg, S., M. & McCarty, T., L. (2012). Autoethnography as Method. *Anthropology and Education Quarterly*, 43(1), P124-126
- Swingler, H. (2020). Only authorized staff and students may return to campus. *University of Cape Town News*. [Online] Available from: <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2020-0707-only-authorised-students-and-staff-may-return-to-campus>
- Tohidian, I. (2008). Examining Linguistic Relativity Hypothesis as One of the Main Views on the Relationship between Language and Thought. *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research*. 38(1): 65-74
- Turner, V. (1969). Liminality and communitas. *The ritual process: Structure and antistructure*, 94(113), 125-30.

Wasserman, H. (2020). Laughter in the time of a pandemic: Why South Africans are joking about coronavirus. *The Conversation*. Available from:

<https://theconversation.com/laughter-in-the-time-of-a-pandemic-why-south-africans-are-joking-about-coronavirus-133528>

Walters, T. (2021) 'Out of control' Table Mountain fire forces UCT evacuation. *Daily Maverick*. [Online] 18<sup>th</sup> April. Available from:

<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2021-04-18-pyrocene-cape-out-of-controlwildfire-rages-on-slopes-of-table-mountain/>

Westwood R, Rhodes C ed. 2007. Humour, work and organisation. London, Routledge.

## Plagiarism declaration

Full names	Roxanne Mathobie
Student number	MTHROX002
Topic of work	Speaking distress out of being: An exploration of memes and expressive phases as jokes and coping mechanisms for university students.

### Declaration

1. I understand what plagiarism is and am aware of the University's policy in this regard.
2. I declare that this Dissertation (e.g. essay, report, project, assignment, dissertation, thesis, etc.) is my own original work. Where other people's work has been used (either from a printed source, internet or any other source), this has been properly acknowledged and referenced in accordance with the requirements as stated in the University's plagiarism prevention policy.
3. I have not used another student's past written work to hand in as my own.
4. I have not allowed, and will not allow, anyone to copy my work with the intention of passing it off as his or her own work.

Signature: R. Mathobie

Date: 10 February 2022