



Communication and Marketing Department
Isebe loThungelwano neNtengiso
Kommunikasie en Bemerkingsdepartement

Private Bag X3, Rondebosch 7701, South Africa
Welgelegen House, Chapel Road Extension, Rosebank, Cape Town
Tel: +27 (0) 21 650 5427/5428/5674 Fax: +27 (0) 21 650 5628

www.uct.ac.za

5 August 2024

UCT's special tribunal introduces AI chatbot to enhance evidence gathering for SGBV survivors



Ronel Koekemoer, the operation manager at GRIT, presented a live demonstration of the Zizu chatbot.

Photo: Robin Thuynsma

In a bid to enhance evidence gathering for better outcomes for sexual and gender-based violence (SGBV) survivors, the University of Cape Town's (UCT) Special Tribunal has reconfigured the Kwanele App – launched in 2023 – to augment processes of reporting and addressing SGBV incidents for better outcomes for survivors.

Now rebranded as Gender Rights in Tech (GRIT), a new addition to the project – an artificial intelligence (AI) chatbot – was unveiled at an event held recently, where project manager, Anne Isaac, hosted GRIT operation manager, Ronel Koekemoer and her team.

This event was marked with a live demonstration session highlighting the features and capabilities of the new AI chatbot, Zizu, which linked to their groundbreaking GBV app [formerly Kwanele].

“My office is the special tribunal that deals with sexual misconduct, racism, and discrimination,” Isaac said as she got the event under way. “It is a very new project that we started in August 2019, and not many universities have a specialised space for sexual misconduct that includes staff and students. Because of the implications, obviously, with labour law that would apply to staff and the administrative law that would apply to students.”

Her mandate, Isaac said, was to draft a procedure that would be compliant in having a single, disciplinary process for staff and students. “And I am incredibly happy to say that that was approved, and we have been doing this now for five years. But we are still new. We are cutting our teeth on a lot of things.”

The team’s work is to equip survivors with a disciplinary process that minimises SGBV. “We try to minimise re-traumatisation in the way that the process unfolds, and a fair process to all parties but it helps survivors come and give their evidence in a way that is comfortable for them. They can stop when they want to,” she explained.

“They can channel the evidence through the panels. They can do so with their cameras off. When a sexual assault occurs, it is one person’s word against another, and survivors are always fighting to prove their cases. What I especially want to link with our work is that this app has a feature to record what is happening when the panic button is activated.”

The app’s unique audio-visual streaming feature allows for 20 seconds of real-time footage that will be captured and sent to responders, enhancing the accuracy and speed of their intervention.

Introducing Zizu

The highlight of the Mandela Month activation was the introduction of Zizu, a generative artificial-intelligence-powered chatbot designed to provide support and advice to GBV survivors. Zizu represents the next phase of GRIT’s technological innovation, offering a private and non-judgmental space for users to discuss their experiences and seek guidance.

“Why do we need a chatbot?” Koekemoer asked the audience. The responses varied but highlighted key advantages, which included less intimidation compared to speaking with a person, complete privacy, and the ability to control the pace of the conversation.

“With a chatbot, you can control the rate of interaction and ensure full privacy,” one attendee noted.

“The development of Zizu was a collaborative effort, involving workshops across the country to gather input on the chatbot’s persona, appearance, and functionality,” Koekemoer continued. “We asked people who they would want to talk to for support. Do they want to talk to a robot or a person? Is that person a man, a woman, non-binary, queer? The result was a chatbot modelled as a friendly and supportive social worker or auntie, a persona that resonated most with users.”

A community effort

The event also served as a live demonstration and testing session for Zizu. Participants were urged to interact with the chatbot, providing feedback on its performance. "We wanted to hear what she is getting wrong. How is she replying? Does she take too long? Are her replies too clunky? We are seeking honest and constructive critiques to refine the chatbot further."

This hands-on approach not only engaged the audience but highlighted the importance of public and societal involvement. This ensures GRIT that the tools they create are truly user-centric and responsive to the needs of GBV survivors.

Technology helping GBV survivors

A UCT alumnus, Koekemoer expressed her gratitude for Isaac's unwavering support and enthusiasm for the project.

"The cornerstone of GRIT's efforts is the Kwanele app, initially launched in November 2022. This mobile application features a pulsating purple panic button, which users can press in emergencies. This sends a message directly to armed response and emergency services free of charge. How many people in South Africa get access to free armed response or free emergency services?"

The power of GRIT

Designed to be user-friendly and accessible, the Kwanele app is free to download and data-free to use, removing barriers for those in need. One of its critical features is the vault, a password-protected space where users can store evidence such as photographs, voice notes, and case details. This information will be stored securely in the cloud for up to 10 years, ensuring that crucial evidence is preserved even if the user's device is lost or damaged.

Additionally, the app includes a directory of localised support services, offering comprehensive resources for users across different regions. From counselling services to emergency contacts, the directory aims to provide support relevant to the user's location.

"The impact of the Kwanele app has been profound. We had 700 subscribers two days ago, and then we had a TikTok video go viral. Now we have nearly 3 000 subscribers," Koekemoer said.

ENDS

Issued by: UCT Communication and Marketing Department

Sisi Qavane

Media Liaison & Monitoring Graduate Intern
Communication and Marketing Department
University of Cape Town
Rondebosch
Cell: (060) 565 6017
Email: Sisi.Qavane@uct.ac.za
Website: www.uct.ac.za