

EVOLUTION OF THE BRAND STRATEGY OF THE METROPOLITAN UNIVERSITY OF CARACAS (UNIMET) DUE TO THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

EVOLUCIÓN DE LA ESTRATEGIA DE MARCA DE UNIVERSIDAD METROPOLITANA DE CARACAS (UNIMET) DEBIDO A LA PANDEMIA DE COVID-19

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Abstract

For this work, research was conducted to identify the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic reputations of the brand of the Metropolitan University (UNIMET, for its name in Spanish) to determine the distinctive characteristics or attributes that it possesses with its primary audiences. The comparison made it possible to decide on the significant changes in the brand strategy caused by the distance education generated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For this purpose, documentary information was analyzed, and interviews were conducted with managers and experts associated with the university. Additionally, two quantitative investigations were carried out through surveys directed to the Comunidad Unimetana (Unimetana Community): students, graduates, professors, and administrative personnel, one before the Pandemic and the second one a year after it, taking significant samples which allowed obtaining statistically valid results.

Keywords: Covid-19, prepandemia, postpandemia, branding strategy, UNIMET.



Resumen

Para este trabajo se realizó una investigación para identificar la reputación prepandémica y postpandémica de la marca de la Universidad Metropolitana (UNIMET), para determinar las características o atributos distintivos que posee con sus principales públicos. La comparación permitió determinar los cambios significativos en la estrategia de marca provocados por la educación a distancia generada por la pandemia COVID-19. Para ello, se analizó información documental y se realizaron entrevistas a directivos y expertos vinculados a la Universidad. Adicionalmente, se realizaron dos investigaciones cuantitativas a través de encuestas dirigidas a la Comunidad Unimetana (Estudiantes, Egresados, Profesores y Personal Administrativo), una previa a la Pandemia y la segunda un año después de la misma, tomando muestras significativas que permitieron obtener resultados estadísticamente válidos.

Palabras Clave: Covid-19, prepandemia, pospandemia, estrategia de marca, UNIMET.

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Introduction

A brand strategy, according to the Spanish Association of Branding Companies (AEBrand), is “the intelligent, strategic, and creative management of all those differentiating elements of a brand’s identity (tangible or intangible).” It must consider the communication channel in which the brand will be positioned and its prominent attributes to determine its promise to transmit to its key audiences. All of this is to establish a practical guide for all marketing activities. Nowadays, brands mainly use digital marketing to connect with their target audience at any time, anywhere, and interactively to increase recognition and loyalty.

The digital revolution has caused the brands of companies, organizations, and institutions to adapt and implement strategies to improve their positioning in the digital media in which they have a presence. All this has made changes in marketing, both strategic and tactical. Higher education institutions are no exception. They have implemented digital media as the basis of their communication with students, professors, employees, alumni, suppliers, sponsoring partners, communities, and supervisory bodies, among the main ones. All these audiences are collectively referred to as the “university community,” which in the case of the Metropolitan University of Caracas is called “Comunidad Unimetana.”

The Metropolitan University of Caracas is one of Venezuela’s most recognized higher education institutions. Its reputation is built upon the quality of its academic program, the high level of preparation of its professors, and the excellence of its facilities. However, its brand has evolved tacitly, driven by the immediate and tactical move rather than a strategic one in the medium and long term. This last fact is the reason for the opportunity to establish a clear, precise, and sustained brand strategy for the university, especially to guide the creation of a digital presence that promotes the interest of different segments of the national and international population in being part of its university community. The words UNIMET and “La Metro” have traditionally been used to refer to the university, with the former formally employed by the official media and the latter informally by students and alumni. In this work, UNIMET is used to refer to its brand.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, between January and April 2020, we conducted a study on the UNIMET brand (Pacheco, I.), covering the trends of higher education institutions and the competitive environment of Metropolitan University. The University’s Institutional Identity Manager was also interviewed, and the study was complemented by surveying a significant sample of the Unimetana Community, allowing us to identify their perceptions regarding the university’s brand and their experience of receiving information from the corresponding social media. The analysis of this first research results lets us set a brand

strategy for UNIMET, which we call pre-pandemic strategy since it was at the dawn of society's adaptation to social distancing and the consequent distance education.

The COVID-19 pandemic was the main protagonist in the 2020 and 2021 years at the global level, which caused "massive confinements and a health crisis never seen before since the Spanish flu pandemic of 1918" (Cordero and Doncel, 2021). This led the world to an adaptation process that would allow the continuation of activities while avoiding the risks inherent in the virus contagion. The consequences of social distancing in universities were empty campuses, the hasty implementation of distance classes, solid implications for the teaching scheme, interaction between students and professors, and the vital role of digital technological infrastructure in education.

Higher education institutions that have succeeded during the pandemic are clear examples of organizations that have evolved to meet the brand promise they offer. The Inter-American Development Bank (2020) reports and affirms that "as a result of forced digitization, most universities have had to digitize curricular content in an accelerated and precarious manner, constricting planning capacity and hindering effective communication channels."

According to Manrique (2020), a healthy digitalization process for university brands implies that their strategic decisions are based on plans that have an emotional impact and find an authentic role between their purpose and the country's needs. He also states the importance of redefining their communication contents to optimize them to "become more relevant and fully capture the attention of stakeholders."

The same report by the Inter-American Development Bank (2020) explains that virtual communities of university brands have been built that create large spaces for interaction among most of their members. They use digital media to share information, feelings, and approaches, among others, about the house of study in which they work. That is why studying these spaces to know the reputation of the brands is a crucial element to be used in strategic marketing strategies.

After 17 months, in September 2021, a year and a half after the beginning of the pandemic, we conducted a second study on the UNIMET brand (Damian, B.), following the same research methodology, to determine if there had significant changes that impacted the pre-Pandemic strategy. In this work, we call the result a post-pandemic strategy. Thanks to the comparative analysis carried out between the results obtained from the two investigations, the perceptual changes were identified, as well as the new expectations of the Unimetana Community, with which UNIMET's branding strategy was adjusted.

The realization of this study was of great interest to us due to the theoretical aspects related to marketing, primarily digital. Among these, it is essential to understand the dynamics of brand strategies of higher education institutions in times of structural changes in the educational model and societal habits, a topic little studied in the Venezuelan university sector.

Methodology

The study conducted to develop the UNIMET brand strategy, pre-pandemic and post-pandemic, was characterized by being descriptive since it detailed the perception of the Unimetana Community to the institution and determined the communication channels of higher education institutions, and based on this, the attributes and positioning were identified. In addition, the differences and similarities with the pre-pandemic strategy were compared in developing the post-pandemic brand strategy.

The investigations supporting this work's conclusions were under the modality of Degree Works of the Universidad Metropolitana (Pacheco, I.) and (Damián, B.). Both followed the same methodological approach of the Branding and Digital Presence research line of the Marketing Department, coordinated by Prof. Cova. The sources of information used in the two investigations were classified as mixed, using qualitative methods based on analysis of documentary information and in-depth interviews with experts. It was complemented by quantitative research, in which data was collected directly from members of the Unimetana Community through electronic surveys that gave statistically valid results. Field data was collected in April 2020 for the pre-pandemic brand strategy research and in September 2021 for the post-pandemic brand strategy research.

The two investigations focused on studying a single variable that referred to the reputation of the UNIMET brand. For this purpose, the attributes of the brand were analyzed, which corresponded to the perception that the Unimetana Community had on the brand, which was measured through the following indicators:

- Brand preference.
- Most valued characteristics or attributes of the UNIMET brand.
- Reasons or motives for choosing the brand over its direct competitors, as defined in the studies.

Regarding the in-depth interviews with experts, for the first research (pre-pandemic), a structured interview was accomplished with the Media Coordinator of the Universidad Metropolitana at that time, Alejandra Rodriguez. This allowed the researchers to inquire about her perspective as an expert in digital media trends for universities, communication strategies, and institution attributes. For the development of the post-pandemic brand strategy, an interview was conducted again with Ms. Rodriguez, who became the University's Institutional Identity Manager. This allowed us to know her perspective on how distance education affected the aspects above that were considered in the pre-pandemic research. In addition, Professor Josymar Carrero was interviewed as an expert on issues related to digital marketing. This contributed to broadening the knowledge of current trends in digital marketing, taking into account the changes caused by distance education and the presence of the UNIMET brand in digital media, mainly in the RRSS. Finally, an interview was conducted with the director of the Educational Innovation and Technology Unit (UITE) of the Universidad Metropolitana, Yuly Esteves. It was advantageous to know her perspective on UNIMET's transformation project during the social distancing and the changes that this has caused in the current perception that the Unimetana Community has about its brand.

Implications of the results

In the quantitative research at the beginning of the Pandemic, an analysis was conducted to understand the reasons for choosing the UNIMET brand over its competitors. The questions were open-ended, interpreting the data of the various words and meanings with brand attributes.

The attributes¹ identified were: Academic Quality, Committed, Diversified, Accessible, Welcoming, Empowering, and Infrastructure. Accessible refers to its geographical location, close to home. Welcoming refers to the pleasant feeling generated by its facilities; it refers to feeling at home. Empowering refers to the fact that it offers the best opportunities in the professional field and allows you to have a network of contacts. Infrastructure refers to the advantages of the campus, such as its laboratories, recreational spaces, green areas, and transportation. Figure 1 presents a graph of these attributes together with a horizontal line showing the average number of mentions.

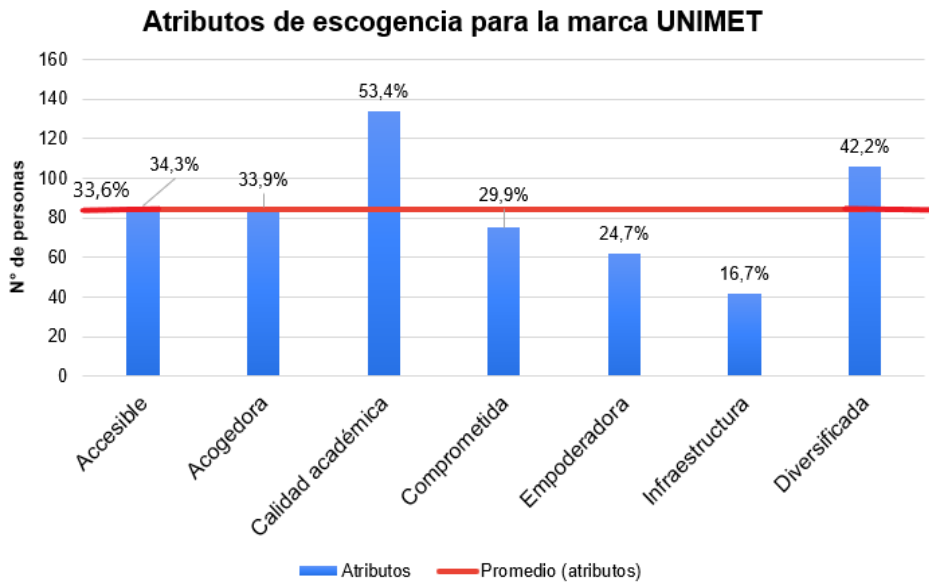


Figure 1. Graph of the attributes of choice of the UNIMET brand.

Source: Own elaboration.

*Translators' note: Labels in the graph are in Spanish. Their corresponding translation is Accessible, Welcoming, Academic Quality, Committed, Empowering, Infrastructure, and Diversified.

¹ A glossary of attributes with definitions in the context of this study is included in the Appendix.

Taking into account the average number of mentions of the attributes, the following stand out for being above average: Academic Quality, Diversified, Accessible, and Welcoming. Likewise, Academic Quality and Diversified, which are attributes related to the institution's study offerings, are shown to be the most relevant. This confirms Ms. Rodriguez's opinion, when in the interview, she stated that the greatest strength of UNIMET is the academic offer and quality of the institution. However, all the characteristics considered by the community were essential for the pre-pandemic brand strategy because they supported the credibility and conviction of its promise.

Next, the respondents' perception of the attributes identified in the competitive environment was analyzed based on the communication in the university's SSNRs. For the analysis of these results, the response alternatives were grouped as follows:

- 1 and 2 (Not at all and A little) as "negative perception".
- 3 and 4 (Somewhat and Fairly) as "positive perception".

Figure 2 shows the graph with the results of positive and negative ratings for each attribute, together with two horizontal lines, which indicate the average positive and negative perception, respectively.

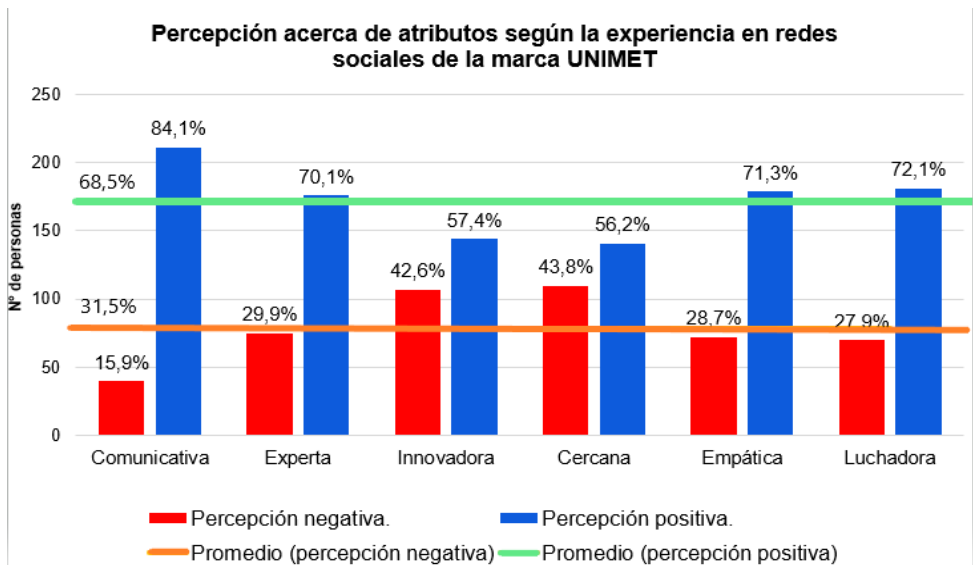


Figure 2. Graph of attributes in social networks of the UNIMET brand.

Source: Own elaboration.

*Translators' note: Labels in the graph are in Spanish. Their corresponding translation is Communicative, Qualified, Innovative, Close, Empathetic, and Determined.

Looking at the users' evaluation of the attributes, it was found that the positive perception prevails over the negative perception. In addition, based on the average of positive perceptions, it was identified that the attributes that present the best rating are in this order: Communicative, Determined, Empathetic, and Expert. In contrast to these, the attributes Innovative and Close, had the highest negative perception.

According to those studied in the best practices in Latin America, the attributes Cercana and Comunicativa are qualities that are repeated as attributes in all the brands evaluated, so they are important to communicate in social media. However, in the responses obtained from the Unimetana Community, the attribute Cercana obtained the lowest positive perception. However, the Communicative attribute stood out, which respondents also consider positive in their interaction with the University's RRSS.

From all the above analysis, it was concluded that the attributes mentioned above are relevant for the higher education sector, when communicated in RRSS by the competitive environment. These were taken into account for the development of UNIMET's pre-pandemic branding strategy.

When conducting the quantitative research after the Pandemic, an analysis was made by crossing the different defined segments of the respondents, which were Students, Graduates, Professors, and Administrative Staff, with the answers related to the brand attributes, which was fundamental to adapt the brand strategy developed for the post-pandemic.

In order to identify the attributes that define the post-pandemic perception of the brand, respondents were asked to define the three characteristics they most valued about UNIMET. Figure 3 represents the total percentage of word mentions associated with each attribute. For the analysis, an average line of the total percentage of all attributes was placed. In summary, they were ranked as follows:

- Pre-pandemic attributes: Academic Quality, Welcoming, Engaging, Empowering, Diversified and Infrastructure. All are above average, with the exception of Infrastructure.
- New attributes that emerged post-pandemic: Resilient, Innovative, Transparent, Sensitive, Responsive and Robust. All are below the average percentage. However, Resilient and Innovative are the ones that had the highest number of mentions.



Figure 3. Attributes of choice for the UNIMET brand.
Source: Own elaboration.

Figure 3 shows that the attributes Academic Quality, Welcoming, Committed, Diversified and Empowering are the ones that are located above the average percentage of mentions. This is why it was concluded that the attributes identified pre-pandemic continue to be valued. However, among the new attributes that emerged during the Pandemic due to social distancing, Resilient is first, followed by Innovative.

With respect to the Accessible attribute, so important in the pre-pandemic strategy, it lost relevance, unlike Academic Quality, which continued to be considered the most important by the respondents of the Unimetana Community. Diversified, Welcoming, Engaging and Empowering continued to be relevant attributes for UNIMET in the post-pandemic. Lastly, among the pre-pandemic attributes is Infrastructure, which, although still mentioned, lost relevance during this period.

Next, the responses on the perception of the UNIMET brand in the University's digital media were analyzed, taking into account the situation of distance education caused by the Pandemic. They were first asked about the distinctive attributes that were defined in the pre-pandemic brand strategy and then about the new post-pandemic attributes.

For the analysis of the results, as in the pre-pandemic analysis, the response alternatives were grouped into 1 and 2 (Not at all and A little) as “negative perception” and 3 and 4 (Very much and Totally) as “positive perception.” According to this classification, a comparison was established between the total percentage of positive perceptions of each attribute and the total percentage of negative perceptions of them. Additionally, an average line was placed for the total percentage of positive perceptions and another for the average of the total percentage of negative perceptions. This applies to the graphs in Figures 4 and 5. In both graphs, positive perceptions prevail over negative perceptions.

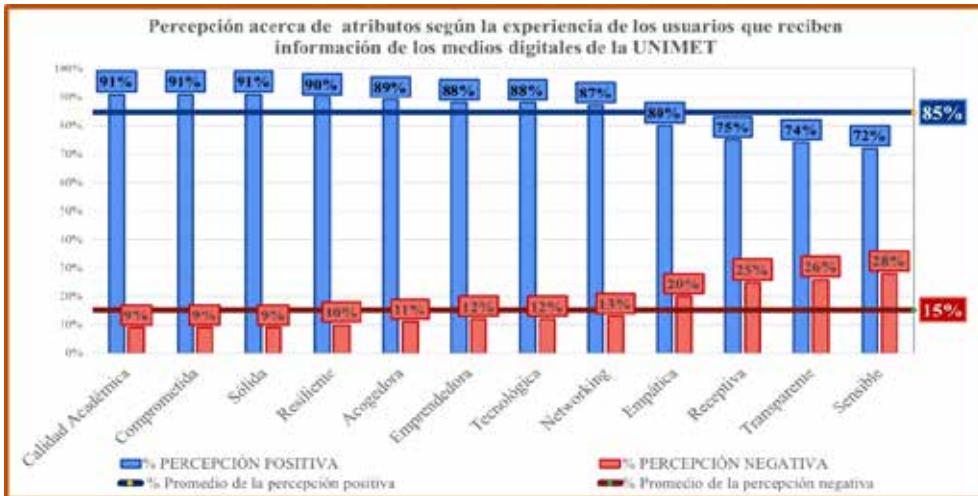


Figure 4. Perception of attributes according to the experience of users who receive information from UNIMET’s digital media.

Source: Own elaboration.

It can be observed that the attributes that have an above-average perception are: Academic Quality, Committed, Solid, Resilient, Welcoming, Entrepreneurial, Technological, and Networking. The latter is associated with the perception that the Unimetana Community has about the academic and professional opportunities offered, referring to Academic Quality, Entrepreneurial, and Networking. These are all aspects of the Empowering attribute. The Welcoming attribute shows that respondents have a perception of UNIMET that associates it as “their second home,” so this is also considered relevant to maintain in the post-pandemic strategy. Finally, Technological and Resilience were considered as new attributes that have become relevant in the perception of the Unimetana Community.

The attributes Empathetic, Responsive, Transparent and Sensitive were those with the highest negative perception. All are related to the values of the University, associated with listening to and understanding the needs of its audience and providing quick and effective responses to them. The implications of these results are explained by the fact that the attributes Transparent, Sensitive, and Responsive are among those with the lowest number of mentions.

An interesting result is that of the attribute Solid, since, although it was previously the one that obtained the worst rating, it was shown that when asked about its perception in the SSRs, it was ranked as the third attribute with the highest positive perception. Resilient and Technological, associated with Innovation, followed this attribute. These are part of the attributes raised for the post-pandemic era that had the highest positive perception. This shows the relevance of responsiveness and the use of technological platforms for the Unimetana Community, during the challenging situation it has gone through due to the social distancing and, therefore, the closure of the campus.

When comparing the perception of students and graduates, as the recipients of the academic offerings and other services provided by the University, vs. professors and administrative staff, as the people who provide such offerings and services, it can be seen in Figure 5 that the positive perception of the former is lower than that of the latter, in all the attributes studied, the only exception being Networking. The average variation in positive perception between these two segments is 10%, showing the need to reinforce them in the post-pandemic positioning. The greatest difference in this variation was seen in the Resilient attribute since Students and Graduates have a significantly worse perception (-18%). The same occurs with the Sensitive attribute, but with a difference of -14%, this being the attribute with the second largest variation.

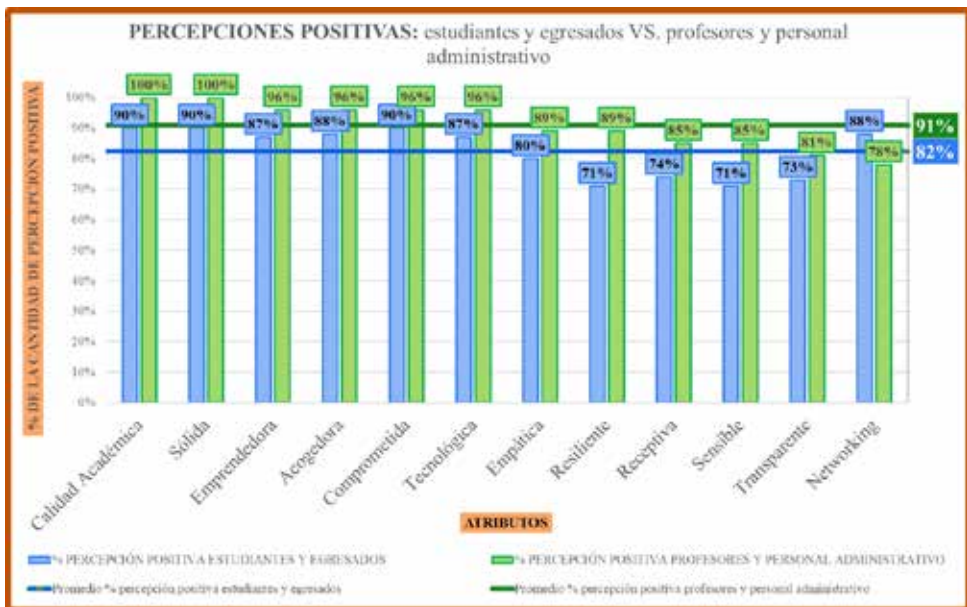


Figure 5. Comparison of positive perceptions of Students and Alumni VS. Professors and Administrative Staff.

Source: Own elaboration.

The Empathetic, Responsive and Transparent attributes are the others with the lowest positive perception by service recipients, even below the average. In the case of the providers, the worst perception was obtained by the attributes of Sensitive, Transparent, and Networking. The attributes Academic Quality, Solid, Committed, Welcoming, Technological, and Enterprising were those with the highest positive perception for both segments, so it was concluded that they are the best evaluated for the post-pandemic strategy.

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Figure 6 shows the summary of how the attributes were modified by the Pandemic, from the pre-pandemic strategy and its adaptation to the post-pandemic perception.

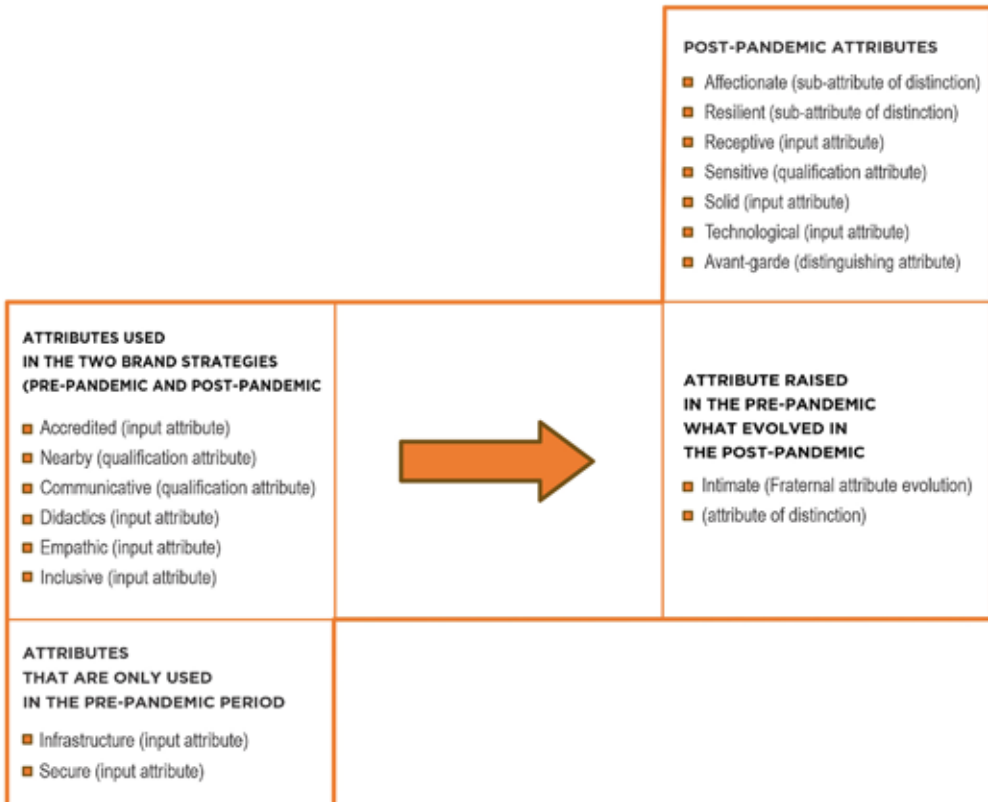


Figure 6. Comparison of the attributes of the pre-pandemic brand strategy and the post-pandemic brand strategy.

Source: Own elaboration.

Taking into account the perception of the Unimetana Community and the attributes identified in the trends of the sector and the competitive environment at the beginning of the Pandemic, the pre-pandemic brand strategy for UNIMET was developed. This was defined based on the tools of the branding methodology used for this study, the communication channel, the pyramid of attributes, the brand idea, and the positioning of UNIMET.

In the pre-pandemic strategy, the UNIMET brand was placed in the Offer communication channel, as shown in Figure 7. The UNIMET brand was placed in the Offer channel because, at that time, its strength and recognition were focused on the high academic quality, the opportunities presented by the university that give a competitive advantage for the personal and professional growth of its students, and that it has the benefits provided by its educational model, focused on the management field, forming leaders and future entrepreneurs. This location was reinforced with aspects of the Vivencia communication channel because it was also highlighted that it offers pleasant facilities within which academic activities are conducted.



Figure 7. Communication channels of the brands studied and UNIMET.

Source: Own elaboration.

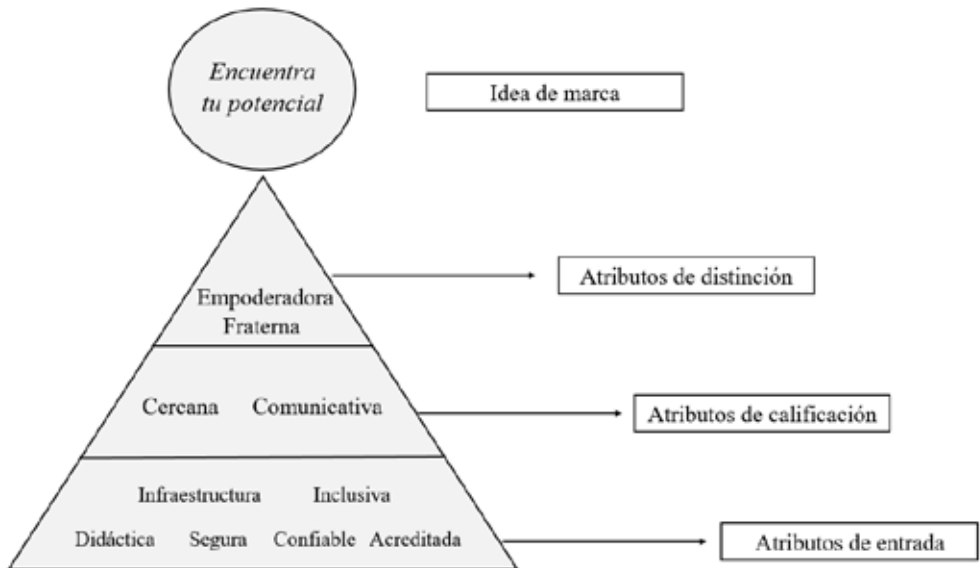
Figure 8 shows the pyramid of attributes. At the base are the entry attributes, which are the basic characteristics that any brand must meet in order to belong to the education sector. For UNIMET, this category was defined as institutions of higher education accredited by the Venezuelan Ministry of Popular Power for Education, offering degrees of 4 years or more, including only postgraduate institutes such as IESA. This definition does not include institutes specializing in diploma and/or short-term training programs (e.g., INCES and the Instituto Superior Mariano Moreno dedicated to gastronomy courses) or particular career institutes (e.g., Escuela Superior de Aeronáutica Tomas Valencia) or military training institutes (e.g., Universidad Militar Bolivariana). Therefore, it was determined that the essential attributes for any institutional brand to want to enter and remain in such a category are: Accredited, Reliable, Didactic, Inclusive, Infrastructure, and Safe.

The rating attributes are associated with the characteristics that the direct competitors have in common with the UNIMET brand, which appears in Figure 7. The attributes that were present in all the direct competitors were: Close and Communicative. Likewise, in the study conducted on the practices of the top-ranked Latin American universities, these attributes were key to the development of the pre-pandemic strategy.

To complete the pyramid, and based on the communication channels selected for the brand, the attributes Empowering and Fraternal were defined as differentiators of UNIMET, which together distinguished the University from its competitors. These two attributes include aspects shown below:

Empowering	Fraternal
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Academic Quality. - Entrepreneur. - Networking. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Empathetic. - Cozy. - Committed.

It is considered empowering because of the variety of opportunities in the professional field offered by being a graduate of the institution and the advantages of having a network of contacts for professional development. Additionally, it is fraternal because of the bond between the institution and its community, where feelings of trust, loyalty, and affection are developed, with the dedication of a family.



Pyramid of attributes of the UNIMET brand.

Source: Own elaboration.

This whole pyramid is identified with the brand idea: “Find your potential” and the brand promise for the UNIMET pre-pandemic brand was proposed as follows:

Find your potential

Unimet provides you with an education of excellence, which projects you towards success as a true integral professional. You can discover your entrepreneurial vocation, maximize your potential, and share with people who will be part of your future, creating valuable relationships. With Unimet you will obtain the best benefits as a graduate, with the renown and greatness of the institution.

You can get infected by the Unimetana energy under the magnificent Saman. Feeling pampered by your alma mater, which is deeply dedicated to being your second home, listening to you and serving you throughout your career.

Unimet is committed to your success.

For the post-pandemic brand strategy, the attribute pyramid was updated and therefore, the brand idea and positioning were adapted based on the changes that arose from the

Pandemic in the trends of the educational sector, the selected Latin American brands, and direct competitors. The first thing that was noticed is that all the brands studied, including UNIMET, remained in the corresponding pre-pandemic communication channel, as shown in Figure 7. Therefore, in the post-pandemic strategy, UNIMET remained in “Offer”, because, in the opinion of the respondents, its high academic quality continues to be its greatest strength.

Based on the post-pandemic quantitative study, the attributes with the most favorable perception were Empowering, Academic Quality, Entrepreneurial, Networking and Diversified. Similarly, the positioning of UNIMET continued to be reinforced with the communication channel “Vivencia”, however, in the post-pandemic case, it is because the digital media, the implementation of distance education with video call technology and virtual classes, as well as the RRSS to maintain day-to-day contact on various topics of interest to the Unimetano Community, constituted the digital “fiber” that allowed during the Pandemic to share an educational experience emulated to that of the pre-pandemic, with its limitations.

As shown in Figure 9, the post-pandemic input attributes were adapted to the following: Accredited, Strong, Responsive, Receptive, Empathetic, Technological, Inclusive, and Didactic. The pre-pandemic qualifying attributes, Communicative and Approachable, were maintained for the post-pandemic branding strategy; however, Sensitive was added as a new attribute. The latter refers to the use of digital media to strengthen ties with the institution and respond to needs arising from the environment and the community.

The attributes of distinction evolved in the post-pandemic strategy and were defined by the following aspects:

Empowering Intimate Vanguardist

Academic Quality - Innovative - Accommodating - Accommodating Entrepreneurial
- Resilient - Reliable - Reliable - Networking - Committed - Affectual

Empowering is the only one that remains the same as in the pre-pandemic era. It is complemented by Vanguard, defined as UNIMET’s ability to adopt modern practices that are emerging in its environment and to generate innovative ideas on its own. This involves being up-to-date with the advances and needs of society and being flexible to adjust, change, and improve whenever necessary. All this in order to fulfill its educational, research and social commitments and responsibilities as an institution.

Along with these two attributes, Intimacy is added, which is the evolution of the Fraternal attribute established in the pre-pandemic strategy, having to adapt to the changes brought about by distance education. This refers to the fact that UNIMET awakens affection among its community, generating a pleasant environment where cordiality and closeness predominate. This promotes the construction of bonds of affection among its members, in which trust predominates. The institution makes its students feel safe by guaranteeing them that, no matter what difficulties appear along the way, it will always find a solution to continue with the educational activities and allow the graduations to continue to take place.



Pyramid of attributes of the UNIMET brand.

Source: Own elaboration.

Based on the new attribute pyramid, the brand idea for the post-pandemic brand was proposed:

Together towards excellence

Metropolitan University is committed to your future, one in which excellence is the fundamental pillar. It knows that the only way to achieve it is through advancement, innovation, and continuous improvement. Its ability to adapt to any situation gives you the security to continue with your studies regardless of the adversities that arise in your environment. It is committed to providing you with a quality education that will shape you as a true integral professional. This is the ideal place to discover your entrepreneurial vocation and maximize your potential.

It is known that uniting strengths goes further, and that is why here, you will be able to create valuable, professional and affectionate relationships that will accompany you with love and dedication until you achieve success. Join and enjoy the energy of Unimetana in the place that will become your second home, and feel the greatness that comes from being part of this institution.

Conclusions

From both investigations, it was concluded that the Universidad Metropolitana is one of the Venezuelan higher education institutions that enjoys a good reputation based on the communication in its digital media. It has a preference among its students, graduates, professors, and administrative staff, as well as an emotional connection due to the prestige and opportunities it offers. Its main differentiator is its educational model, aimed at the business environment, which focuses on providing a comprehensive educational experience so that the graduate is able to develop as an entrepreneurial leader, either in a company or in their own business.

The comparison of the results of the pre-pandemic and post-pandemic research showed that UNIMET's brand strategy was affected by the situation caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, and indeed, the need to adapt its brand strategy based on this was determined. To achieve this, the changes in the post-pandemic perception of the Unimetana Community were taken into account, as well as the University's ambition to be perceived as an advanced Venezuelan institution of regional prestige.

The analysis of higher education trends in the pre-pandemic period identified the attributes Infrastructure, Inclusive, Didactic, Secure, Reliable, Trustworthy and Accredited as essential attributes that every university should have. After the Pandemic, the only of the above attributes that remained were Didactic, Accredited and Inclusive. Additionally, new attributes of relevance emerged, which were Technological, Robust, Responsive and Empathetic.

When studying the higher education institutions that were considered direct competitors of Universidad Metropolitana, it became evident that they are empathetic and communicative in their SSRs, keeping their communities informed and attending to their needs. That is why Communicative and Close were established as common attributes among competitors. After conducting the post-pandemic research again, considering the changes caused by distance education caused by social distancing, it was found that Sensitive emerged as a new qualification attribute.

In the pre-pandemic, the community survey determined that the main attributes that respondents associated with UNIMET were Academic Quality, Diversified, Welcoming, Accessible, Infrastructure, Committed and Empowering. In addition, it was possible to know how the users' experience with the University's social networks has been, being able to determine that it is perceived positively, being considered as a communicative brand. In the post-pandemic research, the attributes that were best perceived were Academic Quality, Diversified, Committed, Empowering, Networking and Entrepreneurial. In addition, new attributes emerged which were Resilient and Innovative.

In the second research, the perception of students and alumni, who represent the captors of the academic offerings and services offered by the University, was compared with that of professors and administrative staff, who are the providers of such offerings and services. It was determined that the perception of the latter group is much more positive for all attributes, with

the exception of Networking. The attributes Empathetic, Resilient, Responsive, Sensitive, and Transparent were the ones that had a worse perception by the Students and Alumni. All of them refer to the new post-pandemic attributes, with the exception of Empathetic. This means that UNIMET should apply communicational strategies that allow it to improve the perception of these attributes since they became very relevant due to distance education.

For both pre-pandemic and post-pandemic, it was decided that “Oferta” (Offer) would be the main communication channel for UNIMET, due to its excellent education and the benefits it offers its students. Both strategies were reinforced with aspects of the communication channel “Vivencia” (Experience), to highlight the emotional bond that the University has with its audiences and the rewarding experiences that the Unimetana Community lives in the university’s spaces, both physical and virtual.

In the pre-pandemic period, Empowering and Fraternal were established as fundamental pillars for the positioning and brand idea. Due to the changes caused by the Pandemic, for the post-pandemic, the following were proposed as distinguishing attributes: Empowering, Vanguard, and Intimate, with the following definitions:

- Empowering: represents the quality of the academic offerings offered by the University, its recognition and the professional opportunities it provides to the members of the Unimetana Community. This is the only attribute of distinction that has not undergone any modification since the pre-pandemic.
- Vanguard: refers to the University’s commitment to change and overcome adversities, applying modern and updated practices to achieve it. It is formed by aspects of Resilient, Innovative and Committed.
- Intimate: is the evolution of the pre-pandemic attribute Fraternal. It includes the aspects of Committed, Empathetic and Welcoming.

Recommendations

For future studies, it is suggested to analyze the perception of the Unimetana Community during the educational modality that has been implemented from the first quarter of the academic year 2021-2022: face-to-face, distance, and hybrid classes. With this, determine the changes that should be made to the post-pandemic branding strategy.

Since the Graduates, Professors and Administrative Staff made up a smaller sample in the quantitative research, it is advisable to conduct a more in-depth study on the perception that these segments have of the UNIMET brand. This is in order to build specific communication strategies for each of them.

It is proposed to extend this study by validating the post-pandemic branding strategy with new entrants. These would be high school graduates who are choosing a school for an undergraduate career and graduates who are considering graduate studies. This will allow us to detect whether it is necessary to make adjustments in the communication of the brand to these groups.

Finally, it was recommended that the Integrated Communications Department of the Metropolitan University develop a brand strategy deployment plan, which involves planning the communication activities of the post-pandemic attributes according to the University's performance and the perception of the Unimetana Community.

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Appendix

Glossary of attributes

The definitions of the attributes used in this study within the context of higher education institutions. This will facilitate the reader's understanding of the proposed branding strategies and avoid ambiguity regarding the general grammatical meaning given to them.

- **Accessible:** Convenient geographic location, close to home.

- **Cozy:** A place with a pleasant atmosphere that conveys a sense of tranquility, security, and comfort. It makes you feel at home.
- **Accredited:** It has a certification of quality in its processes, curricula, and results. In Venezuela, it has the approval of the Ministry of Popular Power for Education of Venezuela.
- **Affectionate:** Communicates the bonds of union, in which the great affection that is formed among the members of its community during its trajectory within the institution is evident.
- **Academic quality:** It presents a high educational level in terms of resources, teachers, and tools.
- **Proximity:** Communicates the most human ties between the University and its community.
- **Committed:** Reflects the effort to fulfill its institutional objective. Attitude of responsibility and constancy with the student.
- **Communicative:** Share useful information with the university community.
- **Reliable:** Sense of assurance that students will be able to graduate in the established period.
- **Didactics:** Directed to the teaching that the institution imparts to its students.
- **Diversified:** Focuses on the institution's study opportunities, such as the curriculum, academic offerings, dual degrees, and graduate studies.
- **Empathetic:** Shares the feelings of the university community based on the circumstances of a given moment.
- **Empowering:** Reference to provide the best opportunities in the workplace, the recognition of being a graduate of the institution, and the possibility of making a network of contacts, opens doors at the professional level.
- **Entrepreneurial:** Refers to the educational model aimed at management and comprehensive learning to develop entrepreneurial leaders.
- **Expert:** Communicates the achievements in research, seminars, or participation carried out by the university community.
- **Fraternal:** It shares a bond of union with its community, where feelings of trust, loyalty and affection are developed, with the dedication that exists in a family.
- **Inclusive:** The right of all persons to be able to receive education in the institution.
- **Infrastructure:** It has fixed assets where classes are taught. Reflects the advantages about the university campus, such as educational facilities, laboratories, recreational spaces, green areas, and transportation.

- **Innovative:** Communicates new achievements in the incorporation of modern practices in higher education.
- **Intimate:** Represents a close and caring personality who can always be trusted, especially during difficult times. This makes him connect in a genuine and deep way with the members of his community.
- **Fighter:** Communicates the actions taken by the University or its community in the face of the adversities of the environment.
- **Networking:** opportunities that open up based on professional and personal contacts arising from interaction with peers and professors in the academic field and associated sports, social and cultural activities.
- **Receptive:** She is attentive to what is happening in the environment in which she operates and knows how to listen to her community.
- **Resilient:** Changes when faced with difficult situations in their environment.
- **Safe:** In its facilities, students can attend feeling confident that no attempt will be made on their lives or property.
- **Sensitive:** Responds to the diverse situations that arise in the environment and to the needs of the community.
- **Solid:** It has financial sustainability in the medium and long term.
- **Technological:** It has an infrastructure for digital communication and interaction that allows distance education.
- **Transparent:** It is clear how it conducts itself and makes decisions in the current circumstances.
- **Avant-garde:** Initiative in seeking and generating innovative solutions that allow him to advance in order to meet his objectives constantly.

