



ADMINISTRATION AND MANAGEMENT DEPARTMENT

ABSTRACT

Of dissertation for award of the educational and scientific degree „Doctor“ (PhD)

Professional field 3.9. Tourism, academic major “Tourism“

entitled

**INNOVATIVE MARKETING TOOLS FOR ENHANCING THE
COMPETITIVENESS OF AGRITOURISM IN BULGARIA**

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The dissertation consists of 272 pages and includes an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, findings, recommendations, and research contributions. Additionally, six appendices are included. The bibliography comprises a total of 111 sources in Bulgarian, English, and Russian, as well as online resources containing official documents, statistical data, illustrative marketing information, scientific articles, and digital collections. The thesis contains 19 figures and 23 tables, some of which are cited from external sources, while others are the author's original work.

The author has provided a declaration of originality and authenticity regarding the dissertation. The complete work is available to interested parties at the Rector's Office of New Bulgarian University (NBU) and on the university's official website.

The public defence of the dissertation will take place on _____ 2026, at _____, in Hall _____ of New Bulgarian University, Sofia. All materials related to the defence are available to interested parties at Office [...], Building [...] of New Bulgarian University.

I. GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DISSERTATION

The dissertation investigates the opportunities for enhancing the competitiveness of agritourism in Bulgaria through the application of digital marketing tools. The topic is particularly relevant given the intensifying processes of globalisation, digitisation, and the evolving demands of tourists regarding the quality, security, and diversity of tourism services. The object of the study includes the specific challenges and the potential for agritourism development in Bulgaria within the context of contemporary sector trends and the need for innovative marketing solutions. The work analyses the resources and current state of agritourism in the country, outlines best practices from successful European models, and formulates practical recommendations alongside a model for a digital marketing strategy.

1. Relevance of the Topic

The significance of tourism activity for humanity is growing, as is its expansion to all parts of the globe. This gives rise to a number of challenges for modern society. Chief among these is achieving the sustainable development of tourism at local, national, regional, and international levels. This involves implementing tourism practices that satisfy consumer interests while simultaneously stimulating the well-being of the local population and preserving the natural and socio-cultural resources of the local environment for future generations.

In recent decades, tourism has undergone continuous expansion and diversification, making it one of the fastest-growing economic sectors worldwide. As an export category, tourism ranks fourth after fuels, chemicals, and food. Europe has emerged as one of the most rapidly developing tourism regions, attracting over half of the world's tourists and recording the highest number of arrivals compared to other continents. In 2023, Europe reported over 700 million international tourist arrivals, representing more than 50% of the global tourism flow¹.

As early as the end of the 20th century, scholars began predicting trends in tourism development that have now become a reality. The current state of the sector, characterised by globalisation, digitisation, and a series of geopolitical and humanitarian crises, justifies the increasing demands of tourists for quality, attractiveness, diversity, safety, and accessibility. These features determine contemporary tourist behaviour. There is a distinct shift in preferences towards nearby destinations and locations with guaranteed security, as well as towards niche forms of tourism – such as SPA, sports and hobby, adventure, wine, gourmet, rural, and

¹ World Tourism Organization (UNWTO). (2025). Global and Regional Tourism Performance. UN Tourism Data Dashboard. Available at: [\[https://www.unwto.org/tourism-data/global-and-regional-tourism-performance\]](https://www.unwto.org/tourism-data/global-and-regional-tourism-performance)

agritourism. Among the already established trends is the significantly expanded role of information and communication technologies in the hospitality and tour operator sectors regarding the search, planning, and execution of travel.

Against the backdrop of these contemporary specifics, attention must be paid to the imbalance in the distribution of tourist travel. Travel is concentrated in certain destinations at the expense of other, less popular ones. A significant portion of travel in Bulgaria by both foreign and domestic tourists is directed towards the Black Sea region. This is driven by the country's image as a destination with "good and affordable prices" and a "seaside holiday destination"². There is also interest in combining sea holidays with cultural tourism tours and visits to natural landmarks. Other positive aspects of Bulgaria's image, though less prominent in preferences, include "hospitality and friendly people" and "good winter sports offerings." Strategic documents in the tourism sector prioritise development, focusing on product growth and key issues (infrastructure, marketing, and education). This creates a favourable environment for tourism, suggesting coordination with other sectoral policies, the provision of financial instruments, and a positive political climate. The current strategic document is the National Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in Bulgaria 2014-2030, which outlines the main goals and priorities for the country's tourism development.

The situational analysis on which the plan is based notes that Bulgaria offers unique opportunities for various types of tourism beyond the Black Sea and winter seasons, including health, balneo, SPA, camping, rural, cultural, eco, wine, gourmet, event, hunting, and congress tourism. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the country's potential has not yet been fully realised. For this reason, the Tourism Development Strategy with a horizon to 2030 identifies the need to reduce the imbalance between different forms of alternative tourism. The document follows Professor Ribov's definition of "strategy" as "a set of alternatives for achieving set goals. It is a conscious and considered set of norms that form the basis for developing and making decisions that affect the future state of the tourism sector. Strategy is accepted as a general programme of action that reveals priority problems and resources for achieving fundamental goals."³.

² Ministry of Tourism of the Republic of Bulgaria. (2023). Target and Prospective Markets – Updating Data, Information, and Analyses by Tourism Type. Sofia.

³ Ribov, M. et al. (2005). Strategicheskiyat izbor v turizma [Strategic Choice in Tourism], Trakiya-M Publishing, Sofia.

2. Future Needs and Trends

Considering the most significant global trends shaping the new market environment and the future of Bulgarian tourism towards 2030, there is a clear necessity for:

1. Developing tourism products tailored to various age categories;
2. Developing products that mitigate the seasonal nature of the sector;
3. Creating package tours to engage more stakeholders and provide additional income streams for the local population;
4. Enhancing the literacy and qualification levels of tourism employees to improve living standards and ensure long-term labour market retention;
5. Directing national advertising towards diverse domestic and international segments to promote Bulgaria as a destination;
6. Expanding the portfolio of advertised tourism forms to stimulate interest in regions with lower economic growth;
7. Attracting investment into the tourism sector;
8. Implementing stricter quality control and motivating providers to maintain high service standards;
9. Strengthening Bulgaria's image as a safe destination;
10. Developing policies that support product specialisation and diversification;
11. Stimulating cross-sectoral connectivity and collaboration between tourism and related economic fields;
12. Encouraging the domestic market;
13. Integrating and developing modern technologies within the tourism offering to achieve competitiveness in the European market.

The relevance of these issues forms the basis for this dissertation: "Innovative Marketing Tools for Enhancing the Competitiveness of Agritourism in Bulgaria."

3. Subject and Object of the Dissertation

The Object of the study consists of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) across Bulgaria, examined within the context of their development, operations, and competitiveness. To this end, over 200 businesses were analysed through their online positioning, including both agricultural and tourism enterprises with the potential to expand into agritourism.

The Subject of the study is the potential for implementing innovative digital marketing tools and their impact on enhancing the competitiveness of the agritourism sector.

4. Research Objective

The primary objective of this dissertation is to investigate the role of innovative digital marketing tools in enhancing the competitiveness of agritourism and, based on this, to develop an applicable model for evaluating and improving digitisation within the sector.

5. Research Tasks

To achieve the stated objective, the research tasks are organised into the following areas:

1. Investigating the innovative marketing tools currently applied in Bulgaria to promote tourism;
2. Examining the current state of the national tourism sector, including service trends, supply, and consumer attitudes;
3. Outlining trends in the dynamics of supply and demand resulting from changes in government regulation and the general economic climate in Europe and Bulgaria;
4. Presenting models for successful agritourism businesses through digital marketing tools;
5. Analysing opportunities for alternative tourism—specifically rural and agritourism—in less urbanised rural areas;
6. Outlining the role of stakeholders and the training needs of personnel in the agriculture and tourism sectors;
7. Defining opportunities for collaboration between agricultural and tourism operators to create sustainable tourism products through long-term partnerships.

The methodology employed includes:

1. Systems, analytical, comparative, deductive, and inductive approaches;

2. SWOT analysis;
3. Opinion polling conducted via three focus groups.

6. Research Hypotheses

The central thesis is that digital marketing tools can significantly enhance the competitiveness of rural and agritourism in Bulgaria. This thesis is supported by three working hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: The application of innovative marketing tools in promoting alternative tourism is significantly lagging in Bulgaria. Their widespread adoption will increase consumer interest in rural tourism. Success can be achieved by integrating agricultural resources, local traditions, gastronomy, wine, and leisure, leading to a synergistic effect on living standards and population retention in rural areas.

Hypothesis 2: Based on an analysis of advantages and potential, an upward trend in rural tourism can be achieved by actively incorporating agribusiness resources and cultural/natural assets. This requires creating new products and targeted digital promotion in domestic and international markets, thereby increasing the economic capacity of these regions.

Hypothesis 3: Agritourism in Bulgaria is currently undervalued and underdeveloped; however, it possesses the potential to be competitive with Western European models by adopting established marketing tools. It must exist as an integral part of rural tourism, utilizing all regional resources (natural, cultural, and historical). Fragmented industry representation and underutilised administrative capacity are key areas for discussion regarding sector challenges and opportunities.

7. Research Methods

To achieve the defined objectives, a toolkit based on desk research of publicly available information sources was employed. The study utilises a systems and analytical approach, deductive and inductive research methods, SWOT analysis, and field research.

The primary sources of information used in the preparation of this dissertation include:

8. Research papers, analyses, scientific reports, textbooks, manuals, handbooks, and academic collections;
9. Strategies and programmes administered by institutional bodies;
10. Regulatory and legal documents;
11. Information brochures;

12. Practical digital marketing tools containing empirical and statistical data.

The study employs sociological methods for primary data collection, including questionnaires and interviews.

The survey was conducted among representatives of small businesses in the agritourism sector. It aims to establish the level of digitisation, the marketing tools utilised, and the primary challenges facing the sector. The questionnaire includes both closed-ended and open-ended questions, allowing for both quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Additionally, semi-structured interviews were conducted with business representatives and experts to deepen the understanding of the practical application of digital tools and to validate the survey results. The collected data were processed using statistical and comparative analysis, with results presented in tables and charts for enhanced interpretation. The empirical findings served as the foundation for the development and testing (approbation) of the digital diagnostic tool (agrotour.digital).

II. STRUCTURE OF THE DISSERTATION

The structure of the dissertation is determined by the combination of its object, subject, goals, and tasks, reflecting the author's research approach.

The work spans 272 pages and includes an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, findings, recommendations, and research contributions. Additionally, six appendices are provided. The bibliography comprises 111 sources in Bulgarian, English, and Russian, as well as online resources including official documents, marketing data, scientific articles, and digital collections. The thesis features 19 figures and 22 tables (both cited and original).

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III. CONTENT OF THE DISSERTATION

CHAPTER ONE: Theoretical and Methodological Foundations of Marketing and its Digitisation in the Context of Tourism

This chapter outlines the theoretical and methodological foundations of marketing and its digital transformation within the tourism sector. It examines the evolution of marketing as a management concept and establishes the theoretical framework for the study, specifically focusing on the competitiveness of agritourism in Bulgaria through the application of digital marketing tools. Furthermore, the chapter explores long-term tourism trends and key factors influencing tourist behaviour in the contemporary landscape of globalisation, digitisation, and dynamic market environments.

The rationale for digital transformation is presented by highlighting new technological processes and the shifting psychology of tourists. These factors now dictate requirements for quality, security, diversity, and the attractiveness of the tourism product. The study argues that the sector is experiencing a significant shift towards "staycations" (nearby destinations) and safe travel, alongside a demand for niche tourism forms, including agritourism, SPA, gourmet, wine, and adventure tourism. In this context, tourism marketing has undergone a substantial evolution—transitioning from traditional mass-market tools to precision digital communication and personalised offerings.

The chapter discusses marketing concepts specific to tourism in the digital age, comparing them with classical and contemporary theories. It presents the fundamental tenets of marketing, covering both traditional principles—such as customer orientation, need identification, and value creation—and modern perspectives on interactive exchange and long-term relationship building via digital platforms. Particular emphasis is placed on the transition to value-based marketing and the importance of customer data management in creating personalised experiences and engagement.

The specific characteristics of the tourism sector are analysed in relation to the tourism product, which is defined by its uniqueness, intangibility, inseparability of production and consumption, perishability, and increased consumer risk. These features heighten the need for rapid feedback

and flexible marketing approaches. The research notes that effective product positioning requires several conditions:

1. A clear understanding of the target market, segments, and consumers;
2. Identifying the importance of selected positioning criteria to consumers;
3. Ensuring the organisation's positioning strategy correlates with all marketing mix tools.

Based on the aforementioned points and extensive literature review⁴, the dissertation concludes that positioning a tourism product is a system of sequential steps, illustrated by the following algorithm:

1. Identification of competitive tourism products available on the market;
2. Establishment of specific attributes (distinctive features and properties of the tourism product);
3. Information gathering regarding consumer perception of the product using various marketing tools, such as digital ones;
4. Analysis of the current market position of the tourism product within the competitive environment;
5. Determination of the attribute combination most preferred by consumers;
6. Gap analysis between the product's position and consumer needs to identify market niches for new product placement;
7. Final positioning conclusions and development of marketing strategy proposals.

Accordingly, the following sequence for positioning a tourism product is proposed:

1. Target market selection;
2. Target market segmentation;
3. Target segment selection;
4. Identification of target consumer requirements;
5. Establishment of the product/service's defining characteristics;
6. Determination of the optimal mix of these characteristics;

⁴ Kotler, P., Bowen, J., Makens, J. (2017). Marketing for Hospitality and Tourism.

7. Development of various offerings based on these characteristics to satisfy consumer needs;
8. Selection of a product positioning strategy;
9. Development of a marketing mix to implement the positioning strategy;
10. Implementation of the positioning strategy;
11. Evaluation of the positioning results.

Attention is also given to innovation in tourism, which is characterised by complexity, uncertainty, and risk. International studies indicate that while tourism companies recognise the importance of innovation, the dissatisfaction rate regarding implementation exceeds 50%. The primary reason is that most innovative activities are not integrated into strategic development plans. According to the classification by Herman Kahn, supplemented by Philip Davidoff⁵, innovation in tourism organisations can be categorised based on four criteria:

Product innovations – introduction of a new tourism product or a significant improvement in the characteristics of an existing one;

Process innovations – implementation of a new or significantly improved method of service delivery;

Marketing innovations – application of a new marketing method involving significant changes in product design, packaging, placement, or promotion;

Organisational innovations – application of a new organisational method in the business practices of the organisation, workplace organisation, or external relations.

This chapter places particular emphasis on the third criterion – innovations directed towards the marketing of the tourism product. These encompass all activities related to the commercialisation of the product: communication, public relations, distribution, etc. Examples of such innovative activities include new methods of marketing, booking tourism services, conducting market research, and interacting with the market as a whole. Innovations in the marketing of tourism services must progress in parallel with innovations in the service offering itself. The first chapter also addresses the advantages, risks, and new realities of digital marketing, as well as the opportunities they provide.

⁵ Kahn, H., Davidoff D., Davidoff, P. (1989). *Tourism Trends*, 60th Anniversary Edition of Trade, New York, USA.

- It is argued and substantiated that digital tools provide:
- The ability for precise targeting of desired audiences;
- Direct and two-way communication with the customer;
- Significantly lower costs compared to traditional marketing;
- High measurability and the possibility for real-time optimisation;

Widespread distribution of brand messages and the collection of user-generated content (UGC), which acts as both an opportunity and a risk.

In parallel, the following disadvantages and risks emerge:

1. Difficulty in controlling brand information online and the potential for a "snowball effect" in the spread of negative opinions;
2. The necessity for constant monitoring of the digital environment and timely crisis response;
3. The need to manage new ethical and technical requirements, alongside the risk of excessive investment without measurable impact if results are not monitored.

Two levels of digitisation⁶ in technology use are presented here, introducing the following classification for digital maturity in the tourism business:

Low level: Basic office software, website, social networks, specialised email, databases, email marketing, internet banking, online storage.

Medium level: Computerised reservation systems (CRS), CRM, mobile applications, chats, and online consultations.

It is concluded that this approach enables business self-assessment and the planning of steps toward higher digital maturity⁷. The thesis of the increasing role of mobility, automation, and the implementation of new tools such as chatbots, personalised offers, and automated reservation platforms is introduced. An overview and analysis of the following primary digital tools applicable to tourism marketing are provided:

Website: Serving as the entrepreneur's or destination's primary virtual business card.

Social Networks: Tools for community building, content exchange, and stimulating organic information dissemination.

⁶ Kostenski, Zh. (2020). Challenges facing tourism in the digital world. In: Tourism – Beyond Expectations. Collective Monograph. Sofia: University of National and World Economy, pp. 663–673.

⁷ Kotler, P. (2022). Marketing 5.0. Locus.

Chatbots and AI: Providing continuous customer service, real-time responses, and automation of information, booking, and analysis processes.

Mobile Applications: Providing integrated services for customers (itineraries, offers, forecasts, translators, converters, etc.) and serving as a source of additional analytics on tourist behaviour.

Content Marketing and Influencers: Highlighting the success of content generated by users and bloggers with trusted audiences as a means of influencing customer decisions.

The first chapter also examines current trends and challenges in tourism marketing, which can be summarised as follows:

1. Individualisation of demand is intensifying;
2. Digital marketing enables mutual recognition between the customer and the business – data on tourist preferences facilitates even more precise campaigns;
3. The use of hashtags, visual content, and mobile channels is becoming an established standard;
4. Reputation management remains a primary challenge – negative feedback spreads rapidly, and constant competition requires a high degree of customer engagement.

The findings of Chapter One indicate that digital transformation is an indispensable part of contemporary tourism marketing. For successful competitiveness, agritourism establishments must transition to a higher level of digital integration, utilising sustainable and innovative marketing campaigns. Continuous staff training in digital skills and the application of the latest trends are essential for attracting and engaging visitors. The integration of digital tools creates conditions for new business models, facilitates direct interaction with tourists, and offers opportunities for sustainable growth in the sector.

CHAPTER TWO: Current State and Development of Agritourism in Bulgaria. Opportunities for Enhancing Competitiveness

The second chapter of the dissertation provides a profile of the contemporary tourist⁸, alongside the trends and directions in which this profile is evolving⁹. A fundamental distinction is made between rural tourism and agritourism, comparing various definitions from Bulgarian and foreign sources. The definition adopted for this study is: "Agritourism is a sub-type of rural tourism and is characterised as travel that combines agricultural or rural settings with products from farming activities, integrated into a tourism experience."¹⁰ It is noted that the tourism offering in rural areas highlights the primary differences between the concepts of "rural" and "agri" tourism. The offering is determined by the available resources. In rural tourism, these include natural and recreational opportunities, food products, cultural-historical heritage, folk art, ethnography, and local customs. Regarding agritourism, the resources are the same but must be viewed specifically as part of active agricultural operations.

A comparison of rural and agritourism resources is presented. A situational analysis is proposed, based on statistical data for rural and mass tourism, as well as analysed information on alternative tourism in Bulgaria and competitiveness indicators used in the surveys conducted for this dissertation. The claims are quantified, with assessments based on an analysis of scientific literature and empirical data detailed in Chapter 3. Each factor is rated on a scale from 1 (weakest/least important) to 5 (strongest/key), allowing for a quantitative comparison of strategic advantages and constraints. Specific proposals are made for expanding agricultural activities to achieve higher value-added, alongside suggestions for minimising the risks outlined in the analysis. National Statistical Institute (NSI) data and the goals set in the Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development in Bulgaria 2030 are examined, leading to corresponding findings. The topic of sustainable tourism development and international objectives is introduced, highlighting the role of rural and agritourism as suitable forms of interaction with environmental priorities dating back to the 1970s. Stakeholders for sustainable tourism in Bulgaria are identified in accordance with relevant strategic documents. Generally, they are positioned in four groups according to the Tourism Act: state institutions, non-governmental organisations, regional tourism associations, local tourism unions, and private businesses. Official national statistics up to 2024 indicate a rising role for the tourism sector in the Bulgarian

⁸ Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference "Tourism and Innovation", Science and Economics Publishing House, University of Economics – Varna, 2018.

⁹ Karailieva, M., Psychology of Tourist Behaviour, Avangard Prima, Sofia, 2012, p. 194.

¹⁰ Stamov, S., Nikovska, K., Specialised Types of Tourism, Kota, 2011, p. 254.

economy, contributing over 8% of GDP in the past year. The dissertation notes that aggregated data for tourism sub-sectors, including rural and agritourism, is currently unavailable, making trend forecasting and tracking somewhat general.

The second chapter also analyses information regarding marketing in rural tourism. According to international sources, the development of this sub-sector requires the initial stimulation of several activities:¹¹

1. Developing clusters at regional, national, and international levels;
2. Initiating educational campaigns in tourism and foreign languages among the rural population;
3. Opening credit opportunities for the business initiatives of local entrepreneurs;
4. Stimulating the establishment and effective functioning of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the rural tourism sphere;
5. Increasing awareness regarding rural tourism.

These activities apply to both rural tourism and, specifically, agritourism. An algorithm for tourism product marketing is provided¹², alongside the necessary preliminary preparations for businesses. The importance of the agricultural sector to the EU and opportunities for supranational funding of agrarian projects are also examined.

A historical review and comparison of rural tourism development in Europe and Bulgaria are presented. It is observed that in EU countries, rural tourism has become a vital segment of the sector¹³. Since the late 20th and early 21st centuries, a steady trend towards rural tourism development has emerged across Europe. The World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) estimates the annual growth of rural tourism at approximately 6%, compared to 2% growth for tourism as a whole. In several Southern and Eastern European countries, growth exceeds 20%, due to transformations in rural areas and agriculture following EU accession.

For decades, Bulgaria practised only traditional holiday tourism. This monocultural development led to a concentration of facilities along the Black Sea coast (over 70%) and in mountain resorts (around 10%), with only 20% located in the interior. Activities related to balneology, culture, and entertainment were negligible. At the end of the 20th century, a new trend in consumer demand began to take hold—a preference for forms of tourism other than the

¹¹ Roberts, L., Hall, D., 2001, *Rural Tourism and Recreation: Principles to Practice*, CABI Publishing, p. 132.

¹² Aleksieva, Y., Stamov, S., *Specialised Types of Tourism*, KOTA, 2005, p. 144.

¹³ Roberts, L., Hall, D. (2001). *Rural Tourism and Recreation: Principles to Practice*. CABI Publishing.

traditional ones. "Specialised tourism" became a common term, and its nomenclature continues to expand.

In 2009, 90% of Bulgarian tourism was dominated by seaside and ski resorts, SPA centres, and the two largest cities, Sofia and Plovdiv. Global trends have necessitated the search for alternative tourism in our country. Tourism in Bulgaria has been characterised by very high development rates over the last 20 years, leading to ultra-urbanisation and saturation of resorts, resulting in an outflow of high-spending tourists. This imbalance has prompted entrepreneurs to shift their focus toward rural areas. Rural municipalities cover 81% of the country's territory and house 42% of the population. There is unequal development between rural and urban areas regarding economic growth, education, and access to services. Rural areas are still characterised by economic, social, and cultural stagnation, an ageing population, low living standards, and compromised infrastructure. Nevertheless, the roots of the Bulgarian spirit are found in the villages, where cultural-historical heritage is preserved¹⁴.

The chapter examines resources and trends for agritourism development in Bulgaria and provides a SWOT analysis. Tourism resources are the baseline objects and phenomena that attract tourist flows to a destination. Tourism is a sector that develops essentially by building on its resources and unlocking their potential. The book *Resource Potential of Tourism* notes that Bulgaria's vast potential for basic and specialised tourism is characterised by an extraordinary wealth of natural and cultural heritage, material-technical facilities, and a "super-culture" of tourism. To improve information provision, all participants should make competent decisions and take effective actions when formulating marketing policies, thereby contributing to the competitiveness of Bulgaria as a destination. An additional competitive advantage for the country's image is its geographical position and its proximity to established European tourism destinations¹⁵.

When discussing rural tourism and agritourism as its integral part, the natural resource potential of Bulgaria as a destination must be highlighted. Rural areas possess the primary advantage of proximity to natural landmarks, which are characterised by fundamental natural components such as topography, climate, water resources, flora, fauna, and protected territories. Their combination forms the natural environment, which represents the primary interest for tourists and determines the natural resource potential of a locality. The natural heritage that

¹⁴ Stamov, S., Nikovska, K., *Specialised Types of Tourism*, Kota, 2011, p. 250.

¹⁵ Karailieva, M., *Resource Potential of Tourism*, Avangard Prima, Sofia, 2018, p. 91.

contributes to increased interest in rural tourism is primarily defined by natural monuments, geological formations, and strictly designated zones or sites.

Beyond natural landmarks, the potential for tourism in rural areas is also determined by the country's cultural heritage. This falls under anthropogenic tourism resources and includes elements of both material and spiritual culture that serve to satisfy tourist needs. These resources encompass historical, archaeological, architectural, ethnographic, and religious sites, as well as fairs, cultural attractions, and sporting events. Bulgaria's cultural heritage not only provides potential for the development of extra-urban areas but also serves to preserve and strengthen the historical memory of the Bulgarian people. Sustainable tourism development policies must treat this heritage with particular care to ensure its preservation for future generations.

A highly significant resource in tourism is linked to human capital. Due to the nature of the sector and its predominant intangible advantages, the human factor in the service sphere is key to establishing highly-rated destinations and creating loyal customers. It is the human factor that integrates material, financial, and information resources into the tourism product. People in tourism do not merely produce the product; they plan, organise, and control the processes within it – they are the ones who "work wonders with the other resources" and contribute to competitiveness in the tourism market¹⁶.

Service quality can be characterised across several dimensions: tangibility, reliability, responsiveness, courtesy, security and safety, accessibility, and communication. All these characteristics point to the need for a clear understanding of customer needs and desires, problem prevention, the ability to demonstrate courtesy and commitment to individual customer requirements, creativity and speed in decision-making, a drive for quality service and feedback for improvement, and continuous flexibility and adaptability. Following the introduction of the aforementioned resource parameters in tourism, the focus of this dissertation shifts specifically to those in rural tourism and, more precisely, agritourism. Some authors identify the following fundamental resources of rural tourism, presented in the table below¹⁷.

¹⁶ Karailieva, M., *Resource Potential of Tourism*, Avangard Prima, Sofia, 2018, p. 91.

¹⁷ Aleksieva, Y., Stamov, S., *Rural Tourism*, KOTA, St. Zagora, 2005, p. 18.

Table 1 Rural and agritourism resources

Rural tourism resources	Agritourism resources
Landscapes	Farms
nature	contacts with local population
historical sites	periodic agricultural activities
cultural heritage	(plowing, sowing, harvesting, gathering produce)
folklore	regular agricultural activities
local cuisine	(milking, feeding, animal care, greenhouse activities)
holidays and customs	processing of agricultural produce
contacts with the local population	local cuisine with farm products
hotel facilities	

The study supports the argument that agritourism is most effectively implemented through the creation of an integrated tourism product. Agritourism can contribute to the preservation and development of agriculture, hunting, fishing, orcharding, mushroom gathering, herbalism, and other characteristic rural activities. Consumers, in turn, are attracted by the rural landscape and traditional practices. To meet this demand, farmers must be informed about which local assets can be utilised as resources to attract tourists, while also protecting the environment and investing in amenities for visitors. Currently, agritourism represents a small fraction of rural tourism, contributing approximately 2% of its total income. Since the 1980s, a trend has been observed in Western Europe where a large proportion of farms have adapted their operations for agritourism. For instance, in Sweden and Switzerland, 20% of all farms offer agritourism services, while in Germany and the Netherlands, the figure stands at 8%¹⁸.

The research includes a SWOT analysis and outlines several trends for agritourism development. This analysis is a widely used tool in strategic planning, allowing for the systematic identification and evaluation of internal and external factors affecting a sector or organisation¹⁹. In the context of Bulgarian agritourism, this analysis is based on statistical data for rural and mass tourism, an analysis of alternative tourism, and competitiveness indicators used within the empirical research. The objective is to outline the key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (SWOT) as a foundation for formulating sustainable development recommendations.

¹⁸ Aleksieva, Y., Stamov, S., Rural Tourism, KOTA, St. Zagora, 2005.

¹⁹ Kotler, P., Armstrong, G. (2021). Principles of Marketing (second European edition). Prentice Hall Europe.

In summarising the situational analysis of tourism in Bulgaria, it is evident from the data within the Strategy for Sustainable Tourism Development 2014–2030 that since 2005, international tourism in Bulgaria has shown a stable trend of continuous growth. This applies both to the number of foreign tourists and the international tourism revenues in the current account of the balance of payments. According to NSI data, Bulgaria was visited by 9,273,300 foreign nationals in 2018²⁰, increasing to 13,249,500 in 2024—a growth of approximately 41.4%.

Data indicates that the share of foreign arrivals for "rest and holiday" purposes varies between 35% and 46% (approx. 3.45 million people), with the remainder visiting for business, personal visits, or transit. Growth is noted in both tourist numbers and revenues—reaching 14 billion BGN in 2024. It should be noted that the share of Romanian tourists is exceptionally high, accounting for over two-thirds of all EU tourists. Revenue from overnight stays alone for the first nine months of 2024 reached 2.1 billion BGN, a 15.4% increase compared to 2023. According to the Ministry of Tourism, international tourists generated between 70% and 80% of all tourism revenue in 2024.

Chapter Two also explores the reputation of Bulgaria as a tourism destination. The concept of a "destination image" is introduced as an amalgam of semantic, visual, and emotional markers influencing consumer perceptions and decisions. According to the Anholt-GMI (2024) and Bloom Consulting (2023) models, this image is evaluated through:

1. Cognitive components (knowledge of the destination);
2. Affective components (emotional associations);
3. Conative components (intentions to visit).

In the international Bloom Consulting Country Brand Ranking (2023), Bulgaria ranks 52nd out of 198 countries, with moderate ratings for emotional appeal (3.8/10) and digital accessibility (4.2/10). A study conducted during the ITB Berlin 2023 trade fair²¹ surveyed 58 foreign tour operators regarding their perceptions of destination competitiveness. Results show that operators rate natural and cultural resources, nightlife quality, local cuisine, and restaurants most highly. Key factors also include hospitality, atmosphere, infrastructure, hygiene, political

²⁰ NSI (National Statistical Institute) data.

²¹ Pavlović, I., Besermenji, S., Blešić, I., Vuković, M., Đorđević, J., & Pivac, R. (2023). Foreign tour operators' perception of Serbia as a tourism destination. In: *Contemporary Trends in Tourism and Hospitality – CTTH 2023*, Novi Sad, Serbia.

stability, marketing, and environmental sustainability. Economic and social determinants suggest a correlation between tourism growth and image. Bulgaria's image remains fragmented and seasonally dependent despite quantitative growth. The dissertation states that its transformation requires:

1. Strategic product diversification (culture, SPA, eco-tourism);
2. Synergy between the public and private sectors in communication campaigns;
3. Integration of digital tools for targeted positioning.

Specific opportunities for agritourism development through marketing tools are examined, outlining trends based on situational data. Market research consistently shows an increasing interest in travel and holidays within rural environments, with a Eurobarometer study finding that 23% of travel agencies now permanently offer rural destinations.

The development of rural tourism necessitates several initial stimulating activities:²²

1. Developing clusters at regional, national, and international levels;
2. Initiating educational campaigns focused on tourism and foreign language training among the rural population;
3. Opening credit opportunities for the business initiatives of local entrepreneurs;
4. Stimulating the establishment and effective functioning of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) in the rural tourism sphere;
5. Increasing awareness regarding rural tourism.
6. Additionally, it should be noted that these activities apply to both rural tourism in general and agritourism in particular.

This chapter also examines funding opportunities for local agrarian food businesses. Regarding local policies to stimulate agricultural activities linked to tourism, it is worth noting that the Ministry of Agriculture and Food (MAF) is developing a Programme for Regional and Local Products. This initiative aims to support producers and the regional economy. Farmers often do not perceive their goods as unique, yet many are distinctive and of interest to both

²² Roberts, L., Hall, D., 2001, *Rural Tourism and Recreation: Principles to Practice*, CABI Publishing, p. 132.

Bulgarian and foreign consumers. The MAF programme also seeks to strengthen communities where local foods are produced, thereby boosting regional economic activity. An inter-institutional thematic group has been established for the programme's implementation, which will be subject to public consultation upon finalisation.

Currently, Bulgaria applies the European quality schemes: Protected Designation of Origin (PDO) and Protected Geographical Indication (PGI). Producers who successfully complete the certification procedure are entitled to use the unified European logo, which is widely recognised and serves as a guarantee of quality and origin throughout the European Union. Within these European quality schemes, the "eAmbrosia" EU register currently includes 1,754 agricultural products and 1,656 wines (including 265 spirit drinks with traditional specific characteristics). At present, this includes 6 Bulgarian food products, 54 native wines, and 12 types of rakia, with further products currently undergoing the application process.

Based on the evidence presented thus far regarding the promotion of agro-activities and agro-products, their intrinsic link to rural tourism must be acknowledged. This same connection is observed within the European Union's priorities for sustainable development. The carbon footprint of agricultural activities and agritourism is significant, particularly concerning transportation services. Measures to limit emissions on a European scale will inevitably impact transport through rising service costs, leading to a preference for nearby holiday destinations (staycations). This trend is already emerging in the tourism services market.

The link between agriculture and tourism manifests both in environmental protection efforts and in the trade of agro-products. Marketing local foods, artisanal goods, and production traditions presents an excellent opportunity for the simultaneous promotion of tourism services. For example, gastronomic tourism can be practised by visiting regions recognised for food production under protected geographical names. It is most authentic to consume Banski Staretz in Bansko, Gornooryahovski Sudzhuk in Gorna Oryahovitsa, and Troyan Rakia in Troyan. Local festivals and events related to these traditions provide a strong foundation for welcoming tourists, combining their visit with opportunities to stay at a farmstead or traditional house and participate in production processes or agro-technical activities.

CHAPTER THREE: Research into the Tourism Potential of Rural Areas in Bulgaria. Enhancing Agritourism Competitiveness through Digital Marketing Tools

This chapter is dedicated to the study of the tourism potential of rural areas in Bulgaria, as well as specific opportunities for enhancing agritourism competitiveness through digital marketing tools.

Essentially, this section presents the empirical research conducted among the primary participants in the Bulgarian agritourism sector – farm owners, tourism entrepreneurs, and service consumers. The analysis reveals the attitudes, challenges, and potential for digital transformation in agritourism based on the collected and processed empirical data.

Comprehensive Rationale for the Study:

1. **Analysis of Best Practices:** Good practices related to the promotion of agritourism in Italy via digital marketing were examined as a benchmark for successful development in Europe;
2. **Identification of Applicable Practices:** Marketing practices with real application in Bulgaria were identified following consultations with industry representatives;
3. **Interviews with Agricultural Producers:** Interviews were conducted regarding perceived opportunities for tourism development in their respective regions and their proposals for a related marketing strategy. Inquiries were also made to farmers already practising agritourism;
4. **Methodological Framework:** A methodology for the application of these practices was developed;
5. **Innovative Models:** Innovative models for developing digital marketing tools to enhance agritourism competitiveness were identified;
6. **Implementation of Surveys:** Three distinct surveys were conducted.

Regarding the research methodology, the scientific approach for data collection and interpretation has been substantiated. The sociological study was conducted between 2022 and 2024 using three primary survey instruments:

Survey 1: Targeted at consumers/tourists;

Survey 2: Targeted at individuals and legal entities with active tourism businesses;

Survey 3: Targeted at farmers and entrepreneurs developing or considering agritourism services.

The empirical section is characterised by its complexity, combining quantitative and qualitative methods: sociological surveys, key expert interviews, comparative analysis of best practices, and desk research of the regulatory and information environment.

From January 2022 to March 2024, a survey was conducted among 148 respondents – representatives of small agricultural and agritourism businesses, rural tourism, and consumers of tourism services. The survey was hosted on an online platform. It was distributed via online channels to a purposefully selected sample of respondents meeting pre-defined criteria, namely representatives of small businesses in the field of agritourism, including owners and managers of tourism sites in rural areas. Respondent recruitment was achieved through a combined approach, including the use of online channels (specialised social media groups) and direct contact with identified businesses via email, based on preliminary internet research. The approach used can be defined as a purposive (non-probability) sampling, where respondents were deliberately selected based on their relevance to the research subject.

The survey was conducted among three focus groups:

Focus Group	Research Period	Number of Participants
Mass Tourists (Consumers)	January 2022 – March 2024	92
Tourism Businesses	January 2022 – March 2024	34
Agricultural Producers	May 2022 – March 2024	42
Total Respondents:		168*

The first survey was targeted at mass tourists from Bulgaria and was conducted from early January 2022 to the end of March 2024, involving 92 adults.

The second survey was directed toward tourism business operators in Bulgaria and was conducted from the first five months of 2022 until the end of the first quarter of 2024; participants included 34 representatives of legal entities operating within the Bulgarian tourism sector.

The third survey was aimed at agricultural producers and took place from May–June 2022 until the end of March 2024, with 42 legal entities engaged in tourism activities in Bulgaria participating.

Based on the collected responses, findings were established regarding the state of tourism in Bulgaria according to the surveyed participants, all of whom have regularly utilised tourism services in recent years. The study identified opportunities for the development and promotion of the sector through digital marketing and determined the attitudes of both tourists and business operators toward rural tourism and agritourism.

The research was carried out in sequential steps based on criteria and indicators of tourism product competitiveness. These are systematised into two groups according to the processes of supply, production, and service delivery. The surveys also integrated the factor of "the impact of the coronavirus pandemic on the sector," which significantly altered the attitudes of both tourists and businesses, placing them in a new operational reality. The primary criteria and indicators for tourism product competitiveness utilised in the study are as follows:²³

Table 2, Criteria and indicators for competitiveness of the tourism product

Infrastructure and superstructure	tourism infrastructure; tourism superstructure;
Product nomenclature and assortment	tourist consumer complex tourist assortment
Product quality	short-term effect on tourism supply; long-term effect on tourism supply; specialization of tourism services;
Product price	production costs; financial costs; profit; discounts;
Form of service	traditional forms of tourist service, involving personal contact; modern forms of service, involving new technologies; self-service;
Operating hours of the tourist site	hourly or 24/7; seasonal or year-round;
Time to perform the service	according to the specifics of the service and the functional capabilities

²³ Ribov, M., Competitive Advantages in Tourism, Trakiya-M, 2011, pp. 175–224.

	of the contractor; according to technical progress; according to motivation;
Service environment	location; equipment and space; interior and exterior; safety and security;
Appearance and attitude of service staff towards customers	clothing, staff hygiene; communication skills; qualifications, education, etiquette;
Environmental requirements	environmental protection systems; voluntary commitments; striving for sustainable development; promoting sustainable practices.

The present study utilises a tripartite survey approach, aiming to encompass the diverse perspectives involved in the development and digitisation of agritourism. The selection of this approach is methodologically substantiated by the need to analyse the interaction between the demand and supply of agritourism services, as well as the specific role of the agrarian component within the tourism product.

In the survey conducted via **Questionnaire 1**, 92 independent respondents shared their attitudes toward tourism in rural areas. The majority (71%) stated a preference for combining various activities during their stay. Only approximately 28% of those surveyed identify the rural environment as a suitable place for a primary holiday. On the other hand, 79% seek secluded locations, prefer short stays, and operate with a limited or lower budget. Regarding what would motivate them to holiday in a rural setting, responses varied, but improvements in road infrastructure, internet quality, and better conditions in accommodation facilities were the primary common denominators.

The conclusion drawn from the potential tourists' responses is that rural areas require a partnership between local municipalities and residents, alongside institutional support for rural infrastructure. Creating more activities, providing quality accommodation, offering authentic experiences, and maintaining competitive pricing would attract more tourists. The involvement of the local cultural community (community centres/chitalishta) or NGOs is an effective way to create events. Preserving and promoting the specific characteristics of regions—such as

unique rituals, culinary specialities, and folklore heritage—through advertising is essential. A key point to note is the necessity for residents and workers in rural areas to be trained in identifying tourism development opportunities using existing resources.

The results from **Questionnaire 2** indicate that half of the respondents:

- Have been involved in the tourism business relatively recently (1 to 5 years);
- Offer tourism services year-round, rely on the income generated from these activities, and systematically invest in their own businesses;
- Indicate that COVID-19 pandemic restrictions negatively impacted their business, leading to shifts in tourist attitudes. Nearly 70% of the entrepreneurs noted that tourists now prefer more secluded locations. Emphasis is placed on accommodation conditions when choosing a location. According to nearly 40% of them, price does not exert a significant influence on the majority of visitors;
- Identify regional infrastructure as a key factor for product competitiveness, placing it on par with marketing activities for tourism promotion;
- Identify social media as the leading tool for tourism promotion, according to the majority of respondents (54%).

The respondents further noted that:

- Most tourists seek greater privacy, authenticity, and personalised experiences;
- Environmentally friendly practices, home-cooked food, contact with local residents, and opportunities to participate in agricultural activities are highly valued;
- Tourists have a distinct preference for direct communication with hosts, quick and easy online booking, and transparency in services and pricing.

The findings show that safety, service quality, and the availability of adequate digital information directly influence the choice of an agritourism destination. Surveyed entrepreneurs noted that their firms are "small or micro-enterprises," predominantly family-owned and managed, often with relatively limited marketing budgets. The analysis indicates:

- Most sites rely on seasonal demand and require service diversification.
- Digital literacy varies, with only a small fraction systematically using integrated booking systems, social media, and SEO.
- The motivation to innovate often faces barriers such as a lack of human resources, insufficient investment, and limited access to training.

The conclusions regarding the business sector emphasise the need for increased awareness among entrepreneurs regarding digital opportunities and better inter-company cooperation.

Questionnaire 3 involved interviews with farmers owning holdings of various scales. Here, 60% of the respondents are small-scale producers for whom it is a supplementary income, while the remaining 40% own larger holdings which serve as their primary occupation and for whom agritourism is of strategic importance.

The majority of farmers are unfamiliar with best practices and the potential of digital marketing. They highlighted:

- Serious difficulties due to a lack of information on funding opportunities, regulatory obstacles, and administrative hurdles;
- A motivation to introduce new services, though they encounter logistical and communication barriers regarding market access.

The majority of surveyed farmers noted successful profitability from tourism as a secondary activity, while others believe there is potential to develop such activities, providing specific proposals. The following factors were identified as obstacles:

- The need for large investments and lack of financial resources;
- Insufficient advertising and a lack of tourist interest;
- Excessive workload with agricultural duties;
- Poor infrastructure and a lack of regional attractions;
- Lack of connectivity between farmers and other stakeholders.

Most respondents (55%) stated they are unaware of other businesses in their area with which it would be appropriate to partner. Among various proposed marketing tools, 77% of the surveyed farmers indicated that social networks are the most reliable and suitable.

The sample in this study can be defined as "purposive", as participants were deliberately selected based on their relevance to the research issues. This type of sampling is appropriate for applied and analytical research where the goal is not statistical representativeness but a deep understanding of processes and attitudes related to digitisation in agritourism.

It should be noted that the research has certain limitations arising from the sampling method used and the specific context of the agritourism sector in Bulgaria. The results do not claim universal generalisability; however, they provide a reliable basis for identifying trends,

issues, and best practices that can be utilised in developing models and recommendations for digital marketing in agritourism. The findings allow for detailed mapping of trends and the identification of critical points in the sector's digitisation.

This chapter further analyses the opportunities for rural and agritourism development based on the geographic regionalisation of sites with identified potential. A characterisation of registered agricultural holdings possessing favourable conditions for supplementary tourism activities is provided.

The following characteristics of agricultural holdings suitable for agritourism have been defined:

Micro and small agricultural holdings;

Family-type farms;

Cultivation of seasonal crops;

Execution of seasonal agricultural activities that would be attractive for observation;

Small-scale livestock farming applying humane, outdoor-rearing practices;

Cultivation of niche or rare crops;

Opportunities to combine production with processing practices or culinary demonstrations and tastings.

Our proposal includes the geographic regionalisation of sites suitable for rural and agritourism into the following regions: North-East; North-Central; North-West; South-East; South-Central; South-West.

For each region, an assessment was conducted of natural landmarks, historical, architectural, and balneological sites, as well as nearby agricultural holdings. Based on this review, innovative models for agritourism development were examined, following the example of Italy. Data from Italy's national statistics and results from sociological studies are presented. The advantages that distinguish Italy as the European country where agritourism is a "trademark" and an absolute advantage for rural areas are outlined. It is observed that the weaknesses identified in our surveys are not present in the Italian model, ensuring higher profitability; furthermore, the Italian legislative framework has prioritised agritourism since 1985. The primary objective was to reduce rural depopulation, with farmer training being a

leading priority. Italy also employs geographic regionalisation for agritourism purposes, and a distinctive feature is the production of goods with Protected Geographical Indications in every region. This approach ensures a very broad and supranational promotion of local production.

Opportunities for applying the Italian experience within the Bulgarian context are proposed, specifically highlighting:

1. Advantages driving the success of the Italian agritourism model;
2. Marketing tools for promoting agritourism in Italy (with specific examples);
3. A practical study of the specifics of Italian agritourism through on-site visits and interviews with practitioners;
4. Opportunities for implementing the Italian promotion model in Bulgaria;
5. Description of the specific conditions in Bulgaria for agritourism development;
6. Online research and identification of successful examples of marketing tools used to increase the popularity of rural and agritourism, with argued advantages and disadvantages;
7. Research into best practices through participation in a webinar featuring an expert guest speaker in agritourism marketing;
8. Specific funding opportunities for agritourism projects in Bulgaria.

In terms of content, a proposal for a marketing strategy is made, providing guidelines for businesses to define:

1. Target group;
2. Positioning;
3. Marketing channels;
4. Product strategy;
5. Market analysis;
6. Target audience;
7. Competition;
8. Industry trends;
9. Audience segmentation.

The potential Product Life Cycle is examined as part of the product strategy for agritourism producers. The significance of the marketing strategy is highlighted as an indispensable part of successful agritourism development, supporting customer acquisition, sustainable development, and wider recognition of agricultural products and services among the public and international tourists.

CHAPTER FOUR: Testing of Digital Marketing Tools for Enhancing Tourism Competitiveness in Rural Areas

The fourth chapter of the dissertation analyses the competitiveness of tourism in rural areas and presents a methodology for testing the digital marketing tools model, thereby validating the hypotheses established in the previous chapters.

During the study of the Bulgarian business environment and consumer attitudes toward agritourism, three aspects were examined that directly relate to the conclusions on how innovative marketing tools can enhance agritourism competitiveness.

1. Attitudes of Current and Potential Consumers

To process data and summarise findings, the opinions of over 90 independent random respondents (aged 18–50) were studied using the volunteer response method. The aggregated information leads to the following conclusions:

1. **Attractiveness:** Leisure in rural areas integrated with agricultural activities is potentially attractive, especially following the COVID-19 restrictions.
2. **Motivations:** Domestic travel is perceived as lower risk and more budget-friendly, while offering a comprehensive product and effective recreation.
3. **Behavioural Patterns:** The preferred length of stay is two to five days. Trips are primarily self-organised for groups of friends or families. Destinations are chosen based on recommendations, online reviews from peers, and the visual appeal/functionality of the host's website.
4. **Perceived Risks:** The primary risks identified are poor infrastructure (difficult access to small settlements) and limited opportunities for combining multiple activities within a short timeframe.

2. Agribusiness Attitudes Toward Tourism Potential

Over 40 respondents from the agricultural sector (where farming is the primary income source) participated.

- **Willingness vs. Fear:** Nearly 90% would include tourism activities if given the opportunity but fear they lack the necessary conditions. Investments in accommodation are perceived as high-risk.

- **Market Links:** Respondents noted a lack of rural tour operators. However, they see tourism as a positive prospect for diversifying income and building customer loyalty by shortening the supply chain and bypassing intermediaries.
- **Barriers:** Key concerns include unrecoverable investments due to poor access, limited additional activities, and a lack of expertise in market research and business planning.
- **Digital Competence:** Farmers noted that heavy workloads limit their time for training and improving digital literacy. There is significant concern regarding the cost and effective implementation of digital tools.

3. Attitudes of Tourism Business Operators

This group included small and family business owners (accommodation, consultancy, or entertainment) with at least one year of experience.

- **Digital Proficiency:** Unlike farmers, these operators are digitally competent and well-positioned online. They actively invest in website content and SEO.
- **Strategic Outlook:** There is a consensus that digital tools are indispensable for tourism promotion and customer acquisition. Key success factors include online customer feedback and collaboration with digital tour operators/platforms.
- **External Constraints:** Operators highlighted the lack of state financial support and poor rural infrastructure as primary growth inhibitors. The lack of reliable statistical data makes forecasting and business planning difficult.
- **Inter-sectoral Cooperation:** A significant issue is the fragmented nature of agricultural cooperation. Successful agritourism marketing requires cross-industry communication, product bundling, and a strong National Brand.

It must be emphasized that cooperation within the agricultural sector is significantly compromised and fragmented, leading to weak and insufficient communication between industries. According to the research results, tourism business operators are unanimous that successful marketing in agritourism requires inter-sectoral communication, product bundling, packaged services, a national brand, and targeted digital marketing tools relevant to progressive technological advancements. There is a definitive consensus that collecting quantitative data on environmental processes, studying best practices both within and outside the establishment, and benchmarking against other randomly and purposefully selected competitive sites supports the

creation of a qualitatively new, competitive, and more attractive tourism product focused on the consumer.²⁴

Methodology for Launching an Agritourism Business

Based on the practitioners' insights, the following steps are identified for a successful transition from farming to agritourism:

1. Market Research: Identifying potential customers by demographic characteristics.
2. Site Assessment: Evaluating if the specific farm location is attractive for visitors and identifying regional advantages.
3. Business Planning: Defining services (e.g., winery tours, cooking classes, eco-tours), financial forecasts, and marketing strategies.
4. Infrastructure Project: Developing a budget and timeline for facilities with a clear focus on Return on Investment (ROI).
5. Marketing Strategy: This must be integrated at the planning stage. It involves collaborating with local tourism boards, sharing marketing costs with local businesses, and utilizing Analytical Data to maximize online positioning.

Regarding digital marketing and social media, access to and presence in social media specifically targeted at agritourism is of key importance for modern tourists; this should include posting photos and videos of farms, wine cellars, and other attractions. The use of targeted advertisements on Facebook, Instagram, and Google Ads can also contribute to delivering this information to potential tourists.

Emphasizing eco-marketing and sustainability is another aspect that could provide competitive advantages for the business. Promoting a contribution to environmental protection can attract attention and would be in line with trends in Marketing 5.0. In practice, this can be achieved through eco-tours where tourists can participate in tree planting or other ecological initiatives. The ecological theme can serve as a leitmotif in marketing regarding the consumption of organic products, conducting on-site training on eco-practices in agriculture, or waste recycling.

²⁴ Draganov, R. (2015). Hotel Policy. Sofia: Sofia University Press "St. Kliment Ohridski", p. 103.

The claim is put forward that partnerships and cooperation with local farms, restaurants, hotels, and regional administrations would be beneficial for the business. The practice of creating package offers that include agritourism and other tourist services has proven successful in most of the positive examples examined. On the other hand, developing partnerships with travel agencies and tour operators to attract groups of tourists and maintain constant contact with consumers of tourist services would ensure a more consistent flow of clients, albeit under promotional conditions.

Organizing educational events and courses is another successful way to attract a specific customer segment—for example, school-aged children who can join an organized school for botany or animal husbandry. Collaboration with vocational high schools for public catering could provide opportunities for group visits to farms with educational significance. The pursuit of a larger number of visitors in a short period would definitely ensure the promotion of the site as a place for recreation. Furthermore, organizing training and courses for adults related to agriculture, winemaking, and cooking traditional dishes will also have a beneficial effect. Partnerships with cooking schools, for instance, can lead to joint events and training in an authentic setting amidst nature and the farm where the raw materials are produced.

Various information platforms and applications play a key role, contributing to the business reaching more customers online, especially in the younger age segment. A website and mobile application for tourist information can also be a channel to new customers, particularly foreign ones—applications like Booking, Tripadvisor, and others could, for a certain percentage fee, recommend the respective accommodation to customers with similar searches. Thus, the algorithm embedded in them will facilitate appropriate audience segmentation. These applications and websites often contain reviews, photos, and contact details of the farms, which shortens the distance to potential tourists while simultaneously stimulating the increasingly popular "word-of-mouth" advertising or C to C (customer to customer) marketing. This illustrates the modern concept of the "prosumer," which denotes the need of the postmodern individual to share their experiences. This carries risks of negative ratings but also provides an opportunity—if the business serves customers conscientiously—to further stimulate positive feedback.

Last but not least is improving the visibility of the agritourism business through SEO optimization and local search engines. SEO optimization in the context of tourism marketing is the process of improving the visibility of websites, blogs, or online platforms in search engines such as Google, Bing, and others to increase traffic to them. In tourism, where competition is

immense, SEO is a particularly important tool that helps tourism companies, agencies, hotels, restaurants, and destinations attract potential customers.

In the current chapter, a synthesis of the data and a ranking of the obtained results have been made. The positive example regarding tourism began with experiments that confirmed expectations for the necessity of a ubiquitous transformation in approaches. The tourism industry moved toward robotic technologies in service. The situation crystallized the imposition of digitalization and showed the readiness of businesses—or rather, the lack of readiness—for it. From the consumers' perspective, the most heavily affected were the so-called "digital migrants" or the "digitally lagging." Sectors where direct interactions between business and customers were expected suffered seriously. As P. Kotler explains in his book "Marketing 5.0"²⁵, readiness for digitalization manifested itself by showing that the hotel industry was among the most affected industries, which had to quickly transform its offerings. Sites and platforms with tourist reviews made service quality and prices transparent.

The conclusion emerged that technologies are most necessary at the beginning and end of the consumer experience, where booking and travel organization are the most automated processes, while the "consumption" of services itself remains predominantly analog. It can still be summarized that in Bulgaria, digitalization in tourism and hospitality is in a relatively early stage of development, working mainly with basic technologies at the advertising level. In the field of agriculture, this indicator lags even further behind, suggesting that if interaction between the two sectors is achieved, tourism would be the more proactive one.

In view of what has been discussed so far, there is a clear need to formulate a strategy for the digitalisation of the agritourism business, beginning with a sub-strategy for the migration of tourism service customers to digital channels. The focus of this strategy should reflect the provision of incentives for switching to digital channels and delivering higher value through an online user experience. The redirection of consumer flow towards automated problem-solving and service delivery can be achieved in several ways described in this dissertation.

It is recommended to define strategies for building digital capacity. Given the need to implement digital solutions, it is crucial to have the capacity for this—financial resources for investing in digital infrastructure and human resources with sufficient competencies. The dissertation provides three proposals in this regard:

²⁵ Kotler, P., Marketing 5.0, Locus, Sofia 2022, p. 121.

First, investing in technology must begin with building customer data infrastructure. Companies should be able to analyse large data sets in real time. In the context of agritourism services, this could involve collecting information on users who visit the merchant's website.

Second, the creation of a digital user experience—this should encompass not only basic user engagement but also other aspects of customer contact, such as marketing, sales of ancillary services, and so forth. All of these must be synchronised with the user experience. A key element is for businesses to rethink ways of delivering value or how to generate additional revenue from the user experience.

Third, it is very important to build a solid digital organisation within the business environment. This determines the success of the investment in digital technologies. Employees must be given the opportunity to use digital tools, be able to work remotely, and also receive solutions to their problems through technology to ensure loyalty in its application. For example, being able to maintain contact with visitors at the accommodation they offer, even if the owners are not constantly present at the location. This is possible through integrated chat systems or by implementing traditional online communication channels.

The fourth chapter of the dissertation research makes proposals for introducing intelligent technologies into the agritourism business. The rise of technology in the field of marketing is extremely intensive at present, and reaching this stage has taken at least half a century to establish its applicable and tangible impact on the mass audience. Machines could replace the human factor in communication, thinking, feeling, movement, imagination, and connection, thereby supporting businesses in rural areas suffering from a deficit of qualified labour and a lack of service speed. At the same time, the fundamental question arises: what will happen to the human factor? Optimistically speaking, the automated work of people in tourism will be facilitated to direct mental capacity toward improvement and development. That is, technologies would allow entrepreneurs to delegate routine activities in favour of focusing on human interaction with customers and improving the "fine-tuning" of the production and implementation of tourism services, especially in the niche spectrum where agritourism falls. Several aspects of technological implementation are proposed:

Artificial Intelligence is one form towards which proactive tourism businesses should aim. Robotic technologies can be used as a commercial advantage-attraction when offering an agritourism service. Mixed Reality and Augmented Reality can hybridise the tourist experience or assist in the process of choosing an accommodation. The Internet of Things (IoT) and

Blockchain can improve precision in customer service and achieve maximum satisfaction without wasting time or resources.

Blockchain, for its part, is an open-source software technology with block-chains forming a distributed public ledger on which encrypted data is recorded in a network of equal participants. Each block is a self-contained page of a ledger and contains information about past transactions. The security of blockchain allows for the bypassing of intermediaries in transactions or the collection of information regarding food supply chains, providing data on all parties involved in production.

To objectively evaluate the effectiveness of the marketing strategy for the development of agritourism businesses proposed in Chapter 3, a system of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) is introduced. These allow for the measurement of results from the application of digital marketing tools and create a basis for subsequent control and optimisation of strategic decisions. Key indicators are particularly suitable for small enterprises, as they help direct limited resources towards specific goals. As shown by research by Zaitsev (2023)²⁶, small and medium-sized enterprises can strategically use KPIs to improve their efficiency and competitiveness. Based on the described models and studied sources, a digital diagnostic tool was created that applies the specified KPIs to assess the level of digitalisation. The tool is structured according to the Balanced Scorecard model, combining the following components:

- Strategic and Financial KPIs: assess the overall economic impact of digital solutions (e.g., revenue growth from online services, profitability of digital projects);
- User Experience and Marketing: measure the success of digital channels and campaigns through indicators of reach, engagement, conversion, and retention;
- Internal Processes and Technology: monitor the digitalisation of operations (digital processing time, number of automated processes) and technological readiness (e.g., availability of software/hardware for online business);
- Staff Training: evaluate the degree of development of digital skills among staff;
- Technology Acceptance and Use: includes a self-assessment or questionnaire regarding perceived usefulness and ease of use of the new systems, as well as factors like organisational support and motivation.

²⁶ Zaitsev, V. (2023). Key performance indicators as a tool for improving the efficiency of small and medium-sized enterprises. *Journal of Small Business and Enterprise Development*, 30(4), 623-639.

The tool combines these indicators into a single diagnostic framework. The presented results provide a quantitative assessment of the strengths and weaknesses in the digital transformation of the business. This allows small agritourism business owners to identify priority areas for development and plan steps for optimisation—for example, through targeted training or improving social media presence with more original content. In this way, the proposed methodology substantiates the choice of KPIs as a practical tool that integrates theoretical models and assists small enterprises practically.

The tool is accessible at the following website: www.agrotour.digital

Chapter 4 substantiates the thesis that the application of new technologies in marketing is of decisive importance for the future and adaptability of tourism businesses. Artificial intelligence allows entrepreneurs to conduct marketing research independently and thus plan personalisations in the products and services they offer. The contextual nature of new technologies enables the creation of an adaptive user experience. From this, it becomes clear that marketers could align the content, offers, and interactions they provide with the current emotions of the customers. With the help of integrated computer networks, service delivery is carried out in real time and at the point of demand.

IV. CONCLUSION, FINDINGS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

As a result of the conducted research, the following main findings and conclusions regarding the possibilities for increasing the competitiveness of agritourism in Bulgaria through innovative marketing tools can be derived:

1. Agritourism in Bulgaria possesses significant potential that remains insufficiently realized. Despite the rich natural, cultural, and historical resources in rural areas, agritourism still holds a limited share in the country's tourism sector. The main challenges are related to the low recognition of agritourism products, insufficient integration between the agricultural and tourism businesses, and the lack of targeted marketing strategies.

2. Digital marketing tools are a key factor for increasing competitiveness. The use of international digital channels—websites, social networks, mobile applications, online booking platforms, and supporting marketing—significantly increases the opportunities to reach new targets and build a sustainable image for Bulgarian agritourism. Digitalization allows for more precise targeting, personalized communication, and effective customer relationship management.

3. Popularizing marketing approaches within the business is a prerequisite for sustainable growth. The introduction of new forms of experiences, themed products, events, and integrated tourism packages, combined with digital campaigns and interactive content, creates added value for both tourists and local communities. Practices from leading European destinations show that the successful development of agritourism requires constant adaptation to the trends and needs of the global tourist.

4. A more active role for all stakeholders is necessary. The sustainable development of agritourism presupposes effective cooperation between local authorities, agricultural producers, the tourism business, and the non-governmental sector. Targeted training to increase digital literacy and marketing skills of those employed in the sector is also of key importance.

5. State policy and strategic planning must support innovation and digitalization. Encouraging investment in digital infrastructure, creating national and regional digital platforms, and conducting information campaigns to promote agritourism are among the recommended measures to increase its visibility and competitiveness.

Agritourism in Bulgaria has the potential to become an important engine for regional development, socio-economic revitalization, and the preservation of traditions. Realizing this potential depends largely on the sector's ability to integrate innovative marketing tools and adapt to the dynamics of the digital environment. Through targeted efforts in digitalization, cooperation, and innovation, agritourism can occupy a more significant place on the tourism map of Bulgaria and contribute to the sustainable development of rural areas and the entire national economy.

The implementation of digital tools in Bulgarian agritourism represents a key opportunity to increase its competitiveness. Through the lens of improved communication in business and with the authorities, collaboration between businesses, a focus on ecological practices, and the collection and analysis of information, agritourism can achieve significantly greater popularity among customers, more effective use of resources, and sustainable development of the sector. These factors will not only contribute to the greater attractiveness of agritourism but also to its establishment as an important factor for economic growth and the development of rural communities in Bulgaria. At the same time, the implementation of these innovations requires a well-built strategy, suitable technological solutions, and cooperation between various stakeholders to ensure the maximum benefit from their implementation.

Agrarian tourism represents a significant aspect of the modern tourism industry, especially in highly urbanized societies where the demand for authentic and natural experiences

is ever-increasing. Rural tourism not only provides an opportunity to discover the rural way of life and its traditions but also allows visitors to enjoy the richness of nature in its primary form.

In the context of the European Union, agritourism plays a key role in the tourism sector, with its contribution to total income reaching a significant 20-30%. Farmers and entrepreneurs in rural areas who combine their agricultural activities with tourism are essential for the development of sustainable tourism. Their contribution, not only in economic terms but also in the preservation of traditions, culture, and the ecology of rural communities, is undeniable.

It follows that the integration of digital tools in agritourism can strengthen these positive trends. Increasing the visibility and accessibility of agritourism offerings through online platforms, improved communication with customers and authorities, and the collection and analysis of data on tourist preferences—all of this can contribute to more effective management of agritourism resources and an increase in their competitiveness. As a result, both tourism in rural areas and agriculture can become a more attractive and key sphere for the development of rural communities in Bulgaria and for attracting and retaining able-bodied individuals.

Thanks to the natural and historical diversity of the country's territory, Bulgaria has significant potential for the development of both mass and alternative types of tourism. A prerequisite for the development of "specialized forms" of tourism activities is the still unexploited potential of rural areas and agricultural production as an activity characteristic of them. Through alternative tourism products, the imbalance in seasonal consumption and the image of our country as a "destination for mass tourism" at low prices would be reduced. Non-traditional forms of tourism could attract smaller but more solvent tourists and develop rural areas in terms of infrastructure and human resources, which are substantially necessary for agricultural production and the food security of the entire country. At this stage, alternative tourism in our country has more of a complementary significance and place in the national tourism product. Under these circumstances, the potential of a large part of our country's territory remains unused, and businesses and local communities in the regions miss the opportunity for diversification of activities and additional added value. The level of digitalization in rural areas, both through network infrastructure and through the awareness of the population and business, can be considered low. This is one of the reasons for the weak positioning of agritourism products on the Internet, where modern consumers are based. It follows that, in marketing terms, the way of promoting alternative tourism products is poorly represented or insufficiently modernized.

On the other hand, the significant financial resources directed towards rural development and sustainable development in the EU could also be used for the development of

the "Tourism" sector where it intersects with agriculture and rural areas. Separately, the financial instruments provided for the sector are an opportunity to develop it in marketing terms and establish a national brand in international markets. The realization of such proposals is possible mainly through good collaboration between the executive branch, local communities, and the business. In turn, business operators could turn towards association activities that provide them with a unified representation in decision-making concerning the industry. Furthermore, training and investing in human resources guarantees an increase in the quality of tourism services and the retention of personnel in Bulgaria.

This dissertation research presents an in-depth analysis of the possibilities for increasing the competitiveness of agritourism in Bulgaria through the application of innovative marketing tools and digital technologies. The study confirms that agritourism has strategic importance for the sustainable development of rural areas by combining economic, social, and cultural benefits, including the diversification of the local economy and the preservation of traditions and natural resources.

In theoretical terms, the dissertation systematizes modern concepts of tourism marketing, emphasizing the role of digitalization and innovation in building competitive capabilities. The main principles and tools of digital marketing are analyzed, allowing for more precise targeting, personalization of the tourist experience, and effective communication with target audiences. The main characteristics and challenges in implementing digital solutions in the agritourism business are derived.

The empirical part of the study, based on surveys among tourists, agricultural producers, and tourism operators, confirms the growing importance of digital channels for information, booking, and sharing tourism experiences. The data indicate that the global tourist is increasingly informed, seeks personalized and authentic experiences, prioritizes sustainability, and actively uses social networks in decision-making. Counterpoints to these trends are barriers related to a shortage of digital skills, limited financial resources, and insufficient coordination among stakeholders.

Comparative analysis with international experience, especially that of Italy, shows that the successful development of agritourism is an integrated approach involving cooperation between the public and private sectors, targeted funding, and constant investment in training and digital transformation. Based on the analysis, practical recommendations are formulated for creating innovative tourism products, developing clusters, using external marketing platforms, and increasing local entrepreneurship.

The dissertation presents a diagnostic practical-applied model for determining the level of digitalization of an agritourism enterprise, which is further developed into a model for the digital maturity of the agritourism business in the form of a self-assessment checklist and specific guidelines for the digitalization of the sector. The practical value of the study is expressed in the proposed solutions for increasing the visibility of Bulgarian agritourism, attracting new target groups, and creating a sustainable environment for the development of rural areas.

In conclusion, the research shows that innovative marketing tools and digital technologies are a key factor for the competitiveness of agritourism in Bulgaria. They not only increase the efficiency of communication and management but also create conditions for sustainable growth, socio-economic revitalization in rural areas, and the establishment of Bulgaria as an attractive destination for alternative tourism on a European and global scale.

V. SUMMARY OF CONTRIBUTIONS IN THE DISSERTATION

The following scientific and scientific-applied achievements can be identified in the dissertation research:

Theoretical Contributions:

1. Systematization and critical analysis of contemporary scientific concepts and approaches regarding digital marketing in tourism have been performed, with an emphasis on their applicability within the agritourism sector. The fundamental concepts related to agritourism, rural tourism, and digital marketing tools have been defined and distinguished, establishing a clear structure of the interconnections between them.
2. Development of an original theoretical-methodological framework for assessing the competitiveness of agritourism through the introduction of innovative marketing tools.

Analytical and Empirical Contributions:

1. A SWOT analysis of agritourism in Bulgaria has been prepared, identifying the specific strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats facing the sector in the context of digital transformation.
2. An empirical study was conducted among business representatives, local communities, and experts, serving to clarify the current state and barriers to the use of digital marketing tools in agritourism.
3. A comparative analysis between the Bulgarian and Italian models for the digitalization of agritourism enriches scientific knowledge with best practices and opportunities for adaptation

in Bulgaria.

Applied Contributions:

1. Practical guidelines and proposals have been formulated for implementing digital marketing tools in the agritourism business, tailored to the specific characteristics of the Bulgarian environment.
2. A model for integrating digital channels (websites, social networks, online booking platforms, etc.) into the marketing strategy of agritourism sites has been developed.
3. An integrated practical-applied model for assessing the level of digitalization and marketing effectiveness in the agritourism business, based on a system of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs), has been developed.
4. Measures have been proposed to increase the digital literacy and marketing skills of entrepreneurs and employees in the agritourism sector.
5. Specific recommendations have been provided to institutions to support digitalization and innovation in rural tourism through policies, training, and financial instruments.

Socio-Economic Contributions:

1. The dissertation establishes the necessity of increasing awareness and engagement of stakeholders (business, local authorities, NGOs) regarding the opportunities for sustainable development of rural areas through agritourism.
2. Potential effects for the socio-economic revitalization of rural areas, the reduction of regional imbalances, and the preservation of cultural heritage have been outlined.

VI. LIST OF PUBLICATIONS RELATED TO THE DISSERTATION

1. Karadocheva, K. (2020). Evolution of the concept of sustainable development in contemporary European policies. Proceedings of the Jubilee International Scientific Conference "Economic Science, Education and Real Economy: Development and Interactions in the Digital Age", "Science and Economics" Publishing House, UE-Varna, p. 793, 2020 / ISBN: 978-954-21-1038-5.
2. Marinova, N., Karadocheva, K. (2020). Pricing and price policy in international marketing activities. Collection of selected reports of the Department of Administration and Management – "Contemporary Realities – Problems and Perspectives", International Scientific Conference, jointly with the University of Management and Information Technology - Skopje, "Asconi" Publishing, p. 161, ISBN 978-954-383-137-1.
3. Karadocheva, K. (2020). Tourism during crisis: opportunities for unlocking potential in

Bulgaria. Collection of selected reports of the Department of Administration and Management – "Contemporary Realities – Problems and Perspectives", International Scientific Conference, jointly with the University of Management and Information Technology - Skopje, "Asconi" Publishing, p. 169, ISBN 978-954-383-137-1.

4. Marinova, N., Karadocheva, K. (2021). Graphic design and advertising imagery – benefits for the innovative tourism brand. Published in the collection Pogleidi, issue 11-12, Nova nasha rech, Leskovac, Serbia, ISSN 2217-737X, KOBISS.SR-ID 200035084, UDC: 621.039:115.333.

5. Karadocheva, K. (2021). Contemporary marketing in the tourism industry through the "Business Model Canvas". Collection of the Jubilee Scientific-Practical Conference dedicated to the 30th anniversary of the establishment of NBU and the first MBA/BA programs in Bulgaria.

6. Marinova, N., Karadocheva, K. (2023). Problems facing brand management and promotion in crisis situations. Remarketing of Reality: International Scientific Conference dedicated to the 25th anniversary of the Department of Marketing at the University of Economics - Varna, Bulgaria, June 17, 2022: Collection of reports. Science and Economics, Varna, pp. 596-604. ISBN 9789542111344.

7. Marinova N., Karadocheva K. (2019). Particularities of making decision in the uncertainty of future results. Thematic Proceedings of the International Scientific Conference "Employment, Education and Entrepreneurship", Faculty of Business Economics and Entrepreneurship, Belgrade, Republic of Serbia, 2019 / ISBN 978-86-6069-173-8.

8. Karadocheva, K. (2021). Innovations and Technologies in Tourism Supply and Demand that Permanently Change the Post-pandemic World. Collection of scientific reports "Economics and Business in the Post-Pandemic World", "Asconi" Publishing, p. 631, ISBN 978-954-383-140-1.