

OPINION

by Prof. Ivan Boevsky, PhD, New Bulgarian University, Department of Economics

on a dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree ‘Doctor’ in Professional Field 3.9 Tourism, doctoral programme ‘Economics and Management (Tourism)’ entitled ‘Innovative Marketing Tools for Enhancing the Competitiveness of Agritourism in Bulgaria’

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1. General Characteristics and Relevance of the Dissertation

The dissertation addresses a current and significant issue for the Bulgarian economy: the opportunities to enhance the competitiveness of agritourism through the targeted use of innovative digital marketing tools. The choice of topic is justified both by transformations in consumer behaviour and the accelerated digitalisation of tourism services, and by the need to make fuller use of the resource potential of rural areas.

The scientific significance of the research stems from the relatively limited systematised information on agritourism in Bulgaria and from the need to distinguish it conceptually while linking it functionally to rural, ecological, cultural and gastronomic tourism. Its scientific and applied significance is determined by its focus on small and medium-sized enterprises, which have limited financial and human resources but may improve their market positioning through the appropriate selection and measurement of digital marketing activities.

The dissertation comprises 272 pages and includes an introduction, four chapters, a conclusion, findings, recommendations, contributions and six appendices. It draws on 111 literary and information sources in Bulgarian, English and Russian, as well as official documents and online sources. Its structure follows a logical progression from theoretical clarification of the problem, through environmental analysis and empirical verification, to the development and testing of an applied tool.

2. Aim, Objectives, Subject, Object and Research Thesis

The principal aim—to examine the role of innovative digital marketing tools in enhancing the competitiveness of agritourism and, on this basis, to develop an applicable model for assessing and improving digitalisation in the sector—is clearly formulated and corresponds to the selected research problem. The object of the research encompasses small and medium-sized enterprises in Bulgaria, considered in terms of their development, operation and competitiveness, while the subject focuses on the application and impact of innovative digital marketing tools.

The stated objectives are sufficiently broad to cover the theoretical, empirical and applied dimensions of the research: analysing marketing tools and the state of the sector; outlining trends in supply and demand; identifying successful models; assessing the potential of rural areas; examining the role of stakeholders; developing and testing a diagnostic tool; and formulating guidelines for enhancing competitiveness.

The research thesis is developed through three working hypotheses linking the extent to which innovative marketing tools are used with interest in the agritourism product, the integration of regional resources, and the potential for Bulgarian agritourism to approach established Western European

practices. There is logical consistency among the aim, objectives, hypotheses and structure of the exposition.

3. Methodology and Empirical Justification

The methodological framework combines desk research, systemic and analytical approaches, induction and deduction, comparative analysis, SWOT analysis, field research, questionnaires and semi-structured interviews. This combination is appropriate for studying a sector in which official statistical information is fragmented and practices depend strongly on the specific regional and entrepreneurial context.

The empirical study includes three purposively selected groups: tourists, tourism business operators and agricultural producers. The use of a non-random purposive sample is acceptable in view of the applied orientation of the dissertation and is correctly identified as a limitation. The data enable comparison of consumer demand, the readiness of tourism businesses, and agricultural producers' attitudes towards diversification and digitalisation.

A positive feature is the effort to ensure that the results do not remain merely descriptive. They have been used to construct and test an online diagnostic tool comprising a checklist and a system of key performance indicators. This establishes a link between the empirical findings, the strategic proposals and the possibility of subsequent management control.

4. Assessment of the Content and Results Obtained

Chapter One establishes the necessary theoretical and methodological foundation through an analysis of marketing concepts, tourism product positioning, digital communication channels and applicable innovative tools. The author consistently directs the general principles of tourism marketing towards the specific characteristics of the agritourism product, which is complex, territorially determined and based on authentic experience.

Chapter Two focuses on the current state and prospects of agritourism in Bulgaria. A significant result is the systematisation of resources, constraints, opportunities and risks, including through SWOT analysis and quantitative competitiveness indicators. The examination of financing, product diversification and interaction between agricultural and tourism businesses extends the analysis beyond the narrow confines of advertising communication.

Chapter Three relates the empirical results to geographical regionalisation and to the comparative study of European practices. Italy is appropriately selected as an example of a country with an established agritourism model, regulatory framework and strong regional identity. The comparison makes it possible to identify not only marketing techniques but also institutional, organisational and cooperative prerequisites for development.

Chapter Four has the strongest applied orientation. It develops guidelines for implementing digital tools, a system of KPIs, approaches to minimising risks for small enterprises, and a checklist for assessing the level of digitalisation. Implementing the model as an online diagnostic tool is convincing evidence of an effort towards practical testing and the transfer of results to business practice.

5. Scientific and Applied Contributions

I accept the contributions formulated by the doctoral candidate. In summary, the most significant are:

the systematisation of theoretical concepts in digital marketing and their adaptation to the specific environment of agritourism;

the clarification of the relationship and distinction between rural tourism and agritourism, including the role of local natural, cultural, agricultural and gastronomic resources;

the development of a SWOT framework and a system of quantitative indicators for assessing the competitiveness of agritourism under conditions of digital transformation;

the comparative analysis of the Bulgarian and Italian models and the identification of organisational and marketing solutions applicable in Bulgaria;

the proposed integrated model for diagnosing digitalisation, based on a checklist and KPIs following the Balanced Scorecard logic, together with its implementation in a functioning online environment;

the recommendations addressed to businesses, professional associations and public institutions for the development of sustainable regional agritourism products.

The contributions are predominantly scientific and applied in nature and are directly related to the results of the research undertaken. They may support both individual management diagnostics for small enterprises and the development of regional and sectoral policies.

6. Publications and Dissemination of Results

Eight publications related to the dissertation topic are presented, both single-authored and co-authored, published in proceedings of national and international scientific forums. Their thematic focus covers digital marketing, agritourism, competitiveness and opportunities for sectoral development. This publication activity demonstrates that key parts of the research have been presented and discussed before the academic community. It meets the requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree ‘Doctor’.

7. Critical Comments and Recommendations

The positive assessment of the dissertation does not preclude several comments of a clarifying and recommendatory nature:

The quantitative data for the empirical study should be made consistent. The stated total of 148 participants does not correspond to the sum of the three groups presented—92 tourists, 34 representatives of tourism businesses and 42 agricultural producers—which amounts to 168. It should also be clearly stated whether the data concerning 92 respondents used in different parts of the dissertation refer to the same survey.

Some of the hypotheses contain broad causal claims regarding income, living standards and population retention. They would be more precise if operationalised through specific indicators and a time horizon allowing subsequent empirical verification.

In demonstrating the effects of digital tools, a clearer distinction should be made between diagnosing digital maturity, the actual implementation of the tool and the measured economic outcome. Such a distinction would enhance the validity of the conclusions concerning competitiveness.

The applicability of the Italian model should be interpreted by taking into account differences in the regulatory framework, farm size, sectoral organisation, regional governance and access to finance. These conditions could usefully be transformed into explicit criteria for the transfer of practices.

Editorial refinement of the terminology, tables and certain repetitions would improve the readability and internal consistency of the final text.

These comments do not alter my overall positive assessment and may serve as guidance for further development and publication of the results.

8. Questions to the Doctoral Candidate

If the proposed diagnostic model were applied in a small agritourism enterprise, which three measurable economic indicators would you use to demonstrate that improved digital maturity actually leads to higher competitiveness, and over what time horizon should they be monitored? Which elements of the Italian model for the development and digital positioning of agritourism can be transferred directly to Bulgaria, and which require prior regulatory, organisational or financial changes? Please indicate a priority sequence for their introduction.

9. Conclusion

The dissertation by Kamelia Evgenieva Karadocheva constitutes a completed and independent scientific study characterised by clear relevance, a logical structure and a convincing scientific and applied orientation. An appropriate methodology has been employed, an original empirical study has been conducted, and an applicable diagnostic tool has been developed. The results enrich knowledge of marketing management and the digital transformation of agritourism and provide a basis for practical solutions at enterprise, regional and sectoral levels.

The dissertation meets the requirements of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, the Regulations for its implementation, and the internal rules of New Bulgarian University for the award of the educational and scientific degree 'Doctor'.

On the basis of the foregoing, I give a positive assessment of the dissertation and propose that the esteemed Scientific Jury award Kamelia Evgenieva Karadocheva the educational and scientific degree 'Doctor' in Professional Field 3.9 Tourism, doctoral programme 'Economics and Management (Tourism)'.

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Opinion prepared by:

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