

OPINION

by **Assoc. Prof. Ekatherina Tzvetanova-Georgieva, PhD, New Bulgarian University, Department of Administration and Management, Professional Field 3.7 Administration and Management**

regarding the award of the educational and scientific degree **Doctor (PhD) in Professional Field 3.9 Tourism**, Scientific Specialty Tourism, with candidate **Kamelia Evgenieva Karadocheva**.

Dissertation Title: Innovative Marketing Tools for Enhancing the Competitiveness of Agritourism in Bulgaria

Academic Supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Nadia Marinova, PhD, Eng.

1. Significance of the research problem from a scientific and applied perspective

The topic of the dissertation is timely and practically relevant. In the context of digital transformation and increasing competition among tourist destinations, opportunities for the development of agritourism are becoming increasingly important both for the sustainable development of rural areas and for the diversification of Bulgaria's tourism product.

The focus on micro and small agritourism enterprises is particularly appropriate, as these businesses face the most significant constraints related to marketing capabilities, digitalisation, and access to markets. The dissertation addresses issues of practical importance for both the business sector and public institutions involved in tourism and rural development.

The study attempts to connect contemporary digital marketing concepts with the specific needs of the agritourism sector and therefore possesses both scientific relevance and a clearly expressed applied orientation.

2. Justification of the objectives and research tasks

The main objective of the dissertation is clearly formulated and fully corresponds to the subject of the research. It is aimed at investigating the role of innovative digital marketing tools in enhancing the competitiveness of agritourism and developing an applicable model for evaluation and improvement.

To achieve this objective, a set of specific research tasks has been defined, covering the main stages of the research process, including theoretical analysis, examination of current practices, empirical investigation, and development of an applied model.

Some of the research hypotheses are formulated in a relatively broad manner and reflect expected sectoral trends rather than strictly measurable relationships. Their more precise linkage to specific indicators would facilitate empirical validation and interpretation.



Overall, the objectives, research tasks, and structure of the dissertation are logically connected and provide an adequate framework for achieving the intended research goals.

3. Correspondence between the research methodology and the research objectives and tasks

The author employs a combination of theoretical and empirical methods, including literature review, analysis of regulatory and strategic documents, questionnaire surveys, interviews, focus groups, and comparative analysis of international practices.

The selected methodology generally corresponds well to the stated objectives and research tasks and enables the accumulation of a substantial amount of empirical material.

Alongside the strengths of the methodological approach, several limitations may be noted.

First, the formation of the research sample could have been explained in greater detail. Given the absence of an official register of agritourism enterprises in Bulgaria, questions remain regarding the extent to which the findings may be considered representative of the sector as a whole.

Second, in certain parts of the dissertation the distinction between the concepts of *agritourism*, *rural tourism*, and *ecotourism* is not always sufficiently clear, which creates some difficulties in interpreting particular findings.

Third, the empirical analysis relies primarily on descriptive methods. The application of a broader range of quantitative analytical techniques could have provided a deeper understanding of the relationship between digitalisation and indicators of competitiveness.

These limitations do not undermine the overall value of the study but rather indicate opportunities for its future development and refinement.

4. Scientific and applied contributions of the dissertation (description and assessment)

The dissertation contains a number of scientific and applied results that deserve a positive evaluation.

Among the most significant contributions I identify the following:

- systematisation and adaptation of contemporary digital marketing concepts to the specific context of agritourism;
- implementation of an original empirical study among representatives of the sector;
- analysis of the current state of agritourism in Bulgaria and identification of major challenges related to the digital transformation of agritourism enterprises;
- development of a practical tool for assessing and diagnosing the digital readiness of agritourism businesses;
- formulation of practical recommendations aimed at improving marketing practices and enhancing competitiveness.



Particularly noteworthy is the author's effort not only to analyse the existing conditions within the sector but also to propose a practical instrument oriented toward business needs.

The contributions are predominantly scientific-applied in nature. The developed diagnostic tool represents an interesting practical outcome; however, its validation remains limited at this stage and could be further strengthened through future studies involving a broader range of enterprises.

The comparative analysis between Bulgarian practice and the Italian agritourism model also constitutes a useful contribution, as it highlights potential development pathways and good practices. At the same time, differences in the institutional and regulatory environments should be taken into account when considering the direct transferability of certain practices.

5. Assessment of the publications related to the dissertation: the number and quality of the publication venues in which the publications have appeared

The submitted publications are directly related to the subject matter of the dissertation and reflect its main research directions.

The publication activity of the doctoral candidate may be considered sufficient for the award of the educational and scientific degree Doctor (PhD). The publications demonstrate consistency between the research topic and the content of the dissertation and provide an opportunity for the dissemination and preliminary validation of part of the obtained results.

Further development of the research and publication of results in internationally refereed academic journals would contribute to greater visibility and broader academic discussion of the subject.

6. Citations by other authors, reviews in academic publications and other indicators

The bibliography is diverse, up-to-date, and largely consistent with the objectives and scope of the dissertation. It includes Bulgarian and international academic publications, regulatory documents, strategic papers, and statistical sources.

At the time of the dissertation defence, there is no evidence of a significant number of independent citations or broader recognition in the academic press. This is understandable given the nature of the doctoral procedure and the relatively short period between the publication of the research results and the defence of the dissertation.

The absence of substantial citation activity should not be considered a weakness, as the primary criterion for awarding the educational and scientific degree Doctor (PhD) remains the quality of the conducted research and the contributions achieved by the candidate.

7. Comments, recommendations and critical remarks

My positive assessment of the dissertation allows me to make several recommendations intended primarily to support the further development of the research.



- It would be useful if the quantitative data concerning the participants in the empirical study were presented in a more concise and aggregated manner in order to provide a clearer picture of the sample structure and the relationships among the different respondent groups.
- In certain parts of the dissertation, the concepts of agritourism, rural tourism, and ecotourism appear in a closely related context. A more precise conceptual distinction would contribute to greater clarity in the interpretation of findings and the definition of the research scope.
- Some of the identified relationships associated with the competitiveness of agritourism enterprises could be further specified in future studies through the use of more clearly defined quantitative indicators and additional statistical analytical techniques.
- The practical value of the proposed diagnostic tool could be further strengthened through broader empirical testing and by examining the relationship between digital readiness, the implementation of specific digital tools, and the achieved business outcomes.
- The comparative analysis of the Italian agritourism model represents an interesting component of the study. It would be useful to distinguish more explicitly between practices that can be directly applied in Bulgaria and those requiring adaptation to the national institutional and regulatory environment.
- Certain sections of the dissertation are more descriptive than analytical. A clearer distinction between empirical presentation and analytical interpretation would further enhance the persuasiveness of the study.
- In future publications, additional editorial refinement of selected terms, tables, and recurring statements would improve readability and overall coherence.

These recommendations do not diminish the scientific and applied value of the dissertation. Rather, they outline opportunities for further development of the research and broader practical utilisation of its results.

8. Conclusion with a clearly formulated positive or negative evaluation of the dissertation

The dissertation addresses a topical and practically significant issue related to enhancing the competitiveness of agritourism through the application of contemporary digital marketing tools.

The research demonstrates the candidate's ability to independently identify a meaningful scientific problem, conduct both theoretical and empirical analysis, formulate well-grounded conclusions, and propose solutions with practical relevance.

Despite certain limitations and opportunities for further development, the dissertation contains results with scientific and applied value and meets the requirements for awarding the educational and scientific degree Doctor (PhD).

Based on the above considerations, I give a **positive evaluation** of the dissertation and recommend that the respected Scientific Jury award **Kamelia Evgenieva Karadocheva** the educational and scientific degree **Doctor (PhD)** in Professional Field **3.9 Tourism**.

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