

REVIEW

of a dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree PhD in the doctoral program "Marketing" at the D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov, professional field 3.8. Economics

Reviewer:

Assoc. Prof. Vanya Petkova Grigorova, PhD, Associate Professor in the scientific specialty "Marketing", professional field 3.8. Economics, Department of Marketing at the D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov.

Grounds for submitting the review:

Participation as a member of the Scientific Jury for the defense of the dissertation according to Order № 785/ 31.08.2026, of the Rector of the D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov, and designation as reviewer by decision of the first meeting of the Scientific Jury held on 01.09.2026.

Author of the dissertation:

KRISTIANA NIKOLAEVA CHESHMEDZHIEVA

Subject:

COMMUNICATION TOOLS FOR POSITIONING A SCHOOL IN A DIGITAL ENVIRONMENT

Scientific supervisor: Assoc. Prof. Ivan Rashkov Marchevsky, PhD

I. Presentation of the PhD student

Kristiana Nikolaeva Cheshmedzhieva began her studies at the Department of Marketing at the D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov as a full-time PhD student in 2022, d010322286, in the scientific specialty "Marketing", within the Department of Marketing. Overall, her educational and professional competency profile is focused on the fields of marketing – primarily digital marketing, information technologies, and training activities. Her professional experience acquired after 2022 is mainly related to digital marketing in the following aspects: digital communications, including in the field of education, content marketing, social media, and public relations. The acquired knowledge and skills have been applied in a newly established educational platform, as well as in teaching and expert activities in social media and digital PR at a secondary school. These facts demonstrate an in-depth understanding of the dissertation subject.

The PhD student has been developing her personal and professional qualities as a specialist through a number of activities: certified courses, participation in socially significant projects, alongside receiving major awards and recognitions at the national level through competitive selection.

II. General characteristics of the dissertation

A multitude of arguments can be adduced regarding the high degree of fulfillment of the formal requirements for the dissertation. The scope is realized in 169 standard pages, of which 151 consist of the main text, structured across three chapters with unbalanced volumes (with a predominance of the third chapter, which does not compromise the quality of the work). Structurally, it possesses all the necessary components: an introduction, three chapters with a varying number of sections (five in the first, four in the second, and three in the third) and subsections ending with summaries, a conclusion, and a bibliography. Stylistic and content requirements for a scientific text have been respected. Clear expression, consistency, and logical coherence between the individual chapters and sections are present. Appropriate visual presentation forms have been utilized, including 13 tables and 4 figures. Sixty-five literature sources serve as the scientific foundation of the research, with a predominance of those in English (60), while the remainder are in Bulgarian. Lists of figures and tables are provided.

The subject's topicality is indisputable, a consequence of digitalisation and the development of social platforms, which necessitate a new approach to building the image of organisations, including those in the field of education. The issue of digital positioning is specific and insufficiently researched in Bulgaria in the context of school education. Furthermore, the digital profiles of educational institutions are not yet sufficiently developed, and school positioning in a digital environment is, in most cases, neither scientifically grounded nor strategically directed. In this regard, the author's motivation is to seek a solution to this problem through the dissertation research, offering a structured framework (model) backed by data that transforms school online activity from mere information dissemination into long-term trust, reputation, and identity building.

The primary parameters for this type of scientific work have been met. The object – the strategic communication of a school in a digital environment (in terms of goals and tools used) and the subject – the capacity of social channels (in terms of capabilities and limitations) as a tool for implementing a school's positioning strategy – have been correctly defined.

The main challenge set by the author is to properly substantiate the formulated research thesis: *successful positioning of a school institution in a digital environment is the result of purposeful and consistent management of communication processes based on an understanding of audience specifics, digital consumption characteristics, and the logic of interaction on social platforms*. To prove this thesis, the main goal and objectives have been correctly formulated.

The study utilised established theoretical and empirical methods corresponding to the work carried out on the topic. The interdisciplinary approach, combining classical marketing knowledge with principles from modern educational marketing, contributes not only to the originality of the work but also to the successful identification of the niche for addressing the formulated problems. The approaches used are predominantly exploratory and qualitative in nature (literary, comparative, and content analysis, case

study method), supplemented by quantitative digital marketing metrics subjected to descriptive and comparative analysis. The empirical study relies on secondary data.

The limitations correctly and clearly outline the framework of the overall dissertation research. The boundaries of the validity of conclusions regarding representativeness, market applicability of the findings, reliance on secondary data, and focus on social media are explicitly defined.

III. Evaluation of the dissertation content

Overall, the dissertation meets the requirements regarding content depth, which can be supported by a number of proofs, such as:

In **Chapter One** (conceptual framework), the conceptual basis of positioning educational institutions in a digital environment is established, and the main issues are identified. A critical review of the evolution of the positioning concept is performed, contrasting the premises of established authors. The genesis, the historical and technological transition to the digital environment, and the role of social media as a factor in digital communication – which transforms the school from an information dispenser to a value creator – are traced. Accent is also placed on the evolution of the modes and extent of digitalization's impact on the communication strategy of school institutions. Viewing the digital environment as a new socio-cultural reality, modern media are analyzed, which transform the user from a passive consumer into an active co-creator of content.

In this regard, drawing on a descriptive and critical analysis of classical strategic positioning principles, these principles are adapted to the sphere of school education. The sectoral specifics of school marketing are systematised. Special attention is devoted to the challenges schools face in managing social networks, as well as the established experience of a private secondary school in this area.

Chapter Two (analytical-creative) forms the methodological core of the study. Emphasising the need for a new approach to this topic, the author proposes a conceptual Process model for the strategic digital positioning of a school institution, comprising 4 blocks – analytical, identification, communication, and management – and their respective elements. The model's algorithm is presented in stages for achieving positioning goals via social channels as communication tools. In the stage of identifying and analyzing the school's target audiences, their profiling characteristics (cognitive, behavioral, and communication specifics) are revealed. Generation Z and Generation Alpha students are defined as primary target groups, with parents as key decision-makers in school selection. The school's digital positioning involves differentiated messaging for these groups, and a SWOT analysis of the applicability of social channels is proposed for channel selection, taking into account educational specifics. The way algorithms and platform demographic profiles affect the school brand is analysed.

Special attention is paid to metrics for evaluating the effectiveness of digital communication tools (KPIs), which are structured as indicators for visibility and reach,

interaction in digital channels, analysis of digital communication metrics, and data analysis and communication strategy optimization.

Chapter Three (Prescriptive/Applied) presents the results of testing the model in a specific Bulgarian secondary school. It is empirical and applied in nature. A well-substantiated methodological framework for choosing the testing approach and a system of metrics for evaluating results are presented. The selection of S. U. "Nikolay Katranov" – Svishtov as a key institution of regional significance within the context of the demographic and school structure of Veliko Tarnovo Province is statistically justified. The communication strategy and digital presence of the school are analyzed, presenting an in-depth review of the impact achieved through communication channels and platforms. The selected metrics are investigated using real data, including data from YouTube Studio and NapoleonCat, from introduced podcast formats and video content – innovative for the school sector in Bulgaria. Behavioral patterns revealing latent potential for marketing impact are identified. It is established that visual, emotionally engaging content plays a central role in digital positioning and that podcasts serve as a high-value-added tool in the strategic positioning of the school. Applied tools are proposed, such as the development of SMART goals and strategic KPI frameworks for measuring success, a media calendar for planning and structuring content across various social channels, recommendations for engaging content by platform, and an operational Digital Safety and Risk Management Checklist.

The reviewed dissertation possesses a number of merits. There is a clear effort toward developing original authorial reasoning, generalizations, and systematizations throughout the text – such as the critical review of classical branding and positioning theories (Chapter I, Section 1) and the outlining of major issues (Chapter I, Section 4); the reasoning on the distinction between "target audiences" and "stakeholders," which is vital for the educational sector; and the deduction of sectoral peculiarities of school marketing. In Chapter II, Section 1, the author introduces and defines the concept of "adequate positioning" of a school institution.

The author's analytical skills are demonstrated primarily in the audience analysis (Chapter II, Section 2) and in the audit of real metrics and the interpretation of processed digital datasets (Chapter III, Section 2.3). Real data from the analytical sections of YouTube Studio, NapoleonCat, and Google Analytics are analyzed, and cause-and-effect relationships are derived.

The capacity for conceptual advancement is demonstrated, first, through the proposed theoretical model (Chapter II, Section 1), whose components are temporally ordered and essentially represent stages in implementing the approach. Second, it is shown by presenting possibilities for utilizing innovative applied tools for Bulgarian education – a managerial KPI framework, a media calendar for planning digital school content, and a Digital Safety Checklist (Chapter III, Section 3). An advancement of scientific theories is also observed in the comparative analysis of institutional image versus digital identity (Chapter I, Section 3.3) and in the analysis of types of interaction across social platforms (Chapter II, Section 4.2).

The author's innovative ideas and creativity are deployed primarily in creating the conceptual Process Model for Strategic Digital Positioning of a School, presented

visually and supported by an application methodology (procedure) consisting of 9 sequentially and cyclically linked stages (Chapter II, Section 1).

The dissertation research employs an empirical study during the practical testing of the author's conceptual model (Chapter III, Section 2). In the form of an authentic empirical study featuring an in-depth case study of the selected S. U. "Nikolay Katranov", an analysis of its digital presence is conducted, supported by empirical charts, tables of traffic sources, audience demographic profiles, and measurable behavioural reactions.

Overall, adhering to the initial scope limitations, the dissertation is well-focused and fulfills the main goal set.

The conclusion reflects the extent to which the formulated goal and objectives have been met, as well as the thesis' validity. The main results from testing the author's model in the specific secondary school are synthesized, confirming its applicability. The potential for further development of the topic is presented.

The bibliographic references demonstrate solid scientific grounding for the developed propositions and the PhD student's scientific awareness. The cited sources are properly used and referenced.

The abstract (auto-abstract), overall, accurately reflects the content of the dissertation, highlighting the main conceptual premises, developed ideas, and new knowledge on the topic, as well as the scientific contributions and publications of the PhD student.

IV. Scientific and scientific-applied contributions of the dissertation

I fully concur with the key benefits identified in the dissertation research, highlighted as contributions, namely:

- *Contributions with scientific value* – the adaptation of modern marketing theories on positioning, differentiation, and digital communication to strategic educational marketing; the enrichment of concepts regarding the positioning of educational institutions in a digital environment; the systematization of its specifics; and the clarified influence of social media on the communication strategy and positioning of schools.

- *Contributions with scientific-applied value* – the development of a multi-stage, universal conceptual model for the strategic digital positioning of a school, with potential to serve as an effective marketing tool for managing a school's digital positioning strategy, as well as the systematization of key metrics for evaluating the effectiveness of its digital communications.

- *Contributions with practical value* – the approach to testing the proposed model for executing a positioning strategy in managing and evaluating a school brand in a digital environment, alongside the derived recommendations for enhancing the communication policy of a Bulgarian school.

The achieved results not only expand upon the marketing paradigm in the field of digital strategic positioning for educational service provision, but also emphasize the utility of the dissertation research for digital marketing in the educational sphere.

V. Critical remarks, questions, and recommendations on the dissertation

The established strengths of the dissertation research correspond with several recommendations for its improvement, which are advisory in nature, namely:

- In analyzing best practices, the experience of private school institutions – which possess greater resource and market flexibility – is shared; therefore, I recommend that the author expand the proposed model for executing a school's digital positioning strategy by incorporating specific strategies to overcome resource deficits in smaller public and municipal schools.

- The proposed tactical tool for measuring success through SMART goals and strategic KPI frameworks could be visualized in an appropriate graphic manner.

Considering the explored aspects of strategic digital positioning for a school, an even more tangible completeness of the core concept could be achieved by clarifying the following point:

- Given the rapid dynamics of Generation Alpha's preferences and the emergence of new digital platforms, in what way could the proposed model, KPI framework, and Security Checklist be adapted in the context of integrating Artificial Intelligence (AI) tools into school digital marketing?

VI. Evaluation of compliance with national minimum requirements

I consider that the dissertation work and the accompanying documents meet the requirements of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, the Regulations for its implementation, and the Regulations for Development of Academic Staff at the D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov. The national minimum requirements for obtaining the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD) have been met, as evidenced by the submitted dissertation (50 pts.) and 3 individual publications (30 pts.), which together satisfy the required minimum of 80 points.

VII. Conclusion

The analysis of the reviewed dissertation by PhD student Kristiana Nikolaeva Cheshmedzhieva shows that the main goal and set objectives have been achieved, the core thesis has been defended, and solutions to the established scientific and practical problems have been proposed. The PhD student demonstrates the necessary competencies for scientific research. My position as a member of the Scientific Jury is that the dissertation fully meets the established requirements, which gives me grounds for a positive evaluation.

The comprehensive assessment and the demonstrated merits of the dissertation titled „**Communication tools for positioning a school in a digital environment**“ give me reason to propose to the esteemed Scientific Jury that the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" (PhD) in the scientific specialty "Marketing", professional field "Economics", be awarded to the PhD student **Kristiana Nikolaeva Cheshmedzhieva**.

16.09.2026
Svishtov

Reviewer:
(Assoc. Prof. V. Grigorova, PhD)