

STATEMENT

By: *Assoc. Prof. Marusya Smokova, PhD,
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Professional Field 3.8 Economics,
Scientific Specialty: Marketing*

Subject: *Dissertation submitted for the award of the educational and scientific degree Doctor of Philosophy (PhD) in the scientific specialty Marketing*

Author of the dissertation: *Kristiana Nikolaeva Cheshmedzhieva*

Title of the dissertation: *Communication Tools for Positioning a School in the Digital Environment*

Scientific supervisor: *Assoc. Prof. Ivan Marchevski, PhD*

Grounds for presenting this opinion: *Participation as a member of the Scientific Jury for the public defence of the dissertation in accordance with Order No. 785/31.08.2026 of the Rector of the D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics.*

1. General characteristics of the dissertation

The dissertation entitled "Communication Tools for Positioning a School in the Digital Environment" addresses a topical and practically significant issue – the transformation of the communication practices of educational institutions in the context of digitalisation. The topic falls within the fields of digital marketing, institutional communications, brand positioning, and the management of the public image of schools.

The dissertation comprises 163 pages and includes an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, and a list of references, accompanied by a list of tables and a list of figures. The discussion is supported by 13 tables and 4 figures. The structure is logically coherent and aligned with the research goal. Chapter one is theoretical and conceptual in nature. Chapter two focuses on the development of a model for implementing a positioning strategy through digital

communication tools. Chapter three is application-oriented and presents the results of testing the model at Nikolay Katranov Secondary school in Svishtov.

The relevance of the topic is well substantiated. The author proceeds from the understanding that social networks and digital platforms are no longer merely channels for disseminating information but constitute a strategic environment for building trust, visibility, and institutional identity. A particular strength of the dissertation is its focus on an issue that remains underexplored in Bulgarian academic literature – the application of marketing and communication models in the school sector. The author identifies and substantiates a theoretical and practical gap related to the lack of adapted models and clearly defined indicators for evaluating digital positioning.

The domain of the research is defined as the strategic communication of the school in the digital environment, while its focus is the capacity of social media channels in implementing the positioning strategy. These formulations clearly delineate the scope of the research. However, the research focus is oriented more towards communication tools and their management than towards the empirical examination of positioning as an outcome of audience perceptions. The statement, that successful positioning results from the purposeful and consistent management of communication processes, is clearly formulated and corresponds to the research goal. The research tasks are logically related to it.

The methodology is appropriate to the exploratory nature of the research and includes literature review, comparative analysis, case study methodology, content analysis, and the analysis of performance indicators. One limitation is that no independent surveys of the target audiences were conducted. The analysis is based on platform analytics data from a single school and on published international case studies.

The theoretical part demonstrates familiarity with a substantial body of relevant academic literature. The relationship between the theoretical and empirical parts can be logically traced. However, the empirical section places greater emphasis on communication activity and channel effectiveness, while positioning as a matter of audience perception is measured to a more limited extent. In this respect, the dissertation can be characterised as a topical, independent, and application-oriented study whose particular strength lies in adapting marketing concepts to educational practice.

2. Assessment of the scientific and applied research results

The principal result of the dissertation is the development of a conceptual model for implementing a school's positioning strategy through digital communication tools. The model is structured into four blocks (analytical,

identification, communication, and management) and integrates environmental analysis, formulation of positioning objectives, audience profiling, development of institutional identity, channel selection, effectiveness assessment, and subsequent optimisation. The proposed model goes beyond a descriptive approach and provides a systematic framework with practical application potential.

A particular strength is the integration of the theoretical propositions developed in Chapter one into the construction of the model, making it possible to trace their transformation into practical solutions. Another noteworthy result is the systematisation of communication effectiveness indicators, such as visibility, reach, interaction, and engagement, linked to the stages of the communication process through the AIDA and RACE frameworks.

The testing of the model in a real educational setting, complemented by a comparison with the practices of the private BRITANICA Park School, is also a positive aspect of the research. Particular recognition should also be given to the practical tools developed in Chapter three – the SMART objectives and KPI framework, the communication calendar, and the digital safety and risk management checklist, which constitute comprehensive solutions for school management.

At the same time, several limitations should be noted. No primary empirical research was conducted among the main target audiences. Consequently, some of the conclusions are based on the interpretation of communication performance indicators and do not allow for a reliable assessment of actual audience perceptions and attitudes. The justification of this omission on the grounds of legal restrictions is valid only with regard to underage pupils. Also indicative in this respect is the methodological evaluation framework presented in Chapter three, which comprises four elements (social media marketing, institutional awareness, institutional image, and audience attitudes), of which only the first is actually operationalised. The analysis remains focused predominantly on quantitative indicators, while qualitative dimensions such as trust, reputation, and perceived quality receive less attention, even though they are envisaged in the eighth stage of the proposed model.

Despite these limitations, I consider the stated research objective to have been achieved to a significant extent. The results are predominantly applied research contributions, whose value lies in adapting existing marketing concepts to the educational context and in providing an applicable framework for the management of digital communication.

3. Evaluation of the scientific and applied research contributions

The doctoral candidate Cheshmedzhieva has presented a statement outlining six research contributions. They are formulated realistically and without overstatement, making no claim to propose a new theory of positioning or a new conceptual approach to digital communications. In essence, I would consolidate the contributions into the following four:

1. Adaptation and systematisation of concepts from marketing, brand management, and digital communications to the specific characteristics of schools as public organisations with a social mission and multiple stakeholders.
2. Development of a process-based model for implementing the positioning strategy of a school, integrating analytical, communication, and management elements into a nine-stage cyclical sequence.
3. Linking digital communication effectiveness indicators to the stages of the communication process and to the logic of the proposed model within the school context.
4. Testing the model in a real school setting and developing practical tools for school management.

I consider most of these contributions to be applied research contributions, consisting primarily in the adaptation and integration of existing concepts and approaches within a specific sector.

4. Evaluation of the publications related to the topic of the dissertation

Three single-authored articles have been presented, all published in journals with editorial review and assigned ISSN numbers. Their number and nature meet the minimum requirements for the award of the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD). Overall, the publications reflect key aspects of the research and provide grounds for concluding that the research results have been subject to professional academic discussion.

5. Evaluation of the dissertation abstract

The dissertation abstract is 32 pages in length and is structured in accordance with the requirements: general characteristics of the dissertation, a synthesised presentation of the individual chapters, a statement of contributions, and a list of publications. With regard to the research domain and focus, thesis, aim, tasks, methodology, limitations, and structure of the proposed model, it accurately reflects the content of the dissertation and provides a clear understanding of its principal contribution.

Nevertheless, several inconsistencies should be noted. The quantitative information stated on page 2 cannot be substantiated. The abstract indicates 125 sources, whereas the bibliography contains 65 entries, and the stated length of 151 pages of main text does not correspond to the actual length. On page 29, it is stated that the appendices contain additional data, tables, and tools, although the dissertation itself contains no appendices. The data relating to Chapter three are made available solely through an electronic link to Google Drive. Furthermore, the four directions for future research formulated on page 30, as well as the information on the number of pupils enrolled at the school provided on page 26, are absent from the dissertation. Another significant issue is that the synthesised presentation of Chapter three does not include any quantitative results.

Notwithstanding the above observations, I consider that, in terms of its overall content and structure, the dissertation abstract meets the requirements and adequately reflects the main content, conclusions, and contributions of the dissertation.

6. Critical remarks, recommendations, and questions

Alongside the strengths of the dissertation outlined above, several critical comments and recommendations can also be made.

First, although the dissertation is devoted to positioning, it does not include a classical marketing analysis of positioning itself as an outcome of target audience perceptions. There are no positioning maps, perceptual maps, or preference maps, which limits the possibility of establishing the extent to which communication efforts result in the desired positioning.

Second, despite the conceptual distinctions introduced in the dissertation, there remains some inconsistency across different sections in the use of the terms “audiences”, “publics”, “users”, “target groups”, and “stakeholders”. The issue is not merely terminological. Different groups imply different communication objectives and different criteria for evaluating effectiveness.

Third, the absence of primary empirical data limits the possibility of directly examining perceptions and attitudes. The use of surveys, interviews, or focus groups involving parents, pupils, and teachers would provide a considerably stronger empirical basis for the conclusions drawn.

Fourth, the model has been tested in a single institution with an already well-established and mature communication practice, described by the author herself as “good practice”. This raises questions about its applicability to schools with only a sporadic digital presence and to other types of educational institutions.

Fifth, the effectiveness analysis focuses primarily on quantitative indicators such as reach, engagement, interactions, and views. Less attention is devoted to measuring qualitative dimensions such as trust, reputation, institutional prestige, and perceptions of the quality of educational services. Yet it is precisely these dimensions that underpin successful positioning.

Sixth, the dissertation demonstrates a certain degree of conceptual overlap between “positioning”, “digital presence”, “communication policy”, and “communication effectiveness”. In practice, a substantial part of the empirical analysis measures the effectiveness of communication channels rather than the school’s position in the minds of its target audiences. This raises the question of whether the proposed model should be defined as a positioning model or, rather, as a model for managing the digital communications of a school.

These critical observations do not diminish the academic value of the dissertation. They may be regarded as recommendations for its further development and refinement.

In this context, I would also like to address the following questions to the doctoral candidate:

1. How does the proposed model differ from established digital marketing planning frameworks such as SOSTAC and RACE, and what are its distinctive features arising from the specific nature of the school as an institution?
2. What research methods and instruments could be used to measure the school’s actual positioning in the minds of its target audiences, and how could quantitative communication indicators be linked to the results of such measurement?
3. Which elements of the model would need to be modified if it were applied in a school with no established digital presence and no internal resources dedicated to communication activities?

7. Conclusion

The research presented constitutes an independently conducted scholarly study addressing a topical issue of significance to both theory and practice. The dissertation demonstrates the doctoral candidate’s sound theoretical background, familiarity with contemporary concepts in marketing, digital communications, and the management of educational institutions, as well as the ability to apply them to a specific research problem. The critical comments made above do not diminish the results achieved and should be regarded as

recommendations for further refinement of the research and for the author's future work.

The dissertation, the dissertation abstract, and the publications related to its topic comply with the requirements of the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria Act, the Regulations for its Implementation, and the Regulations on the Development of the Academic Staff of the D. A. Tsenov Academy of Economics – Svishtov.

On the basis of the above, I give a positive assessment of the dissertation by Kristiana Nikolaeva Cheshmedzhieva, entitled "Communication Tools for Positioning a School in the Digital Environment", and recommend that the esteemed academic jury award her the educational and scientific degree of Doctor (PhD) in Professional Field 3.8 Economics, scientific specialty Marketing.

Svishtov, 14 September 2026

Member of scientific jury:
(Asspc. Prof. Marusya Smokova)