

REVIEW

Subject: *dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the professional field 3.9 Tourism in the area of higher education 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, Professional field 3.9 Tourism, scientific specialty (doctoral program) "Economics and Management")", With author Mila Zdravkova Gaidarska*

Dissertation topic: **"Innovative marketing approaches for tourism development"**

Reviewer: **Prof. Dr. Mariya Zlatkova Stankova**

1. Information about the procedure

I participate in the procedure for public defense of the dissertation on "Innovative marketing approaches to tourism development" as a member of the scientific jury, according to Order № 246 /01.12.2021 of the Rector of the International Business School. At the first meeting of the Scientific Jury, I was appointed a reviewer.

The procedure provided a set of materials as electronic sources, including a dissertation, abstract on the dissertation (in Bulgarian and English), CV (in Bulgarian and English), list of the publications and their copies, reference to scientific contributions and two reviews from travel companies, expressing a positive attitude and emphasizing the practical and applied orientation of the dissertation for the tourism business.

2. Summary data for the doctoral student and the procedure

Mila Zdravkova Gaidarska graduated from Tambov State University "GR Derzhavin", Tambov (Russia) with a bachelor's degree in Economics. She also obtained two master's degrees in Finance and Banking from UARD, Plovdiv (Bulgaria) in the period 2017-2018 and in Digital Marketing from International Business School, Sofia (Bulgaria) in the period 2017-2019. From February 2020. She is a doctoral student at the International Business School in the professional field 3.9 Tourism and works on a dissertation with topic "Innovative marketing approaches to tourism development". Mila Gaidarska speaks English and Russian. Professionally, she realizes herself as a digital freelance marketing specialist.

The dissertation presented by Mila Zdravkova Gaidarska for review is in the volume of 233 pages, of which the main text is 227 pages. The applications are 2 in number and with a volume of 6 pages. The bibliographic apparatus includes 163 titles, of which 140 in Bulgarian

and Russian and 23 in English and German. The work is illustrated with 18 tables and 23 figures; 20 formulas were also used. On the conducted research 4 scientific publications have been realized (two in Bulgarian and two in English), of which 3 are independent and one is co-authored. By their nature, they are scientific reports - 3 in number and 1 is article, and reflect some specific issues of the general issues to which the dissertation is devoted.

An abstract on the dissertation of 50 pages is also presented under the procedure, developed in accordance with the requirements for layout and correct reflection of the main accents in the dissertation and its contributions.

3. General presentation of the dissertation

The general assessment of the presented dissertation, developed on the issue of the application of innovative marketing approaches in the development of tourism, requires to indicate that it is structured in three chapters, introduction, conclusions, applications and literature sources. The individual parts are logically connected and correspond to the research framework developed by the doctoral student Mila Gaidarska. It sets out theoretical, methodological and applied aspects in relation to the innovative potential of the tourism business, the nature and specifics of marketing in the tourism business and digitalization of the marketing environment of the tourism brand as a possible marketing component with the characteristics of innovation. The selection and handling of the bibliographic apparatus show responsible research conducted by the doctoral student on the scientific achievements in the field she studies, as well as her ability to express and argue a position in relation to them.

From the presented **reviews** from the two travel companies, it is evident that the tourism business accepts as definitely **applicable in practice, the algorithm developed by the doctoral student for optimization of advertising in social networks and the matrix of the relationship** between branding strategy and innovation of the travel company.

In this regard, I would like to express my impressions regarding the relevance of the reviewed work. I definitely accept it as such and believe that it affects aspects of professional importance for the tourism business, such as the need to identify possible innovative marketing approaches for tourism development, oriented on a principled basis, but also to the specifics of Bulgaria. The doctoral student Mila Gaidarska rightly notes that new technologies are changing the competitive environment in the tourism business. In addition to the Covid 19 pandemic, this implies the need to look for new approaches to creating competitive products to achieve new competitive advantages.

For Bulgaria, as a country developing tourism, in terms of innovative marketing approaches and their application in the activities of tourism companies to achieve high results, there are shortcomings. The doctoral student tries to identify and transform them, and to present them as a prerequisite for achieving competitive advantages, taking into account the specifics of the conditions of the pandemic situation.

Mila Gaidarska considers it her “challenge” to study the “phenomenon” of digitalization, visualization and the cluster approach and, based on the corresponding theoretical and methodological justifications, to derive their practical aspects. As a result of the study, the main conclusion was made that "the efforts of the tourism business should be directed towards consolidation to realize readiness for the transition to innovative approaches to work." Of course, the relevant clarifications have been made, with which I definitely agree that the process is strongly influenced by external and internal factors for the tourism business, including security of the business environment, public finances, and last but not least, tourism zoning policy.

The doctoral student reaches such conclusions, primarily because he defines the subject of research in labor digitalization and visualization of marketing in tourism and innovation clusters at the regional level. **The object of research** are the tourist structures at the regional level, but without the relevant clarification regarding their specifics, which would actually give greater clarity, even at this stage, to the development of the author's concept for the study. To some extent, this omission is compensated by the derivation of the **main goal** and the tasks that provide it, a total of 5 in number. The main thesis is defined in view of the potential of the use of digitalization and visualization of marketing activities to help increase the efficiency of tourism by improving the critical dimensions. It has been developed taking into account the general framework of the tourism industry, as well as the effects of the pandemic, whose restrictive effects tourism suffers to a large extent. Thus derived, the object, the subject and the research thesis set the general framework for the research of the dissertation, although I believe that the development would benefit from greater specificity of their formulation, as well as in terms of their composition in the general logical construction.

The introductory part of the paper, where the topicality, the object, the subject, the goal and the tasks are indicated, also contains a description of the methodology. Gaidarska proposes a methodological framework of research that takes into account the broad context of the issue and its interdisciplinarity, and which includes both traditional and some innovative approaches.

In general, the author's concept in the individual parts of the dissertation outlines the theoretical and methodological foundations of the research in connection with the defined **two**

research hypotheses. The first of them is set in the direction of creating sustainable competitive advantages by comparing the degree of dependence of the tourism business on digitalization and visualization, such as information technology. The second - to the competitors' advantages and opportunities for their creation when adopting the cluster approach.

The first chapter of the dissertation is dedicated to clarifying the theoretical aspects of the innovative potential of the tourism business. The characteristic features and peculiarities of the tourist business are considered, as well as the factors for the development of tourism, distinguished as general and specific. Mila Gaidarska recognizes that these specific features of the tourist product are interrelated and affect its movement and realization on the market of services. Therefore, she emphasizes that only after assessing their own capabilities, travel companies should analyze the demand in terms of market opportunities, so as to achieve a specification of the tourism product. The development of the innovative activity in the tourism business is analyzed, and for this purpose researches of scientists in different spheres of economic science are studied. The main factors for innovative development are identified and the potential of the cluster approach for the development of innovative tourism business is considered. Special attention in this first chapter is paid to the specifics of innovation and innovation management, with emphasis on the need to create a comprehensive system for assessing the tourism-innovation potential of tourism in terms of tourist regions and the specifics of indicators characterizing innovation potential in the field of tourism.

In the second chapter the methodology is presented, which the doctoral student Gaidarska associates as relevant to the peculiarities of marketing in tourism. It starts with clarifying the nature and specifics of marketing in the tourism business. For this purpose, the different levels of marketing and the subjects initiating marketing research for the needs of the substantiation of the respective marketing concepts for the development of tourism have been identified. The three main types of research are identified, which are associated with methodological approaches in the tourism business, as well as the main objectives of marketing research. Based on expert opinions, the doctoral student assumes that the process of marketing research in tourism should have a specific sequence, in view of which he proposes one consisting of eight stages. His critical opinion on the specifics and timing of the use of primary and secondary data is impressive. In this part of the work there is a place for the presentation of innovative methods for developing a competitive product, applicable to tourism. In particular, the QFD - VoC toolkit (structuring the quality functions and voice of the user) is presented as suitable for the purposes of the research and for obtaining the necessary information on needs. His research includes focus groups, in-depth interviews, special

techniques in the field of neuromarketing and associative methods, surveys (illustrated in Appendix 1), marketing experiments, mystery shopper or so-called mystery shopper. Considering that the obtained qualitative data is subject to quantitative assessment, Mila Gaidarska also examined the behavior of the consumer when consuming a tourist product. She clarified the stages in the process of consumption, as well as the types of consumers in terms of innovation. Chapter two also presents the results of the author's online survey of consumer behavior when choosing a tourist product in a digital environment (considered innovative and non-standard). It is based on a structurally organized questionnaire, containing as a basis for standard a priori segmentation eight groups of indicators.

Chapter three presents the work of Mila Gaidarska on identifying possible innovative marketing components in the tourism business. The focus of this application is set in several directions, namely:

- with regard to the cluster approach for the purposes of regionalization of tourism,
- regarding the digitalization of the marketing environment of the tourism brand,
- with regard to the use of graphic design and advertising image.

In particular, based on the exposition from the first chapter, Mila Gaidarska determines the use of the cluster approach as a necessary innovation and connects it with the organization, functioning and development of tourist areas. He talks about the tourism-innovation cluster and points out the criteria by which it can be distinguished from other clusters and agglomerations in the field of tourism. Here it is important to emphasize the objective assessment expressed by her. It refers to the strategically provided approach to the basic marketing competencies for the tourism-innovation cluster and to the role of the state structures. It also addresses the need to develop and use a system of objective criteria for assessing the current situation and prospects for the development of innovation activity in the cluster. At the same time, however, it should be noted that the adaptation of the presented ideas to the specifics of the tourist regions in Bulgaria is missing. The same statement is made in connection with the matter concerning the digitalization of the marketing environment of the tourist brand. With all the detailed clarification of the concept of "brand", its placement in a digital environment and the use of an appropriate marketing model such as AIDA, it would be especially valuable to offer specifics corresponding to the peculiarities of Bulgarian practice. This part of the paper includes another point from the applied research of Gaidarska - that of the specifics of the marketing positioning of the tourist brand on social networks. Based on a study of the characteristics of leading social networks in terms of the number of active users, the positives and negatives of advertising in them have been clarified. Mila Gaidarska believes that building a tourism marketing strategy

on social networks is directly dependent on brand activity. It is on this basis that it offers a 9-step algorithm for developing a successful marketing strategy. Again, a well-defined parallel with the tourism business in our country and the conditions of digitalization in which it operates is not established. Of course, the omission mentioned here, as well as those mentioned above, aim primarily to provoke the attention of Gaidarska in the direction of her future work and do not diminish my positive assessment of her research results.

In the **concluding part** of the paper, Mila Gaidarska presents the summaries and conclusions made in connection with the studied problems before the use of innovative marketing approaches for the development of tourism. The results of her research lead her to the conclusion that the tourism business needs marketing research, organized through a regional campaign, taking into account the challenges and opportunities of the digital environment. The conclusion that she identifies as key and that she emphasizes is that digital marketing has a key role in the process of making an informed decision for the consumer in tourism.

4. Evaluation of scientific and applied research results

Having in mind the findings made, based on my detailed acquaintance with the dissertation, I accept that as a structure and content, it is adopted and achieved a standard model of theoretical and methodological construction. The object and the subject of research, the purpose and the tasks arising from its detailing are substantiated. I also believe that the specifics of the thematic focus of the work are taken into account and the main stages of research work are observed. At the same time, I think it is necessary to note that some weaknesses are identified, primarily of a technical nature, related to the illustrative materials used, their visualization, as well as the indication of their sources, some of which are obviously a result of Mila Gaidarska's research work. Others have already been noted in previous parts of the review. However, these findings, in the nature of remarks, are not such as to call into question the contributions of scientific work.

Contributions: The dissertation makes an impression with the actuality of the issues under consideration, as well as has its own **contributions**. I accept the systematization made by the doctoral student and the research supervisor in this regard. In addition, I believe that the following summary of the achievements of Gaidarska as doctoral student in her dissertation can be made:

- The terminology in the field of innovative marketing approaches for the development of tourism is enriched and the need for their implementation in the tourism business is

justified in the specifics of the innovative cluster approach for organization and management of tourist areas in Bulgaria;

- An exemplary algorithm for developing a successful marketing strategy is proposed;
- The applied methods for analysis and evaluation of the relationship between the branding strategy and the innovation of the tourism business are enriched.

Conclusion: The dissertation submitted for review meets the requirements of the Law for the Development of the Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria and the Regulations for its implementation, as well as the requirements of the International Business School. This position of mine is based on my detailed acquaintance with the materials of the procedure. In view of this, I also accept that the work developed by Mila Gaidarska is a completed study, which contains scientific and applied contributions on current and important for the development of tourism topic, such as that of innovative approaches identified and implemented in the context of the marketing efforts of the tourism business.

Considering that the dissertation is an independent work of the doctoral student, as well as the fact that the candidate has the qualities, experience and competencies to conduct independent research and meets the minimum national requirements for acquiring a Doctoral degree, I suggest to the Distinguished members of the Scientific Jury to vote positively and to make a decision to award Mila Zdravkova Gaidarska the educational and scientific degree DOCTOR in Professional field 3.9 Tourism, scientific specialty (doctoral program) "Economics and Management (Tourism)".

01.02.2022

Reviewer:

Prof. Dr. Mariya Stankova