

REVIEW

by Prof. Dr. Krasimir Marinov Marinov
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Of dissertation for the award of the educational and scientific degree "**Doctor**"

Field of higher education **3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences**

Professional field **3.8. Economics**

Doctoral Programme **Marketing**

Author: **Valeriya Emilova Toncheva**

Topic: **Impact of dual training on the brand image of vocational schools**

Scientific supervisor: **Assoc. Prof. D-r Teofana Dimitrova-Staneva**

1. General description of the submitted materials

By Order No. RD-22-1102 of 13.05.2025 of the Rector of Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski" (PU) I have been appointed as a member of the scientific jury for the procedure for the defense of a dissertation thesis entitled "Impact of dual training on the brand image of vocational schools" for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences, professional field 3.8. Economics, doctoral programme Marketing. The author of the dissertation is Valeriya Emilova Toncheva - PhD student in full-time studies at the Department of Marketing and International Economic Relations with scientific supervisor Assoc. Prof. Dr. Teofana Dimitrova-Staneva from Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski".

The set of paper materials submitted by Valeriya Toncheva is in accordance with Article 36 (1) of the Regulations for the Development of the Academic Staff of PU, and includes the following documents:

- a Request to the Rector of PU for disclosure of the dissertation defense procedure;
- CV in European format;
- Minutes of the Departmental Council relating to the reporting of readiness for the opening of the procedure and to the preliminary discussion of the thesis;
- Dissertation;

- Abstract;
- List of scientific publications on the topic of the dissertation;
- Copies of scientific publications;
- A declaration of originality and authenticity of the attached documents;
- A reference on the fulfilment of the minimum national requirements.

The doctoral student has attached 3 publications (1 article, part of a collective monograph, published; 2 papers in edited collective volumes, accepted for publication) and a dissertation. According to the Report on the fulfilment of the minimum national requirements, the doctoral student meets the minimum of 80 points.

2. Brief biographical data about the doctoral student

Valeriya Toncheva has studied in the doctoral program Marketing, professional field 3.8. Economics at the Department of Marketing and International Economic Relations of the Faculty of Economic and Social Sciences of Plovdiv Paisii Hilendarski University according to the Order of the Rector of PU № RD-21-267 of 03.02.2022. The training is carried out in full-time form.

The doctoral candidate completed his higher education at Plovdiv University "Paisii Hilendarski", where he successively obtained a Bachelor's degree in International Economic Relations and a Master's degree in Marketing.

Valeriya Toncheva's professional development is related to the Municipality of Plovdiv, and the gradual expansion of her responsibilities is impressive. She has successively been a coordinator of an international project funded under the Seventh Framework Programme of the European Commission; a project coordinator under the Operational Programme "Science and Education for Smart Growth"; a project manager under the Environment Programme with Plovdiv Municipality as a beneficiary.

Valeria is fluent in English and Spanish.

3. Relevance of the subject matter and appropriateness of the set goals and objectives

The relevance of the topic and the importance of the research are undoubted.

On the one hand, research on different aspects of brand, including brand image, in different countries and in different industries is increasingly popular because of the role and importance that

brands and branding have for marketing, and more generally for achieving the goals of firms. Brand management is a complex and multifaceted process in which the interests of all audiences internal and external to the firm are intertwined. Last but not least, brand image research is relevant for commercial organizations, which are usually the focus of brand research, but also for non-commercial organizations, including public educational institutions, which also have their challenges in achieving their marketing objectives.

At the same time, on the other hand, dual education and training is among the priority areas in the management of secondary education in the country. It is a form of education in vocational secondary schools, the importance of which is much broader than what curriculum is taught and what exactly students should acquire in terms of knowledge, skills and competences at the end of their secondary education. Vocational education and training has implications for a broader range of societal issues, including the partnership between educational institutions and business; the level and structure of youth unemployment in the country; the adequacy of students' knowledge and skills to participate fully in the contemporary knowledge economy dominated by digital transformation processes and the growing role of artificial intelligence in shaping human resource needs; etc.

Given the above, it can be summarized that the development of a methodology for empirical research on the brand image of educational institutions providing dual vocational training and education, and the development of recommendations for these institutions to improve their brand image, are relevant and significant for our country research tasks.

4. Knowledge of the problem

The presented dissertation testifies to the doctoral student's excellent knowledge of the problem. The following evidence can be cited in support:

First, the paper contains a thorough and comprehensive literature review on the subject area of the study (pp. 8-39). Previous publications studied by the author cover both aspects of the research problem - brand image management of vocational schools; and dual training as a factor influencing brand image formation. In presenting the level of development of the problem, both studies from Bulgaria - extremely few in number, but the same as studies from other countries and different educational systems are taken into account.

Second, the paper is based on a survey of 168 literature sources (pp. 112-127). In terms of its length, this bibliography fully covers what is required of a scholarly work of this kind. The

literature used is relevant to the topic, subject and object of study. In a temporal perspective, the doctoral student has reflected the current developments in the thematic area under study.

Thirdly, in justifying his methodological approach, the author has specifically justified the constructs he will adapt and use, and has in good faith identified the sources from which he has borrowed the constructs he has used (pp. 40-47).

Fourth, excellent knowledge of the state of the problem is reflected in the doctoral student's ability not only to correctly select what to research and analyze, but also to formulate adequate conclusions and inferences based on what is found in the literature review or in the processing of the results of the empirical study.

5. Research methodology

To investigate the impact of dual training on the brand image of vocational secondary schools, the author has adopted a two-phase research programme. The first phase involved a qualitative study conducted among principals and vice-principals of high schools offering dual training. This phase aims to explore in depth the opinions on the process of dual training; the problems in implementing this method; the plans for its development, the actions taken to build and improve its brand image; and the factors that have a perceived impact on the image in the eyes of the users - the students in vocational schools.

The second phase is a quantitative study that aims to establish the attitudes and attitudes of students in dual training on the set of factors influencing the brand image of the vocational school.

The application of the described two-phase research program provides the author with the opportunity to analyze the opinions of the two main parties in the process of educational branding - consumers (high school learners) and creators or agents of brand image (managers of educational institutions), and thus to get a more complete picture of the effects of the implementation of dual vocational training. The chosen approach allows to achieve the author's set goal and to obtain an adequate answer to the research tasks.

6. Characteristics and evaluation of the thesis

This dissertation contains an introduction, three chapters, a conclusion, a statement of originality of results and contributions, a bibliography and an appendix. The total length of the thesis is 132 pages.

The methodological framework of the work is well established. The object and subject of study are properly formulated and correspond to the research contained in the work. The object of the study is the vocational schools in Plovdiv region, which offer dual training to their students. The subject of the research is the brand image of vocational schools by covering the opinion of the users of the educational service (the students trained through work) and the creators of the corporate image (the managers of the schools).

The formulation of the objective - to establish the role and degree of influence of attitudes towards dual training on the brand image of vocational schools - is precise and adequate to the chosen object and subject of the study. The dissertation transforms the above formulated aim into a justified set of five research tasks, which are logically arranged and clearly formulated. They are specific enough; their implementation allows to achieve the set goal; and they direct the research in the right direction.

Guided by the object and subject of the study noted above, and bearing in mind the goal he has set himself, the dissertation formulates four research hypotheses concerning the existence of a statistically significant relationship between factors derived from previous studies and the brand image of the vocational school. These hypotheses focus the research and allow the author to evaluate the impact of the factors in question.

The structure of the presented work reflects the logical completeness of the research and is an expression of the existing links and dependencies between the elements of the exposition - both between the individual chapters and between the points within them. The logical arrangement of the chapters enables the author to ask the right questions to the research problem and to make correct generalizations about the use of rhetorical figures in advertising slogans. The style and language of the doctoral dissertation are distinguished by scholarship, while at the same time being clear and understandable.

The first chapter of the thesis reviews the literature on the problem under consideration and generalizations are made regarding brand image in the context of vocational school as well as the factors influencing it. The dissertation's findings and conclusions are situated in several directions.

First, a scientific result in this part of the work is the conclusion that in the context of schools, the brand includes not only the name of the institution, the logo and the slogan, but also the material and technical and information base, the teaching staff, the teaching methods used, the quality of the administrative service, and the promise of future professional realization of the graduates. Another specificity of the brand management of the educational institution is the presence of diverse stakeholders - the children being educated, but also the prospective students, the parents of the

current and potential students, the representatives of the businesses that are possible partners of the institution, the teachers, etc.

Secondly, the scientific result of the dissertation is the description of the factors influencing brand image formation. Based on the literature review, ten factors of brand image formation are systematized: brand associations, perceived quality, brand satisfaction, brand loyalty, brand trust, brand attitudes, brand awareness, brand love, brand experience, and participation in brand communities on social media.

Thirdly, a result in this part of the study is the analysis of the dual training in Bulgaria and its comparison with the training implemented in countries with traditions and proven results of this type of training, such as Germany and Austria.

What can be summed up about this part of the study is that it is thorough enough; comprehensive without being cluttered; striking the fine balance between what to say and what to spare the reader. Overall, the text reads easily and is comprehensible. Particularly important is that the doctoral student's attitude and evaluation is revealed in the exposition. The text does not simply reproduce the views of researchers who have worked on the problem under study, but classifies and makes sense of them; it shows how what they have written relates to what the author thinks and defends.

The second chapter justifies the methodology of the study by presenting the structure and objectives of the study, the hypotheses formulated by the author, the justification of the type of research program and the methods used, the preparation and conduct of the actual primary data collection.

Firstly, the dissertator has argued for the need to implement a two-phase research programme, elements of which have been presented above.

Secondly, the research-application outcome of this part is the development of questionnaires, both for the first phase, the formative research programme, and for the second part, the descriptive research programme. The in-depth interview guide was composed of 10 questions, aiming to establish the overall picture of dual training as seen by school leaders. The quantitative research questionnaire includes 56 statements measuring five constructs adapted from previous publications.

Third, this section justifies the designs and sample sizes of the two phases of the research programme.

The third chapter contains an analysis of the results of the empirical study. Based on the qualitative study, the author reaches a number of conclusions regarding the difficulties of

implementing dual training; the marketing strategies of schools; the periodic evaluation of the image of vocational education; and so on. The quantitative study was used to assess the relationships between the variables and constructs studied. For this purpose, Structural Equation Modeling method was applied. Estimates of the measurement model and the structural model as components of Structural Equation Modeling were made. Based on the results of the quantitative study, three hypotheses were confirmed and one of the four hypotheses put forward was rejected.

All of the above regarding the characteristics and results of the dissertation gives me reason to conclude that the set tasks have been fulfilled, and thus the aim of the dissertation has been achieved.

7. Contributions and significance of the development for science and practice

In the abstract, the dissertator has formulated three contributions, namely:

First, to further develop and enrich the existing scientific knowledge in the field of brand image of educational institutions offering and conducting dual training and education.

Second, a methodology for conducting a two-phase study of the factors influencing the brand image of the vocational school was developed and approbated. For this purpose, a critical analysis and an original interpretation of the existing literature in the field of brand image of educational institutions, as well as a comparative analysis of the educational system in Bulgaria, Germany and Austria was prepared.

Thirdly, the results of the research and the recommendations can serve to improve the image of the secondary vocational school in Bulgaria.

I accept all three stated contributions as available and indisputably existing. The way in which they have been formulated - succinctly, reversed, and at the same time - precise - is positively impressive.

8. Assessment of the publications on the dissertation

The PhD student has submitted 3 publications. The first of them - *The case of Plovdiv Municipality* - was published in 2022 as part of a collective monograph presenting the results of a scientific project. The second and third publications - *The Influence of Dual Education on the Brand Image of Vocational High Schools* and *Issues and opportunities for dual vocational education in the secondary schools of Bulgaria, Germany and Austria - a comparative analysis* - have been accepted

for publication and are papers in an international scientific conference organized by Plovdiv University.

All publications are on the topic of the dissertation and present to the scientific community significant results achieved with the dissertation. The quantity and type of publications are sufficient to meet the minimum national requirements for the award of the PhD.

9. Personal participation of the PhD student

The reviewer accepts that the results obtained and the contributions formulated in the scientific production, which the PhD student has presented in the defense procedure, are original and are not borrowed from research and publications in which the PhD student has no participation.

10. Abstract

The abstract is 32 pages long. It contains all the necessary elements - the subject and object of the research; the aim and objectives of the dissertation; the content of the research; a list of contributions and a list of the publications presented. The abstract from fully and adequately reveals the content of the dissertation. It is written clearly and according to the requirements of Plovdiv University.

11. Critical comments and recommendations

I have no comments and recommendations to the submitted thesis.

I have a recommendation for the PhD student - to continue his research on marketing issues of the Bulgarian education system, in particular of secondary education in Bulgaria, as this is an important but unexplored area.

I also have a question for the doctoral student to answer during the defense: what is the doctoral student's explanation for rejecting the second hypothesis (H2), which suggests a significant relationship between brand satisfaction and the brand image of the vocational school?

12. Personal impressions

I have no personal impressions of the doctoral student. The presented dissertation gives me reasons to believe that Valeriya Toncheva is a researcher with developed skills for conducting independent scientific research at a high level.

CONCLUSION

The presented dissertation is an independently conducted scientific research with clearly outlined results and scientific and applied contributions, complying with the requirements for such scientific work, formulated in the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, the Regulations for the Implementation of the Law for the Development of Academic Staff in the Republic of Bulgaria, and the relevant Regulations of Paisii Hilendarski University.

The dissertation thesis shows that PhD student Valeriya Toncheva has in-depth theoretical knowledge and professional skills in the scientific specialty "3.8. Economics", demonstrating qualities and skills for independent scientific research.

Due to the above, I confidently give my **positive evaluation** for the conducted research, presented by the above-reviewed dissertation, abstract, results and contributions, and **recommend the scientific jury to award Valeriya Emilova Toncheva the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the field of higher education "3. Social, Economic and Legal Sciences"; professional field "3.8. Economics", doctoral programme "Marketing".**

I myself will vote convincingly "For".

25.05.2025

Reviewer:

Prof. Dr. Krasimir Marinov