PHD THESIS REVIEW

on the PhD dissertation titled: "The 'Consumer-Voter' Analogy: Factors Influencing Impression Formation of Market and Political Brands"

Concerning: Public defence of a PhD thesis for the award of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the area of higher education: 3. Social, economic and legal sciences, professional field 3.2. Psychology, scientific specialty "Social Psychology"

Doctoral candidate: Valentina Boyanova Dolmova, PhD student and assistant at "Social and Counselling Psychology" Unit, Department of Psychology, Institute for Population and Human Studies – Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

Prepared by: Assoc. Prof. Diana Bakalova, PhD, Department of Psychology, Institute for Population and Human Studies - Bulgarian Academy of Sciences

The PhD dissertation represents an original, highly ambitious, and sufficiently well-implemented fundamental research project. The PhD candidate aims to fill an important interdisciplinary niche in scientific research. The primary objective is to investigate the presence of common and fundamental factors that influence the formation of impressions of political and market brands among consumers and voters in Bulgaria. For the first time in the country, and in an Eastern European context, a theoretical and empirically in-depth exploration using qualitative methods of the conceptual analogy "consumer – voter" is pursued. Achieving this goal contributes not only to the fields of social, political, and consumer psychology but also to political science, sociology, economics, and marketing, including political marketing and other intermediary disciplines. Moreover, although presented in an academic style, the work is written in an accessible language, making it of interest not only to researchers, experts, and practitioners but also to the broader audience in their roles as consumers and voters. The relevance and significance of the topic are not only evident but also clearly and precisely argued by the PhD candidate in the introduction of the work.

The dissertation comprises 179 pages, including the main content (140 pages) and the bibliography (24 pages), excluding the appendices. The total number of references is impressive—369, with most being in English and only a small number (20) in Bulgarian. This is entirely understandable given the lack of related research in the country. It is noteworthy that most references, except for the foundational ones for the relevant concepts, are from recent

years. The content includes five appendices, which I find entirely appropriate in terms of content and format, and justifiably separated from the main body of the dissertation. There are 15 tables and 39 figures in total.

In terms of content, the dissertation includes an introduction, five chapters—two theoretical, one methodological, and two empirical (including design, results and discussion, a review of the contributions, reflection on the methodology and challenges encountered during the research process, and lessons learned), as well as the research limitations, implications for future research, and a conclusion presented separately at the end. By distributing the dissertation content across more than the standard three chapters, the author achieves a relative balance between the theoretical, methodological, and empirical parts of the work, with a quantitative predominance of the systematic review section over the others.

I assess the first two chapters, dedicated to the theoretical review, as excellently structured and very precisely systematized in terms of content, fully in line with the dissertation's topic and objectives. In the first chapter, the candidate skilfully, exhaustively, and consistently presents systematic review analyses—first of publications, theories, and models of consumer behaviour and impression formation factors in this sphere, and then of the same for voter behaviour and impression formation of political brands. The terminological definitions and distinctions between the studied constructs are correctly introduced.

In the second chapter, the author makes a convincing conceptual parallel between market and political behaviour contexts through the analogy "consumer – voter" with the aim of identifying common factors. The brand is considered a common construct in both political and commercial contexts, the impression formation process for political and product brands, as well as subfactors identified by other researchers as having a decisive role in political and consumer choice, along with key demographic, psychological, social, and cultural factors, namely: perceived benefit or loss, memory of the past, recognizable faces, and presence of (internal) conflict. The summaries convincingly transition to the introduction and justification of the original research model at the end of the theoretical review and to the arguments for the choice of the applied research approach.

In the third chapter (Empirical Part), the research objectives, tasks, hypotheses, sample, methods, and procedure are clearly, precisely, and thoroughly described. I highly regard the originality of the research design and the choice of methods for collecting and analysing qualitative data, specifically semantic analysis of semi-structured interviews with experts and non-experts (consumers/voters) in the two studied contexts—market and political. These

methods are particularly suitable for testing the hypotheses and achieving the dissertation's research objective—to identify fundamental and common factors for impression formation. I also positively evaluate the efforts to develop a coding scheme based on a pilot qualitative study and to validate the research methodology through the alignment of independent expert assessments. In formulating the interview questions, the influence of certain (sub)factors is presupposed, as they are explicitly addressed in the questions (e.g., values, benefits), while the influence of others is sought implicitly (e.g., demographic, psychological factors, losses). Consequently, it is unsurprising that among the semantic categories of psychological factors with the highest frequency are values, which are explicitly addressed, unlike others. The same applies to benefits as opposed to losses, and to demographic factors, which are not explicitly included. The declaration for participation in the interview explicitly mentions the specific factors being investigated, which creates the potential for biasing the results towards focusing on the indicated factors and away from other key factors. With this design, extracting semantic categories and classifying factors, regardless of the frequency of semantic units within them, and the relationship (i.e., proximity in the text) between categories of factors, is much more valuable and convincing compared to measuring the weight of the extracted factors.

In the fourth chapter (Results and Discussion), the results of the qualitative research are correctly described. In addition to testing the hypotheses, it is also indicated whether the hypotheses are supported or not, and some results are discussed through the lens of theory and other studies. The identification of significant statistical differences in the weight of influence of subfactors according to the respondents' level of expertise adds real quantitative dimensions to the qualitative research approach. The high level of skill of the PhD candidate in working with qualitative data collection and analysis methods, which are known to require significant time, creative, and analytical capacity, is evident. Moreover, the empirical research results are presented in suitable tabular and graphical forms and are well-structured in terms of objectives and hypotheses.

In the fifth chapter (Discussion and Conclusion), although some results are discussed when presented in the previous chapter, I would like to highlight my high appreciation for the candidate's ability to analyse, describe, and summarize the dissertation research results, discussing them in the context of the hypotheses, existing theories, and studies on the topic.

The well-synthesized conclusions, correctly reflected limitations, and derived directions for future research, as well as valuable reflections on the methodology and challenges during the research process and lessons learned, make a strong impression. These challenges and

limitations can also serve as valuable guidelines for future research by the PhD candidate and other researchers.

I accept the contributions identified by the author, which I consider undeniable and convincingly presented.

The abstract accurately reflects the structure and content of the work.

Four articles have been published on the dissertation topic—three in Bulgarian and one in English language.

In conclusion, the dissertation is distinguished by its interdisciplinary nature, well-argued relevance and significance, a well-structured theoretical review appropriate to the topic, an original research model, suitable design, methods, and procedure, a rich set of examined factors, appropriately described, illustrated, and discussed results, as well as undeniable scientific contributions to theory, methodology, and practice not only in social and political psychology but also in other disciplines and practices related to consumer and voter behaviour. **The dissertation meets the requirements for awarding the degree of "Doctor" and thus I confidently recommend to the esteemed members of the scientific jury to support the awarding of the degree of "Doctor in Social Psychology" to Valentina Boyanova Dolmova.**

06.06.2024 Prepared by:

Sofia /Assoc. Prof. Diana Bakalova, PhD/