



REVIEW¹

by Associate Professor Dr. Hristina Hristova – St. Cyril and St. Methodius University of Veliko Tarnovo, for the acquisition of the educational and scientific degree "Doctor" in the scientific field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences (Media and Communications – Integrated Marketing Communications), regarding the dissertation titled: *"Marketing Communications of Healthcare Institutions for Hospital Medical Care"*, submitted by Valentina Ivanova Marinova, PhD candidate in the Department of Communication, Public Relations and Advertising at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication, under the academic supervision of Professor DSc Hristo Kaftandzhiev.

I Presentation of the PhD Candidate Based on the Submitted Documentation

Valentina Ivanova Marinova graduated with a Bachelor's degree in "Mass Communications – Producing in Mass Media" from New Bulgarian University in 2013. In 2020, she earned a Master's degree in "Public Relation" from Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". From 2021 to 2025, she has been a full-time doctoral student at the Department of Communication, Public Relation, and Advertising at the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski". During this period, she developed a dissertation on the topic "Marketing Communications of Healthcare Institutions for Hospital Medical Care" in the professional field 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences.

Valentina Marinova successfully combines research activities with her professional development, which is connected to various institutions in both the private and public sectors. She worked as an Office Manager at ET "INA – V- Iliya Dimitrov" in Sofia from 2002 to 2006. Over the following six years, she held the position of Trade Manager in different business organizations: at ET "VAL – Valentina Ivanova" in Lovech from 2006 to 2010, and from 2010 to 2012 at EOOD "The Iguans – NVM -2010" in Sofia.

For several months, from August 2012 to May 2013, Marinova was an Operation Office Assistant at OOD "NIYA Standard NMM 2011", where she briefly worked as an Advertising Manager from November to December 2013.

In the following years, Valentina Marinova expanded her professional experience in the field of communications. Notable in this regard is her role as a PR expert under a civil contract with the Bulgarian Investment Agency in 2013, as well as her positions in various organizations: as a Chief Specialist and materially responsible person at the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Being for six months – from January to July 2014, and as a Chief Specialist at the Sofia Health Insurance Fund from July 2014 to August 2016.

Marinova's professional development is also connected to organizations in the healthcare sector. Since August 2016, she has been working as an Office Manager at the National Association of Private Hospitals.

An important role in the acquisition of valuable competencies and communication skills was played by her work as a juror at the Specialized Court from 2010 to 2015 and at the Sofia City Court from 2016 to 2021.

The professional positions held by Valentina Marinova and her social engagement are closely aligned with her research activities in the field of communication. Marinova is the author of

¹ Note: The text in italics offers reference points for evaluating the research results. Recommended volume of the review - about 6-7 standard pages



one study published in the online journal *The New Media of the 21st Century*, a chapter in a collective monograph, five articles, and six conference papers dedicated to topics related to public relations and the importance of marketing communications in the operations of hospital institutions.

The aforementioned academic researches have been published in various collections by the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and by New Bulgarian University over past five years. Valentina Marinova's active research work is also evidenced by her participation in prestigious international academic conferences organized by the Faculty of Journalism and Mass Communication at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and by New Bulgarian University.

II Evaluation of the Dissertation Text

The dissertation, dedicated to a current and relevant issue, comprises 229 pages and includes an Introduction, four chapters, conclusions and a final summary, references, a summary of the main contributions, a list of publications related to the dissertation topic, a list of abbreviations used, and acknowledgments. The structure of the text is determined by the aim and the objectives of the research, as outlined in the Introduction. The Introduction also defines the specific focus of the study—the private healthcare institutions in Bulgaria—and the subject of the dissertation—marketing communications of inpatient medical care facilities. It further presents the applied research approaches (analysis of theoretical sources, observation and analysis of the communication channels used by healthcare institutions, and surveys conducted with managers of private medical facilities) and methods (content analysis, survey research, semiotic and linguistic analysis).

The Introduction also presents the motivation behind the choice of the topic and outlines the main research problem and the theoretical foundation of the dissertation, which brings together scholarly sources from various thematic fields: social marketing, public relations, advertising, marketing communications, crisis communication, and healthcare marketing and resource management. The introductory section includes the formulation of the central research thesis and four hypotheses that the study seeks to test. The scope limitations of the topic are also precisely defined.

The first part of the dissertation introduces the legal definition of a healthcare institution (p. 25), as outlined in the Law on Healthcare Institutions in Bulgaria. It presents the latest foundational concepts in the development of marketing communications and their applicability in healthcare organizations in the country. The contradiction between outdated management and financing models in certain healthcare institutions and the necessity for applying marketing communications, which have penetrated various public spheres, structures, and institutions, is highlighted. The main advantages and key aspects of the activities of multispeciality hospitals in Bulgaria are also emphasized.

A significant aspect of the first part of the dissertation is the presented classification of healthcare institutions in the country based on specific indicators: population coverage and territorial distribution, patient condition, specialization, ownership, and size.

Among the strengths of the dissertation research, I can highlight the analytical presentation, in a comparative framework, of the Bulgarian healthcare system alongside healthcare models established in other countries. In the comparative context, observations on the healthcare systems in Kazakhstan, France, Slovenia, and Bulgaria are skillfully introduced. The main differences in the types of management of healthcare systems and the methods of financing healthcare institutions are identified. A key focus of the analysis is the orientation of marketing



communications content, as well as the types of communications practiced in the healthcare sector in the four countries.

The focus of the research in the first part is **the concept of hospital marketing, which is relatively new**, the specifics of hospital marketing, the main marketing goals, and the most important marketing tools. The definition "**marketing communications for a regulated development market**" is convincingly introduced into the analysis of the Bulgarian healthcare system. This definition refers to a market "whose opportunities for development and expansion are limited by regulations from state institutions and legal acts" (p. 34).

The reformulation of the marketing mix for healthcare institutions, presented in detail in the first chapter, offers a new interpretation of the analyzed subject in scientific research – the structure of the marketing mix, and is outlined as one of the contributions of the dissertation. The proposed formulation includes both the familiar elements: product, price, place, and promotion, as well as three additional components: people, physical evidence, and processes.

The author's perspective on the structure of hospital products or activities and services is presented. In this context, the ambiguous nature of the differentiated approach in medicine is explained. Regarding the newly introduced component – people – the importance of human resources in the operations of healthcare institutions is emphasized. The main factors in recruiting specialized medical personnel are identified, and the role of relationships between doctors and patients, as well as between the other members of a team, is highlighted as "a key indicator of a well-managed hospital structure."

In the discussion of physical evidence, highlighted as an element of the marketing mix for healthcare institutions, the focus is placed on the significance of space "for how patients will feel," and on the different understandings of the concepts "intimate," "personal," "social," and "public distance" between the genders. The most important aspects of physical evidence are distinguished: the architectural design of the hospital, amenities, signs, symbols, and artifacts, overall architectural design, the general condition of the environment and the building, as well as the overall condition and quality of the air in the rooms – temperature and lighting. The observations made about the environment in two Bulgarian hospitals – University First MBAL – Sofia "St. John the Baptist," and MBAL "Polimed," are integrated into the justification of the claim regarding the importance of physical evidence in healthcare institutions.

A key focus in the content structure of the first chapter is the application of a successful medical marketing strategy to improve the clinic's brand, the use of technological solutions, and maintaining the impeccable reputation of the doctors. The "correct use of content marketing" is highlighted as the most important component in this system of factors. Specific examples of successful content marketing are mentioned, such as contracts between some major private hospitals and established publications primarily focused on the healthcare sector, like the websites "Zdrave.net" and "Klinika.bg."

Among the strengths of the dissertation is the traced evolution of the concept of social marketing in the first chapter, the appropriate distinction between the terms "social marketing" and "social propaganda," as well as the convincingly justified standpoint **on the development of the hospital brand** as a strategy for promoting the competitive advantages of the healthcare institution and the values of the team. The importance of medical branding for the successful positioning of healthcare institutions and the personal reputation of specialists for the reputation of individual hospitals is emphasized.

Branding, highlighted among the main aspects in the first chapter of the dissertation, is presented both as a process and as a key factor in the competitive performance of healthcare



institutions. The role of the interconnection between personal and institutional brands – the brands of doctors and the brands of hospitals – is emphasized.

In the second chapter – "Public Relations and Integrated Marketing Communications," the specifics of marketing communications and the role of public relations in the healthcare sector are discussed. The various aspects of public relations activities in healthcare institutions are outlined. The significance of social marketing in the healthcare sector is highlighted, along with the strategic focus of hospital PR on improving citizens' health culture and implementing prevention efforts.

A significant aspect in the content structure of the second chapter is the management of issues and crises within the healthcare system. The priority task of communication management during crises is identified: to manage the provision of information to specific target groups and the public, and to prevent the distortion of facts and the spread of rumors. The research perspective is focused on the two largest and most serious crises in Bulgarian healthcare in recent years: the COVID-19 pandemic and the problematic situation with the price differences of oncology medications. The priority communication commitments of healthcare institutions during the COVID-19 crisis are also specified.

Among the highlights in the content structure of the second part are the statements regarding the ineffective communication policies of municipal hospitals and healthcare institutions in small towns in the country, whose patients are deprived of necessary information, as well as the advantage of private hospitals, which strive to attract PR experts to their teams and apply communication practices that have emerged with the development of technology. The justification for these statements includes the maintenance of Facebook pages by private hospitals, where new treatment techniques and practices are promoted, as well as campaigns for special screenings of certain diseases and free consultations with specialists. In this context, the role of the website created in Bulgaria for evaluating hospitals based on the useful content provided on the hospital's website is emphasized. It is appropriately clarified that the evaluation is based on 10 criteria regarding the usefulness of the information, which have been borrowed from similar structural evaluations of patient organizations in America and Europe. Additionally, the map on the website for evaluating healthcare institutions includes all hospitals across the country, regardless of their ownership, patient coverage, or financial capacity.

Among the highlights in the content, the position is emphasized that the prosperity of hospitals within the healthcare system depends on their flexibility, their ability to make adequate strategic decisions based on the observations and expertise of communication specialists regarding consumer opinions and trends in the healthcare system, as well as their focus on customer service.

One of the main conclusions related to PR communication in the healthcare sector in Bulgaria is the leading role of private hospitals in the active application of specific PR tools and communication techniques: organizing round tables, seminars, and PR campaigns. Healthcare institutions in the private sector, for the most part, have PR experts and possess certain resources for feedback with target audiences and maintaining a positive image. Public relations are identified as the most effective form of communication for healthcare institutions.

The content structure of the second chapter outlines the key factors for the brand image of healthcare institutions. In this context, the role of social marketing in their organizational cultures and policies is emphasized, as well as the impact of proxemics, chromatics, and decor systems in their overall structure. The specifics and functions of advertising in healthcare are highlighted within the dynamic context of evolving technologies.



In the third chapter – "Hospital Communications in the Online Space," the main technologies and patterns of this type of communications are discussed, which, according to the author of the dissertation, are "poorly studied" and "underdeveloped" in the Bulgarian healthcare system. The focus is on the impact of information on the reputation of institutional brands in the healthcare sector, as well as the role of the PR expert in managing the information process.

This part of the dissertation presents two studies conducted in 2020: the study "PR Communication of Private Hospitals in Bulgaria via Social Media" and a study on consumer behavior regarding preferred channels for acquiring information about healthcare institutions and services. The results of studies carried out in 2022 and 2023 with representatives of private hospitals and the National Association of Private Hospitals are also presented. The conclusions of these studies highlight persistent deficiencies in the communication policies of healthcare institutions and emerging trends indicating the growing interest in digital platforms and their tangible position in the communication infrastructure of organizations in the healthcare sector.

The fourth part examines the emergence, development, purpose, and communication practices of various hospital associations in the country. Valuable observations and analyses of significant issues in the NGO sector and hospital organizations in Bulgaria are presented. The importance of the final chapter of the dissertation is defined by the thorough discussion of public relations as an element in the management of non-governmental organizations.

The conclusions and summary focus on the main highlights in the content and justification of the main thesis, as well as on the contributions of the dissertation, emphasizing the significance of the multifaceted activities carried out by PR departments in institutions within the healthcare sector.

The content structure of the dissertation is outlined in the abstract, which succinctly presents the topic, object, subject, goal, tasks, and theoretical foundation of the research. The main research thesis and the four working hypotheses are also highlighted.

III Contributions of the Dissertation Research

The contribution of the study lies in the newly formulated marketing mix in the healthcare sector and the highlighted strategic priorities of medical marketing: attracting new clients (patients), investing in online reputation, expanding the use of artificial intelligence, and achieving a high level of medical analysis "through new techniques, research, equipment, and methodology." The contributions presented are of a scientific and applied nature.

As a contribution of theoretical significance, I would highlight the emerging trend in the communication between hospital institutions observed during the COVID-19 pandemic, which is directly linked to the specifics of client culture — namely, the development of partnership relations between competitors, in this case, hospitals competing for the attention of healthcare service users.

The studies conducted by the author of the dissertation in 2020, 2022, and 2023 are of contributory significance. They reveal the insufficient adoption of effective PR communication models within the Bulgarian healthcare system and highlight the need for "continued professional development of hospitals' online communications." At the same time, the research indicates a certain positive trend regarding the communication practices applied in the online environment, namely: "more active use of new communication channels with patients to facilitate quick access to information and transition to treatment."



The results obtained are valuable for PR practitioners in the healthcare sector, as well as for communication experts in non-governmental organizations.

IV. Notes and Recommendations

I have no comments regarding the research approach to the topic and the content structure of the text. The research goals and objectives, specified in the Introduction, have been achieved. There are some technical errors observed in places (p. 50: "The experience of contact with healthcare will already be in a different context when you have the knowledge and understanding," and p. 52 - Reke Harlow instead of Rex Harlow), but despite this remark, I can state that the dissertation demonstrates very good language skills.

I believe that Marinova has interesting observations and analyses on the semantic dimensions and significance of social marketing, and therefore I recommend that she directs her research efforts toward this thematic area as well.

V. Publications and Participation in Scientific Forums

Valentina Marinova is the author of five articles, six reports, one study, and one chapter of a collective monograph related to the topic of her dissertation. She has fulfilled the requirements of the Regulations for the Conditions and Procedure for Acquiring the Educational and Scientific Degree of "Doctor" at Sofia University "St. Kliment Ohridski" and has met the national requirements according to Article 63, Paragraph 1, Item 4, and Article 69, Paragraph 3. The "publications" indicators have been exceeded as per the requirements. The scientometric indicator A points are 50, and the indicator G points are 145, with a minimum of 30 points, totaling 195 points across both indicators.

VI. Conclusion

The merits and contributions of the dissertation titled "Marketing Communications of Healthcare Institutions for Hospital Medical Care" and the publication output of Valentina Ivanova Marinova provide solid grounds for my strong recommendation to the esteemed jury to award her the educational and scientific degree of "Doctor" in the field of higher education 3. Social, Economic, and Information Sciences, professional area 3.5. Public Communications and Information Sciences, scientific specialty "Media and Communications – Integrated Marketing Communications."

14.04.2025

Veliko Tarnovo

Reviewer

Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hristina Hristova