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Marketing communication strategies in community-based wellness tourism: Umbul Brintik, Klaten, Indonesia

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ABSTRACT

Background: Umbul Brintik is a community-managed wellness tourism destination operated by a Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) in Klaten, Central Java. It is known for its distinctive high-pH natural spring water, which is associated with health treatments, while competing with conventional recreational water parks. **Purpose:** This study examines the marketing communication strategies adopted by BUMDes management to strengthen destination brand awareness. **Methods:** This qualitative study employed a multi-source single-case design based on Yin's case study framework. Data were collected through field observations, document analysis, and interviews with BUMDes managers, local therapists, health academic partners, and senior visitors. The analysis was guided by Kotler and Keller's STP model, the eight components of the integrated marketing communication mix, and Aaker's Brand Awareness Pyramid. **Results:** The findings show that word-of-mouth communication, experiential engagement, particularly supervised aquatic exercises, and community outreach are the primary communication strategies. These approaches are relevant because wellness tourism relies heavily on credence attributes that require social endorsement and experiential validation. The strategies have enabled Umbul Brintik to achieve brand recall among elderly and health-conscious consumers, although top-of-mind awareness has not yet been achieved, partly due to limited structured digital marketing. **Conclusion:** Brand awareness in community-based wellness tourism is strengthened through the alignment of niche positioning, interpersonal trust, experiential validation, and institutional credibility. **Implications:** Theoretically, this study proposes a Trust-Based Niche Marketing Communication Model for credence-based tourism offerings. Practically, it provides a framework for resource-constrained BUMDes to combine interpersonal credibility with gradual digital marketing development without replacing the trust-based communication that supports niche positioning.

Keywords: community-based tourism; BUMDES; niche marketing; trust-based communication; word of mouth communication

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INTRODUCTION

Tourism has been identified as one of the main engines of regional economic development, especially in economically disadvantaged regions that have certain natural and cultural resources. Tourism generates income for local communities and helps create jobs, infrastructure, and investment in related industries such as transportation, hospitality, creative sectors, and small and medium enterprises. Tourism development in developing countries such as Indonesia is strongly anchored by social inclusion as a structural catalyst of societal welfare. This sector's strategic value is explicitly stated in Law Number 10 of (2009) on Tourism which states that the development of tourism must be sustainable to improve people's, preserve cultural values, and protect environmental resources.

Tourism is a great asset of value, but nowadays it is increasingly operating in a competitive market and a changing paradigm of tourism. The current tourism demand is now shifting from the mass market standardized tourism products to personalized experience-based tourism (Dong & Siu, 2013; Stamboulis & Skayannis, 2003). In the present day, this trend has been increasingly driven by a growing health consciousness and a collective pursuit of holistic wellness, turning niche travel into a mainstream lifestyle goal (Kay Smith & Diekmann, 2017; Liao et al., 2023). The evolution of tastes reflects broader sociocultural changes. Today's independent travelers increasingly seek authenticity, self-fulfillment, and wellness, moving beyond superficial forms of recreation. Modern tourism destinations are therefore forced to fundamentally revise their positioning strategies and competitive in highly segmented niche markets.

One of the most visible manifestations of this paradigm shift is the global growth in wellness tourism. Wellness tourism was initially a niche for relatively well of travelers, but has grown rapidly as everyone wants mental, emotional, and physical wellness. Wellness tourism is more proactive and preventative than traditional leisure tourism, which is primarily for recreational enjoyment and includes hydrotherapy, mindfulness retreats, nature-based therapy and holistic lifestyle experiences. The global wellness tourism economy has recovered rapidly since the pandemic, in the market size expected to reach USD 1 trillion mark in 2025 (Global Wellness Institute, 2024). Apart from that, the economic importance is highlighted by the fact that wellness tourists spend about 36% more per trip than the average foreign tourist because they are willing to spend more on experiences, services, and amenities that support their health and well-being (Global

Wellness Institute, 2024).

In the theory, a distinct line between medical tourism and wellness tourism needs to be established to anchor strategic management practices. Medical tourism is a reactive, clinical tourism focused on a real disease or surgery in orthodox health care facilities. However, wellness tourism is proactive and preventative; it contributes to the preservation, enhancement, or betterment of the total quality of life in line with natural and cultural interactions, by balancing the body, mind, and soul (Liao et al., 2023). These wellness activities are often combined with environmental resources and local traditions, contributing to a holistic consumer experience. These features give wellness tourism a unique potential to address the fundamental aspects of sustainable tourism and to find an operational balance between the economic development of the region, the preservation of the environment, and the identity of the local communities.

In the Indonesian context, this regional potential appears in the Klaten Regency, which is widely known as the 'City of Thousand Umbuls.' It carefully uses the richness and diversity of natural tourist attractions and local potentials in the development of its tourist destinations (Disbudporapar Kabupaten Klaten, 2023). But a big gap separating the potential of this natural resource from the real strategic marketing practice of the community-controlled organizations of the region. An excellent example is Umbul Brintik, a unique spring created specifically for health and hydrotherapy tourism. It has been established and officially managed by the Sumber Makmur Village-owned Enterprise (BUMDes) since 2017. This destination attempts to convert local natural spring assets into a specialized wellness attraction. However, the location faces critical challenges in market connection and visibility.

Umbul Brintik has a distinct therapeutic value proposition but suffers badly from a baseline brand recognition gap compared to its recreational equivalents in the region. Umbul Brintik reported only 68.685 visits in 2021, while other nearby recreational springs such as Umbul Ponggok are known for mass water recreation, comfortably attracting more than 500.000 tourists yearly. This research is followed by a preliminary survey made informally to 50 domestic tourists in the city of Yogyakarta. The results of the survey show that Umbul Brintik is predicted to have traffic of 270.997 in 2024, but 82% of tourists do not know the health benefits of Umbul Brintik. There are even some tourists who think that Umbul Brintik is a common public swimming pool. The local community believes that the spring water has healing properties for many medical conditions, from rheumatism to post stroke symptoms, which means Umbul Brintik has fundamentally

considerable therapeutic potential. Laboratory evaluations show that the water has a high pH of 8.2, a feature that is linked to the health benefits of alkaline water and that further supports this traditional notion. These distinct clinical and experiential aspects are great assets in the wellness tourism sector. However, the absence of structured communication methods limits the destination's capacity to translate these intrinsic characteristics into broad market recognition.

Wellness tourism is a 'credence product' which requires a different marketing approach to communicate the value of the product. Unlike traditional leisure activities, the therapeutic benefits of water-based wellness cannot be properly investigated before or immediately after consumption (Liao et al., 2023). Consequently, the health attributes of the tourism services are based on perceived uncertainty, and thus the consumer behavior on the mentioned sector is significantly impacted by social networks, interpersonal trust and also word of mouth (Hyder et al., 2019). This dynamic is sometimes a challenge for community-based tourism entrepreneurs (CBTEs) that are known to have very limited financial resources, limited professional marketing skills, and limited promotional networks. While community managed tourism approaches empower local people and promote social participation (Giampiccoli & Kalis, 2012). Despite this, they are structurally constrained by insufficient market connections, which prohibit high intrinsic value destinations from successfully competing in saturated environments.

Existing literature on Indonesian tourism marketing communication provides basic insights into destination branding, but it is limited in scope and context. Prior studies have predominantly examined marketing mixes in conventional nature parks (Trisia & Nugraha, 2022) or focused on corporate integrated marketing communication models in highly commercialized coastal areas (Sholihah & Cindoswari, 2024). Methodologically, these academic endeavors have heavily leaned toward quantitative consumer satisfaction indices, digital storytelling metrics on corporate social media (Pera, 2017), or the perceived helpfulness of online reviews in mass-market travel decisions (Filieri et al., 2018). While these studies address important dimensions of destination visibility, they focus almost exclusively on mass-market, commercial, or government-run attractions, leaving small scale, community managed operations severely under researched.

While existing studies have examined marketing communication in mass-market or government tourism destinations, no study has specifically examined how community managed wellness tourism destinations operating under

resource constraints construct and implement marketing communication strategies to build brand awareness. There is a tangible lack of empirical knowledge regarding how small-scale destinations strategically manage the credence attributes of health and well-being to elevate consumer familiarity from basic recognition to active preference. This strategic gap asks for comprehensive qualitative research that investigates how destination branding could be constructed not on physical characteristics or massive financial investments, but on authentic narrative and communicative processes that create meaning and trust (Chronis, 2005).

To address this empirical omission, the main research question of this study is formulated as: What marketing communication techniques are done by the management of Umbul Brintik to improve the awareness of brand? This study deals with the operational management of the marketing communication mix, the adaptation of messaging to specific target audiences, and the strategic use of trust-based channels to boost destination exposure.

This research offers two important contributions in the field of communication management and sustainable tourism. It gives an advanced qualitative study of a growing tourism niche and contributes to the academic literature of destination branding, credibility product marketing and community-based management. The results can be used practically as an empirical benchmark model for BUMDes managers, tourism awareness groups (Pokdarwis), and local government planners across Indonesia. By demonstrating how a resource-constrained enterprise can leverage interpersonal credibility and niche positioning, this study provides actionable insights to strengthen destination competitiveness without compromising regional authenticity.

RESEARCH METHOD

The qualitative data collected from the qualitative studies provides a deep understanding of the construction of individuals' social reality; therefore, providing an anchor for the constructivist paradigm (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The constructivist paradigm fits the research goal of understanding how managers create strategic marketing communication programs and how visitors experience them. As such, a qualitative descriptive case study design by Yin (2018) was chosen for the purpose of this study, using Umbul Brintik as a bounded case in the context of its natural tourism and community environment. The research object is the marketing communication program developed by Umbul Brintik, which will be examined through the STP (Segmentation, Targeting, Positioning) framework and the eight elements of the marketing communication mix.

The qualitative descriptive case study design allows for an examination of the complexity of managing a community-based tourism brand under extreme resource limitations.

To ensure that the sample aligned with the research objectives, this study employed purposive sampling to select participants with relevant knowledge and experience of the destination's marketing strategies (Campbell et al., 2020). Participants were divided into two groups: key informants and supporting informants. Key informants are individuals that develop strategies, whereas supporting informants are individuals that represent the destination's primary target markets. There were two primary key informants that were identified by the researcher: the Director and Secretary of BUMDes Sumber Makmur. To gather empirical data from the destination's primary target market, supporting informants included older visitors (50+ years old) that visited the spring for health reasons. Additionally, younger visitors (22 years old) were also included as supporting informants to reflect a potentially emerging secondary and aspirational market segment. A field worker was also included as a supporting informant to collect empirical data on interactions occurring at the site. A complete listing of all informants can be found in Table 1.

The process of collecting data took place from January through February of 2025 using multiple-source triangulation to provide evidence that the data collected was credible and valid (Yin, 2018). There are several types of qualitative research methods that were employed to collect data for this study. Semi-structured in-depth interviews were conducted with all eight of the participants so that the researcher could explore the participants' ideas, experiences, and perspectives on the marketing communications strategies implemented by Umbul Brintik. The questions for the interviews were categorized into three general themes: (1) how STP decisions are made; (2) how the marketing communication

Table 1 Informants Profile

No.	Name	Age	Occupation
1	Informant 1	57	Director of BUMDes
2	Informant 2	33	Secretary of BUMDes
3	Informant 3	47	Workers of Um-bul Brintik
4	Informant 4	44	Visitors
5	Informant 5	22	Younger Visitors
6	Informant 6	22	Younger Visitors
7	Informant 7	65	Older Visitor
8	Informant 8	70	Older Visitor

Source: Research Result, 2025

mix elements are being used; and (3) what the participants believe to be the outcome of their branding efforts. Non-participant observation occurred on-site at Umbul Brintik during six separate time periods (each lasted for 2-3 hours) during weekdays and on weekends. This allowed the researcher to directly observe how communication elements (on-site promotion media, banners, brochures), staff-visitor interactions, and on-site therapeutic experiences occur within their natural environments. Lastly, a documentation study was conducted where the researcher collected and reviewed document-based sources of information related to Umbul Brintik's promotional campaigns. Some examples of these sources include the organic content posted on the official Instagram social media page @umbulbrintik, printed pamphlets, and local news reports about Umbul Brintik's promotional campaigns.

Miles et al. (2014) qualitative interactive analysis model was used for analyzing the data; this model consists of three interrelated processes of analysis that occur simultaneously: (1) data reduction; (2) data display; and (3) conclusion drawing/verification. During the data reduction process, the researcher reviewed all the raw data collected in the form of verbatim interview transcriptions, visual documents, and field notes. This process allowed the researcher to identify and code the relevant sections of the raw data. He then grouped these coded segments together under larger categories based on their commonalities. Once the data had been reduced, the researcher displayed the reduced data using structured matrices and analytical narratives. The analytical narrative was structured using the theoretical framework of Segmentation, Targeting, and Positioning (STP), followed by the eight components of the marketing communications mix. Finally, after the reduced data had been displayed, the researcher analyzed the displayed data to determine if there were any patterns, meanings, or operational relationships that could explain why the marketing strategies used by BUMDes Sumber Makmur have successfully increased the awareness of its destination brand. To help ensure credibility and reduce interpretive bias, the findings and interpretations of the data were reviewed by the Director and Secretary of BUMDes Sumber Makmur to confirm the accuracy of the information provided by BUMDes Sumber Makmur through member checks.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Umbul Brintik is a natural spring-fed water park that can be found in the village of Malangjiwan in the district of Kebonarum, Klaten Regency, Central Java. As far as location

is concerned, Umbul Brintik is only 5 km away from the city center of Klaten; thus, it can be reached without much difficulty by residents and visitors who are visiting the area from elsewhere. Due to the clarity of the spring water, the pristine rural environment surrounding the site, and the potential for a therapeutic experience based on the natural features of the site, Umbul Brintik falls into the category of health and wellness tourism. Since 2017, Umbul Brintik has been formally operated by the Village-Owned Enterprise (BUMDes) Sumber Makmur. It was officially recognized as a specialized health and wellness tourism site by the Klaten Regency Government.

The Umbul Brintik receives water from more than 10 separate springs that flow continually into the pool. One of the main physical features of Umbul Brintik is the release of air bubbles from the bottom of the pool. The name Umbul Brintik translates to "bubbles" in Javanese. A laboratory analysis of the water shows that the pH level of the water at Umbul Brintik is 8.2, and it contains a large amount of dissolved oxygen. Many people believe that the water from Umbul Brintik can relieve many types of aches and pains, including muscle aches, rheumatism, and post-stroke complications. Because of the special chemicals found in the water and the experiences that people have when using the water, Umbul Brintik is considered a health resort area as opposed to a standard recreational water park.

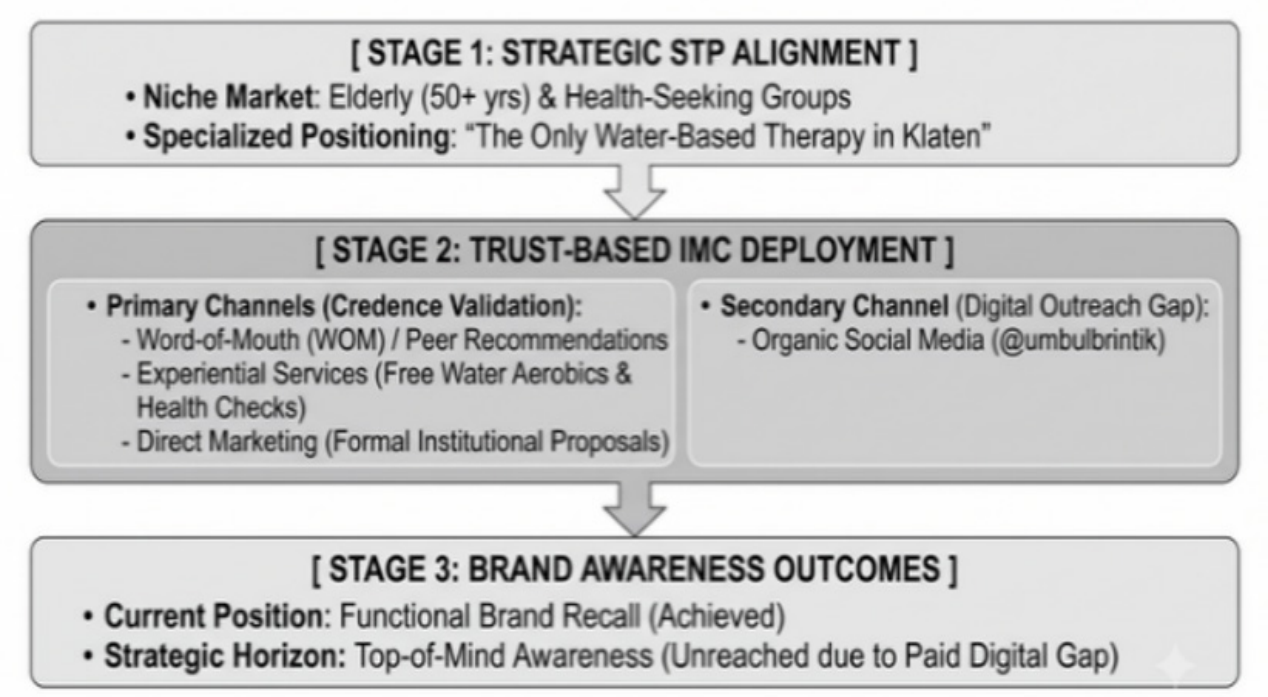
The results of the empirical research indicate that the management of Umbul Brintik has intentionally used the Segmentation, Targeting and Positioning (STP) framework as the basis for its marketing communications. The main method of segmenting markets used is demographic; specifically targeting consumers age 50 and older seeking proactive and preventative water-based therapies. As far as targeting, the management employs a selective targeting strategy that focuses mainly on organized groups located in the Klaten area such as associations of retired teachers, associations of retired civil servants (ASN), and community health groups. The positioning strategy is supported by the official tagline: "The only water-based therapy destination in Klaten." This positioning strategically emphasizes the intangible therapeutic attributes of the destination over general recreational swimming. This approach is consistent with the concept of niche tourism where local destinations do not compete in saturated mass markets but rather develop and market specialized and authentic products that meet the needs of specific health-seeking consumer segments (Kumar et al., 2018; Rosalina & Teoh, 2026). Additionally, by incorporating local therapeutic assets into the core brand identity, the destination develops a

unique brand association that distinguishes it from general water attractions (Pradnyandari et al., 2025).

The logic between the strategic positioning decisions of Umbul Brintik and the operational communication decisions is highly interdependent. Figure 1 shows the conceptual framework visually combining this conceptual relationship, how strategic niche selection leads to the adoption of certain communication channels.

The model in Figure 1 shows that targeting structured elderly communities directly encourages a strong reliance on direct marketing, including formal proposal letters and group-based sales promotions, while broad digital advertising plays a more limited role. This senior audience is structurally less responsive to contemporary social media platforms and highly dependent on institutional communal activities, so the deployment of personalized invitations to community leaders is an optimal strategic fit. Also, because the destination positions itself strictly as a niche water therapy sanctuary, the communication mix automatically rules out mass media advertising to the advantage of high-touch experiential events like free health checks and guided aerobics. Such a structural alignment ensures that the enterprise's scarce resources are well directed at audiences who value the credence attributes of wellness.

The destination's steady traffic growth is



Source: Research Result, 2025

Figure 1 Conceptual Framework of Umbul Brintik's Trust-Based Marketing Communication Model

reflected in the operational results of this STP aligned strategy. Table 2 shows the number of visitors per year, which indicates steady growth over a four-year period.

To realize the strategic niche position, Umbul Brintik coordinates the eight elements of the marketing communication mix. The management is instead expanding on interpersonal, experiential, and highly localized messages to build an authentic brand narrative based on trust and physical healing. All these integrated elements are comprehensively presented in Table 3.

The prioritization of organic interpersonal communication and direct sales pitches over paid mass media advertising is explicitly explained by Informant 1, the Director of BUMDes Sumber Makmur, during his interview:

> We have never used paid promotion. We prefer to use unpaid promotional methods. We do engage in personal selling, usually

Table 2 Umbul Brintik Visitor Data

No.	Year	Number of Visitors
1	2021	68.685
2	2022	143.690
3	2023	217.052
4	2024	270.997

Source: Research Result, 2025

Table 3 Integrated Marketing Communication Mix Matrix

IMC Ele-ment	Operational Activi-ties & Audience	Key Message & Effectiveness
Advertis-ing	Organic IG & Phys-ical entrance sign-age for general lo-cal tourists	Operational hours & natural pool features Low to Moderate: Restricted by organic reach.
Sales Pro-motion	Bundling for senior groups & large families, “Buy 10 Get 1 Free”	Cost effective group wellness & socialization High: Drives institutional group booking
Event & Experienc-es	Saturday water aer-obics & free health checks for health seeking elderly	Direct physical proof of therapeutic water value Very high: Neutralizes health credence risks
Public Re-lations	Local media cover-age & BUMDes community CSR in-itiatives	Umbul Brintik as a supportive health sanctuary High: Builds long term institutional goodwill
Direct Marketing	Formal proposals sent to retiree groups & civil servant unions	Structured, safe, & specialized therapy packages High: Matches senior institutional preferences
Interactive Marketing	Responsive DM & comment engage-ment on official In-stagram	Transparent & adaptive customer service Moderate: Good engagement, but limited reach
WOM	Peer-to-peer shar-ing of physical healing & pain re-lief stories	Experiential validation of spring’s healing efficacy Very high: Primary driver of brand recall
Personal Selling	Face to face repre-sentation at local government tour-ism fairs	Unique high pH water therapeutic benefits Moderate: Strong local network, high manual effort

Source: Research Result, 2025

> when we visit communities, nursing homes, orphanages, or institutions. During these visits, we explain the health benefits of Umbul Brintik. We promote Umbul Brintik to retiree communities, orphanages, and schools. We also provide discounts for group visits. From our experience in promoting Umbul Brintik to these communities, we receive reciprocal benefits in the form of word-of-mouth promotion carried out by visitors (Informant 1, personal communication, January 30, 2025).

This evidence indicates a key empirical pattern: resource-constrained community enterprises rely on direct, trust based relational marketing to generate organic peer to peer recommendation chains. As observed within the framework of community-based tourism (CBT) frameworks, communities themselves are often the driving force of this organic promotional engine, through bottom-up initiatives and word-of-mouth, without the need for substantial capital investment or significant government support (Anismar et al., 2025). In addition, localized outreach and collaboration with institutional groups further promote a strong sense of community trust and ownership that supports this tourism development (Gunawan et al., 2026). This strategic decision is logically linked to the behavioral characteristics of the target market, who rely heavily on collective affirmation and word-of-mouth recommendations to build destination brand awareness and trust (Pradnyandari et al., 2025; Supriyanto & Suroso, 2026). Informant 2, the Secretary of BUMDEs, further emphasized that interpersonal recommendations are prevalent in the health sector, while digital media is utilized by general leisure visitors who usually depend on electronic word of mouth (e-WOM) and digital content for their travel decision making (Granata, 2020; Phengkona, 2021).

> Many visitors seeking therapy usually hear about Umbul Brintik through word of mouth, while those coming mainly for recreation generally discover it via social media. Management has discovered that many visitors have learned about the place through the recommendations of others. Therefore, they have instructed all employees to maintain friendly relations with visitors. One of these is believed to attract tourists to return and recommend Umbul Brintik to others (Informant 2, personal communication, February 9, 2025).

Empirical verification of the lived experiences of the primary target segment shows the total dominance of trust-based interpersonal networks. Elderly guests like Informant 7 (65) and Informant 8 (70) confirmed explicitly that their first awareness of Umbul Brintik was not through digital exposure but was entirely from word-of-mouth recommendations shared by neighbors and close acquaintances who had experienced healing at the spring before. Informant 7 (65) shared her personal story in the interview:

> I heard about Umbul Brintik from a neighbor in my village who said their leg condition had improved after soaking in the water there. I thought I'd give it a try

> and when I got there was an instructor in the pool taking us through a series of movements in the water. Alhamdulillah, my lower back pain is gone, and I am in a better condition (Informant 7, personal communication, July 16, 2026).

This personal interaction with the local instructor is a sign of the implementation of holistic wellness tourism products where visitors are actively involved in guided practices for tangible physical and psychological recovery (Rosalina & Teoh, 2026). On top of that, these personal, high-touch interactions create a strong destination brand experience (DBE) that strengthens visitor satisfaction, trust, and future loyalty (Faliti & Atmoko, 2025).

Additionally, the results from the empirical study illustrate a transition in how wellness value propositions are communicated from abstract promotions to concrete assurances provided by on-site experiential service delivery. The results of the study confirm that an experiential wellness product which allows the tourist to participate in guided holistic activities led by local staff provides a significant means of converting passive tourist awareness into active endorsement of a brand and physical recovery (Rosalina & Teoh, 2026). Additionally, from a destination branding standpoint, participation in such participatory engagement experiences represents a powerful behavioral DBE that promotes authenticity and culturally relevant communication (Faliti & Atmoko, 2025). As per community agency and structuration principles, the empathetic exchange between local frontline staff and instructors acts as a primary operational resource that establishes credibility in communication and strengthens the bond between the tourist and the destination (Gunawan et al., 2026).

The results also show internal managerial problems, such as limited management capability, inactive local tourism association (Pokdarwis), and limited destination governance coordination. These internal constraints have echoed the current issues of community-based rural tourism in terms of marketing and ICT skills, human resources, and financial limitations (Phengkona, 2021; Wahyuningrat & Harsanto, 2025). Informant 2 identified these structural internal bottlenecks as follows:

> The Umbul Brintik brand awareness is currently at a high level; however, its development has halted. The main reason for this stagnation is that no specific marketing team exists for Umbul Brintik, specifically in relation to social media and tourism management. Social media postings are inconsistent and do not contain set monthly goals. BUMDes Sumber Makmur does not currently employ a marketing team, therefore, the administrator manages the social media accounts. An additional improvement that needs to occur with Umbul Brintik is to expand the number of therapists employed. However, during various times of the year, the number of therapists available is insufficient to serve each visitor who wishes to participate in therapy (Informant

2, personal communication, February 9, 2025).

The integration of quantitative empirical evidence and descriptive visitor data, as well as qualitative narrative data obtained from interviews with individuals, indicates that Umbul Brintik's communication strategies have contributed to creating initial brand recognition. A conceptual representation of this finding may be viewed through the application of Aaker's Brand Awareness Pyramid Model (2018), which is represented graphically in Figure 2.

Based on the results, it appears that Umbul Brintik has moved beyond the 'Brand Recognition' phase of the Brand Awareness process and is now firmly positioned in the 'Brand Recall' category. Umbul Brintik has developed into an identifiable memory trace for residents of Klaten; especially those who are seniors seeking health care. When consumers exhibit recall, they will be able to immediately recall the name "Umbul Brintik" when asked to identify specific locations where people can go for health-related aquatic therapy. According to Aaker (2018) such high levels of recall demonstrate that the destination has effectively entered the consumer's active consideration set. Brand Awareness is the first step in developing destination brand equity, and direct recall of a brand helps reinforce positive brand associations and shape travel decisions made by visitors (Pradnyandari et al., 2025). This finding illustrates how today's modern tourism economy, which is characterized by high levels



Source: Aaker (2018)

Figure 2 Brand Awareness Pyramid

of saturation and fragmentation, functions. Umbul Brintik avoids direct competition with generalist tourism destinations such as Umbul Ponggok in crowded mass tourism markets by focusing on the specialized wellness segment, which helps reduce competitive pressures. In essence, Umbul Brintik is practicing a form of niche tourism, enabling destinations to avoid competing directly with each other through focus on meeting the unique requirements of smaller, specialized segments of the market (Farmaki et al., 2024). According to Kotler and Keller (2016) small businesses can achieve significant market visibility by concentrating their efforts on serving niche markets instead of competing across broad market segments. Additionally, maintaining a consistent level of therapeutic quality throughout its products and services will help create consistency within Umbul Brintik's brand portfolio and reduce potential conflicts related to differing quality perceptions that may negatively impact overall visitor satisfaction (Yang et al., 2022).

The complete reliance on interpersonal word of mouth, experiential activities, and public relations may be seen as a direct result of the specific credence characteristics associated with wellness tourism. Unlike typical physical tourism products, the effectiveness of water-based wellness cannot be fully assessed before or even directly following consumption. As defined by Liao et al. (2023), wellness tourism requires individuals to find physical and mental consistency when selecting products to consume, thereby creating very individualistic and risky purchasing decisions. Thus, the older adults use information from others as well as personal experience to make decisions on tourism (Patterson, 2007). Older adult travelers are especially looking for experiences that offer them lasting health benefits and genuine social interaction (Kay Smith & Diekmann, 2017). This age group's desire for psychological and subjective well-being is like what has been observed recently in the post-pandemic period; that is, rural community-based tourism offers significant multidimensional quality of life enhancements due to increased social cohesion and perceived safety (Kusumawardhani, 2026). The present study shows how Umbul Brintik takes advantage of these trends in older adult traveler behaviors by encouraging positive interpersonal communication among visitors through high levels of service satisfaction, guided pool exercise classes, and communal engagement. This trend reflects the reciprocal nature of community-developed wellness products, where high-touch, altruistic, and educational interactions result in shared psychological and social well-being for both visitors and host communities (Rosalina & Teoh, 2026). In addition, when local

community members actively participate as hosts and authentic service providers, they become "organic" brand ambassadors who constantly communicate the unique aspects of their destination to visitors (Juriah & Nugroho, 2025). This process provides evidence to back up destination claims and converts intangible credence attributes into tangible social proof (Anismar et al., 2025; Gunawan et al., 2026).

Prior empirical evidence supports these findings from both a national and international perspective. The use of both interpersonal and community-based communication techniques can create consistent branding which is able to elevate destination loyalty past the mass tourism model (Al Qosam & Taubih, 2022). Furthermore, the Destination Brand Experience (DBE) framework provides theoretical support for this concept. Sensory, affective, and behavioral engagement provided by local hosts can serve as mediators of tourist satisfaction and result in long-term attitudinal loyalty (Faliti & Atmoko, 2025). Experiential services provide an effective method to counter consumer skepticism and develop experiential attachment (Febriana & Setyanto, 2019). The concept of value co-creation in sustainable tourism also supports this notion. Through direct interaction between host and visitor, a sustainable value proposition is created which reduces the perception of risk (Alawi & Noer, 2025). Additionally, Rohim et al. (2025) find that in the present-day tourism environment, perceived security and communicative credibility are the main factors influencing tourist interest. Although Rohim et al. (2025) studied another destination, the mediating role of trust in facilitating specialized tourism experiences remains very consistent with the operational model found at Umbul Brintik. Empirical consistency indicates that a positive destination image created through interpersonal trust and authentic electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) continues to be the best predictor of visitor decision-making and sustainable competitiveness of destinations (Supriyanto & Suroso, 2026).

To remain competitive in the rapidly expanding regional wellness market in the long run, Umbul Brintik needs to move towards becoming "Top-of-Mind Awareness." At present, Umbul Brintik has not reached the top level of the pyramid, which represents the highest level of brand equity that a destination can achieve, where a consumer will immediately recall the destination brand over all others (Pradnyandari et al., 2025). The research findings point out a strategic weakness in terms of how Umbul Brintik communicates with the public; that is, the destination does not use digital marketing strategies to its full extent, nor does it have a dedicated social

media marketing team. The deficiency in this area reflects a common problem found in rural tourism development, in which a destination's ability to consistently communicate its brand values is limited due to a lack of available personnel and/or digital marketing skills (Juriah & Nugroho, 2025; Phengkona, 2021). The reliance of Umbul Brintik management on creating and distributing organic content on a sporadic basis limits its ability to communicate with individuals who already follow it via social media and thus limits its ability to attract new followers from larger urban areas. Research conducted internationally indicates that current digital platforms play an integral role in facilitating both proactive destination image development and information gathering behaviors (Ilieva, 2022; Sujatmiko et al., 2025). Digital platforms facilitate the communication of intangible benefits of wellness tourism (e.g., therapeutic benefits), primarily through electronic word-of-mouth (E-WOM) and digital storytelling, prior to physical visitation (Lim et al., 2022). In addition, digital green marketing communication and stories have also been suggested to influence tourists toward pro-environmental behavior and revisit intention due to suitable framing of destination attributes toward sustainability efforts (Alawi & Noer, 2025; Sanjaya et al., 2024). Communication research suggests that social media marketing is one of the most cost-effective elements of Integrated Marketing Communications (IMC) to maximize visibility for health-related services (Prana, 2023). However, achieving consistent digital engagement requires dedicated management resources, and as Prana (2023) points out, many health service providers face operational constraints when they lack a specialized digital marketing team to structure their interactive communication activities. Therefore, a structured capacity enhancement, such as forming a dedicated management team consisting of marketers, content creators, and administrators, is necessary to facilitate effective execution of integrated online marketing (Phengkona, 2021). The digital divide is well documented throughout the hospitality and tourism industry, as digital communication tools and structured E-WOM are increasingly being used to gather continuous feedback, enhance relationship marketing, and maintain long-term competitive advantage (Granata, 2020). If community-based destinations fail to utilize modern digital channels to amplify their local stories, they risk being confined within their local communities and failing to reach broader demographic segments (Anismar et al., 2025; Gunawan et al., 2026). This theoretical concept accurately describes the internal constraints at Umbul Brintik; specifically, the absence of a dedicated marketing department

prevents consistent execution of organic social media activities despite their high potential for reaching a wide audience.

E-WOM generated on platforms such as Instagram acts as a digital form of word-of-mouth (WOM), which provides essential social proof indicators for validating the credibility of a company (Riama, 2021). E-WOM, as it is based on the actual experiences of other tourists, is seen by potential visitors as being very objective, reliable and credible, as opposed to traditional forms of advertising (Supriyanto & Suroso, 2026). At present, Umbul Brintik's brand awareness exists within its specific market niche of functional therapy, however, moving beyond this awareness level to a "top of mind" status will require a series of consistent and repetitive messages to create a strong emotional connection with consumers (Kotler & Keller, 2016). According to Lund et al. (2018), destination branding in the digital age is created through authentic storytelling that transforms physical space into an interactive and engaging narrative experience. Umbul Brintik must therefore learn to transfer the high level of trust gained at its physical spring into the digital ecosystem, combining interpersonal credibility with targeted digital outreach to ensure long term brand sustainability. In doing so, the destination management can adopt a participatory digital branding paradigm by actively involving the digitally literate younger generation to co create social media content, thereby bridging local heritage preservation with modern digital outreach to ensure long term brand sustainability (Juriah & Nugroho, 2025; Wijaya et al., 2026).

CONCLUSION

This study finds that Umbul Brintik's marketing communication strategy is primarily built on word-of-mouth communication, experiential activities, and public relations, within a niche STP framework targeting elderly and wellness-oriented communities in Klaten. These communication practices have enabled the destination to achieve brand recall, although not yet top of mind awareness. In line with the qualitative objectives of this case study, the findings conceptualize a Trust-Based Niche Marketing Communication Model for community managed wellness tourism destinations. The model consists of three interrelated mechanisms: specialized market positioning based on distinctive therapeutic attributes, particularly the perceived health benefits of its high pH natural water, the prioritization of interpersonal and experiential communication channels that allow visitors to directly experience and validate the destination's wellness attributes; and the development of institutional credibility through public relations,

local community networks, and organizational partnerships. The model demonstrates that for a village owned enterprise with limited promotional resources, communication effectiveness does not necessarily depend on board media exposure, but rather on the alignment between niche market characteristics, trust building communication channels, and the experiential nature of the tourism product.

Theoretically, these findings suggest that in wellness tourism characterized by credence attributes and perceived health risks, interpersonal trust, experiential validation, and peer recommendations can function as central mechanisms of brand awareness and brand equity development rather than merely as substitutes for mass-media promotion. The finding enhances the relevance of Aaker's brand awareness framework by focusing on the significance of matching communication channels with product characteristics and consumer perceptions of risk. Practically, BUMDes Sumber Makmur may support the current trust-based strategy with the gradual integration of structured digital marketing and electronic word of mouth (E-WOM) without replacing the interpersonal communication that supports its niche positioning. The study is nevertheless limited by its single-case design, relatively small number of informants, and inability to establish a direct causal relationship between specific communication activities and visitor growth. Future research may therefore examine the proposed model across different community-based wellness destinations and employ broader or mixed-method approaches to assess its applicability and explanatory power.

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