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An empirical study of marketing of SMEs in the tourism sector

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ABSTRACT

In the tourism industry, products and services of destination are synonyms with branding. Marketing works as a bridge that connects the path for a successful business approach, especially for rural tourism firms. However, the nature of community tourism firms' marketing and their various produces are understudied. The current study aimed to access and understand these gaps. A survey of 355 tourism firms owned and run by the local community was collected through a semi-structured questionnaire from Arunachal Pradesh, Northeast India. The study found that most community tourism firms lack a long-term branding approach and integrated marketing communication. The majority of community tourism firms conceive product/service features by themselves without any external interventions. The implication of this study will be useful in segmenting tourism products and services produced by community tourism firms from general tourism marketing; contribute to industry practitioners and government bodies involving in projects related to rural and community-based tourism.

KEYWORDS

Rural tourism; SMEs; marketing; India; management

Introduction

Many developing nations often aim for a strategic marketing approach for their tourism destination and identify an image to represent (Chen et al., 2013; Moertini, 2012). Furthermore, the images, themes, and words used during tourism promotion for any destination become 'identity' and 'brand' for a considerable time. The investigation of the developing nations' tourism market and marketing patterns lands the need to understand them distinctively (Echtner & Prasad, 2003). Another study done by (Zeng & Gerritsen, 2014) shows that social media in tourism marketing is still in the infancy stage.

Products and services without promotional tools are like birds without wings. Social media acts as a strategic medium for communication and marketing for both hosts and guests (Chang et al., 2018; Dey & Sarma, 2010; Mangold & Faulds, 2009; Wang et al., 2002). It is more challenging for community-produced tourism service providers, as most of them depend on third-party stakeholders for marketing and promotion. The third-party, like NGOs, government bodies, commercial tour operators, guides, integrate these small units of services in the larger pool of the market and make them readily

available for customers. And these social networks in tourism work as the connection between stakeholders (Viren et al., 2015).

Community participation is an essential step for inclusive regional development, especially in third-world countries, and it is an essential element of sustainable tourism (Moscardo et al., 2017; Sutawa, 2012). To achieve sustainable tourism, residents' attitudes toward tourism and local well-being should be an inevitable part of tourism planning (Amir et al., 2015; Kilipiris, 2005; Saufi et al., 2014). Lack of long-term planning in tourism firms is a critical factor that undermines the business (Choi & Murray, 2010). For booming community-based tourism, the marketing of products and services should be considered an essential part of the project (Dangi & Jamal, 2016). A similar study conducted by Hede and Stokes (2009) found that marketing practices are the key to achieving sustainable tourism goals. The government authorities encourage the local people to participate in tourism and allied services through various schemes and campaigns. However, local service providers often found not able to come in the frontline in the tourism market and ultimately receive fewer tourists, less income, and in few cases they lost their service identity.

Therefore, this study explores how community tourism services and products have come into place and how local tourism firms market them to reach customers. The study aims to establish a fundamental understanding of the market system and the creation of community-produced tourism products and services; the main aim has been broken down into the following sub-objectives. Therefore, the study aims to:-

1. Understand marketing mediums and the branding approach for community tourism firms.
2. Explore the frequency of marketing and promotion of community tourism firms.
3. Identify kinds and types of assistance in building community tourism products and services.
4. Find out the nature of community tourism products and services.

Literature review

The recent studies on the tourism marketing pattern observed that social media and text mining from customer-generated content is profitable (He et al., 2013; Sotiriadis, 2019). Such a scenario is very much competitive and often difficult to survive for community tourism firms. The social media presence is an essential element for tourism firms (Chang et al., 2018). Internet-based tourism marketing successfully uses the content drawn from the experience-based information, images, and words with technological intervention for marketing tourism products and services (Wöber, 2003; Wöber & Gretzel, 2000). The social media platform information acts as an inducer for customers to imagine and think about the tourist destination. The social media act as a mediating role in the firm (Tajvidi & Karami, 2017).

The investment and return from the marketing medium and promotional activities depend on its customers (Molina et al., 2010; Wöber, 2003). The marketing of the destination is one prime aim of getting customers for any firm. The way of presenting information on social media is crucial for successful communication and determines how well

it impacted profit. Digital communication acts as a catalyst and a driver for an experience creation platform (Inversini & Rega, 2020; Labanauskaitė et al., 2020).

Social media is a hybrid form of a promotional mix for business firms (Mangold & Faulds, 2009). It became the medium to build a relationship between seller and buyer and work as a strategic tool for customer engagement (Li et al., 2017; Sashi, 2012). For any business firm, social media is an essential part of marketing for an emerging unit for sustainable business (Kumar & Aggarwal, 2018; Kumar & Pandey, 2018) and keeping active networks with other stakeholders in the domain (El-Gohary, 2012; Gallo-way et al., 2011; Hede & Stokes, 2009; Pesonen, 2011).

The rural-based small and firms with traditional management systems find it difficult in decision-making, especially in the marketing of resources; e-base communication. Moreover, these challenges undermine firms' sustainable growth (Munar, 2012; Saxena & Ilbery, 2008; Spencer et al., 2012). The management of the tourism resources in rural areas, especially in developing nations, is running and managed by third parties, mostly in an unregulated manner, and links these services to customers. This system lends limitations and maximizes the bubble in service delivery. The commercialization of tourist destinations is the marketer considered value as profitable and capable of generating economic chains (Moscardo et al., 2017).

The inclusion of socio-cultural features is an integral element for tourism marketing (García-Rosell et al., 2007; Moscardo et al., 2017; Rahmawati et al., 2014). Whether it is human-made or natural resources, the destinations' resources are an undeniable part of the community. The value of resources contributes significantly to tourism growth when included and highlighted during marketing (d'Angella & Go, 2009). Social capital generated from the destinations' uniqueness and information is an asset for the tourism market (Rastogi et al., 2015; Viren et al., 2015). Tourism services can convert the region's culture into an asset and contribute significantly to economic development (Lansing & De Vries, 2007).

The current trends in tourism marketing are based on modern marketing and follow management principles, where understanding community tourism products and services is limited. The study conducted by Sørensen (2007) shows a strong relationship between product innovation in tourism firms and their marketing. The importance of knowing the characteristic of tourism firms helps in market segmentation (Polo-Peña et al., 2012). Similar studies (Alford & Page, 2015; Polo-Peña et al., 2012; Rahab, 2012) argue that marketing innovation requires more technological intervention for small and rural-based tourism firms. The study conducted by Polo Peña et al. (2013) confirms the effect of market orientation on firms' performance and tourists' behaviours. Furthermore, there is a strong relationship between financial results, improvement in services, and firms' market orientation (Kumar et al., 2020; Kumar & Ayedee, 2018, 2019).

There is tough competition among the conventional tourist destinations in the tourism market, mainly in the e-database with modulating glossy images (Anholt, 2010; Bramwell & Rawding, 1996). The service industry's growing dimensions need constant change and intervention in its framework (Lay et al., 2009). Brand-building secured an essential segment in tourism and its marketing strategy (Anholt, 2010; Dey & Sarma, 2010; Kamboj et al., 2018; Molina et al., 2010; Papadimitriou et al., 2018). It is more prevalent in small tourism firms to use technological intervention in marketing for growth and survival (Kumar & Ayedee, 2021).

Several past studies on small tourism firms are on conceptualization and usefulness of strategic marketing (Thomas et al., 2011), the business network of less formalized tourism firms and destination development (Tinsley & Lynch, 2007, 2008), globalization of small firms from rural destination using internet-based marketing (Young, 2010). However, the tourism market needs a specific understanding of local-level tourism firms to integrate them into the market (Dey, 2013).

The framework to integrate the local community's tourism products and services in tourism marketing is rarely considered in previous studies. Simultaneously, integration for local tourism firms is crucial for the sustainable development of destinations. The local community's role is an integrated sustainability approach in the tourism industry (Triantafyllidou & Tsiras, 2018). Therefore, knowing the nuances and features of products and services is essential for marketing them correctly. Previous studies urge us to know why community firms' marketing needs to be studied distinctively (García-Rosell et al., 2007). To enhance the better remuneration of the handicraft, handloom producers, and other similar produce, the local entrepreneur should intervene directly in the market (Cohen, 2001). Hence, it gives a better opportunity to the local community to exercise and represent democratically.

However, community tourism produced products and services are mostly informal, making them challenging to augment, regulate, and sustain in the market. These occur due to the unstructured production line and lack of information in the macro-level tourism market. These small and local tourism firms are not visible in the mainstream market, and it is difficult for the local community to channelize the business due to the unstructured market. These barriers are common in developing nations' rural and remote destinations where the marketing infrastructures are not yet established.

Methodology

Study site

The study is conducted in Arunachal Pradesh, India's easternmost part, with 83,743 Sq. Km and 25 districts with a population of 13.84 Lakhs as per, 2011 census (Census of India 2011a, 2011b). Tourism in Arunachal Pradesh is in the initial phase of development, and it is comparatively low in terms of tourist arrival rank compared to other Indian states and union territories. According to India Stats 2019 report, Arunachal Pradesh ranked 30th out of 36 State-wise (including union territories) in Number of Foreign Tourist Visits (FTVs) in India from data 2010 to 2018 and 32nd out of 36 State-wise (including union territories) in Domestic Tourist Visits in India from data 2011 to 2018. The last 1-decade tourism industry in the state observed slow and steady growth in the state. [Figure 1](#) shows ten years of tourist arrival data of the state of combined domestic and foreign tourists. The current stage of the tourism industry in the state of Arunachal Pradesh is in the exploration stage. Furthermore, the local people are also exploring and experiencing the various business possibilities related to tourism.

Data collection and sample

Data was collected from homestay, hotel, tour guide, tour operator, and transport service providers in Arunachal Pradesh. We collected 355 samples from the five districts of the

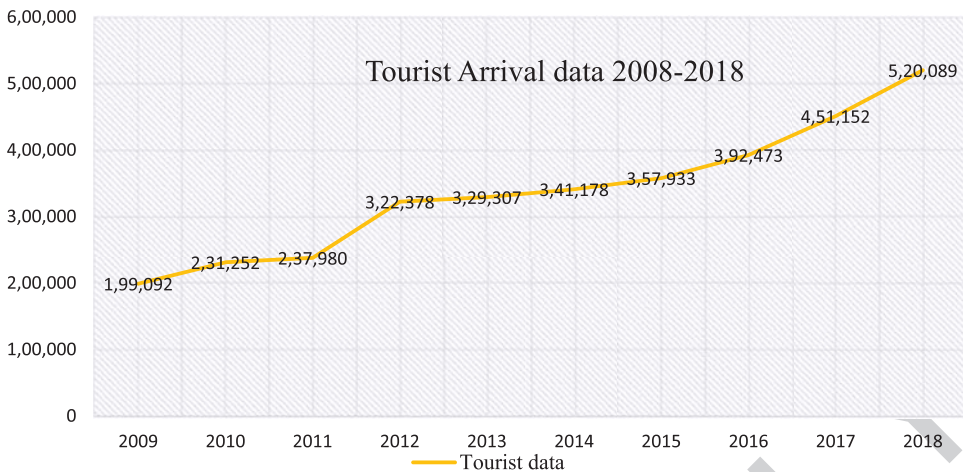


Figure 1. Ten years tourist arrival data of Arunachal Pradesh, Source: Department of Tourism, the Government of Arunachal Pradesh (India Stat 2019a, 2019b).

state, namely Lower Subansiri, Papum Pare, Tawang, West Kameng and West Siang. These five districts are deliberately selected based on the number of higher participation in tourism and allied services from the local community, registries in the Department of the Tourism Government of Arunachal Pradesh as of 31st May 2019 (Arunachal Tourism, 2020). During the study, 109 were listed under the portal, including homestay, hotel, and tour operators in these five select districts altogether. However, non-registered or under-process registration service providers, local tour guides, and transport services were also included in the study for comprehensive responses. These tourism firms are owned and run by the local community. The samples were collected from June to September, 2019.

We considered the owner of the unit as the respondent. Whenever the business owner could not contact or give information, the manager/caretaker was considered the respondent. We made sure that all the respondents were above the age of 18 and above. The data was collected from a survey questionnaire, and an interview was carried out further with those respondents who were willing to discuss more and share their experience to incorporate responses. The variables of the questionnaire were derived from existing literature, branding and marketing of products and services in tourism from (Anholt, 1998, 2010; Coulter et al., 2012); social media marketing (Mangold & Faulds, 2009); nature of tourism product (García-Rosell et al., 2007). Related topics and region-specific concerns were gathered from the pilot study.

Results

All four sub-objectives are separately analysed and discussed in sequence. Tables are numbered and mentioned, along with the results.

Table 1 presents the types of tourism services that participated in the study from descriptive statistics. This comprises five types of tourism firms, i.e. homestay, hotel, tour operator, tour guide, and transport service. Homestay and hotels make up 31%

Table 1. Tourism firms participated in the study.

Firms	Frequency	Percent
Homestay	110	31
Hotel	110	31
Tour operator	36	10.1
Tour guide	24	6.8
Transport service	75	21.1
Total	355	100

each; the transport service comprises 21.1%, 10.1% for tour operators, and 6.8% for the tour guide.

The Marketing mediums used by the community tourism firms

Table 2 shows the responses for local service providers (firms) on different marketing mediums being used by their respective firms to understand the nature of existing tourism marketing mediums in the region through five elements, i.e. social media, billboards and hoardings, television ads, and word-of-mouth (Kilipiris, 2005). The result shows only 60.8% of service providers use social media for promotional activities. While 53.5% of firms use word-of-mouth for marketing, this is the second most used medium, and this result is tuning with a previous study by Gilmore (2011), where the author suggests using word-of-mouth promotion with existing customers as an effective medium for small firms. Only 2.3% of the firms are using billboards and hoardings, and for television ads, it is only 3.4% of firms.

Frequency of promotion of community tourism firms in a year

Table 3 represents the frequency of promotion by local tourism firms. We asked the frequency of promotion on the following options 0–2 times, 3–6, and 7 times and more in a year. We found 89% of the firms do their promotion only less than 2 times a year; 5.4% of firms fall under 3–6 times and 5.6% in the above 7 times of promotion in a year. This result implies that community tourism firms practice less promotional activities, causing their services to be less visible in the tourism market.

Assistance in building/conceptualizing community tourism services

Table 4 shows the percentage of distributions for various assistance for community tourism firms. The result shows that 86.2% conceptualize their service themselves, 5.4% through private consultants, and 8.5% through government officials. 87.6% of business owners do the pricing of the services themselves, 6.2% each through private

Table 2. Marketing mediums used by the community tourism firms.

N-355	Yes	No
Social media	60.8	39.2
Word-of-mouth	53.5	46.5
Television ads	3.4	96.6
Billboards and hoardings	2.3	97.7

Table 3. Frequency of promotion of community tourism firms in a year.

N-355	Frequency	Percent
0–2 times	316	89
3–6 times	19	5.4
7 times and more	20	5.6
Total	355	100

Table 4. Assistance in building community tourism services.

N-355	Self-driven/No external assistance (%)	Private consultant (%)	Government officials (%)
a Who designs the service features?	86.2	5.4	8.5
b Who fixes the price of tourism services?	87.6	6.2	6.2
c Who promotes/markets services?	90.1	3.7	6.2

consultants and government officials. In the case of promotion of services, we found that 90.1% of firms do promotional activities of their services by themselves. Only 3.7% of the firms promote through consultants, and 6.2% take help from the government. The result shows that most service providers do their promotional activities by themselves. Therefore, building or conceptualizing of services is mostly done by the service providers themselves. We found that most community tourism service providers conceptualize, do pricing, and promote their services by themselves.

Marketing nature of community tourism firms

Table 5 presents the marketing nature community's tourism firms; 42% of firms have a brand management system. It was surprising to observe some firms providing services with no brand identification or no name. It is like a service with no name. Only 3.4% of firms have target sales in their firms. Only 9.6% of firms practice marketing strategy. However, 80.8% of tourism firms in the region collaborate/associate with other firms for selling services to their customers, and 90.4% of firms consider the tourists' interest while curating tourism services. The result shows that most community tourism services lack contemporary brand-building strategies and marketing approaches, mostly integrated marketing communications elements. This setback is one of the reasons for the slow growth of tourism in the region. These are essential components of new marketing tools and strategies representing the brand and work as an apparatus for tourism services to customers.

Table 5. Marketing nature of community tourism firms.

N-355	Yes (%)	No (%)
Does your firm has a brand management system/brand identification?	42	58
Do you have any sales targets to achieve?	3.4	96.6
Do you have any marketing strategy?	9.6	90.4
Do you have any association/collaboration with other firms to market the service(s)?	80.8	19.2
Do you consider tourists' interests while designing the service(s)?	90.4	9.6

Finding and discussion

The result shows that many local tourism service providers solely conceptualize and pricing their products and services. At the same time, few firms take guidance either from Govt. officials and consultants. Social media is the highest form of marketing, followed by word-of-mouth tools amongst four other mediums in this study. It is important to note here that word-of-mouth promotion is still a trusted and powerful medium in the region. However, the frequency of promotion for firms is found low. Hence, this reduces the firm's recognition as a unit in the bigger system of the market. It lags business to reach in the electronic database for the potential customers. The results show that the existing community tourism products and services are devoid of integrated marketing communication and branding approaches. Hence the results infer that local tourism resources and destinations get limited representation due to these setbacks.

Finding 1: The marketing approach of local tourism firms is higher in the use of social media. However, word-of-mouth promotion is a trusted medium among local tourism firms to build customer relations and get referred customers. It is important to note here that word-of-mouth promotion is still considered a vital channel for rural and remote regions in this technology age.

Excerpt from Interview:

1. 'The tourist themselves promoted us in on the internet when they receive good service they write about us. For example, Lonely Planet also came and promoted us in their magazine. And made our business enlarge a bit.' (A middle-aged women, Manager from Tawang)
2. 'Only reference and word-of-mouth works as a marketing tool for me, as I am mostly busy in household work, and I am not an internet person. I get many new customers from *Happy and Satisfied* customers.' (A homestay service owner from Ziro Valley)
3. 'The telecommunication facilities are not very good in my village and remain days and sometimes for months without the internet and telecommunication. In such a case, my hope for customers come from previous customers. I feel really happy and motivated.' (A homestay owner from Sangti Valley)

Indeed, local tourism firms believe more in word-of-mouth marketing, but they cannot rely only on word-of-mouth marketing. The trends are changing, so those local tourism firms also need to integrate both WOM (word-of-mouth) and e-WOM in marketing as its one of the trusted mediums (Mehraliyev et al., 2019; Nusair, 2020). By integrating the technology in word-of-mouth marketing, the gap or lag in marketing activities can be covered.

Finding 2: The promotional activities of local tourism firms in the region is relatively low. This could be why many service providers believe firmly in the value of word-of-mouth promotion though most service providers use social media for promotion, which we can understand from the interview excerpts. The general use of media and its ability to induce the customer is visibly low. The reasons could be due to various limitations and barriers, like lack of telecommunication in remote villages, less education, and other related issues. As the trends of sharing destination experiences on social media create business opportunities and influence the customers for travel decisions (Dedeoğlu

et al., 2019; Gupta, 2019; Wong et al., 2020); build a constructive image of a tourist destination (Asongu & Odhiambo, 2019). The local community tourism firms should also treat social media as the strategic tool for business visibility and maximize profit.

Finding 3: The result shows that the majority of tourism firms conceptualize their products and services themselves. Few take guidance from Govt. officials and private consultants. We found that some service providers have been a tourist before starting their business outside the state from the interview. From their experience as guests in other destinations, they learned the idea and conceptualized their services. In the same manner, the price of the services. Furthermore, service providers' marketing and promotion are mostly conducted through various traditional mediums, as we discussed earlier.

Finding 4: The majority of local tourism services in the region lack target sale, long term branding vision, and integrated marketing communication, which are essential components of contemporary marketing strategy. Due to these features' absence, local tourism firms' products/services are unstructured and highly vulnerable. However, most community tourism service providers keep association and collaboration with other tourism firms in the locality for business leads, which help them better visibility. The consideration of tourists' interest while procuring products/services is high; these findings infer that the region's tourism firms and allied services providers attempt to cope with the trends though they lagged in other marketing segments.

The community produced tourism services need regulation for a better entry system and long-term existence in the market as a brand. As social media also create brand awareness (Coulter et al., 2012). Understanding their services and nature will help authorities and firms take up the necessary steps and measures in the marketing approach. Integrated marketing is an essential aspect of the business, and the organizations need to introduce various tools of integrated marketing that can help the community tourism services.

The recent studies also found the significant role of social media in the tourism business. The social media act as a buying inducer and destination determinant for tourists (Hu & Olivieri, 2020; Koutras et al., 2019). In the growing online presence of business and competition, the more powerful medium of influencer buying decisions for the customer (tourists) is to own social media for business growth. Brand recognition is an essential element for systematic monitoring and reaching the customer, and this can be achieved by having a presence in social media as an interactive medium for business owners and customers.

Practical implications and suggestion

The community produced tourism services need regulation for a better entry system and long-term existence in the market as a brand. Understanding community tourism services and nature will help tourism authorities, policymakers, academicians, and firms to take up the necessary steps and measures in the marketing approach. This study contributes to understanding the aspects mentioned earlier in the findings and considers nature community-produced tourism services while planning to integrate local firms in the bigger tourism market. Tourism's governing bodies can focus on channelizing community firms' products and services to ease the business's operation for the

community in tourism. It also highlights the importance of understanding community tourism services by marketing agencies to benefit local tourism firms and tourists.

The current study provides crucial information about the existing community tourism firms of Arunachal Pradesh. The region needs attention from the tourism governing bodies; despite having an abundance of tourism resources, the state did not rip its tourism resources to full potential. The state has a diverse culture with 26 major tribes along with other 100 sub-tribes. Furthermore, the state is one of the biodiversity hotspots in the Himalayan region. According to the India 2011 census report, the poverty index of the state reports 34.67%, which is much higher than the national average of 21.92. Here, the tourism industry can ease the local economy with proper guidance and channelization of resources.

Very often, local firms have no idea how to take their business to the next level. This study is helpful for all the local businesses which are looking after community tourism. If community participation increases, then the tourism services are also bound to increase. Furthermore, in many third-world and Asian countries, its governing bodies consider tourism an economic driver and identified community participation in tourism as an inalienable part of the development and sustainable tourism growth.

This study suggests segmenting the community tourism firms and their associated produce from other kinds of marketing. The community in tourist destinations and their nature of tourism services are different in terms of approach due to intertwined socio-cultural aspects. Tourism resources are dependent on the environment of the destination (Drosos & Skordoulis, 2018). Considering these measures will help policymakers and academicians consider and provoke to understand more from a marketing perspective, especially in the rising rural tourism market.

Due to unstructured and informal business units, the tourism market is often vulnerable to many problems, questions, and issues, especially in rural community tourism firms. Hence, it is crucial to understand links and local roles for tourism development (Misso et al., 2018). In rural places, people also lack the necessary technical skills to utilize social media tools for marketing activities effectively. Therefore, firms should seek help from government officials and concerned authorities to channelize their businesses for smoother and more profitable. Academicians and industry practitioners should explore social media marketing in depth so that tourism services can achieve their real potential.

Conclusion and future research

The study's finding instils us to explore more about community tourism production and its marketing pattern distinctively rather than concluding aspect and consider them different from other tourism marketing patterns. Community tourism and rural-based tourism highly depend on its socio-cultural and environmental factors of the destination.

The community tourism firms create their produces plans and execute their business ideas without much external assistance. There is no strong presence of long term brand building affinity and strategy in the services. Furthermore, the frequency of the promotion of the services is less. All these drawbacks contributed to low performance in tourism's overall growth, and other region's specific limitations are mentioned and recommended for further research options. Therefore, there should be a designated and

exclusive cell for guidance and feedback for community service providers by governmental bodies or private firms where such a database is efficiently available for the tourist and host. The government stakeholder should channelize this segment of firms' products and services to ease the operation and focus on necessary improvement for community participants in tourism.

In this study, we tried to tap the nature of community-owned and produced tourism services from the local tourism firms and allied businesses. Thus comes limitations to the study. First, the destination is in the initial phase of tourism development and the rural location where marketing infrastructure is not yet fully establish and available. Second, the result is from tourism firms owned and run by the community. Therefore, corporate travel firms were not included in the study.

Region-specific suggestions for further study. First, the interdependence of the marketing, branding approach, and sustainability of community tourism firms in the market. Second, accessibility issues and their impact on tourism growth in the region. Another area for further study can represent the socio-cultural image in marketing and its effects on creating brand value specific to the community and rural tourism segment. Future researchers can also explore the usage of e-WOM for the marketing of tourism services in the local and rural regions. Prior research has been done on WOM marketing, but e-WOM is a new trend, and it goes in synchronization with digital marketing or social media marketing.

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