

Digital Marketing in Unsustainable Wildlife Tourism (A Study on the Practice of Marketing Communication of Sea Turtles Observation Tourism)

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Abstract. Visiting turtle's breeding sites is often regarded as good natural tourism to show concern about endangered species. Not all of the sites in Indonesia is run by authorized institutions such as the Natural Resources Conservation Agency or the Fisheries Office. Many local communities also try to take profit by opening the breeding sites independently. Consequently, the managers need to cover the costs of offering turtle observation tourism. They are mostly doing the marketing through various digital media as the most economical method. However, as shown in the advertisement, the offered tour does not support the sustainable ecological tourism. The services are not compatible with the turtle's requirement to swim. The sites are also overpopulated, which causing cannibalism. The managers also allow visitors to touch or take the turtle from the water and consume the eggs. Besides, they also offer accessories from turtle's space, as well as trading preserved sea turtles. This study looks at the contradiction between tourism and conservation through the content of the applied digital marketing. By using a critical discourse analysis method, this study concludes that there are absolute necessity to increase the awareness of the tourists and the turtle breeders about sustainable tourism.

1. Introduction

Nature has a vast potential for biological tourism, besides its role as the crucial support for sustaining the ecosystem. One of the most valuable tourism activity is the rare wildlife observation tourism. However, based on the concern about visitors' safeness, the animals that are provided as the observation objects are not genuinely wild. They usually have been domesticated or sheltered. This kind of tourism can be found at animal circuses, zoos, safari parks, and other animal attractions. That includes sea turtles breeding sites, which provided sea turtles natural behavior as an attraction.

In Indonesia, a maritime country that is known as a vibrant place with huge biodiversity in the sea, possesses many sea turtles breeding sites that spread in many islands. According to World Wildlife Fund (WWF), quoted by The Jakarta Post [1], Indonesia is home for six out of seven world's sea turtle species. As an archipelago, the long coastal of Indonesia provides an important nesting place for turtles and their foraging grounds, as well as the important migration routes, since Indonesia lays at the crossroads of the Pacific and Indian ocean.

Furthermore, The Jakarta Post cited the list created by The International Union for Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources (IUCN), an organization that research about animal conservation status, to show the six endangered species of sea turtles as follows:



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- *Dermochelys coriacea* (leatherback turtle) – vulnerable, population decreasing
- *Chelonia mydas* (green turtle) – endangered, population decreasing
- *Caretta caretta* (loggerhead turtle) – endangered, now vulnerable since 2017
- *Natator depressus* (flatback turtle) – threatened species, data deficient
- *Eretmochelys imbricata* (hawksbill sea turtle) – critically endangered, population decreasing. This species is the nearest to being extinct.
- *Lepidochelys olivacea* (olive ridley sea turtle) – vulnerable, population decreasing.

This statistical data has been the reason for the effort to save sea turtles' population. On the same track, the basic objective of this turtle tourism activity is to educate visitors about sea turtles conservation. The visitors will be taken to observe hatchlings and offered to take pictures and release sea hatchlings to the sea. The hatchlings release becomes a symbol of sea turtles' freedom and conservation.

However, as it was found at some breeding sites, the visitors were also allowed to touch, lift or even carry the turtles out of the water and take their picture. The frequency of this turtle tourism attracts many visitors that have less knowledge about conservation. Even though the business owners, this tourism industry has provided a very promising revenue that makes this business lasts. We could find the eggs and some accessories made of turtle body parts being sold as souvenirs. At some shops, we also could find people selling preserved turtle's shells or carapaces with a very high price.

This business potential makes the private tourism providers incessantly promote their turtle tourism services. For example, in Bali, the turtle attraction has become a part of its marine tourism. The turtle visitation itself will not be longer than an hour for the visitors who spend their time sightseeing and take pictures, and use the rest of the day for other sports activities.

Regardless of the spending time of the visitors to have a connection with turtles, the promotions, and marketing activities to sell turtles have become a controversy. The business potential often distracts the tourism service owners from the turtles' real status as one of protected wildlife. As a result, the marketing communication that was usually done through online channel often promoting some issues that actually against the wildlife conservation regulation. According to Government Regulation no. 7/1999, all sea turtles in Indonesia are protected by the law. It means, it is forbidden for anyone to trade sea turtles and their body parts, including the eggs. Keeping the turtles is only possible to be done by authorized conservation institutions as part of conservation effort. All the tourism potentials have to be directed to educate the activities about preserving sea turtles natural life, and experts must accompany it. Therefore, what have been offered by the private tourism services to sell turtle souvenirs, as well as take pictures while carrying or lifting the turtles, is not a proper thing from the perspective of conservation.

The controversial and contradictory actions are the backgrounds of this study. We indicated the improper marketing activities, especially digital marketing through online channels, that against the spirit of conservation. As the underlying issue for the discussion, this article provides some examples of the marketing activities in some places in Indonesia. By using critical discourse method through conservation and literature studies, this article critically analyzes various turtle tourism marketing from the perspective of environmental communication, especially the theories in ecotourism marketing.

2. Methodology

This research uses critical discourse analysis of digital marketing content used by turtle breeders to attract tourists. The critical discourse analysis approach is not a neutral approach. According to Jorgensen and Phillips, critical research takes sides with oppressed groups [2].

Fairclough [3] states that discourses in a text relate to other social dimensions. The Fairclough Approach is a text-oriented form of discourse that brings together three areas: a. a detailed textual analysis in the linguistic field; b. A sociological macro analysis of social practice; c. an interpretative and micro-sociological tradition in sociology.

The ideology arising from the analysis of the practice of discourse is a modified ideology. In this case, the debate over which ideology is right or wrong is based on the understanding of researchers by using various references. Nor does this methodology calculate the impact of discourse, but emphasizes the concern for the social dimensions that are perceived as being intentionally or unintentionally suppressed [4].

In this research, digital marketing content will be evaluated textually from a linguistic standpoint and analyzed in social practice and sociologically interpreted. The analysis used here refers intertextually to the ecological dimensions and philosophy of wildlife conservation.

The wealth of knowledge from researchers becomes a significant force in the conduct of dialectics. Understanding the intertextuality that arises from other discourses becomes the reference material in the interpretation and implementation of it sociologically. Criticism about the digital marketing content of turtle breeding is interpreted based on the researchers' direct observation of some turtle breeding in Indonesia, as well as the activities of researchers in wildlife conservation.

3. Fact findings and analysis

3.1. Sea turtle breeding site: a commodification for tourism

Before we go further to discuss the existence of sea turtles breeding tourism, what has to be clarified that the term "breeding" in the context of the sea turtles breeding site is not accurate. According to the dictionaries, a breeding site is defined as a place for multiplying the number of individual animals. Usually, the effort of breeding is made by mating some couples of animals. However, in the context of breeding the sea turtles, breeders are helping to hatch the eggs in a safe place and feed the hatchlings until a certain age before they release those hatchlings to the sea. Breeders do not conduct the mating effort.

The main reason why breeders do not do the mating effort is the fact that the reproduction process of one sea turtles is prolonged. For instance, the reproduction range of female green sea turtles (*Chelonia mydas*) is once every three years. Meanwhile, they are only productive for 19 years. In one season, a green sea turtle usually delivers 400 eggs. However, the successful natural hatching presentation is only about 90-85%. Moreover, the possibility ratio of the hatchling to reach the sea is only 1:1000. These conditions are caused by the presence of hatchlings' natural predators that catch them on the way to the sea. More than that, some irresponsible humans worsened the situation by stealing the eggs or taking hatchlings to become their pets [5]. These are the reasons why breeders have to interfere with natural turtle eggs, considering the population of turtles in the world is decreasing.

The breeding activity that involves this rare and unique animal has attracted people to look at it. This interest created a business desire, which in turn generated a commodification of the turtles' conservation area into a tourism site.

Breeding sites, which are supposed to be run by authorized institutions, are now becoming popular as a local business, run by private sectors. The problem is that most of the breeding sites have inadequate support. It is a mischievous business because it is usually limited by minimum financial support to increase the profit. PROFAUNA, an organization that concerns to protect forest and fauna in Indonesia, notes that the turtle breeding sites mostly have these following problems [6]:

1. The pools are too shallow. This condition is a problematic issue since sea turtle babies need to deep pools to develop their lungs and their ability to swim.
2. Some donors indeed help the breeders by providing deep water. However, due to the high cost of maintenance expenses, such as electricity and water pump, breeders did not fill the pools in full. Some are only filled by a quarter or even a tenth of the pool's depth.
3. Breeders usually miss the proper treatment for the sea turtles that need medical assistance. Consequently, many of the turtles died because of common diseases caused by fungus, bacteria, and protozoa, as it usually happens to animals in the dirty water.

4. Some breeders often allow the visitors to touch the hatchlings, which is not recommended to be done since the direct contact will cause a stressful state.
5. As an effort to reduce the expenses, most of the hatchlings are fed with minced dead fish. This policy could eliminate the turtles' instinct to find for their meals in natural environment actively.
6. In its natural behavior, the sea turtle is a solitary animal. If a group of hatchlings is forced to live together in one pool with a high density and interaction, it will raise a stressful condition and can be a trigger for cannibalism.

The problems above will lead to many negative impacts like, for example, the failure of the turtle to recognize its natural diet. It happens because it has become used to be fed by the human. The turtle's misbehavior usually occurs after the headstarting step. Headstarting is a technical method for raising sea turtles until a certain age before they are released into the ocean. This method is an effort to guarantee the turtles' chance to survive. However, there were cases where the headstarted hatchlings returned to the shore in severe condition after a few days. Most probably, the hatchlings have failed to adapt to their natural environment.

Another consequence of being too dependent on human, the turtle usually swim around in a circle and afraid to go too far from the shore. They would wait for fishermen's boats and ask to be fed. Unfortunately, some irresponsible fishermen would catch them just for dead fishes.

Because of their unnatural behavior, as a consequence, sea turtles from the breeding sites like that would fail to play their role in the ecosystem. It means the sustainability of the world would also be threatened, including human's life as well.

This situation increasingly becomes out of control because the Natural Resources Conservation Agency and the Fisheries Office as the institutions that officially have authority to supervise the community turtle breeding activities do not perform their functions properly. For example, they seldom send veterinarians to come to check the sea turtle breeding regularly. On the other hand, the mortality of the hatchlings is rarely reported to the authority by the breeders.

Furthermore, most of the local tourism providers do not understand the sea turtle conservation principle. More often, they only view the turtle breeding as a tourism commodity of the area. They concern more about the economic benefits rather than the environmental impacts.

To satisfy the visitors' demand, some breeders even buy turtle eggs from hunters along the island. This attitude of course violates Indonesian law. However, the law enforcement against them is deficient. The results of interviews with turtle breeders in Lombok showed that they regularly buy turtle eggs from egg hunters in Bali and small islands around Lombok with the price range around Rp 2,000 to Rp 3,500 per item.

Besides the severe impacts to the environment and sea turtles natural behavior, this commodification has brought financial benefit to local people. Several attraction products are launched through particular marketing communications to attract visitors. The observation found that digital advertisement through online channels dominates the marketing. This phenomenon is understandable since at the moment, most of the people, especially the youth, have shifted from conventional media to online and social media [7].

There is some turtle tourism product marketing that can be found online:

1. Observing turtles lay their eggs.

In several places, including Indonesia, Mexico, and India, watching turtles lay their eggs has become a tourism commodity. Generally, turtles lay their eggs in the middle of the night until dawn. The sensation to wake up in the night time, accompanied by the sounds of the wave, has naturally attracted visitors. In some digital advertisement, some private tourism companies publish the pictures of turtles laying the eggs as their eye catcher to attract people's attention.



Figure 1. A picture of a turtle laying its eggs that were used for online promotion. This photo was taken at Sukamade Beach, Banyuwangi, Indonesia [8].

Not only from the travel bureau's website, but the promotion also comes from social media personal account. It becomes viral when the content owner shares the image with the public. It creates high enthusiasm from the public, even more than the tourism's advertisement. For example, a set of pictures published by @rizkiah in *Instagram* shows a group of people taking pictures around a turtle while it was laying its eggs. Sometimes the situation is very stressful for the turtle, which makes it difficult to deliver the eggs. On the other hand, social media contents somehow are more influential in changing people's behavior. Moreover, this image gives an impression to the public that it is fine to be around turtles at the same moment like that, which is totally incorrect.

b. Visiting turtles' breeding sites

As mentioned in the introduction, the visiting program to the breeding site is usually not the prime attraction of turtle tourism. Visitors only spend their time for about one hour among their other activities. The short time obviously would not enough to achieve the educational objective of the program.

The analysis above is following the result of a study by Meletis and Harrison [9]. They conducted similar observation on sea turtles breeding tourism in Tortuguero, Costa Rica. In their article, they explained that most of the tourists who visited the turtle breeding sites focus on seeing only and not learning about the turtles and their conservation.

At the breeding site, visitors will be able to observe turtle hatchlings and yearlings. Some sites even allow the visitors to touch the turtles and have photos with them. Even though some other sites strictly forbid the direct contact with the turtles, it has to be admitted that pictures of visitors together with the turtles are the best advertisement to attract people's attention. Consequently, these pictures promote the improper behavior towards wildlife in the perspective of conservation.

The direct contact between visitors and the turtles is dangerous. It could raise the possibility of spreading illness. This illness transfer is called *Zoonosis*, which affect the visitors or the animals too.



Figure 2. Some tourists took a picture while lifting a sea turtle out of the water, in Banda Aceh, Menjangan Island, Karimun Jawa Island [10].

Again, this misconduct has been promoted more through social media, when some visitors publish their photos with the turtles. As it is shown by *gnavivahok* in *Instagram*, visitors of a breeding site entered the pool and got happily involved with the turtles, made direct contact, and even lifted them out of the water. The way they pose shows how fun and enjoyable it is to play with turtles. The promotion is obviously against conservation principles, because these misconducts would make the turtles distressed.

c. Releasing hatchlings

Releasing hatchlings is one of the natural tourist attractions that tries to emphasize the conservation side. The objective is to make the tourists feel involved in the attempt of preserving the sea turtles. Unlike the other attractions, releasing hatchlings has not much publication on the web. Instead, the breeder collaborates with some particular tourists, media or event organizers to make the releasing activity as part of their package.



Figure 3. A picture of releasing hatchlings as a part of Pantai Lapuuk tourism promotion, in Banda Aceh [11]

For this particular attraction, the study did not indicate a major violation of turtle conservation. People usually pour the hatchlings onto the sand from a bucket without touching them too much.

The prime attraction is to watch the struggle of the hatchlings to find the water. Naturally, the visitors will try to guard the surrounding, to prevent any interference from predators or irresponsible humans that might disturb those hatchlings on their way to the ocean.

d. Trading accessories made of sea turtles

One of the most exciting things for tourists, as well as the most valuable financial resource, is the exotic souvenir and memorabilia sales. In this case, the accessories made of sea turtles' body parts are the most wanted in the business of turtle tourism. Consequently, because of the high demand, the business owners are no longer searching resources from dead turtles. Instead, they intentionally hunt and kill turtle to take the animal's body parts. This action is definitely against the principle of conservation.



Figure 4. Bracelets made of turtle's carapace promoted on online shops [12].

The promotion not only appears on the online shop but also on social media channels. The people so-called artists try to encourage the public to appreciate the art by showing how the accessories were made. They indeed require skills and sense of art, which might impress people. Consequently, people are attracted to own them, without thinking about the life of the turtles.



Figure 5. One of the turtle souvenir artists who sell the accessories through social media.

e. Having sea turtles culinary tourism

Besides promoting the breeding site for tourism, the industry also offers sea turtles' meat as a meal that has certain benefit for human's health. In some part of Indonesia, eating sea turtles' meat has even become a tradition. Because of the high interest to eat the meat, this culinary business offers a promising revenue for local people who do not understand about the situation of turtle's population. Again, this kind of business is really against the effort of sea turtles conservation.



Figure 6. A promotion of sea turtle satay at Gunung Trisakti, Kuta, Bali [13].

The online advertisement is massive, which makes people forget about the real condition of sea turtle's population. The situation is worsened by social media, where many people spread the news about how eatable the turtles are. One of them is @mkey_wibisono, who published a very stimulating photo of satay at Trisakti, Kuta, Bali.

Not only for documentation, but this publication is an example of how social media could be influential to promote a product. Based in the comments after the picture, it is seen the followers of the account express their interest in buying the same thing. The account holder also promotes how delicious the turtle's meat is and worth the price. The communication on social media like this will be more interesting and practical to attract people.

3.2. The moral responsibility of the ecotourism

The commodification of the sea turtle breeding site as mentioned above is often related to the ecotourism. However, this industry could be contradictory with the actual understanding about the ecotourism. The International Ecotourism Society (TIES) mentions explicitly that the ecotourism is a tourism journey with moral responsibility regarding conserving or saving the environment as well as giving opportunities to local people to make a living [14]. The World Conservation Union (WCU) supports the effort by emphasizing the significance of ecotourism in backing the effort of environmental conservation without any negative impact [15].

From the above definition, it is clear that the ecotourism is a part of maintaining environmental sustainability. It could be understood too that the ecotourism is a manifestation of what so-called sustainable tourism that is related to the environment, social, and economy aspects [16]. The Quebec Declaration (2002) as the result of TIES Convention in Quebec, Canada clearly states that the ecotourism is a particular type of tourism that actively contributes in environmental and cultural conservation efforts, involves local people to help to develop their prosperity, and is done by small independent groups [17]. These small groups need to have certain moral responsibilities to support the above objectives, which were formulated by TIES as follows:

- a. Reducing negative impacts such as the destruction or pollution of the environment and local culture caused by the tourism activities.
- b. Building the awareness and appreciation towards the environment and local culture.
- c. Offering positive experiences for tourists as well as local people through intense cultural contact and collaborative effort to maintain the tourism object.
- d. Contributing a direct financial benefit for conservation purposes that is taken from the visitors.
- e. Producing financial benefit as well as empowerment for the local people by creating tourism products that emphasize local values.
- f. Developing the awareness about the social, environmental, and political situation at the tourism destination.
- g. Respecting human rights and labor agreements, which means to give both visitors and local people freedom to enjoy tourism attractions but still within specific regulations.

According to the explanation above, we can analyze how the tourism industry in sea turtles' breeding sites can be compatible with the principles of ecotourism. Looking at the part of moral responsibilities, arguably, many turtle tourism businesses have not really fulfilled the responsible principles. This situation is caused by the business owners' behavior which is not in line with the conservation objectives. Instead of preserving the tourism objects, many of the services destroy them. The destruction includes the physical disturbance of the turtles, the commotion of turtles' body parts including their eggs, and also the disruption of their natural habitat. The trade of turtles' accessories, the consumption of their meat and eggs, and the action of taking pictures while physically disturbing their natural lives are entirely against the principles of responsible ecotourism. However, these negative things are the most valuable information in the tourism advertisements to attract visitors, which we could find on their promotion through digital marketing on the web.

3.3. The Digital Media as Ecotourism Stakeholder

Practically, ecotourism encounters two or more different cultures. It means the responsibility is not only held by the business owners, visitors and managers could take benefits by taking valuable experiences from local people. On the other hand, the local people receive financial revenue by accompanying and educating the visitors. The ecotourism service also needs to be professionally managed to increase the revenue usually by involving private companies. Within the service, there are roles of government as well as non-governmental organizations to maintain the favorable situation for the private tourism (Nugroho, 2015). The following diagram shows the relationships and flows among the stakeholders.

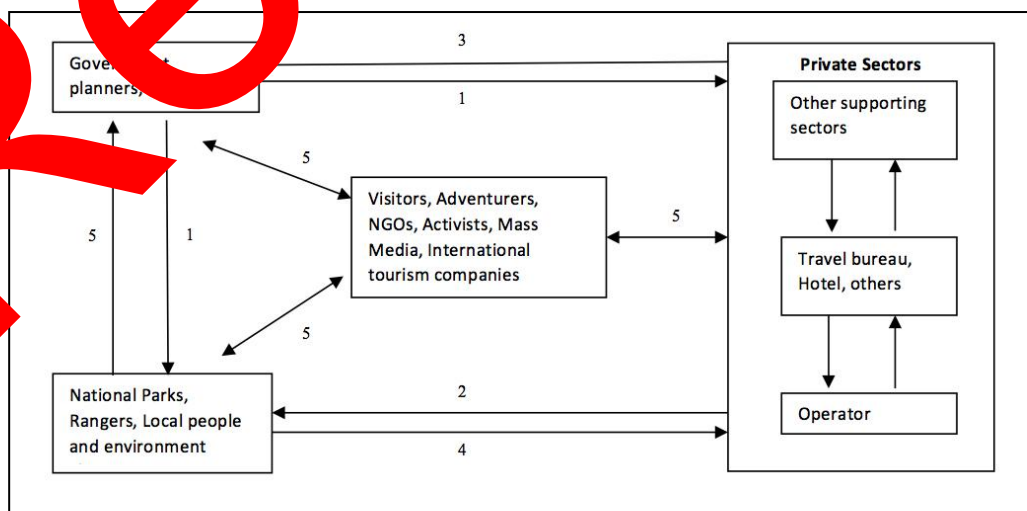


Figure 7. Relationships among stakeholders in ecotourism (1 = policy; 2 = visitors and economy benefit; 3 = taxes or policy inputs; 4 = participation; 5 = policies) (Source: Eagles et al., 2002 [18])

From the diagram, we could find the related stakeholders in ecotourism consists of governmental elements (including planners, researchers, national park supervisors), private tourism companies, visitors or tourists, local people, NGOs, and also media organizations (especially digital or online media). The failure to build the synergy among them will create severe misunderstanding, which not only causes the financial problem but also, even worse, destroying the ecosystem.

This study found there are many problems among the involved stakeholders in the business of sea turtle tourism. The necessary thing is the common misunderstanding about the principle of ecotourism and conservation. The observation of this study shows, one of the main problems is caused by the improper digital marketing that was done by the business managers to attract many visitors as they can.

Digital marketing is very influential in the business today. Arguably, the rise of social media, blogging or podcasting applications that so-called *user-generated content* (UGC), has caused the situation. Nasrullah observes that social media is a perfect place for publishing UGC. Quoting Jenkins, Nasrullah points out that some the media industries have involved the audiences as the marketing extension. The digital environment has broadened audiences' ability to create, explain, readjust, as well as recirculate media contents [19]. In other words, UGC has provided opportunities for the public to not just produce their own content, but also to consume the content that was produced by someone else.

Consequently, social media users become potential to support business marketing. Companies would be able to use them as their "free agent." For example, it is common today to find ordinary people's postings on *Instagram* that show photos of some tourism sites or restaurants. These contents are actually endorsing the commercial place by giving "word of mouth" information to the public. Because of that, recent survey research concludes that UGC has become more efficient than conventional promotion. One of the findings shows that UGC has gained people's trust seven times more than conventional advertisements, while 45% people purchase the advertised products look at user-generated images for information at least once a day [20]. It means information from the public could become more influential than the one from mainstream media.

Unfortunately, this situation also creates problems regarding publishing the right information. People tend to believe what social media or online advertisement tell readily. Especially for environmental communication issues, wrong information will easily mislead the public. The level of public's trust in digital media is one of the reasons for the misunderstanding.

In the case of sea turtle tourism, the most problem the digital marketing strategy has created in the business is the incorrect content of their message. Because of the advancement of online technology, the message is spreading very quickly with desirable content including photos or videos. As a result, these digital marketing efforts have attracted massive visitors who did not understand the principle of conservation to disturb sea turtles natural habitat, and even put the population of sea turtles in a critical situation.

The problem actually happens not only in Indonesia but also in almost every turtle breeding site in the world. The rareness of turtle's population, as well as the uniqueness of its behavior as a survived prehistoric animal, indeed become the highest element to attract people interest. The interest has made people to observe, touch, and even involve their selves with the natural life of the turtle. Therefore, marketing communication becomes very crucial to maintain a good synergy among stakeholders. Improper marketing will cause a very negative impact towards the effort of sea turtle conservation.

Making good synergy and relationship is the matter of the proper communication strategy. Unfortunately, this marketing effort did not apply what so-called conservation communications, one of the methods in environmental communication studies that aimed at supporting the conservation of natural resources and their ecosystems. In conservation communication, all elements or stakeholders

that involved in the conservation effort must have the same understanding in protecting the conservation. Communicators, communicants, messages, communication effects, and communication channels should be used as widely as possible for the sake of nature conservation.

Wildlife conservation should be of great concern to the Indonesian people, as Indonesia is the third world's most biodiverse country according to Mongabay, an international online media that deals with nature conservation [21]. Unfortunately, this outstanding biodiversity does not make the Indonesian people wise to manage it for the earth's sustainability. Many people think that this richness of natural resources will never be exhausted. Contradictory, they take advantage of this wealth regardless of its sustainability. This condition is the reason why conservation communications must play an important role in bridging the communication gap that occurs in many natural conservation failures.

4. Conclusions

The critical discourse analysis of the practice of digital marketing in the sea turtle tourism found several crucial problems regarding conservation and environmental communication. The first one is the fact that the marketing activity has a misunderstanding about tourism concept. Instead of supporting environmental sustainability and local people prosperity, the message spread by the marketing communication is promoting harmful activity that can destroy sea turtle life.

The second one is the imperfect synergy among stakeholders in the business of sea turtle tourism. The private sector as the service provider and the tourists as the users are not fully aware of the principle of conservation and sustainable tourism. The government also has less power to encourage this industry to be environmentally friendly.

The third, the mass media, especially digital and online media, still has less concern to support the conservation effort. As a result, the media could not select which information provided by the business marketing is correct and which one is against the conservation regulations. This situation has a tremendous potential to distribute incorrect knowledge to the public about conservation and sustainable tourism.

Based on the result, this study recommends all stakeholders to increase their synergy by enhancing the understanding of conservation and sustainable tourism. Moreover, there should be better marketing communication activity that compatible with the spirit of conservation. Therefore, there will not be wrong information distributed to the public.

Sea turtle preservation is one of the attempt to maintain the sustainability of the ecosystem, which in turn will guarantee the quality of human life. Hence, we need to develop the responsible way to explore this magnificent creature by conducting the right sustainable tourism.

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