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## The Role of Digital Media in Ecotourism - A Study Among tourists of Kanyakumari District

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### ABSTRACT

Tourism industry has frequently been synonymous with degradation of the environment. Thus the major focus of tourism industry in the recent decade is about sustainability of tourism and how the right path can be created. The present study is an attempt to find out which type of media creates sustainable tourism awareness among tourists in Kanyakumari district, Tamil Nadu, India. The study combines a general review of media's role on ecotourism and aims to find which media is catering to tourists. The pleasing weather of Kanyakumari district throughout the year provides best sites for the tourism industry. A questionnaire was administered to collect data from 100 tourists in Kanyakumari district during the time period January 2018 to February 2018. Respondents to the questionnaire were selected through stratified random sampling technique. The main finding of the study is that the ecotourism information through digital media is more persuasive, though newspapers are more credible.

**KEYWORDS:** Sustainable tourism, ecotourism, mass media, digital media, Western Ghats, livelihood.

### INTRODUCTION

Kanyakumari, located at the southern extremity of Indian peninsula where the Arabian Sea, the Indian Ocean and the Bay of Bengal meet, is referred as 'Thrivani Sangamam' (confluence point of three seas). So the district occupies a unique place in the world tourism map for this location. Kanyakumari has always been considered as the prime cultural hub of India. The beach with multi-colour sand has a uniqueness, where one can enjoy the sun sets and the moonrise simultaneously in full moon days. The district has a good potentiality in attracting national and foreign tourists. According to India Brand Equity Foundation (IBEF – Ministry of Commerce and Industry, Government of India), Tamil Nadu attracted 20.1% of total foreign tourists visiting India in 2015 and in Tamil Nadu, Kanyakumari has a great role in attracting the foreign tourists. The Western Ghats keep the district with rich natural resources of flora and fauna. The district is also known as 'district of ponds'. The district is blessed with a moderate climate and seasonal rains twice a year. This supports a wide variety of banana agriculture than most other places. The district is made up of different topography where the western seashore supports coconut groves, the Western Ghats that have flourishing rubber (latex) plantation, pepper, cashew, the plain region has vegetables, tapioca and horticultural crops like mango, pineapple and jackfruits. This natural scenario of greenery attracts the tourists worldwide. But in the present scenario of climate change, Kanyakumari district is losing some of its charm. Climate

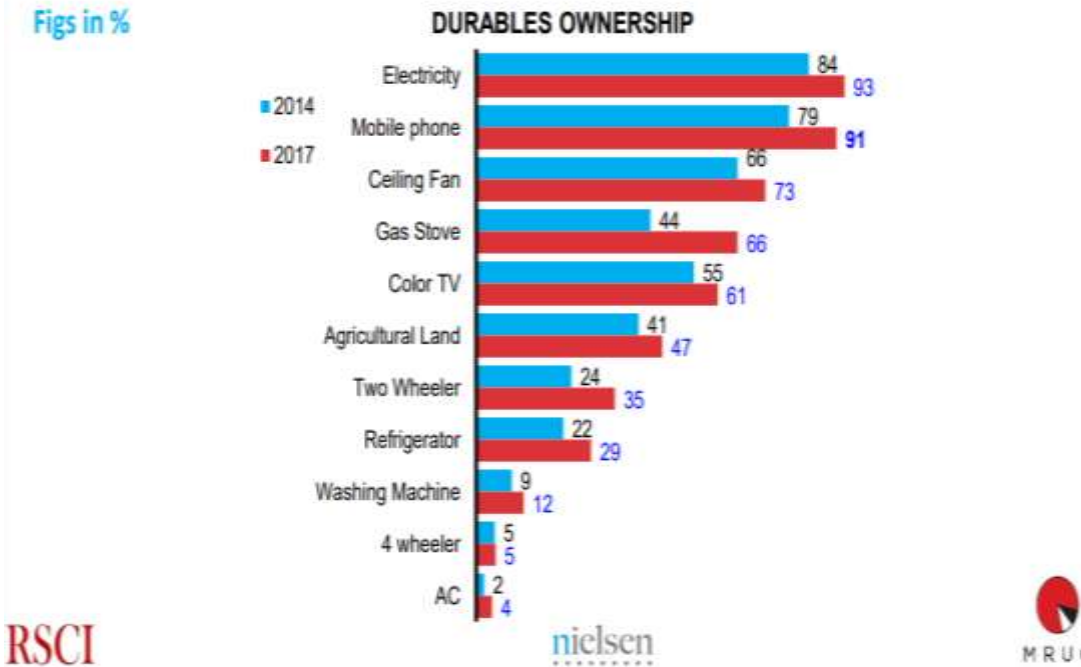
change is one of the greatest challenges for policymakers at both the international and national levels of our present century. Therefore the notion of environmental awareness have to explore. Tourism industry, purely natural environment segmented and does not have any special exception. Tourism scientists have kept on investigating the connection between feasible tourism and environmental change to build up a scope of compelling methodologies for policymakers (Farid, 2016 et. al). This negative trend can be checked by the proper interlocking of conservation through education and awareness.

The economic status of the district should also be developed along with it. Tourism, in this context, can be considered to cope with this situation on acting as a catalyst for the economic and social development of the district. As per IBEF report(2017), many developing nations are considering tourism as a multispectral industry to stimulate the economy from different sectors. Since it's a major sector in today's world, many countries are competing to attract tourists through all means of communication. So the mode of communication is considered for informing and influencing tourists in the selection of destination. At the same time, tourism without proper management leads to heavy damaging impacts on the environment such as increased water use, increased pollution loadings through waste and emissions, and direct and indirect disturbance to wildlife and vegetation (Fennell, 2003). This may destroy the beauty of natural destination and the tourists may reject the destinations which are polluted. As tourism opens door for rapid economic growth that attracts a number of foreign and non-local investors, this may neglect the prosperity of local people. So tourism also has its own seeds of destruction and, therefore, tourism can kill tourism; destroying the environmental attractions for which visitors come to this location (Glasson et al., 1995). Many environmentalists suggested ecotourism as a promoting tool for environmental conservation as well as socio-economic developments. To make ecotourism more practical, travellers should follow the definition of TIES. As per TIES, ecotourism should be "responsible travel to natural areas that conserves the environment and improves the well-being of local people and involves interpretation and education". While practising ecotourism, tourists are supposed not to destroy the natural inhabitants of the spot they visit. Ecotourism may play a vital role in this regard. Tourism activity in the district could be taken as a vibrant tool in enriching the social status of the society. Therefore, tourism calls for awareness for the conservation of nature and environment which can be done by the media.

With the advent of modern media technologies, there is an immense possibility to reach the unreached tourism spots and enlighten significance of ecotourism. Many countries have succeeded the usage of internet for their destination promotion. Tourism promotional activities through internet are encouraged by governments to reach globally. The district has a good potentiality in attracting national and foreign tourists. Based on Indian Readership Survey (IRS, 2017) released by the Readership Studies Council of India (RSCI), the household ownership of mobile phones had crosses 90 %.



## HOUSEHOLD OWNERSHIP OF MOBILES CROSSES THE 90% MARK



(Source: IRS January 2017, <http://mruc.net/topline-findings> Media Research Users Council)

In the ancient times, man had the urge to explore new places and their travels were less sophisticated than current generation. Today, the situation is different. Human ecosystem is significantly mediated by technology. Mostly digital media are based on translating analog data into digital data. Any digitized content (*text, audio, video, and graphics*) that transmitted over the internet is digital media. This include that news from a TV, newspaper, magazine, etc. that is presented on a Web site or blog as a form of ‘convergence-media’ can fall into this category. Because of the rapid speed, today people are more likely to use digital media to communicate than all other medium. The development in the field of transportation as well as communication makes travelling more sophisticated and a modern traveller demands safety and comfort for his enjoyment. Modern tourists treat the tourism as not just packing the bags and exploring a new destination. It is about stepping to another comfort zone. People always love novelty, especially travellers like to explore new experiences and are curious to find new destinations, so tourism industry has always been on the lookout for new attractions to keep their tourists coming. The tourism department of Kanyakumari district should take the advantage of curiosity that people towards tourist attractions. The diversified culture and natural ecology has to be uncovered with the help of media. So it is the time to initiate development policies and strategies for encouraging tourism based on needs of moderntravellers. In this sophisticated age, the efficiency of a department can be measured by the usage of technical competence for the promotional activities. People use digital technologies for their day-to-day life considering digital technology is smarter

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than anything else in this world. So it is quite natural that in the field of tourism that travellers are interested in using digital communication technology to get information.

### **SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY**

Our world is facing competition in every field, and the general trend is adapting the fastest initiative for rapid economic progression, without any concern about future generation. The tourism industry is also used for the economic growth without any concern for the next generation. However, this adversely affects the environment. Tourism can be said as people from different countries assemble at a place to relish the natural beauty of a place. Thus tourism is one of the most popular forms of economic recreation. Tourism is directly associated with natural environment and culture, and the preservation of natural environment and tradition for economic progression. While digging the past, the negative impact of mass tourism triggered a lot of tourism critique and led consequently to the introduction of alternative tourism. Tourism studies develop a sense of ethical responsibility to protect the nature to achieve sustainable development. This resulted in the need for sustainable tourism.

In terms of the United Nations World Tourism Organization (WTO, 2001) the sustainable tourism development is, “the tourism development meets the needs of present tourists and host regions while protecting and enhancing opportunities for the future”. As limited negative environmental impact and increased economical conservation are the core of sustainability, the sustainable tourism should balance the ecological and economical system of the host region and it can be characterized by enhancing the well-being of host community, supporting the protection of the natural and cultural environment and quality tourism presented by a region. It is very imperative for the tourism stakeholders engaged with the business are in-charge of the usage of various parts of the principles. Governments, mass media, tourism partners, regional peoples, NGOs and the tourists would all be able to make tourism more sustainable. With a specific end goal to accomplish the objectives of sustainable tourism, the diverse actors ought to participate, stimulate and empower each other to incorporate the standards (UNESCO, 2005). The tourists practice a non-consumptive use of wildlife and natural resources and contribute to benefiting the conservation of the site. With the development of ecotourism concept, the quality of life of the rural would be improved, instead of their migration to the cities for more income. Tourism would create way to new jobs, business, more income and stabilization of the rural economy (Garcia-Ramon, 1995). With a vision for the global development the United Nations General Assembly declared 2017 as the ‘International Year of Sustainable Tourism for Development recalling the potential of tourism. To make sustainable tourism more practical, it’s better to join hands on hold with the definition of ecotourism given by TIES. Ecotourism is an idea, not a discipline or inscription, but travel agents and hoteliers are using the term without understanding even its basic principles. According to TIES (2002), each region should develop its own principles, guidelines and certification procedures for ecotourism based on the materials available internationally; only then it will be beneficial for the local people.

Most of the countries recognized tourism to open job opportunities, foreign exchange earnings and maintain friendly relationship with foreign countries. From 2002, "Incredible India" is the official tourism promotion campaign slogan, which has been adopted by the Ministry of Tourism, India. As per the report of the World Travel and Tourism Council (2015) that India

government has achieved an amount of rupees, 8.30 Lakh Crore from the tourism activities itself in 2015. Apart from this direct economic benefits, the same year under review, tourism supported 37.315 million jobs, accounting for 8.7% of total employment in the country. The Government of India furthermore concentrated and number of initiatives have taken for the recharge of tourism promotion in a new platform called,– ecotourism, concentrating more on natural conservation and rural tourism. Its 'Swadesh Darshan' under the Ministry of Tourism also provides funds for the propagation of ecotourism for sustainable development. Tourism contributes to ecological and economic conservation that leads to other major infrastructural developments in the fields of transportation, accommodation, hospital facilities, hygiene, proper sanitation measures etc., and these measures support the country to reach top rank in the Environmental Sustainability Index (ESI) and Human Development Index (HDI). As Kanyakumari district is endowed with natural rich resources, it widely attracts tourists from all over the world. Delving deeper into these places for tourism promotion and environmental education can protect biodiversity while creating jobs and sustaining the region through revenues from sustainable tourism. Introducing ecotourism to the district can protect and conserve the ecosystem by involving local people. Media is an integral part of communication today. The policy makers, social agents join with media in constructing environmental awareness for widely dispersed people. Thus media is a key source of destination information and environmental awareness.

## OBJECTIVES

1. To explore the role of various media in creating ecotourism awareness among tourists in Kanyakumari district.
2. To understand the role of digital media in environmental conservation.
3. To examine the gender difference and environmental concerns among the tourists.
4. To find out the source of information about natural places in Kanyakumari district.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Which are the types of media that create more ecotourism awareness in Kanyakumari district?
2. How do the media influence the tourists of Kanyakumari district?
3. How do media create awareness on environmental conservation among the tourists of Kanyakumari district?
4. Which media is more influential for Kanyakumari ecotourism awareness?
5. How does age difference affect the environmental concerns and practices among tourists?
6. How does gender difference affect the environmental concerns and practices among tourists?
7. How does environmental tourism and ecotourism support environmental conservation?

## METHODOLOGY

This study analyses the role of various media in creating environmental awareness among the tourists in Kanyakumari district. The researchers have conducted a survey in the district. A questionnaire composed of demographic questions in the first part and it was followed by the questions related to the media and environmental awareness. For the study, the questionnaire concentrated on two aspects, namely *information completeness* and *persuasiveness* of the media.

The questionnaire collected information on the various types of media and its influence on tourism. Respondents were asked about the source of information for natural places in Kanyakumari district. Respondents are selected through a stratified random sampling technique. The survey was administrated to 100 respondents to understand the information sources of Kanyakumari ecotourism awareness. The selected respondents belonged to the 21-60 age group which are categorized into four sub-groups. Among the N100 samples, male respondents are N69 and female respondents N31. The researchers also go through a Focus Group Discussion (FGD) with the local people, travel agents, tourist guides and some young tourists. The FGD is accumulate people from similar backgrounds to discuss a specific topic of interest.

### FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

The survey was conducted among the tourists from the states of Tamil Nadu and Kerala, as most tourists visit Kanyakumari district from these two states. Among the total samples collected, 61% are from Tamil Nadu and 39% are from Kerala.

The demographical details of the sample population are as given below:

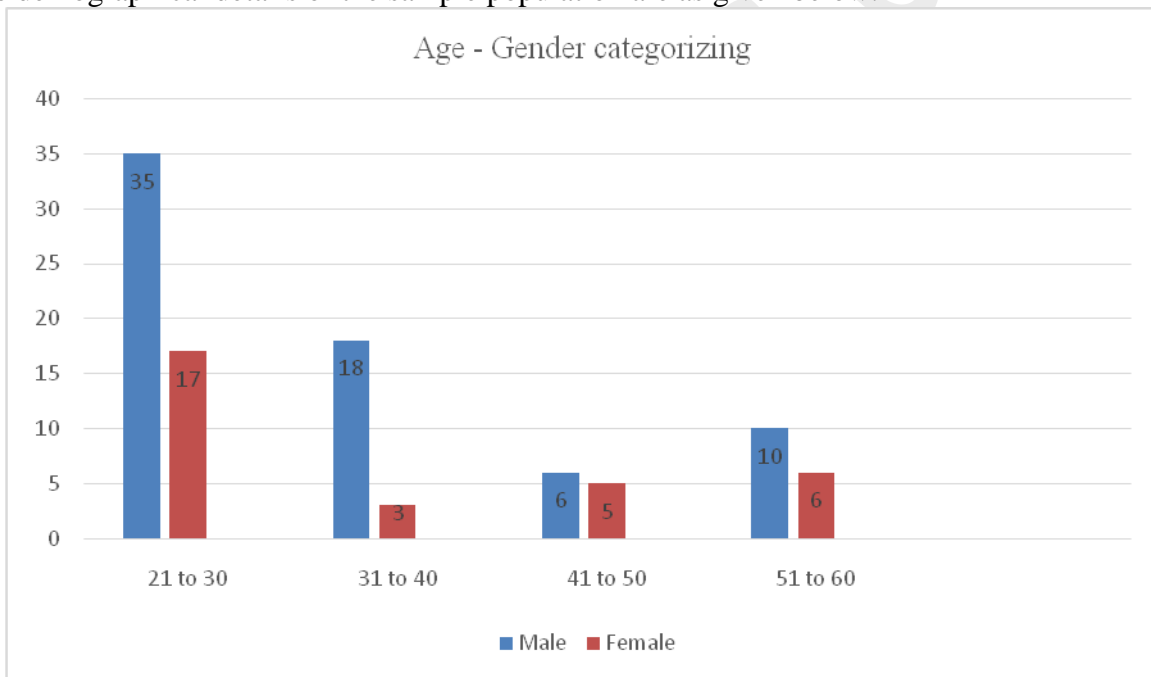


Figure 1: Age-gender categorization

Figure 1 shows that the majority of tourists are in the 21-30 age group and most of them are unmarried. They are free from job pressure and with less responsibility which give them more time for tourism. The study also finds out that the same age group are more users of social media. Social network sites helps youngsters to becoming more social and bond with other people (Arpita, 2017).

Among the 41-50 age group, least tourists are found. It indicates that they spend less time for tourism activity. This is due to the age most of people work hard for their children's education.

The 21-30 age group (52%) travels more than other age groups. As much as 21 percentage of them are in the 31-40 age group, 11 percentage of them belongs to the 41-50 age group, and 16 percentage of the respondents belongs to the 51-60 age group.

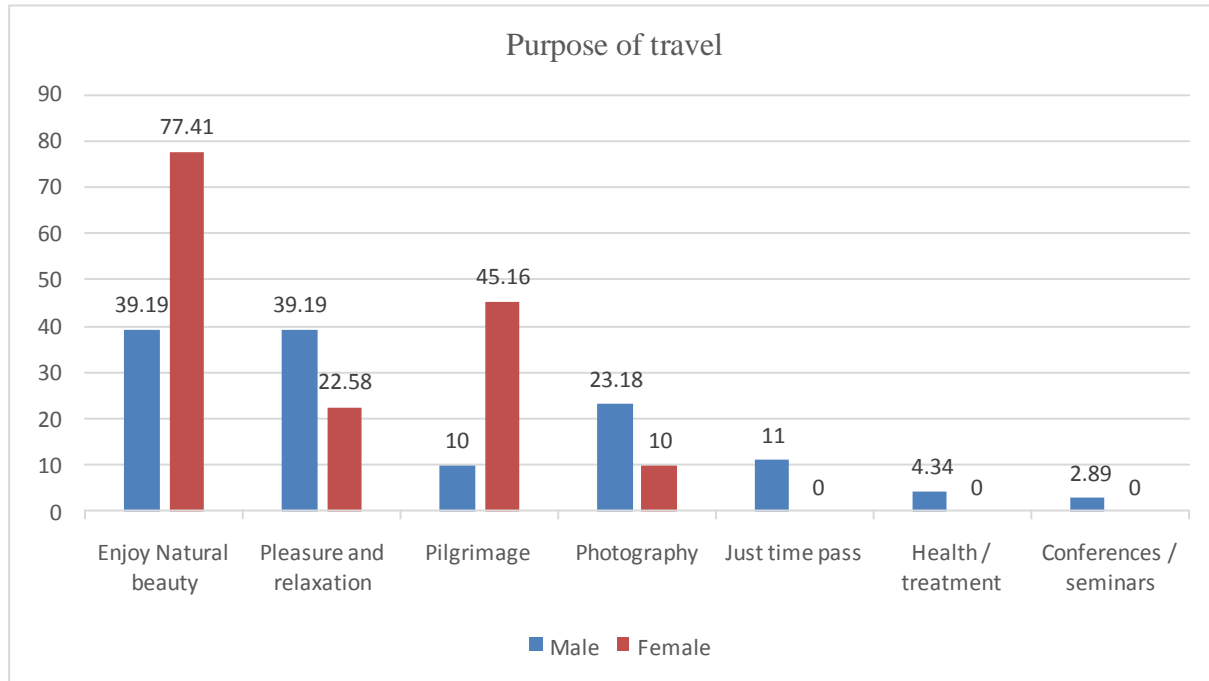


Figure 2: Purpose of travel

Tourism is the temporary, short-term movement of people to destinations outside the places where they normally live and work and their activities. It includes movements for all purposes (The Tourism Society of England, 1976). So the researchers designed the questionnaire to find out the purpose of travel also. They found that among the total sample the most tourists (N51) prefer to travel Kanyakumari district to *enjoy the natural beauty*. This indicates that the Kanyakumari district has more environmental tourism potentiality. Figure 2 shows that among the total male respondents (N27), 39.19% are interested in *enjoying the natural beauty*, whereas 77.41% of female are interested in *enjoying the natural beauty* of the district. This indicates that femaletravellers (77.41 %)show more interest for *travel to enjoy the natural beauty* than male travellers (39.19 %).

Except for *enjoying the natural beauty* and *pilgrimage*, all other variables show that male are more interested. For pilgrimage purpose, among the total 69 male respondents only 7 show interest (10%).From the total 31 female respondents 14 show interest in pilgrimage (45.16%). The study found that majority of respondents travel with a specific objective, and only 8% of respondents prefer to *travel for just time pass*. Tourism involves travelling with the specific object of studying, admiring, and enjoying the scenery.

Researchers found out that19% of respondents *travel for photography*. *Travel for photography*freezes the beauty of nature.

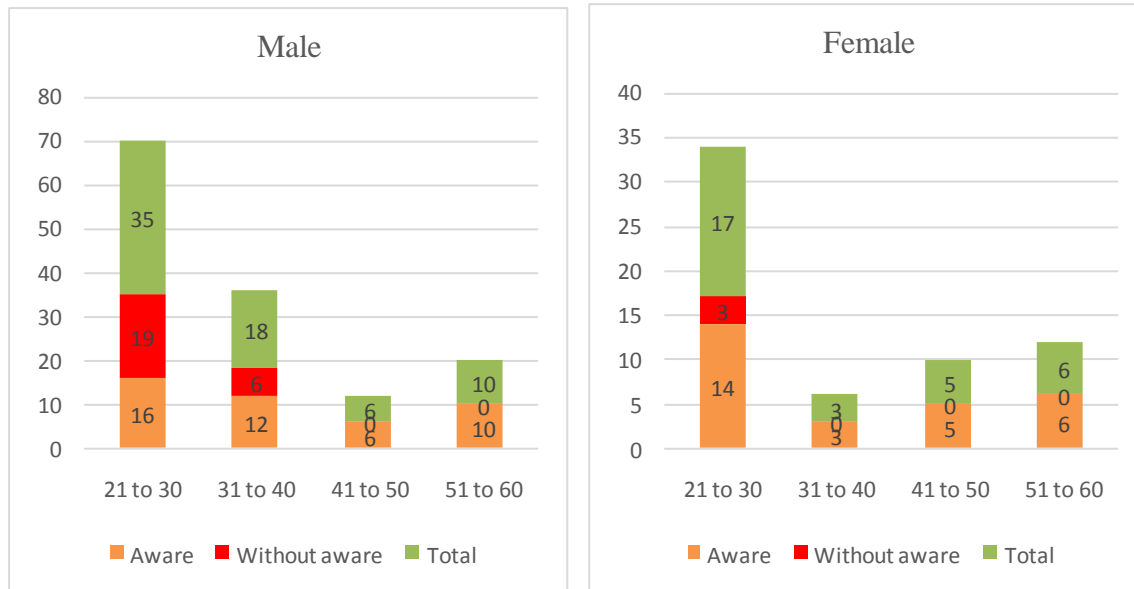


Figure 3a Figure 3b

Figures 3a and 3b show that the female respondents are more aware about the need of environmental conservation. Among the total N69 male respondents, N44 are aware about the need of need of environmental conservation (63.76%), and of the total N31 female respondents 90.32% (N28) are aware about the need of need of environmental conservation. Women show at every age more concern for the environment than men (Bekkers, 2005).

Women, being attached with domestic and household management, interact more intensively with the nature than men. Women's direct contact with environment has not only produced them deep knowledge, but also protective and caring. Women had launched number of movement in demanding of better protection and environment conservation. Chipko movement, Narmada Bachao Andolan are the best examples for the environmental movements led by women (Aditya, 2016).

Figure 3a and 3b also explain that age is a factor in environmental concern, as higher the age group, they are more aware about the need of environmental conservation. Higher age exerts a positive effect on environmental morale. Focusing on social norms we observe that higher age is considered for higher social positions. It is stated that higher age persons have acquired greater social stakes.

The study also examines the connection between natural tour and natural environment conservation thoughts. Majority of respondents (More than 76 %) responded that there is a great bond between travels and the environmental conservation thoughts.



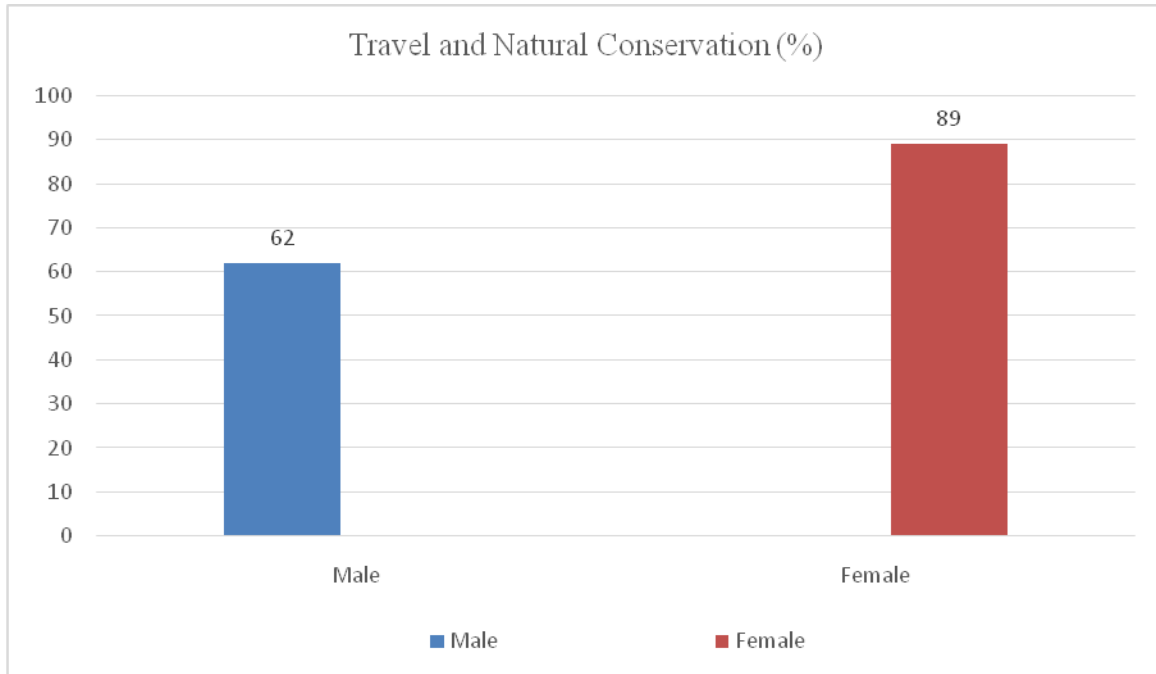


Figure 4: Kanyakumari ecotourism awareness through various media

The above (Figure 4) representing the relationship between the travel and natural conservation thoughts. The researchers find out majority of respondents are considering that travel to natural regions create a thought in their mind about the need for natural conservation. 62 % of male and 89 % of female answered traveling to the natural environmental locations provide environmental knowledge and make them to think about the need of conserve the environment. Commonly its known to all that, 'Travels are great book of information'. When travelling, the traveller can experience and learn a lot of knowledge that cannot be learned from books. These experiences will lead the traveller to be richer in knowledge. From the real experience, they can touch all part of environment and that create a thought in themselves about the need of natural conservation – as the traveller directly comprehend the environment for sustainable development. The chances for economic empowerment from the homestays are perfectly managing by Kerala ecotourism sector, and that applying to Kanyakumari district will enhance in all point of view.

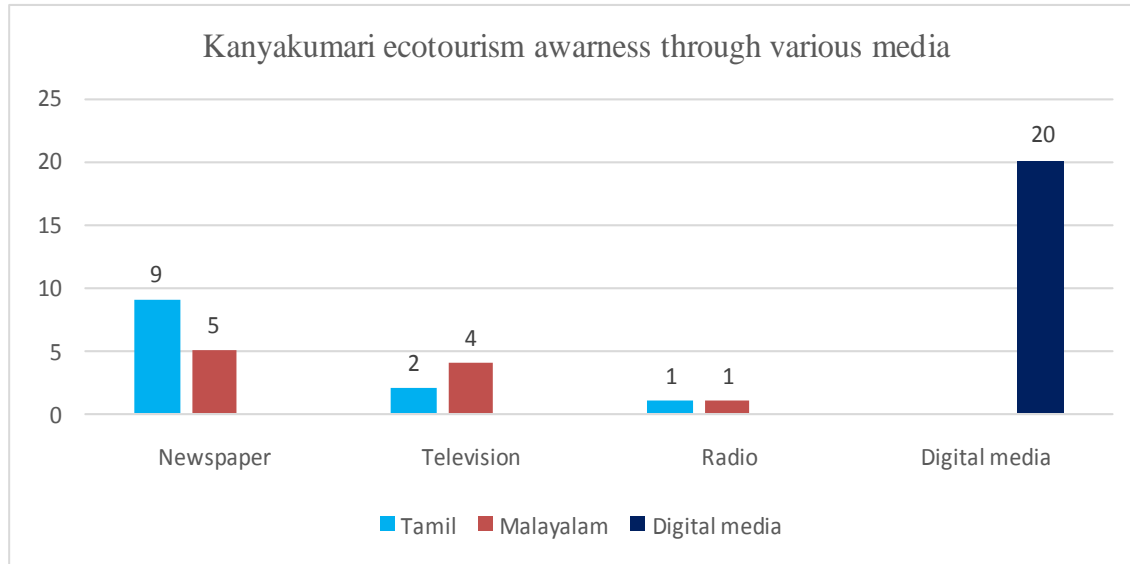


Figure 5: Kanyakumari ecotourism awareness through various media

Figure 5 describes the details of various media in ecotourism awareness in Kanyakumari district. The study found that only 41% of respondents were aware of ecotourism through media. Among the N41 respondents, 20 were informed through digital media which is 48.78%, Tamil newspapers 21.95%, Malayalam newspapers 12.19%, Tamil television channels 4.87%, and Malayalam television channels 9.75%. A very less percentage of 2.43 got awareness through radio. The study shows that more number of people are aware about ecotourism of Kanyakumari district through social media/digital media.

## DISCUSSION:ROLE OF MEDIA IN RELATE TO ENVIRONMENT

'Information completeness' and 'Persuasiveness' are the aspects used by the researchers to analyse the role of various media. Most of the respondents stated that digital media can persuade, while newspapers can provide access for more credible and complete information that satisfies the 'information completeness' and authenticity.

Digital / Social media can be considered as a canvas of users' interests. In digital-social media, the users will share their travel experience. It is easy to access by the peer group and friends in the list. But at the same time, some users are not considering that digital media as a responsible and credible medium. Once people get some information about nearby places, they search about the related contents in the internet or other printed medium. Though ecotourism supports the well-being of local people, it is very important to create a positive attitude among the local people about the benefits of ecotourism which includes ecological and economic conservation.

Focus Group Discussions (FGD) acknowledges that the concept of ecotourism has several dimensions that all need to be integrated along with sustainable development. So it's clear that the concept of ecotourism emphasis should not only be economically profitable, but also kept in mind the concept of environment that only can lead to meet the needs of human for a quality life.

Again from the FGD and the review of literature studies, the researchers find out that, services providing by private sector is superior than by the government sector is may be due to the red-ribbon (delay) of proper planning and hence implementation became the burden for the growth of tourism. The lack of professionalism among the department is another problem facing by the tourism department. It is much known to all that private sectors can update and make the changes as per the demand effortlessly, but in case of the government sector, the employees can walk only through the proper channel to break the rotten eggs for the amendments (Sudheer, 1991). Therefore, tourism calls for awareness for renovation activities which can be done by the mass media. Mass media is the most powerful tool to change audience cognition, belief systems, and attitudes, as well as emotional, physiological and behavioural effects (Potter, 2012). The places with great possibilities of tourism developments, should be tracked into the channel of ecotourism.

**For this, media has to analyse:**

How the Government is promoting various ecotourism destination? ; Does the government allow private agencies to promote ecotourism? Does providing concessions and more advertisements can promote ecotourism ?

Media and eco-clubs should spread good perceptions of local people on sustainability of ecotourism in the Kanyakumari district. To protect our environment from the illicit activities, low impact ecotourism must be implemented. Some of the studies are demanding the Government not to delay the framework plans for the progressive activities of ecotourism. The Government should open doors to NGOs and other private agencies to begin the startups-related tourism.

NGOs may range from small clubs in schools and villages can play a vital role in imparting awareness on several such issues relating to environment and development, and in mobilizing people to take up action oriented programmes by employing a variety of techniques and methods. The Government has started many projects with the Tamil Nadu Tourism Development Corporation and Eco-clubs in schools and colleges. 'Eco Echo Newsletter' an environmental development magazine started by students was unfortunately taken forward. Environmental concern should be imparted from the school days. The media only can make aware about the need of these clubs on each locality so as to rejuvenate them. Society's perception of world is based on the information get from mass media and the media became a significant force in shaping the society.

Most of environmental problems are due to manmade activities and insensitivity towards nature. As the mass media becomes part of contemporary life, people give priority to the contents in mass media. The media should pay more attention to environmental problems. Most of studies saying the media is less active in environmental news coverage, unless there are sensational issues. In this situation, the media can act fast and be effective in influencing the mindset of people and sensitizing them on the importance of protecting the environment.

Repeated follow-up of any environment content through media is more effective. Space and importance given to the environmental news are very less and seasonal. Most of the media report environment news only when there is some serious problem or a disaster and later no detailed follow-up on the news content. It is the duty of the media to break the silence that surrounds the

environmental problems. It should cover environmental news and environmental protection laws on a regular basis and follow up the news to educate people on various measures of safeguarding environment that encourages local people to take part and change their behaviour (Meda, 2016). For uplifting tourism, there must be frequent communication campaigns of local people with tourists so that social barriers and orthodox systems could be abolished (Batra, 1990). Internet as a medium of mass communication, making its efforts to educate, inform and persuade the masses all over the world. It offers the best platform for social interaction (Arpita, 2017).

## CONCLUSION

Based on the survey, respondents ranked the digital media as top one institution contributing to public environmental awareness. Today, society pays more for information and awareness that can be gained through various communication channels. As digital media is more persuasive, most of the organizations use digital media as a broadcasting platform to magnify messages from traditional media sources such as radio, television, and print media. Digital media can be entirely a new way of approach on reaching the target audience and fast feedback for the content. It has a pivotal role for effective communication of informing and creating awareness. Digital media allows the users to access in any platform (including desktop, laptop, tablets, and mobile phones – in a convergence form). It is a fascinating medium. The content that previously used to be available only on the mainstream media outlets such as print media, radio and television. This in turn has resulted in a growing trend in the online community.

Moreover, digital/social media can serve as a canvas of users' mind. So the Tourism Department use this medium for the ecotourism can produce a better result. Researchers found out that digital media can influence with its attractive platform and user friendliness but the traditional newspapers can provide information completeness. The efforts for the promotion of ecotourism in Kanyakumari district can create more opportunities in the field of natural tourism and reveal the less known surrounding places. By generating awareness in the host community (regional people) and guest community (tourists) through the right media can reduce the negative impacts of mass tourism and for attaining sustainable development along with ecotourism.

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