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**DEVELOPING MEMORABLE WILDLIFE TOURISM
EXPERIENCE INDICATORS: A CASE OF SEPILOK
ORANGUTAN REHABILITATION CENTRE (SORC),
SANDAKAN, SABAH**

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Abstract:

This research establishes indicators for Memorable Wildlife Tourism Experiences at Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre in Sandakan, Sabah. It will outline vital factors leading to memorable experiences and provide measures of the relationship between visitor loyalty and wildlife dimensions. Data collection was conducted using a structured questionnaire based on a Likert scale, and after viewing the orangutan, 18 items measuring components of memorable wildlife tourism experiences were assessed. The 18 dimensions included hedonism, refreshment, knowledge, novelty, local culture, meaningfulness, involvement, visitor loyalty, relaxing, stimulation, adverse feeling, happiness, challenge, service assessment, value assessment, unexpected happenings, planning, and wildlife tourism. It is proposed that descriptive statistics will be used to analyse the data with a focus on significant indicators of memorable wildlife tourism experiences. The results will provide valuable information to SORC management that will inform improvements to the visitor experience, foster visitor loyalty, and hopefully, be beneficial for orangutan conservation. The findings of this research will help direct SORC



Keywords:

Memorable Wildlife Tourism Experiences; Orangutan Conservation; Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre; Visitor Loyalty; Visitor Satisfaction

Introduction

The Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, located in Sandakan, Sabah, Malaysia, is a distinct form of ecotourism that mainly encompasses national and international tourists who want to experience orangutans in a rehabilitation environment (Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, 2025). Sabah, the Malaysian state where the SORC is located, is well known for its biodiversity and ecosystems; it is also world-renowned for growing ecotourism and maximising natural resources. Tourism, particularly ecotourism, serves as a pathway to rural development by creating livelihoods and empowering communities. The approach is in line with sustainable development—recognising ecological conservation along with socio-economic development (Zamzami et al., 2021). Additionally, as Sabah prioritises rural tourism due to its naturally beautiful landscapes, travel and ecotourism become even more relevant, especially with the involvement of surrounding communities. Ecotourism is travel and related activities to natural areas to conserve the environment, preserve the lives and well-being of local residents, and enhance understanding through education. Ecotourism can relate conservation, economic, and rural development (Meschini et al., 2021). The SORC (Figure 1) is of significance to care for orphaned and injured orangutans.

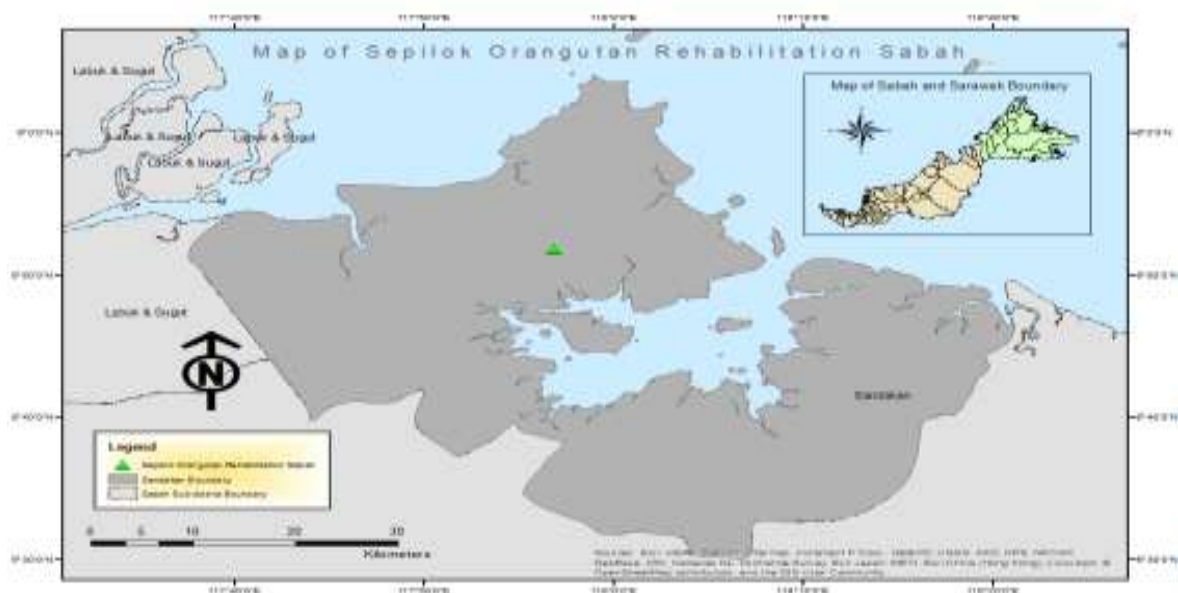


Figure 1: Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre location

The Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre is an important ecotourism site in Sabah, Malaysia, which is important in orangutan conservation and rural community development. While SORC attracts a significant number of visitors, there need to be specific indicators of

Memorable Wildlife Tourism Experiences that could be measured and evaluated (Tangit et al., 2014; Zander et al., 2014). The absence of significant indicators constrains the SORC's capabilities to rigorously improve the experiences of its visitors, optimise the limited resources of its management, and maximise the benefits of tourism for conservation. The establishment of these key performance indicators is critical to ensure SORC is able to offer valuable and sustainable tourism experiences that benefit the visitors and orangutans.

Research Questions:

1. What are the key dimensions and components that should be included in a set of indicators designed to capture Memorable Wildlife Tourism Experiences at the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre?
2. How can these indicators be effectively measured and utilised to evaluate and enhance the overall visitor experience at SORC?

Research Objectives:

1. To identify the key dimensions relevant to Memorable Wildlife Tourism Experiences at the SORC.
2. To develop a set of measurable indicators for visitor experience quality improvement at SORC.

Literature Review

Memorable tourism experiences are now highly regarded within tourism research and are considered a positive resulting impact of tourism experiences on the lives of individuals (Andrianto et al., 2022). The Memorable Tourism Experience scales connote constructs that are being used as a tourism marketing session tool (Kim & Ritchie, 2013). The scales were a means to measure the elements of memorable tourism experiences so that destinations could identify ways to develop or enhance their offerings. Development of a Memorable Tourism Experience scale should be rigorously and systematically undertaken, as it entails involving empirical studies to measure validity and reliability. Kim, Ritchie, and McCormick (2012) described the importance of using rigorous scale development processes to empirically test the validity of the MTE. In their research, the literature of memory was cross-referenced with tourism experiences, which resulted in a seven-dimension model to capture at a point in time the range of emotions related to visitors. These findings allowed for a more comprehensive understanding of memorable tourism experiences to be developed, targeted at times, and marketed, which improved visitor satisfaction and sense of belonging. This model may serve as a strong foundation, but its general applicability may not be sufficient to capture the distinctive dimensions of wildlife tourism that combines nature-based tourism, wildlife tourism experiences, and wildlife conservation (Meschini et al., 2021). These distinctive dimensions may offer an extension beyond the identified original MTE model.

SORC has considerable significance to wildlife tourism because it provides tourists with the opportunity to visit orangutans in their natural environment and is expected to enhance their overall satisfaction. It is important for those working in these destinations to understand and identify the elements that contribute to a memorable wildlife tourism encounter to achieve a high-quality visitor experience. Such an understanding is imperative, as consumers' future expectations, preferences, attitudes, and behaviours with respect to the visit to a wildlife tourism experience are often driven by memories associated with their past encounters (Curtin, 2010).

SORC offers authentic, engaging, and educational experiences that will not only help develop memories but could also provide lasting memories that lead to positive recommendations and repeat visits. Additionally, emotional factors greatly influence tourism experiences. Given the significance of MWTE, it is useful for this study to develop several indicators that capture the characteristics of these memorable wildlife tourism experiences at the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre. These indicators will provide tools for SORC management to examine and evolve visitor experiences, ensuring they meet SORC's conservation and sustainability tourism objectives.

When developing indicators for Memorable Wildlife Tourism Experiences at SORC, we must consider existing factors that are commonly assessed as contributing to both memorable tourism experiences and the context of wildlife tourism. The literature identified factors, hedonic factors, that are key dimensions of memorable tourism experiences: hedonism, refreshment, exploration, novelty, social interaction, local culture, knowledge, meaningfulness, and involvement (Kim, 2016). In the context of wildlife tourism specifically, 'wildlife tourism' can be considered a key dimension aspect, as ultimately wildlife tourism offers biotic opportunities for environmental learning and appreciation that spur visitor satisfaction. This study goes on to use the eighteen components to evaluate the memorable wildlife tourism experiences: hedonism, refreshment, knowledge, novelty, local culture, meaningfulness, involvement, visitor loyalty, relaxing, stimulation, adverse feelings, happiness, challenge, service assessment, value assessment, unexpected happenings, planning, and wildlife tourism. The indicators will be measured via existing goals at SORC, like orangutan conservation, visitor satisfaction, and community development. Visitors become more loyal when emotional attachments and awareness are created relating specifically to orangutans as a species.

Methodology

The study site for this research is the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre in Sandakan, Sabah, Malaysia. It has approximately 43 square kilometres of protected land lying adjacent to the Kabili-Sepilok Forest Reserve. The aim of the centre is to rehabilitate orphaned or injured orangutans so they can be released back into the wild (Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre, 2025). This study was based on a quantitative research approach using questionnaires as the means for collecting data from a representative sample of tourists visiting the SORC. The questionnaires included scales that were designed to capture the memorable tourism experiences of respondents, visitor loyalty, and socio-demographic data. The questionnaire was designed to capture data on several different dimensions, including visitor demographics, visitor perceptions or attitudes, and motivations. Questions were gauged in tripartite sections (i.e., visitors' evaluation rating on Memorable Wildlife Tourism Experiences Scales, questions on visitors' loyalty, and socio-demographics).

For the purpose of this study, it is suggested to use non-probability sampling method because it is difficult to compile a complete sampling frame (Rowley, 2014). The sampling technique used was judgemental sampling. Judgemental sampling is used when something about the population member is known and only these members are selected because they are expected to generate the most needed and valuable data (Rowley, 2014). In this study context, data was collected through survey respondents at the SORC site, only to domestic and international tourists who had direct access to the orangutans and services within the SORC. The survey data was collected on both weekdays and weekends, including school holidays and public holidays, which would encourage a larger pool of participants.

A total of 66 Memorable Wildlife Tourism Experience (MWTE) indicators were adapted from the research undertaken by Akkus and Gulluce (2016); Brighton et al. (2014); Chandralal & Valenzuela (2015); Htet et al. (2014); Kim (2009); Kim and Ritchie (2013); Shuib et al. (2015); Sthapit and Coudounaris (2018); Subramaniam et al. (2018); and Wang (2016). Moreover, the wildlife tourism dimension was represented as it contributed 5 indicators to describe the wildlife experiences within memorable tourism experiences adapted from Mariki et al. (2011). Respondents systematically evaluated replies for each indicator using a 5-point Likert scale with 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree. One version of a questionnaire was developed for visitors to the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre (SORC). The English version of the questionnaire was translated into Malay for local visitors using back translation (Brislin, 1970).

Findings

A total of 400 visitors (local visitors: 207; international visitors: 193) answered the questionnaires. The visitor group, as shown in Table 1, had more women than men, the majority of whom were international visitors aged 18-29.

Table 1: Demographic Information of the Stakeholder Groups (Frequency)

Items	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	143	35.3
Female	257	64.3
Age		
18 – 29	214	53.5
30 – 49	138	34.5
50 – 69	45	11.3
70 and above	3	0.8
Nationality		
Local	207	51.8
International	193	48.3

The weight of the 66 indicators was established through Tsaur et al. (2006). Following this, the raw score of each indicator became the weighted score. The result provided the MWTE achievement for SORC. As shown in Table 2, the mean of the raw scores, which summarised each visitor's perceptions of the three main components of MWTE (affective component, behavioural component, and cognitive development) with 18 dimensions, was calculated.

Table 2: Indicators Mean Score

Dimension	Indicators	Mean score	Dimension mean score
Hedonism	I was excited about having a new experience of visiting wildlife at Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre.	4.45	4.33
	I really enjoyed the experience of visiting wildlife at Sepilok.	4.36	
	I was happy with the wildlife nature environment in Sepilok.	4.41	
	I had an exciting experience of viewing wildlife during my visit to Sepilok.	4.33	
	I enjoyed in participating in the activities provided.	4.08	

Refresh- ment	I feel refreshed after visiting the wildlife centre.	4.09	4.25
	I enjoyed the sense of freedom from my daily routine while visiting wildlife.	4.25	
	I felt relaxed and enjoyed while viewing the wildlife.	4.32	
	Visiting wildlife in Sepilok can release my stress.	4.18	
	The experiences of viewing wildlife give good memories.	4.42	
Knowledge	The info of this centre made me want to come here to see the wildlife.	4.15	4.12
	The information about the wildlife in Sepilok was very beneficial for me.	4.11	
	I learned something new about wildlife especially in Sepilok.	4.2	
	The history of wildlife in Sepilok gives me new knowledge.	4.16	
	After this visit, I am able to understand the lifecycle of wildlife.	4	
Novelty	The new experience of visiting wildlife are memories that I cannot forget.	4.24	4.06
	First time experiences of visiting wildlife are the most memorable in my life.	4.01	
	Visiting wildlife in Sepilok satisfy my needs and wants.	3.94	
	These experiences were different from previous experiences of visiting wildlife.	4.01	
	The uniqueness of this area are memorable to me.	4.1	
Local Culture	The staffs here were helpful and provided guidance about wildlife here.	4.07	3.97
	The interaction with other visitors here gave unforgettable memory.	3.67	
	The staffs in SORC were very friendly and made me want to come here again to see the wildlife.	4.06	
	Visitors create their unique experiences with the wildlife.	4.05	
	Visiting the wildlife was something meaningful and memorable.	4.27	4.23
Meaning- fulness	I felt that I learned something meaningful during this trip about wildlife.	4.11	
	I hope that I can share these meaningful experiences with my friends.	4.25	
	After this visit, I realize that viewing wildlife in the natural environment can create memorable experience.	4.26	
	I feel this visit to the wildlife centre is a meaningful trip.	4.27	
	I enjoyed participating in the activities provided.	3.86	3.82
Involve- ment	I am willing to be involved in volunteering activity in Sepilok during my visit.	3.79	
	I really want to visit again to be involved in	3.7	

	volunteering activities for the wildlife.		
	The activities provided give some memorable experiences that cannot be forgotten.	3.92	
Visitor Loyalty	I am interested to visit again the Sepilok Orangutan Rehabilitation Centre (SORC).	4.06	4.28
	I will tell my other family members and friends about this place after this visit.	4.35	
	I will recommend to my family members and friends to visit the wildlife in Sepilok.	4.35	
	The involvement in volunteer programs can increase the awareness towards wildlife conservation.	4.27	
	Visiting to the wildlife centre can establish the memorable tourism experiences.	4.33	
Relaxing	Experience of visiting wildlife at Sepilok make me feel calm.	4.2	4.16
	I feel revitalized when visiting the wildlife centre.	4.08	
	Visiting the wildlife here can relax my mind.	4.2	
Stimulation	The experience of visiting wildlife was thrilling.	4.09	4.09
	The weather here was good and make me relieved.	4.02	
	The environment here makes me feel comfortable and safe.	4.17	
Adverse Feeling	I feel frustrated during my visit to this place.	1.74	1.6
	Visiting the wildlife here makes me feel angry.	1.51	
	The trip was long and tiring.	1.67	
	I have bad memories during my visit to the wildlife centre in Sepilok.	1.47	
Happiness	I get pleasure from the experience of visiting the wildlife centre.	4.18	4.18
	I feel amazed in my first wildlife visit.	4.18	
Challenge	I experienced a problem with transportation during the journey to the wildlife centre.	2.12	2.12
	The place was physically challenging for me.	2.12	
Assessment of Value	I feel that visiting Sepilok was more valuable compared to other wildlife centre.	3.7	3.91
	Visiting the Sepilok gives a memorable value to visitors.	4.11	
Assessment of Service	I feel satisfied with all the facilities given.	4.09	4.09
	Service staff at Sepilok are always willing to help visitors.	4.08	
Unexpected happening	I lost my valuables during my visit to Sepilok.	1.51	1.52
	I had experienced of attacks by wildlife at Sepilok.	1.53	
Planning	I spent a lot of time in planning the visit to the wildlife centre.	3.12	3.37
	In planning my visit to the Sepilok wildlife centre, I made little comparison to other wildlife centre.	3.36	
	I planned my visit to Sepilok wildlife centre by myself.	3.63	
Wildlife	The wildlife themselves looks more awesome in real	4.16	4.21

Experience	life than any picture one takes.	
	Seeing the wildlife at Sepilok was exciting to me.	4.26
	I realized the importance of wildlife after visiting Sepilok.	4.21
	I can see how human interaction get closer with the wildlife.	4.18
	I have a unique experience that cannot be forgotten after seeing wildlife.	4.25

The 66 indicators measured in raw mean score were summarised in Table 2. The sum of the mean score was calculated and summarised to define the value of combined indicators within a dimension. The mean score for most indicators approximately relays the tourist experience at SORC as memorable, which means a score of at least 4.0, and for spectators, their most exhilarating experience is a first, at 4.45. However, eight indicators were recognised as negative experiences by respondents, which yields an average mean score lower than 3.0 (neutral). This number indicates that tourists have yet to experience certain mishaps or aversions during their survey, which allows these indicators to be organised into three dimensions: Adverse Feelings, Challenge, and Unexpected Happening.

To clarify the percentage of performance of memorable tourism experiences in wildlife tourism in SORC, the mean score of each indicator was weighed. The computed value of weight and weight score, which produces the percentages of achieved experience per dimension, was illustrated in Table 3. The performance score approximates the value of visitors' perceptions by converting qualitative details (mean score) into quantitative measures. The percentage represents the quantified level of agreement (weight score) made by visitors on the tourism experience, considering that the weight stands as the maximum level of agreement. For example, visitors primarily reported visiting SORC was a great hedonism experience at the percentage of 83.47%. Conversely, visitors mostly did not perceive Unexpected Happening to occur on their tour in SORC; that is not because Unexpected Happening did not occur but rather because visitors had never experienced such a situation, as evidenced from the low acceptance percentage of 13.22%. Overall, the performance of all the indicators presents as a 74.62% likelihood of agreement for SORC as a rather memorable experience.

Table 3: Weight And Weighted Score Of Dimensions

Component	Dimension	Weight	Weighted Score	Memorable Tourism Experience Score (%)	Component's Performance (%)
Affective	Hedonism	8.59	7.17	83.47	71.35
	Refreshment	8.46	6.88	81.32	
	Local Culture	6.31	4.68	74.17	
	Relaxing	4.96	3.93	79.23	
	Stimulation	4.89	3.78	77.30	
	Adverse Feeling	2.53	0.39	15.42	
	Happiness	3.32	2.64	79.52	

Behavioural	Wildlife Experience	8.36	6.72	80.38	70.66
	Involvement	6.08	4.28	70.39	
	Visitor Loyalty	8.50	6.96	81.88	
Cognitive	Planning	4.02	2.40	59.70	61.05
	Knowledge	8.19	6.40	78.14	
	Novelty	8.09	6.18	76.39	
	Meaningfulness	8.41	6.80	80.86	
	Challenge	1.68	0.48	28.57	
	Assessment of Value	3.10	2.26	72.90	
	Assessment of Service	3.25	2.51	77.23	
Total	Unexpected happening	1.21	0.16	13.22	
		100.00	74.62		

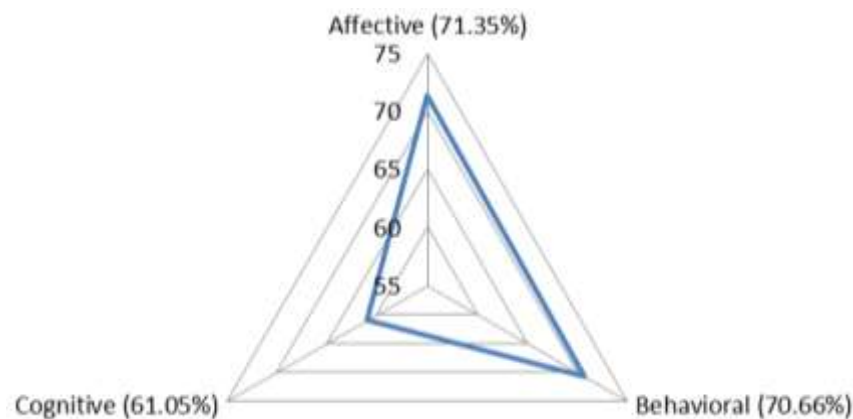


Figure 2: Level of Components

The association between dimensions was further divided into three components of major visitors' perceived experience of touring in SORC as presented in Table 3 and in Figure 2. The scores produced by any component were generated from the mean scores of their constituent parts; for instance, the score of the behavioural components came from an average of Involvement, Planning, and Visitor Loyalty. The chart indicates that the affective component was higher than the behavioural component, at 71.35 and 70.66, respectively, followed by the cognitive development component, at 61.05 overall.

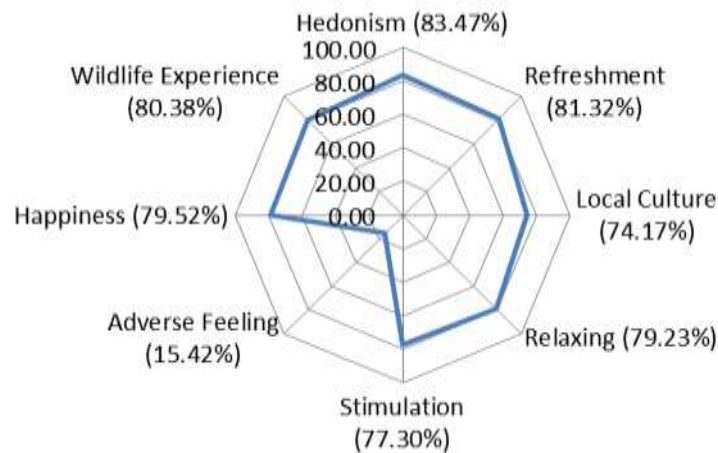


Figure 3: Level of Affective Component's Items

Figure 3 above depicts the level of items for the affective component. The figure shows that all the items achieved a high level of achievement, with adverse feelings being scored only 15.42%. Furthermore, hedonism achieved the highest score, which is 83.47%, followed, respectively, by refreshment (81.32%), wildlife experience (80.32%), happiness (79.52%), relaxing (79.23%), stimulation (77.3%), and local culture (74.17%).

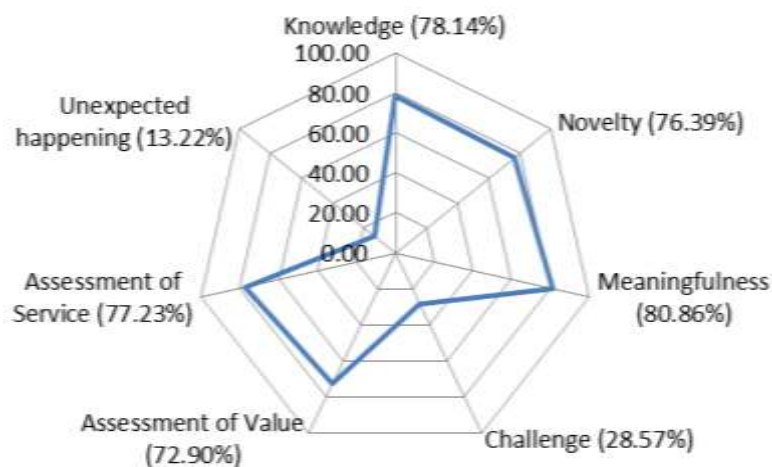


Figure 4: Level of Cognitive Development's Items

In relation to cognitive development, the study analysed its items and so summarised its results as in Figure 4. It is very clear from the chart that there were two items that scored poorly in comparison to others, as Unexpected Happening and Challenge scored 13.22% and 28.57%, respectively. The analysis indicated that meaningfulness was the highest-scoring item with a score of 80.86%, then knowledge (78.14%), assessment of service (77.23%), novelty (76.39%), and assessment of value (72.90%).

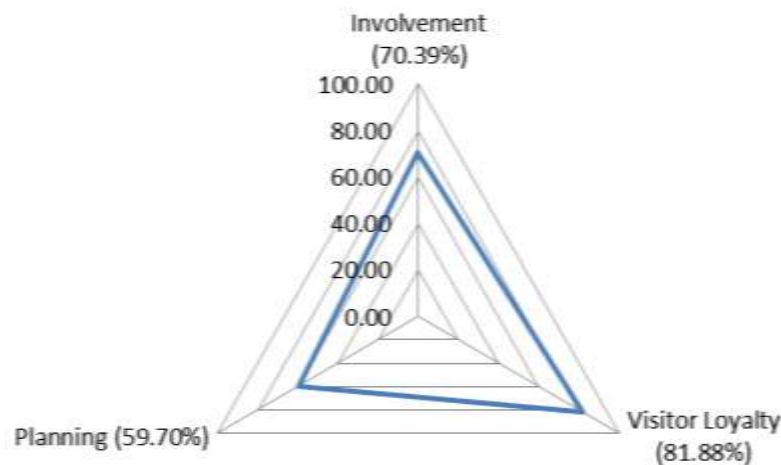


Figure 5: Level of Behavioural Component's Items

Figure 5 shows the level of the three items under the behavioural component. Looking at the figure, planning did rank the lowest of the three items at 59.70%. While visitor loyalty and involvement were ranked better, with scores of 81.88% and 70.39%, respectively. Even though SORC was able to provide moderate MTE with no extreme tendency to either affective, behavioural, or cognitive components only, information based on the tourist experience and perception can be useful to destination managers. This is because the tourist experience relies on impressions from companies' strategies to generate demand and increase revenue. Feedback from guest experiences can illuminate strengths and opportunities communicated through the destination brand, establishing its value as a memorable destination. Weaknesses and threats communicated, or reflected, through the dissatisfaction of tourists require managers who are tasked with minimising the risks associated with this behaviour. Overall, SORC was able to provide moderate MTE; SORC was not limited in providing extreme outcomes to the affective, behavioural, or cognitive components only. Judging by the scores of greater than 80% for the dimensions (Hedonism, Refreshment, Wildlife Experience, Visitor Loyalty, and Meaningfulness), it could be determined that SORC would still be justified in maintaining the exclusivity of wildlife conservation as a primary motivator for visitation. Furthermore, because risk management considerations should not be forgotten even while tourists feel safe and secure during visitation to SORC, I can support my dimension score of less than 20% (Unexpected Happening and Adverse Feeling). Conversely, the most moderate dimension score, between 50 and 70% (Planning), does not particularly apply to tourists and has obvious demands or actions. These issues may stem from the indecision of tourists due to a lack of knowledge of destination choices. At first glance, a tourist thinks to scantily plan due to a lack of information appropriate to SORC; they then may find the destination very memorable, as reflected in the five dimensions, more than scores of less than or equal to 80%, discussed previously. It would be essential for management to develop a tourism strategy for disseminating relevant information to the SORC as an effort to ease potential tourists' decision-making during the planning process. It is most appropriate for SORC to maintain or preferably improve the destination impression and to continue as a memorable tourism destination.

Conclusion

The research has led to several management recommendations for SORC, derived from the study's results, which aim to enhance the delivery of memorable wildlife experiences for visitors. The authority should manage expectations and satisfaction with tourists and develop marketing strategies to help cultivate an enduring relationship with them, which will increase business and profitability (Hasan et al., 2019; McIntosh & Wright, 2017). Focusing on continuous improvement and innovation will develop business sustainability and success at SORC in the long term (Fianto & Andrianto, 2022).

Future research could seek to determine demographic moderating effects on the relationships among the dimensions of memorable experience and visitor loyalty. Future investigations would delve into the long-term effects of memorable tourism experiences on behavioural intentions and destination loyalty (Juliana et al., 2024). Facilitate ideas related to green tourism. In terms of policy, this would be useful for researchers and practitioners to offer a framework to add value to tourism experiences that engender memories and sustainability.

Doing so will help retain tourists by better developing tourist attractions so that they can benefit from a more engaging experience (Yu et al., 2019). To grow the tourist experience, the following can be implemented by tourism destination managers: increase the likelihood that tourists will visit again in the future based on their past experiences.

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