

# **Boxed Play: Room Escapes and Karaoke Boxes in Hong Kong**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

This paper explores the historical and cultural context of room escape games in densely populated urban areas. We compare it to an established form of urban leisure – karaoke rooms – that is framed by the same condition of participating in a playful entertainment activity in a small room with a limited number of (familiar) people. The success of both karaoke boxes and room escapes has not reached such popularity elsewhere in the world as in Asian megacities (Mitsui & Hosokawa, 1998). These packed urban environments provide a unique context for the study of room-based experiences. Our focus is on room escapes and karaoke boxes in Hong Kong.

While both karaoke rooms and room escapes operate within specific rules and social expectations, we ask if competition and goal orientation of room escapes marks them different from karaoke rooms. Specifically, in this paper we seek to answer: Are there enough commonalities in the ways the two setups establish a ‘box’ in order to meaningfully study side by side? What makes the box(es) and how is this articulated in people’s motivations to enter such spaces? What are the cultural and historical specificities of ‘boxed experiences’ in Hong Kong?

We conducted ‘mini interviews’ to find out the opinions of people who have attended karaoke rooms and room escapes in Hong Kong. During short, 5-10 minutes long, online interviews using the chat functions of Facebook, WhatsApp and WeChat and in face-to-face interviews conducted in various public spaces, participants were asked why they choose to go to these spaces, what is their motivation, and where does the attraction lie. 50 participants, 30 females and 20 males between 18 and 50 years old, participated the interviews. A thematic analysis helped to recognize patterns that we will now discuss further.

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Whilst attempting to understand the attraction of the ‘box’, it is important to explore what constitutes the box in the first place. The ways in which the participants of this study discuss the boundaries of karaoke rooms and room escapes are very much in line with each other. What room escapes and karaoke boxes have in common as popular leisure activities in Hong Kong is that they are not affected by the monsoon-influenced subtropical climate. Several of our female interviewees noted this mentioning that such a room is a place “out of the sun” or that the reason for going to Karaoke rooms is “definitely the weather”.

Moreover, the limited space offers privacy, safety, and an escape from the wider social context. While the average living space per person for family and single tenants in subdivided flats in the city is only 47.8 ft<sup>2</sup> (Chinese University of Hong Kong 2015), it is not uncommon for three generations to share a household. Interviewees note that karaoke rooms attract as private spaces and room escapes provide a retreat from the everyday life. Boxed experiences offer young people an option to claim their own space if only temporarily: “small room is still a private room”. Interviewees further state that within what might be labeled as the magic circle (Huizinga 1949) or understood in terms of Foucault’s (1971) theory of heterotopia whereby spaces operate as non-hegemonic spaces of otherness, participants are not disturbed and not disturbing others, either. Interviewees of all ages and genders mention karaoke rooms are their ‘own’ and they can act silly, behave bad or even “be savage.” This is in line with previous literature (Wu et al. 2015) which suggests participants have hedonistic motives for attending KTV. Fung (2009) and Nicholson (2015) have noted how karaoke rooms and room escapes, respectively, are primarily occupied by young people. Interviews also resonate with growing health concerns about stress related to fast-paced lifestyle among Hong Kong youth (Cheung 2016).

Following Foucault (1971), de Certeau (1984) and Derrida (1982), among others, we note that space is also necessarily temporal. Massey’s (2005) thorough research on space discusses how space is not solely physical, but temporal bringing the idea of multiplicity and dynamism. The aspect of temporality in case of room escapes and karaoke boxes is exactly what is being capitalized. We saw this reflected in our responses from younger interviewees (18-25) with recurrent themes of wanting a space where they could stay for a long time since such spaces are very rare in Hong Kong.

Interviewees of all included demographics further suggest that there is simply nothing else to do and nowhere else to go in Hong Kong than to participate in boxed experiences. For mature visitors, karaoke rooms and room escapes are also close to office areas which makes them easy to access and easy to enter with colleagues after work. Other team-building activities are disregarded as less preferable by one interviewee since they are not unisex. Significantly both karaoke boxes and room escapes are considered very gender-neutral. Fung (2009) makes a similar observation about karaoke boxes being gender-neutral and Nicholson (2015) proposes it in respect to room escape games.

Alongside those mentioned, this paper will discuss the two types of rooms as places for different types of social gatherings, explore how experiences in the boxes are technologically mediated, and address the related payment structure. While we may define boxed experiences based on a physical, temporally capitalized separation from the everyday life in Hong Kong and a special attitude as a precondition for it, clear differences exist between how room escapes and karaoke boxes are perceived. This paper concludes that boxed experiences are created and defined not only by the physical, but established based on shared agreements, commercially articulated temporality, exclusion of everyday responsibilities, collaborative practices, and voluntary or involuntary abstinence from accessing virtual spaces.

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