

Escape Zoom: Does the Remote Format of Escape Rooms Change Visitors' Experience?

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PURPOSE

This study aims to assess the attractiveness of the remote escape rooms emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic based on visitors' attitudes and experiences. The study focus on the following research questions: RQ1) How does the remote format of escape rooms change visitors' experience, emotions and intentions compared to classic real-life escape rooms? RQ2) What prevents players of offline escape rooms from participating in remote formats?

RESEARCH METHODS

The study's methodology is based on a survey of escape rooms' visitors in Russia. The survey questionnaire included measurements of visitors' experience, emotions, and intentions of both offline and online (remote) escape rooms. The respondents answered questions only for those escape room formats that they played during the last year. Respondents who did not visit online rooms were asked about the reasons for not playing.

The questionnaire was distributed through several thematic escape communities in VK.com, the leading Russian online social networking service. The final sample includes 194 real-life escape room players primarily from Moscow and Moscow region, 29 of whom also tried playing in a remote room at least once. Data analysis was based on frequency and contingency analysis using the Student's t-test and Chi-square test.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The COVID-19 pandemic, lockdowns, and travel restrictions have forced many tourist attractions to use online channels to interact with their visitors (Agostino et al., 2020; Vanderberg, 2020). Real-life escape rooms which have become popular tourist attractions (Kolar, 2017) were forced to close or use remote formats such as avatar-driven games via Zoom or other similar services (Spira, 2021). Nevertheless, some experts express doubts about remote escape rooms and their prospects in the post-pandemic world (Bass, 2020).

The present study is the first attempt to measure the experience of remote entertainment escape rooms' visitors. The evidence from the study shows that in remote format participants tend to note less emotional involvement, satisfaction, and loyalty intentions compared to offline escape rooms. Moreover, remote escape rooms provide a poorer level of participation, excluding participation in solving tasks. However, puzzles and tasks which becoming a less significant source of experience in offline escape rooms (Pakhalov and Rozhkova, 2020) are still commonly mentioned as the most memorable part of remote rooms.

The results indicate that the key factor preventing people from attending remote escape rooms is a perception of this attraction as entertainment with a lacking of atmosphere and physical interaction. A quarter of the respondents have heard of remote escape rooms for the first time, thus, lack of awareness might be also a significant barrier to the development of this format.

IMPLICATIONS

This study provides some useful insights for experience design strategy at the remote escape rooms. In particular, they could pay special attention to puzzles, and try to enhance the atmosphere using extended reality technologies (Kwok and Koh, 2020). Further research may focus on a deeper understanding of the remote escape experience through the use of neuromarketing methods. In particular, eye tracking or EEG (electroencephalography) studies, which were difficult to carry out in the offline escape rooms, may be easily implemented in the remote format.

KEYWORDS

Escape rooms, visitors' experience, experience design, remote game

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