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Karaoke elitism?

A qualitative look into the importance of singing ability in Japanese and Finnish karaoke

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Abstract:
This research was conducted to gain an understanding into how singers of the Japanese-invented form of singing entertainment known as karaoke view the importance of singing ability in karaoke, and what they consider to be the respective roles of the singer and the listener. A total of 6 semi-structured interviews were conducted on 3 Japanese informants and 3 Finnish informants to form 6 separate life history case studies, which were then thematically analyzed, and common themes identified.

The study found that greater self-rated singing ability of a respondent correlated with higher perceived importance of singing ability, and that a singer is expected to consider the listeners’ preferences and the mood of the occasion when deciding on which song to sing, but that lower singing ability is generally not a role conflict. It was also found that a Finnish-style karaoke bar is actually a low pressure singing environment when compared to the more intimate Japanese forms of karaoke, due to it being common and acceptable for listeners to not pay attention to the singer, while in Japanese karaoke social cohesion is higher.

Keywords: Japan, Finland, karaoke, singing
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1. Introduction

Karaoke is a form of entertainment invented in Japan, in which participants take turns singing popular songs into a microphone over a pre-recorded backing track, that has expanded from Japan and is well-known and popular across the world. Unlike many other forms of entertainment though, karaoke involves a performative aspect. The singers have to present their ability to sing to the other participants. This ability is possessed by different people to different extents. This research project was conducted to get an understanding of what Japanese and Finnish singers of karaoko consider to be the appeal of karaoke, to what extent they view singing ability to be important to the enjoyment of it, and what they see as the responsibilities of the singer and listener in karaoke.

I conducted semi-structured interviews of six people with karaoke experience, three Japanese and three Finnish, to find out their life history as it relates to karaoke. The interviews were interpreted to find out the importance of singing ability and pressures regarding it. The interviewees were chosen based on them having extensive enough experience of karaoke, so they were able to comfortably discuss issues related to it.

The background section of this study covers the history and current state of Japanese and Finnish karaoke, and provides a definition for what is meant by “singing ability” to provide context for the case studies. It also introduces “role theory” to provide the terminology which is used to discuss the respective roles of the singer and the listener. Section 2.2 presents an overview of research related to karaoke in Japan and Finland. The methods section introduces the “life history case study” methodology, discussing its strengths and weaknesses, as well as details of how the interviews were conducted. Following this, summaries and interpretations of the six interviews based on the interview transcripts are presented in the results section, and the discussion section discusses common themes in these results.

The aim of this study is to gain an understanding of how some Japanese and Finnish karaoke singers experience the role of the “singer” and the “listener” in karaoke, how they view the importance of singing ability, and what factors could be hypothesized to influence the differences in views, by the means of an analysis of 6 individual life history cases. This should be especially of interest to those concerned about whether they can muster the courage to sing karaoke due to a perceived lack in singing ability.
2. Background and previous research

2.1 Background

2.1.1 History of karaoke in Japan

Even before the invention of karaoke, it was a common part of Japanese drinking culture to have amateur singers perform to an accompaniment played by professional musicians called nagashi, but this earlier culture was replaced by karaoke starting from 1971 onwards due to the efforts Daisuke Inoue, often called “the father of karaoke” (Greimel, 2003). Although others had created karaoke machines before Inoue, such as the engineer Shigeichi Negishi in 1967, an advantage that Inoue had that men such as Negishi did not, was that Inoue was a nagashi himself. This helped him calm the objections of other nagashi, which had been a fatal problem to Negishi’s product, by appealing to their sense of pride as fellow nagashi, insisting that professionals such as they could not be replaced by mere machines. His background also helped him to create high quality backing tracks tailored to the abilities of amateur singers (Ugaya, 2008).

Inoue’s karaoke served as an alternative to hiring a nagashi, but it did nothing to change the demographics involved in amateur singing at drinking establishments, which meant that singers were still generally older men. The next major invention that paved the way for the current state of karaoke was the “karaoke box”, invented by the owner of a karaoke café, Youichi Satou, who had the idea of putting a karaoke machine into a shipping container box outside his café, allowing customers to rent it as a private karaoke room (Ugaya, 2008). This was a huge success, and vastly increased the accessibility of karaoke to demographics other than older men, with women, children and people uncomfortable singing in front of strangers also getting to enjoy karaoke. These shipping container karaoke boxes spread across Japan, increasing in number from the first one Satou invented in 1985 to there being over 50000 karaoke boxes in Japan just 5 years later. From 1990 and onwards the idea of a “karaoke box” was adapted to the city environment, and container boxes gave way to karaoke rooms, with the total number of karaoke rooms increasing to over 160 000 by 1996 (Kaji, 2010).

The final major technological advancement in the history of Japanese karaoke was the invention of karaoke systems capable of accessing a wireless network in the early 90s, allowing songs to be stored on a server and updated remotely, instead of having to use physical media. This invention by the scientist Yuuichi Yasutomo was used in 98% of karaoke establishments by the year 2007, and karaoke CDs and tapes became practically obsolete (Ugaya, 2008).

2.1.2 History of karaoke in Finland

Karaoke came to Finland in the spring of the year 1991, being established as an entertainment option in restaurants and bars, and quickly spread across Finland (Ritosalmi, 1993). There are at least two Finnish businessmen who claim to have introduced karaoke to Finland. One is Kalervo Kummola, an influencer famous in the realm of ice hockey, who describes hearing about karaoke from his Hong Kong-residing
brother, realizing its potential (Uotinen, 2018). He started a karaoke business in Finland in the early 90s, which nearly achieved monopoly status (Hiiteliä, 2015). The other is the businessman Kalervo Korvensyrjä, who recounts holding the first karaoke night ever held in Finland in 1981, with karaoke equipment received through business ties with the Mitsubishi Group. He describes karaoke becoming very popular among his work associates at a Finnish electronics company, but does not claim to have popularized it beyond these private connections (Anttila, 2004).

No comprehensive research has been done into how karaoke came to be popular in Finland, and Kummola’s claims, although widely quoted, have very few details, and do not seem to have much evidence supporting them. It thus seems likely that his story is at least not the whole story. Korvensyrjä’s claims do not contradict Kummola’s, and both could be considered to have brought karaoke to Finland, depending on how one interprets the claim. Finnish public karaoke is still confined to bars and restaurants like in the early 90s (Helin, 2007), with no push for karaoke boxes ever occurring.

2.1.3 Singing ability

In their 2014 study about the causes of poor singing ability, Hutchins, Larrouy-Maestri and Peretz write that although music is an important and universal aspect of culture, and singing is one of the most prevalent musical activities, many people are still poor singers, despite having no problems hearing or understanding music. They describe the most common cause of this being poor pitch control, an ability that is usually measured as the distance in pitch between the sung note and the target note. Pitch control comprises three parts, any one of which causes poor pitch control when not done properly. These are, perceiving the correct pitch, determining how to produce the same pitch with one’s vocal apparatus, and then enacting that motor command. Most cases of poor singing are due to problems with producing the correct sound, rather than with perceiving it. It has also been shown that only 4% of all people are entirely tone deaf, having the condition of “amusia”, which is the inability to perceive differences in pitch or follow a tune (Harvard Medical School, 2007), so poor singing in karaoke is unlikely to be due to innate factors. It should also be noted that having poor pitch control as measured here, is not necessarily the same as being a poor performer.

Although this study focuses on lack of singing ability as a possible hindrance to the enjoyment of karaoke, factors such as illiteracy can be a barrier as well, as karaoke relies heavily on the ability to read song lyrics (Lum, 2009).

2.1.4 Role theory

Biddle (1986) describes role theory as following:

Role theory concerns one of the most important characteristics of social behavior - the fact that human beings behave in ways that are different and predictable depending on their respective social identities and the situation. As the term role suggests, the theory began life as a theatrical metaphor. If performances in the theater were differentiated and predictable because actors were constrained to perform "parts" for which "scripts" were written, then it seemed reasonable to believe that social behaviors in other contexts were also associated with parts and scripts.
understood by social actors. Thus, role theory may be said to concern itself with a triad of concepts: patterned and characteristic social behaviors, parts or identities that are assumed by social participants, and scripts or expectations for behavior that are understood by all and adhered to by performers. (p. 68)

In *karaoke* there are two distinct modes of activity, singing and listening, and therefore two roles: the singer and the listener. *Consensus* is a concept in role theory, which is used when describing the expectations towards various roles held by people to signify that people agree on these expectations. Biddle (1986) criticizes the tendency of some role theorists to assume consensus in their premises, which in the case of this study would mean the assumption that hearing one interviewee describe what they feel to be the role of the singer means that other people they sing with agree with this view. Therefore, one of my goals is to discover how much of the role of the singer and the listener can be considered an inherent part of the activity known as *karaoke*, and how much, if even all of it, can vary from person to person. A related concept is the concept of role conflict, which is what happens when there is no true consensus, and people feel like someone is not behaving according to their role. It is also possible for more than two views on what a role should entail to exist in the same space, making harmony impossible due to conflicting expectations (Biddle, 1986).

### 2.2 Previous research

According to Mitsui & Hosokawa (1998), the practice of *karaoke* as well as its history has been documented in various publications since at least the year 1977, with the first academic observations by an overseas ethnomusicologist being published in 1984 (Keil & Feld, 1984), who described “*karaoke* as one of four examples of the simultaneous use of recorded sound and live performance in public that he observed in Japan” (Mitsui & Hosokawa, 1998, p. 12). Early *karaoke* research was especially focused on ethnographically describing the Japanese phenomenon to global audiences (Mitsui & Hosokawa, 1998), but later Japanese studies by no means abandoned such a methodology, with studies such as Shinobu (1998) using participatory methods, surveys and interviews to research middle-aged and older women’s relationship with *karaoke*, and Hotta (2019) analyzing a *karaoke*-singing situation to gain an understanding of how technology affects human interaction in *karaoke*, finding that modern *karaoke* technology facilitates human interaction instead of hindering it.

Research on *karaoke* has been conducted in Finland since the early 90s, when the Finnish ethnomusicological journal, “Musiikin Suunta”, published a special issue reviewing *karaoke* bars in the Finnish city of Tampere, as well as describing the history of *karaoke* in Finland (Finnish Ethnomusicological Society, 1993). Helin (2007) had a similar approach to this study, introducing the *karaoke* experiences of a group of Finnish *karaoke* singers with the goal of finding out what singing means to them, while Salovaara (2001) conducted case studies of five Finnish interviewees as a part of her research on the meaning *karaoke* holds for singers, finding that they all considered *karaoke* to be highly important to them, and that song choices might have a subconscious connection to the singer’s mood and past experiences.

Through her semi-structured interviews, Salovaara (2001) also found that four of the interviewees had dreamt of becoming a star or a famous professional singer,
something that karaoke supposedly fulfilled in their lives. It should be noted that she chose her interviewees based on them being the five most active singers of a certain karaoke bar, meaning that they were the cream of the crop when it comes to karaoke enthusiasts. While she describes how previous research has found that less experienced karaoke singers generally choose their songs based on what they feel the most confident singing, emphasizing factors like which songs their voices are suited to, and sticking to songs they are deeply familiar with, Salovaara’s five interviewees mostly chose based on which songs they like the most in general. Salovaara interprets this as experienced singers feeling more confident in choosing songs based on their music preferences.

Salovaara’s (2001) informants were generally of the opinion that karaoke contests are too serious and lose sight of the original purpose of karaoke, which is to have fun. It has also been found that some Finnish singers of karaoke do not consider professional singers all too welcome in casual karaoke spaces, considering it the domain of amateurs (Niiranen & Vanhanen, 1993). Both seem to suggest that singing as well as possible is not the highest purpose of karaoke, something that is echoed in Mitsui & Hosokawa (1998) writing how in Japanese karaoke a reluctant singer is “much more disliked” than a poor singer.

3. Methodology and Material

3.1 Data collection

I conducted a qualitative study into how frequent singers of karaoke view the importance of singing ability in karaoke, by the means of semi-structured interviews aimed at creating a life history case study of each of them. I chose a qualitative approach rather than a quantitative one, since my study is aimed at understanding in detail how karaoke singers experience karaoke, and such detail would be difficult to reach with quantitative methods. The Finnish interviews were conducted and transcribed in Finnish, while the Japanese interviews in Japanese.

Abubakar, Bakar and Abdullah (2008) describe qualitative research as providing definitive information regarding the opinions and behaviors of the subjects in the study, with a life history approach emphasizing the experiences of the individual. According to their paper, a life history approach was once deemed “inefficient and old fashioned”, with quantitative methods being more effective and reliable, but that eventually it was understood that quantitative methods miss a lot of information, and that they are lacking when attempting to answer questions related to understanding and explaining human experiences, and are difficult to utilize for gathering information about long time periods. They describe that a life history approach can be seen as having both general and specific purposes, with the general being focused on providing insights into the nature and meaning of lives, while the specific is about analyzing a life for a specific purpose, such as understanding their relationship with karaoke, in the case of this study. Abubakar, Bakar and Abdullah (2008) summarize, that the life history method “explores the subject’s experience and the meanings he/she attributes to the experiences.” Some of the weaknesses mentioned are the generally small sample size, the difficulty of generalization based on the gathered data, the difficulty of making systematic comparisons, as well as the dependency on the researcher’s personal attributes and skills.
As much of the subject material I need to cover to answer my research questions is related to feelings that could be categorized as negative by many, such as what the participants find to be annoying or problematic behavior in karaoke, and especially the extent to which they judge the singing abilities of others, it could be supposed that asking about these matters directly would not give an honest and accurate answer. As I found in my interviews, through both the various other topics as well as the direct question of how much the interviewees value singing ability, the views that could be gleaned from their overall story often differed from what they expressed directly, meaning that a life history approach might have given not only a comprehensive answer to the “why” better than a quantitative approach would have, but that the “what” could be considered more accurate as well.

I ended up conducting most of my interviews as remote interviews through the communication services Line, Skype and WhatsApp, with only one of the interviews being a physical interview at a karaoke bar in Finland, something that I believe was justified due to remote interviews having been shown to be a viable alternative to face-to-face interviews in past studies, with a reasonable set of both positives and negatives (Iacono, Symonds, & Brown, 2016), the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus at the time the interviews were conducted from late January 2020 to second half of February 2020, as well as this allowing for convenient access to remote interviewees.

I transcribed the interviews from recordings, and analyzed them for common themes, especially paying attention to statements alluding to judgments about the singing ability of others, and views about the responsibilities of the roles of singer and listener.

3.2 Instruments

The instrument I used was a semi-structured interview, which Bernard and Gravlee (2014) discuss as follows:

Open-ended, semi-structured formats facilitate the collection of new information with the flexibility to explore topics in-depth with informants. Meaningful comparisons across people may not be possible, however, because informants have been encouraged to discuss different items and so have not really been asked the “same” questions. (p. 353)

For a life history approach, the choice is conducting either unstructured or semi-structured interviews. Singh, Tebboth, Spear, Mesah and Davies (2018) compare the two methods, stating that the unstructured interview’s strengths are the possibility to decide what issues come up, allowing for flexibility, while also still being within boundaries set by the interviewer, while an unstructured interview allows for greater depth, and for the subject to answer in their own words, but has the possibility that the researcher’s topic of interest is not covered as much as the researcher could have hoped. I chose the semi-structured interview as my instrument due to its superior effectiveness in getting the subjects to talk about issues related to my research topic, which I believe to be more suitable for a life history approach focused on answering a specific question, although in a sense “forcing” the informant to discuss a topic they might not think of
otherwise could lead to data of questionable reliability, if the researcher’s topic is something not all too meaningful to the subject in the first place.

The general structure of my interviews was as follows:
1. Having the informant introduce themselves
2. Asking about their relationship and history with karaoke
3. Asking what they consider to be problematic behavior in karaoke
4. Asking what they feel to be the appeal of karaoke. Why do they personally enjoy karaoke?
5. Asking how they would define a karaoke enthusiast or hobbyist.
6. Asking how important they consider singing ability to be in karaoke
7. Asking how they view their own singing ability.

Questions 1 and 2 were important to get a general overview of who the informants are, 3, 4 and 5 are questions were singing ability might or might not come up depending on how important the informant considers it, and 6 and 7 were explicitly about singing ability.

Although not in the structure directly, I also often ended up asking directly about the roles and responsibilities of the singer and the listeners, when the informant said something related to the topic. I found questions 3 and 5 to be of varying usefulness, with 3 sometimes being a bit too vague to understand without examples, and if examples were given, the subjects would sometimes mostly only discuss what they thought about the examples I gave them. 5 I found to be particularly difficult to ask properly in Japanese, often finding no proper words to convey the question without using a loaded word for “enthusiast” or “hobbyist” that made the answer appear either obviously slanted to the side of singing ability being important, or to the side of singing frequency being important. The rest of the questions I found to be generally fruitful.

3.3 Respondents

My Japanese interviewees were Daichi and Tarou, two men in their 30s, and Haruka, a woman in her mid-20s. Daichi and Tarou have mostly sang karaoke in Tokyo, while Haruka has lived in Osaka and Kobe. My three Finnish interviewees were Kaisu, a woman in her 50s who’s from Helsinki, as well as Aino and Veera, two women in their late 20s, who are from Joensuu and Järvenpää respectively. As all three of the Finnish respondents were women, the study could have been strengthened by the addition of a male informant. All names used are pseudonyms to protect the privacy of the informants.

Daichi is the manager of a karaoke snack bar in the Shinjuku ward of Tokyo, who I met while gathering karaoke experience for a previous paper, while Tarou I met a few years ago when singing karaoke in Japan for the first time ever, at a karaoke meetup event. Haruka is also an acquaintance of mine from a few years back, but I was not aware that she liked karaoke before offhandedly mentioning the topic of this study.

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1 A snack bar is a bar with a counter that offers alcohol and food. Daichi’s bar is significantly larger than the average snack bar, consisting of a counter, a few tables, and a stage for karaoke.
to her, and her telling me that she loves karaoke and is up for being interviewed. Daichi and Tarou I chose due to having sung with them enough times that I was confident they were enthusiastic about karaoke, and would be open to be interviewed. I also knew both to have experience of more than a single type of karaoke establishment. I believe that knowing my Japanese interviewees from before, and even having sung karaoke with Daichi and Tarou, ended up being a benefit for establishing a positive rapport with the informants, which is considered important in interviewing (Spradley, 1979), as well as allowing for a more comprehensive understanding of their karaoke experiences, having been a participant in them, especially with the limitations of remote interviewing. Kaisu is a relative of mine who I was vaguely aware of liking singing, and found out that she is a karaoke enthusiast after starting to look for interviewees. Aino and Veera I found and got to accept to be interviewed by asking if my friends were aware of any karaoke singers, and both were considered to be lovers of karaoke, and felt confident in being knowledgeable enough to be interviewed.

4. Results

4.1 Summary of Daichi’s interview

Daichi is a Japanese man in his late 30s, who runs a karaoke snack bar in Tokyo’s Shinjuku ward. Although now having been involved with karaoke almost daily through his line of work for over a decade, he actually did not feel comfortable performing in front of people through his younger years, and therefore also disliking karaoke, and only singing it for the first time at the age of 25, even though the people around him were regularly going to karaoke since middle school. These days Daichi is a confident singer, being requested songs by customers as a part of his work daily, and has rather strict views about the importance of singing ability in karaoke, especially as it relates to the snack bar setting.

While acknowledging that singing in karaoke boxes is more common, Daichi only sings in them about once every two months, exclaiming that singing in a place with people is more interesting, and how he does not really have much need to since he gets to sing so much due to his work. Daichi considers alcohol consumption to be an inevitable part of bar culture, and therefore does not consider drunk singing to be a problem inherently, but things that he does find annoying are people singing kaeuta, songs with a familiar melody but new humorous lyrics, as well as people forcing performers to imitate the original singer, considering it fine if the singer wants to do it, but not when singers are pressured into it. He also dislikes people singing songs without practising them first elsewhere, especially when this is obvious through the singer being unable to properly sing the song.

Daichi believes there to be two primary appeals to karaoke, with the first being the ability to relieve stress through singing loudly, something that he says to be the case for both singing alone and with others. The other appeal is the possibility of meeting and getting to know new people by singing together, which he says to be especially the case when it comes to singing in snack bars, with Daichi being able to become friends with most people he meets through karaoke. When it comes to the importance of singing ability, Daichi believes the honing of one’s singing ability to be a major underlying goal of karaoke, since being able to sing and perform well also connects...
back to being able to make friends. Daichi also acknowledges the existence of people who like singing even though they are not good at it, with there being both people who are simply not aware that they are not singing well, as well as tone-deaf people. Daichi describes being a bit irritated seeing people he knows not to be good singers come to his bar, since this means he will have to listen to them sing again, but also says how this cannot be helped since they are not singing badly intentionally.

Although Daichi knows of people who are bad singers without knowing it, he also says it not to be at all unheard of that people openly criticize others’ singing, yell for them to stop, and even end their performance halfway through, with this sometimes even leading up to physical brawling, although Daichi says that the people who frequent his current bar know how to behave and would never start fighting. He believes that singing is 70% about one’s ability, and 30% about the voice one was born with, and tells how he himself was terrible at singing the first time he sang, due to not having the confidence to properly let out his voice, but evaluates himself as now being above average due to knowing how to properly handle a microphone, and how to properly use his voice, and considers the fact that he is requested to sing by customers practically daily to be proof of his singing not being unpleasant to listen to, although he adds that he is not good at getting high scores with a scoring feature available in karaoke systems. Regarding these scores, he believes that singing that sounds good to human listeners is not necessarily the same as what the machine considers to be good, and that there is a specific way of singing for getting a high score.

When singing to customers, Daichi naturally feels obligated to sing songs the customers will enjoy, and give as good of a performance as he can. When it comes to singing as a customer himself, he believes that in a bar environment the singer does have a responsibility to think of the people listening as well, giving as an example how certain bars have certain themes, and how it would not be proper to sing enka\(^2\) at a rock bar, or anime songs in an environment where everyone else is singing enka. As for whether something should be expected from the listeners, he says how reacting to performances varies from person to person, but that he personally believes that positive feedback should be proactively given to encourage a positive atmosphere, since karaoke is a group activity. His view of singing in a karaoke box with friends is that depending on the friends, you are free to sing however and whatever you like, even singing the same song multiple times for practice, while if you are singing with people from your workplace, you should adjust your song choices to fit in with them, be polite, and not play with your phone while others are singing.

Daichi is rather strongly of the opinion that singing ability is very important for karaoke, but it also seems natural how his perspective would result in this view, as he is more immersed in karaoke than probably any person whose work is not related to it could be. He is also practically professionally obligated to sing well himself, making it no wonder that he would value personal improvement highly.

4.2 Summary of Tarou’s interview

Tarou is a Japanese man in his 30s who I met the first time I ever sang karaoke in Japan, at an anime song karaoke meetup organized through a phone application.

\(^2\) A form of sentimental ballad music.
Tarou recalls karaoke becoming a massive phenomenon in the 90s when he was a middle schooler, and how during these early days song selection was done by searching for the song and its code from phonebook-like karaoke catalogue, a system he calls completely unthinkable in the modern day.

During these middle school days, he considers the strong point of karaoke to have been how it made it possible for an introverted kid who is bad at expressing themselves through words, to tell the people around them how they feel through choosing songs with appropriate lyrics, and allowing them to let our their voice even if they usually were quiet. He acknowledges that it is possible for an introverted and quiet kid to also find it difficult to sing in front of other people, but regarding this tells an anecdote about karaoke giving him a topic to talk about even with quiet kids, where he could ask about the kinds of songs they like at karaoke, and then even encourage them to sing something they liked, even if they were shy at first.

Being asked whether he found it easy to sing karaoke in front of other people from the very beginning, Tarou describes himself as having been born into rather blessed circumstances when it comes to music, due his mother graduating from a college of music, and his brother being a music aficionado. Tarou recounts how his family would always sing karaoke at night during hot springs vacations. As for why karaoke allows him to relief stress, he describes it as being the only time he feels he can stop being his usual quiet and introverted self and be loud. He also tells an anecdote of playing a game at karaoke in middle school, where they would enter a medley song, and then assign people randomly to sing the fragments of popular songs played in succession, with some kids just passing on when not familiar with a song, while others could successfully sing their part with made up words and even when faced with a song they did not know, and how this would reveal something about the personalities of the people participating. He explains how such a situation might make a kid who is usually in a leader-like position give up, while allowing for a more happy-go-lucky kid the time to shine when they could improvise through a tough situation. Tarou goes as far as to describe this as “revealing a person’s true nature”, where a shy kid could be revealed to be strong and reliable when push comes to shove, and the strong kid be revealed to actually be timid inside.

When it comes to how Tarou feels about rules and manners in karaoke, he believes that there really are no general rules that apply in every situation, with adjusting to the specific situation being important instead. The important thing is to consider how everyone could have a fun time. He is also completely fine with men singing songs originally sung by female singers and vice versa, stating that “karaoke is karaoke, not a concert”, and “if it’s a concert it’s important for the artist to sing well and with a great voice, but karaoke is about having a good time”. Regarding how he feels about people giving negative feedback to a singer, he says that it is completely fine to not sing well and be off-note, since the idea is to have fun, and that the one criticizing someone else is the one in the wrong. As a response to me pointing out how listening to someone not sing well might prevent someone from having fun, Tarou says that if someone cannot enjoy the singing, they should just pay attention to the background music and appreciate that instead, since if they like the background music, they could become interested in listening to the original back at home.

To Tarou the appeal of karaoke is in being able to express aspects of yourself you normally cannot express, and getting to know what is below the surface of your
friends through song and genre choices. Another one is sharing songs with your friends, and getting to know new songs from them in turn. Tarou believes that singing ability is not at all necessary for karaoke, but that if singing well is someone’s way of relieving stress, they are completely free to do so, while acknowledging that singing can be a way to relieve stress even when not singing well. He also mentions how even professional singers cannot score the maximum amount of points singing their own songs at karaoke, making the scoring feature especially meaningless, and says that it is also possible to give a performance perceived as pleasant by the listeners even if one’s rendition of a song differs significantly from the original.

In Tarou’s opinion, it is important for the singer to think about what they want to tell the listeners, for example, where the singer might acknowledge that they are not a great singer, but still want to introduce the listeners to a song, or to how great the rhythm of a particular song is, while for the listeners it is important to pay attention to what the singer is trying to tell them. To a question about his own singing ability, Tarou at first answers that he is absolutely terrible, then continuing that he does not even know how singing ability could be measured, saying that he has never even thought about it since it is not really related at all to karaoke. He explains how he has never even considered giving a good performance to be something important to him, and how instead he just aims to end every karaoke session on a positive note with the others present. He then relates an anecdote from his childhood, where his college of music-graduate mother would always point out his mistakes in tone and octave when singing, and how this would result in the situation being fun for neither the one being corrected, nor the one doing the correcting, nor the other people listening.

Tarou described partly in third person how karaoke was a tool for someone shy and quiet to open up in middle school, but at times he also described himself with these same descriptors, interestingly enough at another point describing himself encouraging a kid with similar traits to participate, seemingly suggesting that it was not just when he had a microphone in hand that he became extraverted and proactive, but instead that he was quite different when it came to karaoke in general. Although Tarou gave an extremely humble answer when it came to the topic of his singing ability now, his anecdote about the shy kid revealing their true nature through karaoke and reversing their standing with the kids who are usually more confident is something that could be seen as quite self-aggrandizing. This is most likely an indication that he was as a child a more confident singer than his classmates due to the musicality of his family, and that this gave him quite a confidence boost in general.

4.3 Summary of Haruka’s interview

Haruka is a 26-year-old Japanese elementary school teacher who specializes in English education. I have been acquainted with her for a few years, but only heard that she likes karaoke upon mentioning my research. I can recall a mutual friend commenting how Haruka has a nice voice, so if this translates to singing as well, it could have been an early clue that she might be into karaoke. She sings karaoke rather often with both foreign and Japanese friends, and is quite confident in her singing ability. Haruka’s little sister was also present for at least some of the interview, and commented at times as well.
According to Haruka, although singing karaoke alone is becoming popular in Japan lately, she prefers singing with friends, usually singing English songs when at karaoke with foreign friends, while mostly singing in Japanese when with Japanese friends. She says that this is because if she sang in English to her Japanese friends, they would not be able to understand her, and it might even come across as showing off. She also considers aligning her song choices with the preferences of her friends to be important to her in general, since singing ballads might make everyone depressed when sung in the wrong occasion, while singing happy songs might not always be ideal either. As an example she mentions going to karaoke between a wedding ceremony and an evening after-party, saying how singing sad songs there would be a complete faux pas, since singing happy songs after a wedding is common sense. Haruka also tells of a friend of hers who would practise songs from her boss’s generation, to be able impress them at karaoke and become closer with them, concluding that the people you are with and the atmosphere matters quite a lot for karaoke.

Regarding rules and manners in karaoke, Haruka dislikes people who sing too loudly by intentionally raising the volume of their microphone, with Haruka herself preferring to lower it. Haruka believes women singing songs originally sung by male singers to be normal, but does not think the opposite happens all that much. Upon hearing Haruka say this, her sister chimed in however, saying that it is not uncommon for men to sign songs by for example the Korean girl group “Twice”, as well as other songs they might like. Haruka does not think that there would be a firm rule preventing cross-gender singing, but thinks that sometimes it might be seen as embarrassing, and that people might be stuck to singing songs by their own gender since it is stereotypically “normal” to do so, and people do not want to go outside what is seen as normal. In addition to singing in karaoke boxes, Haruka also tells of singing using a home karaoke machine as a child, something she says was only really popular among girls, with boys preferring to play video games. Haruka ponders that elementary school and middle school boys just might not be into singing, but also that she does not see gender affecting who likes karaoke as an adult.

To Haruka the appeal of karaoke is in allowing for stress relief by giving the chance to let out your voice and be loud, as well as being convenient during various short downtimes between other activities, since a karaoke room can be rented for whatever timespan suits the situation. She considers singing ability to be only somewhat important, preferring to listen to good singers rather than bad ones. Haruka also states that she has many friends who are tone-deaf, although she heard from a music teacher that this is a condition than can be cured through effort. She does not go all the way into saying that only the sky is the limit in how much they could improve through practise, instead believing that they should be able to at least get to a level where it would not be painful to listen to them anymore. Haruka stresses how singing voice is also important, with those with a good singing voice being pleasant to listen to even as beginners. Although Haruka does not consider herself to have any special background in singing, she later reveals that her university had regular singing tests due to it being a necessary skill for an elementary school teacher, something that could be considered an advantage. When asked about her singing ability, she says that she probably is better than average, being able to generally score around 89-90 points with the scoring feature present in karaoke machines, a score that is actually extremely high, although she mentioned this completely nonchalantly, saying that truly good people can “probably” get close to a
hundred. This “probably” could be seen as possibly indicating that she is not personally aware of any such people.

To my question whether she has many friends who like karaoke but are not good singers, she answers in the affirmative with no hesitation. She also believes that people who get told that they are tone-deaf generally actually are so, and people who get told that they are good generally are good, so people usually have an idea about which category they are in. Even if someone thinks they are good, and tries to argue back when told that they are not, they generally really are at least close to tone-deaf. She also believes that tone-deaf people usually have been told that they are tone-deaf, and offhandedly says that her sister is tone-deaf. She reaffirms this upon my exclamation of surprise, to make the point that it is normal to say it at least to her sister, although Haruka acknowledges that this might only be since they are family. According to Haruka’s sister, the reason she knows that she is not good at singing is that Japan has singing tests multiple times a year all the way until high school, and she always got bad marks from these tests, with her teacher even once reflexively uttering a negative comment just as she finished singing. Haruka’s sister apparently avoids karaoke due to this, almost never singing.

Haruka believes that the singer has a responsibility to choose songs that the listeners preferably know, and that fit the tone of the occasion, and that the listeners have a responsibility to pay attention to the singer, and not play with their phones. Haruka is definitely very confident as a singer, something that can be seen both in her directly saying that she is above average, and scoring in a range that she doubtlessly knows to be a high score with the scoring feature. She is also rather harsh about throwing around the word “onchi”, or “tone-deaf” at people she does not consider to be good singers, although regarding her sister she said that a better teacher would have given her advice and encouragement instead of just criticism.

4.4 Summary of Kaisu’s interview

Kaisu is a Finnish woman in her 50’s, who has a long history of singing karaoke, stating that she has sung it since the time it was first introduced to Finland in the very same suburban bar I conducted the interview in. Kaisu lives upstairs from the bar, and her familiarity with the establishment was apparent from both her telling of how the bar has changed owners over the years, as well as her descriptions of how karaoke was sung before, and how it is sung now. Kaisu had went through singing school before karaoke even landed in Finland, and therefore was capable of describing matters related to singing in technical terminology. Most likely at least somewhat owing to this background, she was also very confident about her own singing ability.

Kaisu described karaoke having been sung at the venue in mostly the same way over the years. The technology used in particular has went through very little changes, with the prospective singer browsing a booklet with song names, singers and song codes listed, and then writing their own name, the song’s name and the song code on a piece of paper, and then taking the piece of paper to the bartender or a guest karaoke disc jockey. Kaisu told me that normally it is acceptable to submit only three to five papers at once, but that she would at her most enthusiastic hand in up to 10 of such papers in one go, and it would then be up to the one managing the situation to space out the performances as such that one singer would not monopolize the spotlight for too long.
The list of upcoming performers and songs would be shown on the television screen used to display lyrics during a performance, but also announced to make sure the singer is aware that their performance is about to begin.

Kaisu tells of herself singing with such abandonment and passion, that she would completely shut out her surroundings during a performance, entering a "world of music", from which she would be forced to return to the real world only upon hearing the applause of the listeners. She describes her mental state during a performance as such that she is only singing to herself, or imagining a loved one and singing to them, and then to her shock noticing that there was indeed a crowd of bar-goers listening in once the song ends, the moment from which she would be already restlessly looking forward to her next turn. Kaisu describes it as being normal for the other patrons to keep chatting during other’s performances and not really paying attention, but also describes gleefully how when it is her turn everyone does go silent. It could be that she is simply so taken in by her own singing, and so deep in her "world of music", that she simply does not notice the chatter, or that the people present indeed do pay more attention to better singers. Kaisu describes herself being often asked to sing particular songs by various people, something which I found very believable due to another middle-aged lady present requesting songs from Kaisu even during the interview.

To Kaisu the appeal of karaoke is in having a good time, being with friends, and feeling a sense of togetherness with the other participants. She also mentions “talking with friends” to be a part of spending time with friends even when it comes to karaoke, which seems to suggest that enjoying karaoke has more dimensions than just performing and listening to other people’s performances. Kaisu also describes it being not all that uncommon for her to sing along with the performer from the audience, which she first stated to be a “bad habit”, but upon questioning further, described very positively as a sign of a good atmosphere at the venue. She also told of the whole audience sometimes joining in to sing along with the performer, with her framing of this being rather interesting. She described how she is often the first one to start singing from the audience, with this triggering the other people to start singing along with her, therefore in a sense situating herself as the prime mover as opposed to the one actually performing.

While it is apparent that Kaisu thinks very highly of her own singing, she also describes herself as being very self-critical and a “perfectionist”, sometimes even ending songs halfway through when she feels like the song is not going as well as she would have hoped, showing two thumbs down to signify her displeasure. She tells of wanting to do everything about a performance absolutely perfectly, starting from the moment she picks up a pen to fill in her song of choice to a piece of paper, and has the habit of showing two thumbs up when she feels like she gave a great performance. According to Kaisu, even when the people around her tell her that she did great, and that she should go easier on herself, this is to no avail when she feels that she did not meet her own high standards, which she says stems from her grandmother always correcting her singing of Christmas carols as a child until every note was perfect. Kaisu speaks of this perfectionism as something that she would like to eventually overcome if possible.

Although Kaisu did not say anything about the actual performing and singing aspect of karaoke when asked about what she sees as the appeal of karaoke, she does feel that singing ability is an important part of karaoke, going as far as to say that if one is singing karaoke a lot all the time, but is still bad at it, they should just stop singing,
from which she continues, that to her the main thing about karaoke is giving a perfect performance. She also believes fully that people can improve a great deal by just singing karaoke even if they are not great at first, so although she gave a harsh answer regarding a hypothetical person not improving, it is most likely not her view that this a common occurrence in any sense. She also did not really seem too bothered by other people not singing perfectly in general, only describing drunkards bothering her while she is singing as behavior that she seems as a real problem. She described a possible motivation for this drunken trouble making to be jealousy of her singing ability, a motive she also attributed to a particular karaoke disc jockey she did not get along with.

All in all, when it comes to how Kaisu views the relationship between the singer and the listeners, it is clear that she feels a significant amount of pressure to give a flawless performance, but there is no indication that the audience is the source of this pressure, as Kaisu describes herself as being her own biggest critic, and makes no mention of ever getting any negative feedback from others, instead talking about other people being jealous of her. She feels that it is up to the listeners to cheer on the performer, at least giving them the bare minimum of applause, but also feels that someone consistently giving bad performances should not really be singing, making it clear that to her singing ability definitely is an important factor when it comes to the enjoyment of karaoke.

4.5 Summary of Aino’s interview

Aino, a Finnish woman in her late 20s, has mostly experienced singing karaoke as a part of nightlife in Joensuu (a small student city in eastern Finland). She describes it being commonplace in Joensuu for even non-karaoke bars to have a separate karaoke section, and how she often sings a few songs when out with friends, since opportunities to sing are so plentiful and a natural part of the nightlife there. Her friends often ask her to perform at karaoke, signifying that she is considered a good singer by them. Aino guesses that her first karaoke experience was probably at a family gathering, with both her godmother and her parents owning personal karaoke machines that Aino says were popular around 15 years ago. In addition to singing with personal karaoke machines, she also recalls singing karaoke using the game “Singstar” at her friend’s house, although she thinks the microphones were of lower quality than what the karaoke machines came with.

She describes karaoke being available in not just bars in Joensuu, but night clubs as well, and describes karaoke as being very popular among all people, and not just limited to a certain group of enthusiasts. Her experience is that it is common for people to go to these karaoke spaces in groups, but usually only a few people of any such group sing, with the rest just tagging along. She recounts that it is more common for people to sing alone, but that it is also possible for even larger groups to sing together, especially when energized by alcohol. At a quieter time, there may be just a few other singers in addition to her group of friends, but at more popular times there can be even several dozens of people.

Aino also describes there being a karaoke bar in Joensuu that has two separate sides for karaoke, with one being for singing in Finnish and the other being for singing in English, something that would not be possible without significant numbers of customers interested in karaoke. At this bar songs are entered into the karaoke system
by using a smartphone application, but smaller bars still have singers write their song requests on pieces of paper. She seems to consider digital systems to be more commonplace than analogue ones, with songs being entered into a monitor of some kind being rather standard.

According to Aino, the most common feedback that singers get from the audience is a round of unenthusiastic clapping, with only the upper echelons of singers inspiring words of praise and more energetic shows of excitement. She has never experienced anyone being booed at by the audience, and thinks that this would be a nasty thing to do to a singer if it did happen, although more so than the atmosphere being positive, it is the case that people generally ignore the singer and talk with the friends they came with. In addition to singing at karaoke bars and nightclubs, Aino has also recently sung at a private karaoke room for her brother’s birthday party, which could be reserved from a karaoke bar. She describes how songs were selected from a Spotify-like list, and how the staff at the venue prepared a bottle of alcohol and sodas for the customers to mix drinks by themselves. Participants also paid more attention to the singer, and expressions of appreciation were more authentic than in an environment where most of the people listening are strangers. She also considers it to be an advantage of a private room that waiting times are much shorter, and as such it is easier to try a larger variety of songs.

Aino views singing ability as a rather important part of karaoke, and thinks that people who enjoy karaoke are probably fond of their own voice, although admitting that it is possible for someone to like their own voice and think of themselves as a competent singer even if this is not in fact the case. She says that improvement of one’s singing ability and ability to perform well is probably something that is a consideration to most people who enjoy karaoke. Aino herself has a background of taking singing classes at a music school, and considers herself to be a capable singer, something that she considers to be a factor in her enjoyment of karaoke. Even though she herself has singing experience outside of karaoke, she does not believe it to be a requirement for karaoke in any way, and believes that people with no singing experience are welcome to try karaoke as well, and that one can improve just by singing karaoke.

As for why Aino enjoys karaoke, she states at least one of the factors to be her enjoyment of singing due to her background in it, but interestingly she also feels a sense of regret the next day after singing, thinking thoughts such as “why did I have to sing again…” . She is not capable of pinpointing exactly why, as she feels this way regardless of how the singing actually went, but as she also specifies it being related to singing in a public space, perhaps it could be related to the lowering of inhibitions due to alcohol consumption being a factor in allowing for the bravery to sing in front of a roomful of strangers. Aino naturally prefers listening to competent performances herself, but considers alcohol to be an inseparable part of Finnish nightlife culture, and does not consider drunk singers to be a big problem. Instead, people singing songs she dislikes, and people not showing up when it is their turn are some of the things she is sometimes annoyed about.

Although Aino feels that singing ability is important, and is most likely proud of her own singing ability, it does not seem that she feels that there is any significant dynamic of pressure between the singer and the listeners. She prefers listening to good singers, but shows no indication of expecting performers to be good singers. She feels a bit embarrassed the morning after a night of singing, but I do not think that this is
necessarily at all related to various pressures present in karaoke, but rather due to having put herself on a pedestal in a manner that is not completely ordinary for her.

4.6 Summary of Veera’s interview

Veera is a Finnish woman in her mid-20s, who has mostly sung karaoke during nights out with her friends in her hometown of Järvenpää (a southern town close to the capital of Helsinki). Rather interestingly although she describes karaoke being a common part of nightlife in Järvenpää, and having therefore partaken in it many times, she has only sung with her friends, and considers the prospect of singing alone impossible for her. Her first karaoke experiences were with the home karaoke video game Singstar, as well as on cruises with her family.

In addition to specialized karaoke bars also existing, she describes many bars in Järvenpää having special karaoke sections, and that the only technology she herself has experienced is one where singers write their song of choice on a piece of paper that is given to staff, who then queue the performance, a system that she considers rather antiquated, and as being like something invented in the 80s. Her impression is that although some people who sing karaoke are actually there to give as good of a performance as possible, it is more common that the ones singing are those who are the most intoxicated, with their friends looking on with embarrassment. She describes people generally not paying much attention to the average drunken singer, but that skilled singers do get positive attention, although everyone does earn the bare minimum of applause. She sees there being two appealing aspects of karaoke, one being just having fun, exemplified by singing after having some drinks, or getting on the stage with friends, and another being just enjoying the act of singing.

Veera usually sings in groups of 4 to 5 people, and recounts how with there usually only being two microphones available, everyone is trying not to be the one directly in front of a microphone, in an effort to hide their voice from standing out. Although Veera prefers listening to better singers, she does not consider singing ability something necessary for karaoke, and also considers other factors that relate to the entertainment value of a performance, such as the singer having a relaxed and fun aura, and taking control of the space with their presence through the use of body language. She does not think that anyone is too bad of a singer to perform in karaoke, but does sometimes feel that some singers are too drunk.

Veera does not considers herself a good singer, going as far as saying that she is not capable of holding a note at all. She also describes herself as an unremarkable singer in the sense that she does not really stand out from others when singing, and as such believes herself to be incapable of performing on her own. She cites the overall low level of performances on any given night at karaoke due to the prevalence of drunken singing as a reason for why she believes that no singing ability is necessary for karaoke. Veera also describes not even really feeling like she is performing to the other people present when she is singing, since usually they are not paying attention anyway, and Veera’s performance is just something going on in the same room. If there is an audience at all, Veera feels it to be the friends she came with.

According to Veera, most people are only comfortable singing in Finnish, and as such most of the songs on any given night will be in Finnish. Veera describes song selection happening by browsing a song booklet until spotting the right song for the
moment, indicating that the availability of songs in the booklet is the primary factor when it comes to choosing what to sing, rather than deciding what one wants to sing and then checking to see whether it is available. Veera’s impression is that the vast majority of songs performed are Finnish classics that everyone is familiar with, something that Veera sees as having many positive aspects, such as everyone being more likely to be able to enjoy the performance and get in the right mood, as well as the singer being able to feel more confident that they know the song inside and out and can perform it well.

When it comes to Veera’s experiences with Singstar as a child, she tells of always playing it with her friends or her sister, with her considering singing alone being a somewhat strange proposition in the first place, due to singing being more fun with someone else present, and always having been a shared activity for her. Although she considers singing not be a pastime exclusive to girls in any sense, she recounts everyone she knew to have Singstar at home being a girl, and boys not playing it even if present when it was played. She does not really know what could have influenced this, stating that it might have something to do with bravery or some such, and does not mention such gender dynamics transferring over to the world of adults and karaoke.

Veera’s experiences with karaoke do not seem to hold an element of pressure exerted on the singer by the audience, with Veera describing it being common for the listeners to mostly ignore what goes on on the stage unless someone particularly skilled or entertaining is performing. For Veera, always performing in a larger group and describing herself as trying to hide her own voice under the voices of her friends, the feeling of pressure would also be especially diluted. Although entertaining or thinking about the listeners is not an important element of karaoke for her, karaoke is still an activity where the presence of other people is essential, but in the form of co-singers instead of listeners.
5. Discussion

Table 1 is a way of visualizing and simplifying how I interpret the case studies, but it should be noted that information is lost when translating complex answers into single words, and it is not impossible that someone else might summarize the same person’s views differently. The categories were chosen based on the importance of singing ability and the roles of the singer and the listener being directly related to my research question, while the informants’ views of the purpose of karaoke and their perceptions of their own singing abilities are important complementary factors.

Table 1: Views of the interviewees on key issues

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Daichi Japanese, Male, Late 30s</th>
<th>Tarou Japanese, Male, Mid-30s</th>
<th>Haruka Japanese, Female, Mid-20s</th>
<th>Kaisu Finnish, Female, Mid-50s</th>
<th>Aino Finnish, Female, Late 20s</th>
<th>Veera Finnish, Female, Late 20s</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Purpose of karaoke</td>
<td>Stress relief, making friends and improving at singing</td>
<td>Stress relief, expressing yourself and getting to know people</td>
<td>Stress relief, convenience between other activities</td>
<td>Having a good time, feeling a sense of togetherness</td>
<td>Enjoying singing</td>
<td>Having fun with friends</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of singing ability</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Completely irrelevant</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Important</td>
<td>Says that important, but elsewhere not judgmental</td>
<td>Not all that important</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of own singing ability</td>
<td>Capable</td>
<td>Terrible?</td>
<td>Great</td>
<td>Superb</td>
<td>Capable</td>
<td>Terrible</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility of singer to listeners</td>
<td>Adjusting to the occasion</td>
<td>Communicating with them through song and adjusting to the occasion</td>
<td>Adjusting to mood and preferences</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>Keeping up a good mood</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Responsibility of listeners to singer</td>
<td>Positivity and respect</td>
<td>Extreme positivity and receptivity</td>
<td>Listening attentively</td>
<td>Not bothering and clapping</td>
<td>Clapping</td>
<td>Clapping</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Regarding the purpose of karaoke, one thing each of the interviewees agrees on is that the idea is to have fun, although opinions on how exactly this should be done differ. Unlike any of the Finnish interviewees, each of the Japanese interviewees mentioned stress relief as a major goal of karaoke. This could be interpreted as a sign of Japan being a high stress society, although the Global Gallup Emotions Report (Gallup,
2019) found that Japan and Finland are not too different in this regard, with 39% of Japanese and 35% of Finnish people having experienced a high amount of stress in the past day at the time of the study, ranking as #53 and #77, respectively. A previous study on stress relief through karaoke (Matsumoto, Tagaya & Kitayama, 2015), based on a survey of Japanese university students, also found having fun, enjoying singing and stress relief to be the main purposes of singing karaoke, but in existing research on Finnish karaoke, such as Innanen (2000) and Salovaara (2001), stress relief does not come up as a purpose of karaoke as expressed by informants.

Singing ability is overall seen as rather important, with Kaisu, Daichi and Haruka seeming even somewhat judgmental about bad singers, while Aino says that it is important when directly asked, but does not really show this elsewhere like the others. Veera does not consider singing ability to be important, going as far as to state that no singing ability is required for karaoke, but seems to consider poor singing due to extreme drunkenness significantly more prevalent than Kaisu and Aino, which could signify a judgmental attitude. Tarou is vehemently of the opinion that consideration of singing ability has no place in karaoke. Interestingly, but perhaps not unsurprisingly, there seems to be a noticeable correlation between the informants’ views on the importance of singing ability, and their own perceived singing ability, with better singers generally considering singing ability to be more important.

Haruka and Daichi both mention the Japanese word for “tone-deaf”, “onchi”, when talking about poor singers, and while they do not necessarily mean the condition of amusia, or actual tone-deafness, I still view this as a rather harsh way of talking about the matter. Although none of the Finnish interviewees mention the Finnish equivalent, I could imagine someone using the word to describe themselves, but using it to talk about others does not seem common in Finnish. Daichi also told of a former colleague of his who could not improve no matter how much he practised, and Haruka believes that while most “tone-deaf” people can improve through practise, they should not have too high expectations, signifying that there might be a sense that being a poor singer is somewhat of a hopeless condition. Both Daichi and Haruka also emphasized the importance of natural singing voice, something that did not really come up at all in any of the other interviews. Based on my interview with Haruka, the word onchi seems to hold a greater meaning than simply saying that someone is a bad singer, since she described a music teacher telling her that being onchi can be fixed through practice, implying that this is not obvious.

Another interesting point from the Japanese interviews is that both Daichi and Tarou brought up the scoring feature in Japanese karaoke systems, saying that they are not great scorers, but also that it does not have much to do with real singing ability, while Haruka brought up her high average scores when asked about her singing ability, suggesting that getting lower scores correlates with belief that the system is a bad judge of singing ability. It should be noted that, as discussed in section 2.1.3, poor pitch control, which is measured by contrasting target note with sung note, is the most common cause of poor singing ability, and is also what karaoke scoring systems measure. It is also true, that being able to give a good performance in karaoke, as measured by people, is about more than just pitch control.

As for the responsibility of the singer, Kaisu and Aino make very little mention of giving any consideration to listeners present, while the rest believe that considering the audience and occasion is a factor, and the singer should not just sing whatever
pleases them personally. Significantly for the topic of this study, it would seem that considering singing ability important is rather unrelated with believing that being the singer is a high-responsibility role. Fulfilling the singer’s role seems to be related more with choosing the correct songs, rather than singing ability.

Although a previous study (Förnas, 1994), has suggested that a fundamental difference in Eastern karaoke and Western karaoke is that where the Japanese go specifically to sing when they go to karaoke, in the West it is more common to only go to listen, and then be pressured to sing by friends, which is stated to be a reason why karaoke can cost money in Japan, while in the west asking for money would make the already big hurdle insurmountable, neither Aino nor Veera considered pressuring someone to sing something that occurs in karaoke. This could be something more common in male karaoke culture, though, and would require further study with male informants.

Kaisu, Aino and Veera believe that clapping when a song is over is all that is expected of the listeners, while the Japanese interviewees expect the listeners to listen to and respect the singer. This is discussed further below, as venue is an important factor.

Table 2: Views of the interviewees on key issues by venue

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Venue</th>
<th>Importance of singing ability</th>
<th>Responsibility of singer to listeners</th>
<th>Responsibility of listeners to singer</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Karaoke bar (Finnish)</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low: only clapping.</td>
<td>Low</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karaoke box with friends (Japanese)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High: paying attention</td>
<td>Very high</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karaoke box with colleagues/strangers (Japanese)</td>
<td>Medium</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>High</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Karaoke snack bar (Japanese)</td>
<td>High</td>
<td>Low</td>
<td>Low</td>
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</tbody>
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Before conducting this study, I would have expected the Finnish karaoke bar to be the most stressful of the karaoke venues, due to singers having to perform to crowds of strangers from a stage or other exposed location, but the results of this study indicate the exact opposite, with the vital factor being that according to all three Finnish interviewees, “listeners” do not actually listen to the singer, unless they are particularly good. The karaoke environment with the highest pressure on the singer is actually the Japanese karaoke snack bar, due to having to sing to a smaller crowd of complete strangers in a more intimate space than the Finnish karaoke bar. Singing at a karaoke box with strangers or colleagues can have some similar elements, with especially the need to consider the occasion and the other participants being highly important, but due to the social aspect of everyone having agreed to enter the same room to spend time together, expectation of singing ability can probably not be considered as high as for a snack bar. With the usual karaoke box experience, where one is singing with friends, although respecting others and minding the mood of the occasion is still important, there is some leeway due to friends knowing each other’s habits, and getting along with everyone being the obvious expectation. While singing a non-enka song at a snack bar
where everyone else is singing *enka* is likely to get a negative reaction due to *role conflict*, among friends this would be a lot more likely to be tolerated.

Ogawa (1998) writes of the rules of karaoke in a Japanese bar or party setting, that as long as people clap at the end of a performance, it is acceptable to chat with others or browse through the list of songs during a performance. This description fits the modern Finnish *karaoke* bar perfectly, and also contradicts nothing Daichi told of the modern Japanese snack bar, although it should be noted that this really is only a description of what is expected of the listeners at the bare minimum, and does not mean that all other factors between the two are the same as well.

As Daichi describes, meeting people with attitude problems is also a possibility in a snack bar due to no selection happening inherently. When singing with friends, if someone is causing trouble, you can simply not go to karaoke with them again, while in a more public environment anyone is free to be there. I would judge the responsibility of the listener to be low for the karaoke snack bar, as the singer is probably not in a position to demand attention from other customers, while in a karaoke box with strangers or people like colleagues, respectful behavior becomes essential.

Ogawa (1998) describes the difference between a karaoke party among coworkers, and karaoke box singing among young people being, that with groups of coworkers the idea is that a heterogeneous group of people unified by a feeling of belonging to the same group gets to know each other better, therefore increasing group cohesiveness, while young people go to sing simply for the pleasure of singing, with no conversation between participants occurring. “In general, conversation among participants does not exist. In other words, it is avoided naturally.” (Ogawa, 1998, p. 46) He describes this by writing that “the relationship may be very superficial, but there exists a human relationship which can be constructed only by sharing the pleasure of singing.” (Ogawa, 1998, p. 46) This seems rather judgmental, and elevates “adult” singing above lesser, pleasure-seeking singing by young people. This description is also contradicted by Tarou’s stories of him seeing karaoke both as a way to express his thoughts, and as a way to understand others since middle school, in addition to karaoke opening up music-related discussion topics with people he usually did not talk with. It is true that chatter during someone’s performance is frowned upon, but based on my own experiences as well, the time in between songs is generally spent conversing, not to mention all the other spare time involved when a group of friends goes to karaoke, with the walk there and back, as well as downtime in the lobby while waiting for and setting up a room.

Ogawa (1998) also describes the karaoke bar manner of clapping after every performance fading away in a karaoke box setting, summarizing that there is little interaction between participants, with them being connected only through staring at the same television screen. This seems so completely separated from the karaoke box culture that Tarou and Haruka described, and the one I have experienced, that it is hard to imagine what could be behind such a depiction. Perhaps it could be the case that karaoke box culture has become more interactive since the 90s? It is not clear from Ogawa’s description of karaoke box culture what methodology was used to reach these findings, but it could be the case that the presence of an observer influenced the situation into a less lively direction. Hotta’s (2019) recent study into the effects of technology on human interaction in karaoke, finding that technology supports human interaction instead of hindering it, challenged these claims, while also suggesting that
whether or not modern karaoke is somehow less social than older forms is still a relevant topic of discussion in modern karaoke discourse. Tarou’s middle school experiences of vibrant social interaction in karaoke were from around the time these claims were made as well. It is not impossible to see though, how the more private box karaoke might have inspired views of it being inherently less social than bar karaoke in older karaoke singers. Hotta (2019) also noted that more research is needed on the effects of technology on karaoke situations where “deviant” behavior is exhibited, such as the listeners not listening, or the singer singing songs that no one else knows. Based on my interviews, the karaoke equipment itself does not seem to be a common source of unsocial behavior, but mobile phones can be a hindrance to group cohesion in karaoke boxes.

I believe my methodology was appropriate for my intended purpose of understanding some of the perspectives Japanese and Finnish karaoke singers might have on the importance of singing ability in karaoke. With just six informants though, three for each country, it can by no means be said that all possible perspectives were taken into account. In the case of Aino and Veera for example, where both are women of similar age, and similarly sing karaoke as an activity when going out with friends, a difference in geographic location and personal background still led to significant differences in experience and opinion. I would consider my informants to successfully represent the varieties of karaoke most common in both countries, and it seems unlikely that they are outliers.
6. Conclusions

All informants thought the goal of *karaoke* to be having a good time, with the Japanese informants also sharing the view of stress relief being an important goal. There would seem to be a correlation between considering oneself to be a good singer, and believing singing ability to be important in *karaoke*, with four of the six interviewees considering singing ability important, while only three of them showed clear attitudes of expecting good singing ability from others.

I had planned to find out whether the *role* of the singer in *karaoke* is seen as that of one who is expected to entertain the audience, which I had assumed would be directly linked to a demand for singing ability, but instead my findings suggest that while there generally is an expectation that the singer gives consideration to the listeners and chooses songs that the listeners will enjoy, this seems to be largely unrelated to expectations of singing ability.

The role of the listener holds very little expectations in a Finnish *karaoke* bar environment, while paying attention to the singer’s performance is expected in a Japanese *karaoke* box setting. The “listeners” should perhaps not be called listeners at all when it comes to a Finnish *karaoke* bar, as the impression that the case studies give is that aside from the expectation to clap when a performance ends, the *karaoke* in a *karaoke* bar is almost not even a shared activity. One would not call a group of chatting people television “watchers” just for being in the same room with a television, even if they once in a while turned to look when something especially interesting is shown on screen.

Both Aino and Veera played the *karaoke* video game *Singstar* as a child, and described how boys were usually not interested in participating, something that matches my experiences from elementary school, but most interestingly, Haruka also described a similar phenomenon, with a home *karaoke* machine that only girls were interested in being popular when she was in elementary school. Studying why boys are not interested in singing entertainment, and whether this affects a later relationship with *karaoke*, such as girls possibly having an advantage in singing experience, could prove to be interesting. A study on how Japanese perceive the word *onchi*, or “tone-deaf”, to find out whether it is commonly thought of as a permanent condition or not could also be interesting.


