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Fine-dining in prisons: Online TripAdvisor reviews of The Clink training restaurants.
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ABSTRACT

This study evaluated customer reviews about The Clink restaurants to understand how they are rated and what experience is gained by fine dining in a prison. The Clink Charity runs training restaurants in four U.K. prisons and aims to change attitudes and transform lives through prisoner rehabilitation. This research used an interpretive case study of the Clink restaurants to evaluate online customer reviews posted on TripAdvisor. In total, 3951 reviews were analysed using Leximancer 5.0. The most prominent themes were Food: ‘fine-dining in prisons’, Visit: ‘The Clink ambassadors’, and Prison: ‘the inside and outside divide’. Despite the prison location, customers reported having exceptional, professional and memorable dining experiences delivered by highly trained chefs, and that the front of house staff would rival those in many fine-dining restaurants. Further research is required to confirm how dining at a Clink restaurant may have potentially begun to change the public perceptions of prisoners.

Keywords:
Prison, hospitality industry, training restaurants, Leximancer, TripAdvisor, customer reviews
1. Introduction

Representing about one-fifth of all employment opportunities in developed countries, the hospitality industry is viewed as suitable for training and employment opportunities of marginalised groups in society. There exists a vast range of hospitality training and employment programmes worldwide aiming to help the marginalised populations transition into the industry. These include programmes for prisoners (e.g., Beier, 2015), refugees (e.g., Collins et al., 2017), and youth with disabilities (e.g., McIntosh and Harris, 2018), among others. They benefit training and/or employment schemes and hospitality management in general, providing an alternate workforce amid issues of high staff turnover and staff shortages that characterise the industry (Meier, 1991). The schemes also engender wider societal impact; for example, through transition planning, rehabilitation or reducing recidivism. In such cases, hospitality is seen as a source for social good (Cockburn-Wootten et al., 2014).

This study focuses on a hospitality training programme provided in four United Kingdom (U.K.) prisons. The Clink Charity U.K. was founded to reduce recidivism by breaking the cycle of crime and changing public perceptions of prisoners, creating second chances, and transforming lives (https://theclinkcharity.org/). It aims to do this through prisoner rehabilitation initiatives provided in partnership with Her Majesty’s Prison Service, including the operation of four restaurants in prison buildings: The Clink Restaurant High Down (the first restaurant to open, in 2009), The Clink Cardiff (2012), The Clink Brixton (2014), and The Clink Styal (2015). Each Clink restaurant is a registered catering college that provides a purposeful training environment in which prisoners can learn the self-discipline, skills, and habits that will prepare them for hospitality employment once released. Clink ‘graduates’ have found successful employment in hospitality establishments ranging from high street catering firms to luxury hotels (Young, 2017). Furthermore, The Clink Charity (2021) has recorded a
65.6% reduction in reoffending among prisoner graduates from its hospitality training programmes.

The four Clink restaurants cater for 90–120 customers at a time in each restaurant. Prisoners with six to eighteen months remaining on their sentences serve as volunteers in the restaurants whilst undertaking full-time training toward hospitality qualifications. The restaurant menus are comparable to those found in other stylish, modern fine-dining establishments, although alcohol cannot be served. The Clink restaurant at Brixton consistently ranks as one of the top-ten fine-dining restaurants in London on TripAdvisor (Thomas-Graham, 2019). There is thus increasing knowledge of the success of The Clink training restaurants as dining establishments and for prisoner rehabilitation through its focus on education and meaningful work. However, little remains known about how customers rate and review their Clink restaurant experience and the potential influence of the prison location on the dining experience.

With customer review being an essential element of any successful hospitality enterprise (Pizam and Ellis, 1999), it is important to understand how well (or otherwise) The Clink restaurants are being experienced by their customers. For restaurant managers, favourable online reviews posted by their customers can be used to increase product and brand awareness and reputation, enhance customer relationships and loyalty, and improve their marketing and public relations (Amaral et al., 2014). This study aims to therefore evaluate customer reviews about The Clink restaurants to understand how they are rated and what experience is gained by fine dining in a prison. This will be done through an analysis of their overall ratings and comments posted on the online review website, TripAdvisor.

The following section reviews the extant literature relevant to understanding prisons as hospitality training establishments, and how they may be reviewed online by diners. This is
followed by a discussion of the study method before presenting the findings and wider conclusions of the research.

2. Literature review

2.1 Prisons as hospitality establishments

Prisons are increasingly seen as hospitality establishments. To date, hospitality, culinary arts, and catering studies have featured prominently in the vocational qualifications and training offered in prisons (Goodger, 2003; Werblow and Dischino, 2015; Peled-Laskov and Timor, 2018). Previous studies have attested to the important role of vocational education and training in prisons in the rehabilitation of adult prisoners and offenders, providing them with learning and employment pathways which will support them economically and socially for life in society once released (Dawe, 2007; Zirkle and Martin, 2012). Ex-offenders are seen as an alternate labour force for the hospitality industry (Meier, 1991), and the nature of the hospitality industry itself – centred on customer interaction – is viewed as what is needed for prisoner rehabilitation (Beier, 2015). Indeed, research reveals the potential of restaurant operations to rehabilitate prisoners and reduce recidivism (Cale et al. 2018; Dawe, 2007; Werblow and Dischino, 2015). As already mentioned, The Clink Charity (2021) found a 65.6% reduction in reoffending among its former prisoner graduates. The employment of former prisoners is also seen as emancipatory for those individuals, allowing them to carve for themselves new social roles for a better future once released (Beier, 2015; Chandra, 2017; Harkison and McIntosh, 2019).

With the objective to reduce high recidivism rates among ex-offenders, other prisons have introduced their own hospitality training and rehabilitation enterprises. These include The Verne – a jailhouse café in the U.K., the InGalera gourmet restaurant in Italy, The Fife and Drum restaurant in the U.S., Restaurant Idlanathi in South Africa, restaurant INTERNO in
Columbia (Thomas-Graham, 2019) and the Gate to Plate event in New Zealand. In each of
these so-called ‘social gastronomy’ enterprises (Thomas-Graham, 2019), prisoners undertake
a hospitality-related qualification while serving their sentences and whilst having controlled
contact with the public through the hospitality training enterprise. Ultimately, the success of
such enterprises is linked not just to the achievement of social objectives, but also to their
economic business sustainability (Alegre and Berbegal-Mirabent, 2016). Dining in prisons
certainly has a novelty factor for customers (Harkison and McIntosh, 2019), yet little remains
understood about the demand perspectives of in-prison restaurants in terms of customer
satisfaction and the success of such enterprises. It is therefore timely to understand how the
customers of the in-prison dining initiatives rate and review their experiences. Although there
have been previous considerations of the success of tourist visits to prisons and prison museums
(e.g., Ross, 2012; Strange and Kempa, 2003), customer overall ratings and reviews of in-prison
restaurants have not previously been evaluated, nor have how those reviews may be shaped by
the restaurant’s prison location. It is widely known that the success of a restaurant can be
attributed to its physical location, making the location an important strategic factor (Hanaysha,
2016; Yang et al., 2017). In the case of the four Clink restaurants, the location cannot be a
strategic choice since all are located within working prisons, making this unique location
worthy of investigation.

2.2. TripAdvisor and online customer reviews of restaurants

The analysis of online restaurant reviews is timely as they now play an important role when
consumers make their dining decisions (Cordato, 2014). Online social media has transformed
the way customers interact with the hospitality industry allowing access to the comments of
other consumers (Yilmaz, 2019). There are various online review platforms, including
community-based sites such as TripAdvisor and Yelp to transaction-based online travel
agencies such as Expedia and Booking.com, where reviews are incorporated as electronic
tools of-mouth (Gligorijevic, 2016). Whilst the trustworthiness of such online reviews has
previously been questioned (Cordato, 2014; Coursaris et al., 2017), not only have online
consumer reviews been shown to provide an important source of information to advise
customer decision-making and purchasing decisions (Zhang et al., 2017); the reviews may also
be used by hospitality management to evaluate overall customer satisfaction. TripAdvisor has
been heralded as the most popular website on the internet for consumers to publish their overall
ratings and reviews of restaurants, as well as of hotels, resorts, and tourist attractions (Cordato,
2014). It is a common source of information regarding customer attitudes and opinions about
a tourism or hospitality product (Tseng et al., 2015).

Whilst the majority of previous hospitality research has evaluated online reviews for hotels
(e.g., Khoo et al., 2017; Sparks and Browning, 2011; Zhang and Verma, 2017), some studies
have examined the use of TripAdvisor for restaurant decision-making. Previous research has
shown that customers select restaurants based on aspects such as quality of food; the ambience
or location of the restaurant; price, value, and service; food availability; and tourists’ own food
culture (Hwang et al., 2012; Mak et al., 2012; Sulek and Hensley, 2004; Yilmaz, 2019). Indeed,
restaurant choice is affected by both tangible (e.g., food and table aspects) and intangible
aspects of restaurant attributes (e.g., value, atmosphere, service). For food aficionados, online
peer reviews of restaurants are argued to be particularly important in selecting restaurants in
which to dine (Rhee et al., 2015).

While the information on restaurant decision-making is important, there remains a gap in
understanding how particular types of restaurants are rated and reviewed by customers. In
particular, whilst some previous studies have found the location and place of the restaurant to
be influential in decision-making (e.g., Hwang et al., 2012; Sulek and Hensley, 2004), the
prison location of a restaurant has rarely been examined. Furthermore, in respect of online
reviews or restaurants, it is important to note that the multiple criteria used by customers to choose a satisfactory restaurant may not always reflect the criteria that online review platforms ask customers to review (Zhang et al., 2017). For instance, TripAdvisor.com requires customers to rate only four criteria overall: a restaurant’s service, food, value, and atmosphere – not their location.

In addition to their numerical rating of these four criteria overall, customers may post a summary of their experience, identify the type, date, and purpose of their visit, recommend particular dishes, and share photos of their dining experience. In this way, text reviews can reveal more nuanced details of customers’ experiences and attitudes beyond mere numerical ratings (Zhang et al., 2017). That said, many working prisons prohibit the possession of cameras and mobile phones during dining, meaning that customers are often not able to take photos of their experience. Also, being served by prison inmates, the prohibition of alcohol, and the important security check required of diners entering prisons similarly make the prison dining experience somewhat unique compared to other restaurant types. As such, this study contributes to hospitality management research by revealing the nature of customers’ overall ratings and reviews of the four Clink restaurants as fine-dining hospitality establishments inside working prisons.

3. Study methods

An interpretive, qualitative case-study methodology was deemed appropriate to evaluate customer restaurant reviews. This approach is useful where the examination of the context and the dynamics of the research situation is important, such as in the unique context of prison dining (Darke et al., 1998; Marshall and Rossman, 2010). The data were collected via a secondary data source: the TripAdvisor website, representing the largest online travel
community in the world, with more than 35 million visitors per month. This website was chosen above others as it is deemed the most popular site on which consumers publish their ratings and reviews of restaurants (Cordato, 2014). It contains more than 45 million reviews and opinions on more than 1.3 million hotels, restaurants, and attractions (TripAdvisor, 2019).

TripAdvisor is a platform of public information that can be used by researchers to explore the non-commercial, user-generated, and peer-to-peer nature of the reviews (Cong et al., 2014). However, the limitations include subjectivity and a lack of background information on the reviewer and the context (Ayeh et al., 2013).

In total, 3951 TripAdvisor reviews (a total of 394,650 words) in English of all four Clink restaurants were analysed using the Leximancer 5.0 software between June 2011 (when the first restaurant was opened) and 15 October 2019 (when data analysis started). The following inclusion criterion was used: only customer reviews in English were analysed. When downloading the customer reviews from TripAdvisor, four reviews were discarded from the total because one was written in Chinese, and three others were related to different restaurants outside of our sample. The Leximancer software helps to explore a large amount of text and visually produces themes and concepts in a conceptual map (Chiu and Leng, 2017; Wu et al., 2017). It is very useful in exploratory studies which analyse big data and where the key concepts may not be clear without researchers’ active intervention (Wilk et al., 2019), such as the analysis of inbound tourists’ complaints (Liu and Li, 2019).

Leximancer uses a quantitative approach to carry out a qualitative analysis of the text (Tseng et al., 2015). It generates themes and concepts; the themes emerge from the co-occurrence of terms rather than being imposed by the researcher’s classification, enabling a more exploratory style to represent the most prominent concepts (Sotiriadou et al., 2014). Unlike other qualitative data management software such as CATPAC, NVivo and ATLAS.ti, Leximancer does not code by frequency of word, term or phrase. Instead, it is used to look for the meaning, concepts and
ideas within the textual data creating visual concept maps to help provide greater insights into
the meaning of language (Tseng et al., 2015). Leximancer algorithms extract semantic and
relational information leading to the formation of concepts through word association from
“terms that indicate meaning around a word” (Harwood et al., 2013: 1032). Then, through a
conceptual analysis, the semantic meaning is created (Harwood et al., 2013). Leximancer does
not capture the communication style of online reviews (Wilk et al., 2019) but it was the most
suitable software for this qualitative study as it allowed the researchers to focus on the meaning
in the reviews by extracting concepts and ideas (Tseng et al., 2015). The researchers played an
important role in the second stage of data analysis, creating further meaning and insights, rather
than simply reporting the outcomes of the software analysis (Harwood et al., 2013).

The overall ratings of The Clink restaurants (i.e. service, food, value and atmosphere) were
extracted from TripAdvisor. Then, the qualitative customer reviews were copied from
TripAdvisor and entered into the Leximancer software for analysis. The software identified
described five main themes (a theme is named after the most prominent concept), one name-like concept
– ‘Clink’, and 72 word-like concepts (the words most frequently occurring) - such as ‘service’,
‘professional’, and ‘charity’ (Wilk et al., 2019). To ensure the validity of the conceptual map
and reliability of data analysis (Wu et al., 2017), the five themes were reviewed multiple times
by the authors to ensure the clear meaning of each theme and subsequent concepts. This
resulted in three most prominent themes: ‘food’, ‘visit’ and ‘prison’, and their relevant
concepts. This study used the default Leximancer settings to generate the results but employed
the ‘concept merge’ function so similar concepts such as ‘course’/ ‘courses’ were grouped.

Findings from The Clink restaurant TripAdvisor ratings and the most prominent themes of the
dining experience, arising from the data analysis, are presented below.
4. Findings and Discussion

This study aimed to evaluate customer reviews about The Clink restaurants to understand how they are rated and what experience is gained by fine dining in a prison. Data analysis revealed that the restaurants are ranked highly on TripAdvisor, with Brixton ranked number 20 out of 16,740 restaurants in London; Cardiff – 9th out of 811; Styal – 1st out of 71 restaurants in Wilmslow; and High Down ranked 1st out of 126 restaurants in Sutton. Only 3% of reviewers rated the restaurants 3 out of a maximum of 5 stars (‘average’ or below), with 0.4% of reviews being 1 star (‘terrible’). The high ratings were consistent across the four restaurants (see Table 1). Where the restaurants were rated as ‘terrible’ or ‘poor’ (1 or 2 stars), reviewers commented on either the poor food quality or poor communication regarding the booking system (for security reasons a table needs to be pre-booked). Almost all of the negative comments were responded to online by the restaurant managers.

Table 1: Customer star ratings on TripAdvisor for four Clink restaurants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rating</th>
<th>Number of ratings for each restaurant 2020</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>High Down</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5* Excellent</td>
<td>755</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4* Very good</td>
<td>144</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3* Average</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2* Poor</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1* Terrible</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

High ratings by restaurant customers are important because customer satisfaction is an essential element of any hospitality enterprise (Pizam and Ellis, 1999). Furthermore, our study found that the positive ratings of the restaurants were similarly evident in the favourable and often
detailed reviews posted on TripAdvisor. There is some evidence therefore that points to the
unique and memorable impact of the restaurant visit on the reviewers.

4.1 Leximancer generated themes and relevant concepts

The five most significant themes generated by Leximancer 5.0, ranked in descending order to
their relative importance were: ‘food’, ‘visit’, ‘prison’, ‘alcohol’ and ‘main’ (see Table 3) with
their respective number of ‘hits’ or counts (meaning the number of text blocks in the project
associated with the theme) set at the high detail level, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: The five most common themes found in TripAdvisor reviews of Clink restaurants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Number of hits</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>11,100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Visit</td>
<td>5794</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Prison</td>
<td>4245</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Alcohol</td>
<td>3105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Main</td>
<td>1865</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These are also shown within the conceptual ‘heat-mapped’ map below (Figure 1), where hot
colours (red, yellow, and green) denote the most important themes, and cool colours (blue and
purple) denote the less important themes. The size of each bubble does not denote the
significance of each theme but rather the significance of the relationship between the relevant
concepts (Wilk et al., 2019).
Figure 1: A concept map of the five themes found in The Clink’s customer reviews.

To describe the five main themes, Table 3 outlines the concepts relevant to each of the themes, illustrated using one example of a customer review from the TripAdvisor data. The five themes were perhaps to be expected given that aspects such as food, drink, and service are common to comments made by restaurant customers on TripAdvisor (see Sulek and Hensley, 2004). Whilst other TripAdvisor studies show the significance of place/location in restaurant reviews (see Zhang et al., 2017), it is notable here that comments relating to prison/prisoner appeared in the key theme (‘prison’) alongside another key concept, place.

Table 3. Five significant themes and associated concepts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Concepts</th>
<th>Example review</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>‘food’</td>
<td>food, service, restaurant, lunch, staff, experience, Clink, presented, excellent, beautifully, friendly, meal, delicious, lovely, menu, time, served, attentive, amazing, course, quality, cooked, waiter, professional, atmosphere, table, nice, restaurants, chapel, kitchen</td>
<td>The menu is actually very nice and the food was extremely well presented (...) we had a delicious meal nicely served by a very competent waiter. (Brixton Reviewer)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>‘visit’</td>
<td>visit, recommend, worth, book, take</td>
<td>We will certainly return and recommend it to anyone else. (Styal Reviewer)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
| ‘prison’ | prison, place, charity, prisoners, dining, friends, work, visited, security, people, inmates, inside, training, outside | This is a fantastic charity which does so much to give prisoners the second chance they often deserve. I am looking forward to visiting The Clink again.  
(High Down Reviewer) |
| ‘alcohol’ | alcohol, best, birthday, evening, tea, dinner, breakfast, day, down | With no alcohol to inflate your bill there is an incentive to be generous.  
(Cardiff Reviewer) |
| ‘main’ | main, tasty, courses, dessert, starter, lamb, chocolate, cream, ice, beef, chicken, cheese, dish, toffee, soup | What a pleasant surprise. My Fig and Gorgonzola tart tatin was delicious but the chocolate dessert with damson ice cream was truly amazing.  
(Brixton Reviewer) |

The conceptual map in Figure 1 shows a significant overlap between ‘food’ and the third most prominent theme of ‘prison’. By adjusting the number of visible concepts from 0% to 4%, the relationship between these two themes is displayed as a knowledge pathway (Figure 2). The software registered the strongest pathway between these themes and the knowledge pathway was from ‘food’ (the most important theme and concept) to service, restaurant, and ‘prison’. Such a pathway illustrates stories from the text and demonstrates indirect connections between concepts (Tseng et al., 2015).
It is apparent that the five themes, together with the related concepts, are all representative of reviewers’ positive comments about dining in the four Clink restaurants. The quality and the presentation of different dishes as well as the level of service were highly regarded and worthy of comment, even though only non-alcoholic beverages may be served in a prison environment.

The conceptual map shows that the theme of ‘food’ was central to the content of The Clink reviews. In addition, it shows a significant overlap between ‘food’ and the third most prominent theme of ‘prison’. This might not be surprising given the distinctive location of the restaurants and is worthy of further exploration.

4.2. The three most prominent themes and relevant concepts

After several reviews of the five main themes, the three most prominent themes were chosen for further analysis (‘food’, ‘visit’, ‘prison’), since the theme of ‘alcohol’ was about the non-alcohol policy in the restaurants, and theme of ‘main’ was used to describe different types of dishes reviewers commented on, as shown in Table 3. As illustrated in Figure 1, the themes of
‘alcohol’ and ‘main’ overlapped with the theme of ‘food’, meaning they had multiple concepts in common. In addition, as can be seen in Figure 3, both themes had strong relationships with the theme of ‘food’.

![Diagram showing the relationship between 'food', 'main', and 'alcohol'.]

Figure 3: The relationship between the theme of ‘food’, and sub-themes of ‘main’ and ‘alcohol’

Cheng and Edwards (2019) recommend that researchers map themes and concepts to higher theoretical knowledge and assess their usefulness to the research aim. Accordingly, the themes of ‘main’ and ‘alcohol’ were analysed as significant sub-themes together with the theme of ‘food’ based on the overlap between their concepts.

The following sections further discuss the three main themes (‘food’, ‘visit’ and ‘prison’) that emerged from data analysis. These three themes are elaborated on below under the expanded thematic titles of ‘fine dining in prisons’, ‘The Clink ambassadors’, and ‘the inside and outside divide’ to more richly describe the qualitative nature of the dining experiences.
4.2.1 Food: Fine-dining in prisons

The first and most significant theme of ‘food’ was made up of 29 word-like concepts and two sub-themes of ‘alcohol’ and ‘main’ and their related concepts (see Table 3). As such, the first theme, expanded to be called ‘fine-dining in prisons’, can best be described as relating to the quality of food, service, reasons for the visit, and the no-alcohol policy. Also, this theme denotes that all four Clink restaurants are considered as fine-dining restaurants despite them being located inside prisons.

Figure 4 shows how Leximancer displayed the conceptual structure of the ‘food’ theme, made up of the most significant concept, food, which was predominantly about food quality and service.

Figure 4: Conceptual structure of text for the concept of food.

The high quality of food (comparable to Michelin star dining) was reported by reviewers, including types of dishes they particularly enjoyed, as well as their presentation. The sub-theme of ‘main’ consists of concepts depicting different types of food as listed in Table 3 and illustrated in the following reviews.
What a great meal! We have eaten in Michelin star restaurants and I can honestly say that this was comparable. (Cardiff Reviewer)

I had an amazing roast beef main course with a large Yorkshire pudding, two sorts of potatoes and a separate dish of vegetables. (Styal Reviewer)

Reviewers praised the high quality of ‘food’ served in these training restaurants which illustrate that working prisons are successful hospitality establishments despite their unique location.

Rehabilitation – New chances – Go for it. Feel-good experience while enjoying superbly cooked and presented food. Great value. And it’s not just about supporting a good cause, you will appreciate the quality as well. (High Down Reviewer)

Excellent meal with very attractively presented dishes, cooked well and very tasty. Overall a good dining experience. A very professional restaurant worth more than one second visit. (Styal Reviewer)

Reviewers also shared their opinions about the professional, friendly, and attentive service delivered by the professional front of house staff (the prisoners). The reviewers suggest that the prisoners are no longer seen as inmates, but as highly trained hospitality workers.

My wife and I had an unbelievable experience. From the moment you walk in, the welcome is superb and all staff who served us were attentive, friendly and professional. (Cardiff Reviewer)

Fabulous food and fabulous service, (...) would not be out of place in a Michelin starred restaurant. No wonder it's in the top ten restaurants in the U.K. (Cardiff Reviewer)

Upon entering, you'd never think this was run by female inmates. It was so professional, extremely clean and very well laid out. (Styal Reviewer)

The above comments illustrate that despite the four restaurants being training restaurants, the quality of service and food is exceptional and worthy of any non-training, fine-dining restaurant.

Reviewed as quality fine-dining establishments, their prison locations, with restrictive security access, also appeared important in reviewers’ comments. Indeed, other TripAdvisor studies
have confirmed the significance of location in restaurant reviews (see Zhang et al., 2017).

Reviewers commented on the reasons for visiting the restaurants – mostly birthday celebrations
and (workplace) Christmas parties, which resulted in a unique/memorable experience.

*I took my wife to prison to celebrate her birthday!! We had a wonderful experience
despite the extra security to get in, plastic cutlery and no alcohol!* (High Down
Reviewer)

*My friend took me here for my birthday. I wanted to do something different and had
seen it mentioned on the TV. It was a bit weird going through the Gates and into the
prison but once inside the restaurant, it was so lovely. You would never realise that
you were in a prison apart from the Wardens walking around outside.* (Brixton
Reviewer)

*What a fab experience! I decided to treat my mum and her partner to a meal here for
their Christmas present.* (High Down Reviewer)

The physical environment of the restaurants was discussed in the reviews often with a tone of
surprise, including the décor, furniture, and artwork.

*Restaurant environment clean, welcoming, comfortable, has great artwork by prison
inmates, tables and chairs made in prison workshops, modern well furnished toilets,
visitors book for comments: we LOVED IT!!* (Brixton Reviewer)

*Magnificent restaurant. Great ambience, mood lighting, lovely decor! Doesn't look
anything like a prison.* (High Down Reviewer)

This positive evaluation of the physical environment was not overshadowed by strict security
measures. As they are dining in a working prison, visitors to the Clink restaurants must leave
their phones and cameras outside, eat with plastic cutlery, and there is a no alcohol policy.

These measures were considered by the reviewers as a necessity and something to be expected.

*We loved our unique visit to The Clink and cannot wait to visit again. Don't be put off
by the plastic cutlery and lack of alcohol (the cutlery is thick and durable and there are
a range of non-alcoholic cocktails!) and pay the restaurant a visit ASAP.* (High Down
Reviewer)
The only clue that we were inside a prison was the plastic cutlery. The decor was fantastic and looked just like a very nice restaurant. (Brixton Reviewer)

Reviewers also described the atmosphere of the restaurants as relaxed and friendly, created by professional staff and a welcoming physical environment. Given the location of the restaurants and the stigma of the staff, this is a surprising finding but one that potentially points to the effective business model, which replicates almost completely a traditional restaurant environment.

Nothing was too much trouble and the atmosphere was relaxed and welcoming. (Cardiff Reviewer)

The food, atmosphere and service were impressive, it was a very relaxing enjoyable night. (Styall Reviewer)

A happy and joyful atmosphere and a unique experience. (Brixton Reviewer)

Great food and atmosphere, lovely ambiance. (High Down Reviewer)

The no alcohol policy based on the sub-theme of ‘alcohol’ is apparent in the reviews in two ways. Firstly, reviewers wanted to remind future diners of this policy to level their expectations. Secondly, the reviewers justified this policy sharing in their reviews that, due to the professionally cooked and served food, the lack of alcohol was no detriment to their overall positive experience of dining in the restaurant. Indeed, the recent growing trend for non-alcoholic beverages supports this necessary safety restriction in the context of The Clink restaurants.

The food, service and presentation was better than some West End restaurants. As it is in a Prison there is no alcohol and the cutlery is plastic. Will certainly be returning. (Brixton Reviewer)

5 stars for service and food quality. Would have got 6 stars but no alcohol and plastic knives and forks prohibited that. Under the circumstances you can understand why. Great to help others retrain so they can get a job in the future. (High Down Reviewer)

Sunday lunch yesterday was outstanding, all three courses were served with no less
than 5 star plus, the waiting staff and the kitchen staff certainly know what they're
doing, we didn't miss having a glass of wine with our meal as the mocktail was
delicious, the restaurant and staff are worth more than five stars, will be going again
and have already recommended it, a wonderful experience overall. (Cardiff Reviewer)

The theme of ‘food’ was also illustrated by the reviews which emphasised how the dining
experience contributed to the positive overall experience of visiting one of the restaurants.
Diners wrote about having a unique, memorable experience, which was based on an
opportunity to visit a prison to celebrate a birthday or attend a Christmas party, providing them
with a ‘wow’ factor.

Experience worth having! It started as a different idea: "Lets go to prison for lunch"!
Wow! Really? We can do that?! (...) And so we did! (Brixton Reviewer)

A modern immaculately maintained restaurant serving a variety of meals. The food
was superb, well presented and served by friendly and helpful staff making it a
memorable event. (Cardiff Reviewer)

4.2.2 Visit: The Clink ambassadors
The second most prominent theme ‘visit’ was about reviewers highly recommending others to
visit one of the restaurants. As such, this theme was expanded to be called ‘The Clink
ambassadors’. The related concepts (see Table 3) form the structure of the discussion of these
findings. Specifically, Figure 5 shows how Leximancer displayed the conceptual structure of
the ‘visit’ theme, made up of the most significant concept, visit, which was particularly
connected to concepts of worth and recommend. These denoted the restaurants as worth visiting
and being highly recommended to others.
Figure 5: Conceptual structure of text for the concept visit.

The reviews revealed that reviewers made two different sets of recommendations for the ‘visit’ in their postings. Firstly, and most importantly, they recommended others to visit one of the restaurants.

The whole experience was fantastic from arrival to departure, the staff, food and service was excellent and this place is certainly worth a visit. (Cardiff Reviewers)

We will certainly return and recommend it to anyone else. (Styal Reviewer)

This is our third visit and I highly recommend it. (Brixton Reviewer)

Secondly, the reviews often included practical recommendations on booking a table in advance, mainly for security reasons, since all restaurant customers are required to include valid identification when booking and then present it on the day of their visit.

To indulge yourself and it really is an experience with gastronomic fare, you do need to book in advance be vetted and take ID. (Brixton Reviewer)

Also, reviewers posted the items not allowed in the prisons and gave instructions on where to leave them before entering the restaurant premises. They also provided details on which buses...
to take to get to the prisons and the locations of the free car parks, as the review below illustrates.

You can reach it by the number 6 bus from Cardiff Bay next to the Millennium Centre or same bus from Cardiff Centre in front of the Marriott among many other stations. Train from Central Station Cardiff to Queen St Station takes 3 minutes and is another option. (Cardiff Reviewer)

Reviews about the ‘visit’ also reveal comments relating to the work of The Clink charity first-hand; notably, comments about how the work of the charity plays a major role in changing public perceptions regarding prisoners’ rehabilitation. The reviews below give examples to illustrate this.

Very interesting to see how they try to rehabilitate prisoners with this scheme. We had a beautiful lunch and so well looked after. The boys that served us very nice and excited for their future now that they’ve had this experience. Excellent idea. No hesitation in recommending this place to anyone excellent food and service. The manager told us that the national reoffending rate is 44% but when they’re on this rehabilitation course it is 12% (Cardiff Reviewer)

Great food. I visited The Clink on Friday with my wife. We decided to go as we think the concept is great, prisons definitely need more schemes like this to rehabilitate the offenders. (Brixton Reviewer)

It is not every day that you get to dine in a category ’C’ prison but I can strongly recommend it. A great concept where training and rehabilitation are the key drivers here- they deliver excellent quality food in a relatively relaxed environment. Well worth supporting. (Brixton Reviewer)

By sharing their reviews on TripAdvisor, there is some evidence to suggest that the restaurant customers become more than reviewers; they potentially become ambassadors for The Clink. As such, the positive reviews of the fine-dining establishments, as well as the supportive comments on the purpose of The Clink charity, are worthy of future research to gauge how this may potentially influence the intentions of future customers as possible future ambassadors for the charity. Indeed, the unique experience of fine-dining in a prison with a social purpose offers the opportunity for ephemeral experiences that engender not only “authenticity, individuality,
and (…) personal positioning in the realm of the fascinating” (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2019: 115), but also herald an important social purpose. Customers want their dining experiences to contribute to their social capital, to build memories, and to add to their cultural awareness and even character, as well as identity. The ultimate souvenir in collecting unique/memorable experiences is the lasting memory (Yeoman and McMahon-Beattie, 2019).

4.2.3 Prison: The inside and outside divide

The third and final theme, ‘prison’, denotes the unusual location of the restaurants in prison buildings, and as part of The Clink charity’s prisoner rehabilitation programme (see Table 3 for related concepts). This theme thus engenders a potential ‘inside and outside divide’.

Figure 6 shows how Leximancer displayed the conceptual structure of the ‘prison’ theme, made up of the most significant concept, prison. Unlike the other two themes (‘food’ and ‘visit’), the concepts related to prison were evenly distributed with the concept, courses, being the most important. This further demonstrates the significant positive relationship between the restaurants being located in prisons and the food served there. This is exampled in the customer reviews below.

Very impressed. Recommended by a friend. Really enjoyed the whole experience, from visiting a prison to delicious three course meal. (High Down Reviewer)

4 course meal prep’d and served by serving prisoners on licence from the prison next door. (High Down Reviewer)

Figure 5 shows how Leximancer displayed the conceptual structure of the ‘visit’ theme, made up of the most significant concept, visit, which was particularly connected to concepts of worth and recommend denoting the restaurants as worth visiting and highly recommended to others.
The concept of place refers to a restaurant for the public located in a prison and staffed by prisoners, being where the two worlds meet: the inside and the outside. Prison may be initially considered ‘the inside’, since it is the location of the four restaurants, which are inside the prisons’ walls. By entering ‘the inside’, customers get an insight into how the prison functions. Also, once inside the restaurant premises, one becomes immersed in a fine-dining setting.

*Once inside it is like any other restaurant. A nice set up with a lively atmosphere, with quiet music in the background. Service by the staff was great.* (Brixton Reviewer)

*Top Notch Restaurant in unique surroundings as this is situated inside Highbury prison walls, the food was excellent and well presented and cooked to perfection.* (Brixton Reviewer)

However, for the prisoners, the restaurants are ‘the outside’. Working there equips them with catering and life skills and allows them the opportunity to engage with the general public as an opportunity to gain confidence before release and integration back into society. The benefits of interaction with the public before release is a finding echoed in previous research (see Peled-Laskov and Timor, 2018). Therefore, the restaurants not only prepare them for the life outside with the help of the mentoring programme but also give them a taste of that life whilst still
inside the prison. This inside/outside dichotomy is explained by reviewers. Reviewers commented on the transition between the physical environments of the prisons and the restaurant premises.

The usual prison security arrangements apply but this information is given to you beforehand. We were escorted inside and accompanied into a very modern restaurant that would not be out of place in a city environment. (High Down Reviewer)

Entrance to the prison is via a "Vacuum" type arrangement whereby you go through one set of doors and are blocked from going in to the actual prison by a second set, which are only opened once the first set are firmly closed. Once inside it is an enclosed world, completely cut off from the outside and, I thought, quite similar to a boarding school atmosphere. (Brixton Reviewer)

Therefore, The Clink charity re-educates both the public and the prisoners in a unique environment. As such, hospitality is potentially confirmed as a source for social good (Cockburn-Wootten et al., 2014). This knowledge exchange is possible because the concept of a fine-dining training restaurant has been applied successfully to an irregular location such as a prison. Such a symbiotic relationship, driven by The Clink, and based on educating the prisoners and the public alike, may be supported by the concept of hospitality and hospitableness where the offer of hospitality is reciprocated, also building the social capital of customers. Centred on customer interaction, the nature of the hospitality industry is viewed as an ideal environment for prisoner rehabilitation (Beier, 2015). Indeed, data analysis showed that reviewers do hold awareness of the purpose behind the fine-dining restaurants, as the following comments illustrate.

The charity helps offenders break the cycle of crime by nurturing self belief, workplace skills and offering nationally recognised qualifications. (Styal Reviewer)

They [prisoners] do not receive a penny in wages or tips. All monies go to the charity to rehabilitate those from prison into a job. Their success stories are amazing. (Cardiff Reviewer)
I also would like to congratulate the clink charity initiative which helps in transforming prisoner's life. I would recommend this place to anyone who would love to have a great meal with fantastic hospitality. (Brixton Reviewer)

The potential of restaurant operations to rehabilitate prisoners and reduce recidivism has been the subject of previous studies (e.g., Cale et al., 2018; Dawe, 2007; Werblow and Dischino, 2015), and is evidenced in the significant reduction in reoffending among The Clink Charity (2021) ‘graduates’. These initiatives may also change public opinion of prisoners who may otherwise remain stigmatised, a topic worthy for future research. However, despite customers praising the work The Clink is doing as a charity, analysis of the reviews revealed that exceptional food and professional service offered in the four restaurants are the aspects most commented on, as the following review demonstrates.

Forget the fact that it's set up as a charity and run by prisoners and you're eating in HMP Cardiff. This is a serious restaurant producing excellent food from scratch that's very well presented and great value. (Cardiff Reviewer)

4.2.4 Discussion

The topic of training restaurants, notably those based within prisons, has not previously been investigated in the field of hospitality research. Yet, the unique prison location of all four Clink restaurants was frequently mentioned by reviewers as having a positive impact on their overall dining experience even though the physical location is not rated as an important characteristic by TripAdvisor. Despite being training restaurants, customers praised the high quality of food in terms of presentation, quality and professional attentive service in their online reviews. Customers also commented on the welcoming, relaxed and friendly atmosphere they experienced during their visits. These are significant findings for these four training restaurants staffed by prisoners and located within working prisons. Prisoners staffing the restaurants were no longer considered as inmates but rather as trainee hospitality employees capable of delivering outstanding service, which further highlights the potential success of vocational
training in reducing reoffending (Cale et al., 2018). This also supports the findings by Peled-Laskov and Timor (2018) who concluded that the opportunity for employment alongside gaining soft skills positively contributes to prisoners’ self-image, self-respect and confidence. Prisoners also start to perceive themselves as providing social and financial benefits to the wider economy which is reflected in their renewed sense of purpose and a desire to serve others through offering hospitality. The employment of former prisoners is also seen as emancipatory for those individuals, allowing them to carve for themselves new social roles for a better future once released (Beier, 2015; Chandra, 2017; Harkison and McIntosh, 2019).

Ultimately, it appears that these restaurants can deliver excellent restaurant food and service in a similar manner to restaurants not located within the confines of a prison setting. Therefore, the restaurants are classed as fine-dining hospitality businesses offering memorable food and dining experiences on par with Michelin-starred restaurants, evidenced by the overall ranking of those restaurants on TripAdvisor. Excellent fine-dining in a prison, although an oxymoron, is an important and successful outcome of The Clink Charity’s work, alongside the achievement of reducing the reoffending rates of prisoners. What is considered to be a hostile and unwelcoming penal environment has become a destination for a culinary experience. Thus, the prison location and The Clink Charity’s prisoner rehabilitation purpose, although significant, were not the determining factors for dining in those restaurants, according to customer reviews. That said, the customers who enjoyed dining in the restaurants potentially became The Clink’s unofficial ambassadors, carefully detailing their experiences and recommending others to visit. Practical information, including the process of security checks, was also shared by guests whose enthusiasm and support for this charity was evident in their reviews.

The dichotomy of ‘the inside’ and ‘the outside’ is another significant finding from this study. It demonstrates that customers get an insight into how a working prison functions. For the
prisoners themselves, the restaurants are a glimpse of their life post-release. As mentioned earlier, the potential of restaurant operations to rehabilitate prisoners by reducing stigma, equipping them with social and life skills, leading to a reduction in recidivism, has been the subject of previous studies (e.g., Cale et al., 2018; Dawe, 2007; Werblow and Dischino, 2015). Therefore, hospitality is seen as an important industry to support prisoner rehabilitation and provide the necessary social and life skills (Beier, 2015). Working there allows prisoners the opportunity to engage with the general public and gain confidence for a successful integration back into society, whilst also providing them with hospitality management and life skills; a success mirrored in previous international research (Werblow and Dischino, 2015; Peled-Laskov and Timor, 2018). Therefore, The Clink Charity becomes the bridge that links these two separate worlds together by (re)educating prisoners using the concept of the training restaurant and, in the process, reducing reoffending rates.

5. Conclusion

This study aimed to evaluate customer reviews about The Clink restaurants to understand how they are rated and what experience was gained by fine dining in a prison. Findings of customers’ online reviews about the four Clink training restaurants using data collected from 3951 TripAdvisor reviews were analysed. All four restaurants received high customer ratings, as has been evidenced previously among TripAdvisor ratings for the Brixton restaurant (Young, 2017). The extent and detail of the reviews have likely contributed to this outstanding result for what is a training restaurant. Five significant themes were generated by Leximancer 5.0 software and from those, the three most prominent themes, namely, ‘food’, ‘visit’, and ‘prison’, were analysed due to their significant interrelationship. These findings yield both theoretical and practical implications which will now be discussed.
5.1 Theoretical implications

The topic of training restaurants has rarely been researched in the field of hospitality research, notably those based within working prisons. As such, our research contributes new insights into the influence of the training restaurants’ prison location on customer experiences through analysis of their online reviews. Given the positive reviews about the prisoner staff, our study also provides empirical support for ex-offenders as a potential alternate labour force for the hospitality industry. This research has further theoretical significance because online restaurant reviews (such as those on TripAdvisor) play an important role when consumers make their dining decisions. In the case of The Clink restaurants, findings from our research show that dining within a prison is not only a memorable and enjoyable dining experience but may also potentially help to change negatively stereotyped perceptions of inmates.

5.2 Practical implications

It can be seen that the Clink model works, not only as a dining experience for customers, but research shows that it has contributed to reducing reoffending (The Clink Charity, 2021). The Charity could franchise its model to other prisons in the U.K. and around the world. The principles, practices, blueprint, standards of procedure of how to run such a successful programme would have to be produced and every establishment that decided to replicate the model would need to follow it carefully. With every new franchise, a training programme could be implemented, and regular training sessions conducted to ensure that the model was being practised accordingly in each franchise. Clear communication to all of the managers at the franchise Clink training restaurants would help maintain their reputations and areas to focus on to ensure the provision of high quality of food and consistent service. Each franchisee would
benefit from an already established Clink name and brand reputation, minimising the risk of
business failure.

Given the success of the operation and customer reviews of The Clink restaurants, this research
shows that this restaurant training model works and that it is now about maintaining and
sustaining the high quality of food and service to ensure that their reputation is maintained and
strengthened. The model could grow domestically and internationally, and the other ventures
they have started; for example, The Clink Events and Clink@Home, could also be replicated
in other prisons in the U.K. and elsewhere. Importantly, the model also positively impacts
prisoner rehabilitation, and there is an opportunity for the hospitality industry to further benefit
The Clink’s purpose. There is an ever-increasing skills shortage in the hospitality sector
worldwide (Gebbels et al., 2019), and the Clink restaurants run successful training restaurants
to equip future hospitality professionals for the front and back of house positions. There is also
the opportunity for ex-offenders to draw on their Clink training to establish dining enterprises
of their own in the future. Other entrepreneurial initiatives could also be examined as allied
forms of ex-offender entrepreneurial activity, e.g., artisan enterprises drawing on food or other
produce.

5.3 Limitations and suggestions for future research

The findings of the current research are only based on the reviews from the four Clink training
restaurants located in the U.K. Therefore, consumers’ perspectives on other training restaurants
(e.g., The Fife and Drum restaurant in the U.S.) may be different. The findings are also based
only on TripAdvisor reviews, therefore another online restaurant review platform (e.g., Google
reviews) might have contrasting perspectives on the Clink training restaurants. As a review
platform, TripAdvisor has its limitations. Although a reviewer can provide qualitative feedback
about a dining experience, TripAdvisor limits rated feedback to aspects of the meal, atmosphere, value and service, thereby possibly limiting the richness of the review.

This research is based on employing only one research method. Applying other qualitative research methods could have enriched the findings and revealed a more in-depth understanding of the Leximancer generated themes. For example, analysis of the TripAdvisor reviews could be combined with in-house customer feedback, such as through evaluation of guest books. A wider selection of methods could also combine both quantitative (e.g., customer surveys) and qualitative evaluations of The Clink’s dining experience. Another limitation of our method can be attributed to the security restrictions of entry into The Clink restaurants, most of which do not allow guests to enter with their mobile phone or other electronic devices. This means that photos of the food or experience cannot be uploaded to TripAdvisor and therefore not be explored as a visual element of the dining experience review.

Future research is needed to further explore how the prison location influences customers’ dining experiences and their awareness of The Clink’s purpose. What remains to be known is how customer support for The Clink’s cause may have potentially begun to change public perceptions through the delivery of professional fine dining restaurant experiences by highly trained chefs and front of house staff whose label as ‘prisoners’ may be otherwise stigmatised. Further research might also seek to understand the novelty factor, or customer motivations, for visiting a Clink restaurant as a niche form of social gastronomy. For example, future research could unveil the consumer decision-making process for visiting restaurants or cafes inside working prisons, pre- and post- dining experiences, focusing on whether the actual visit significantly changed visitors’ perceptions of offenders to further evaluate the social good of hospitality establishments.
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