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Rethinking hospitality in incarcerated spaces: the case of the Clink

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ABSTRACT

This research letter presents a conceptual discussion of the tensions of hospitality within carceral spaces, using the example of The Clink in-prison training restaurant. By analysing visitor-prisoner encounters, we unsettle normative boundaries between hospitality and hostility, and the rigid dichotomy of the free guest versus the imprisoned host. We argue that while visiting carceral spaces reveals novel tensions regarding the experiences of those lacking basic hospitality rights, they also function as avenues for social transformation, reorienting visitors from voyeuristic seeking to active participants in rehabilitative efforts. By temporarily suspending hierarchies, hospitality serves as a critical lens to uncover complexities in rehabilitation, reduce stigma and foster social integration on the margins.

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Introduction

Despite the growing recognition of hospitality as a vehicle for social inclusion, there has been little conceptual debates that link hospitality to incarcerated settings (Gebbels et al., 2021; Turner, 2016). The pervasive influence of commercial imperatives and neoliberal logics is further eroding the foundational virtues of hospitality: welcome, generosity, interconnectedness and reciprocity – reducing social exchanges to mere transactions (Bilgihan et al., 2023). This commodification of social exchange has generated a palpable deficit of authentic human connection within mainstream tourism and hospitality spaces, prompting a counter-movement among tourists who seek encounters that transcend the transactional. Against this backdrop, tourists increasingly seek novel encounters that promise meaningful engagement with unfamiliar and often marginalised social contexts, deviating from traditional experiences into dark tourism spheres (McIntosh et al., 2022; Turner, 2016). These commercial dynamics and tourists' curiosity-driven mindset may be particularly complex within an incarcerated context, often described as liminal, where host–guest relationships and spatial identities are likely to be continually contested and reconstructed (Guia & Jamal, 2023; Irimias & Mitev, 2025). In this juxtaposition of hospitality and incarceration, a unique space emerges to interrogate the complexity of control and care in shaping visitor experiences, revealing the complexity and multiplicity of hospitality in host–guest interactions (Derrida, 2000).

A distinctive niche within the broader dark tourism sphere, prison tourism describes visitation to sites associated with death, suffering and atrocity (Stone & Sharpley, 2008). While dark tourism scholarship has long grappled with the tension between voyeuristic curiosity and more reflexive, socially conscious, educational engagement (Sharma & Martini, 2025), prison tourism, especially in the context of a working prison, complicates this binary by introducing an active rehabilitation function, contributing to social transformation.

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This research letter uses the concept of hospitality to expose the tensions inherent in ‘contested’ host–guest interactions during visitations to a working prison – The Clink Restaurant. We argue that such liminal spaces of transition and displacement fundamentally destabilise traditional notions of welcome and service, contributing to a motivational shift from voyeuristic interests to altruistic engagement. Such motivational shifts are embedded in the ‘prison hospitality’ experience design, making it a critical axis around which our conceptual discussions are organised.

In this conceptual discussion, we draw on information publicly available on The Clink Charity’s (2025) website to problematise the role of hospitality in carceral spaces, given the well-documented constraints and practical limitations on gaining empirical access to such settings. We also call for a rethinking of hospitality that challenges exclusionary logics and restores agency to those excluded by the dominant service discourse.

The Clink Restaurant

The Clink Restaurant at HMP (His Majesty’s Prison) Brixton, England, is an award-winning, in-prison training restaurant open to the public (The Clink Charity, 2025). Run by The Clink Charity since 2009, its aim is to reduce reoffending rates by training prisoners in hospitality (The Clink Charity, 2025). Students, prisoners nearing release, volunteer to work in a simulated restaurant, gaining practical skills and qualifications, the City & Guilds National Vocational Qualifications in Food & Beverage Service, Professional Cookery and Food Hygiene (The Clink Charity, 2025). For the public, dining in a working prison offers a unique opportunity to experience the often-hidden penal environment, and challenge misconceptions about incarceration (Barton & Brown, 2015). For the incarcerated, this programme facilitates a smoother reintegration into society, while challenging the social stigma that reduces prisoners to their criminal identity, repositioning them instead as individuals capable of rehabilitation and social contribution (Chan, 2026; Towne et al., 2023; The Clink Charity, 2025). Analysis by the Ministry of Justice (2022) found that participants in The Clink programme reoffended less frequently than a matched comparison group over a one-year period, suggesting that structured hospitality training may serve as a meaningful intervention in the cycle of reoffending. In 2025, The Clink Restaurant in Brixton trained 108 students; 69% of students supported at release moved into employment or further education, demonstrating the effectiveness of combining training with real work experience and structured support (The Clink Charity, 2026).

(Re)conceptualising hospitality in carceral tourism places

In unveiling the complexities of host and guest interactions in this contested space, Derrida’s (2000) ethics of hospitality offers a useful analytical lens. His understanding of hospitality foregrounds a tension between the ethics of unconditional welcome and the conditions that regulate it (Caracostea & Gaffney, 2023; Derrida, 2000), advocating for hospitality that is open to the ‘other’, the ‘foreigner’, but one that is never fully possible. This tension is evident in the contemporary global tourism landscape, as destinations navigate a polycrisis in which notions of place and belonging are increasingly understood as contested, transitional and deeply entangled in conflict (Irimias & Mitev, 2025). Within this context, the increasingly commodified nature of host–guest relationships, and the inherent power imbalances that structure them, has contributed to the gradual erosion of hospitality’s foundational virtues (Aramberri, 2001). In the case of The Clink, we argue that hospitality cannot be reduced to a service provision but instead foregrounds a complex and contested relationship between the host and the guest.

Against this backdrop, The Clink opens traditionally closed carceral spaces to the public, by transforming the in-prison restaurant into a site of social engagement where serving prisoners, redefined as students, are trained in service and culinary skills (The Clink Charity, 2025). Both students and diners, enter The Clink restaurant as a space where the traditional markers of status, occupation and social identity are temporarily suspended. In this setting, the roles of prisoner–host and

visitor-guest are unsettled and bound within a 'difficult leisure'. Prisoners simultaneously inhabit the dual roles of inmates and trained hospitality professionals, while visitors must reconcile the pleasure of dining experiences with the awareness of the carceral institution (The Clink Charity, 2025). The boundary between inclusion and exclusion blurs during the dining encounter – freedom and incarceration become conditional for both hosts and guests. On one hand, the dining encounter affords prisoners a form of probationary semi-inclusion, rewarded for compliance, service quality and demonstrated training, yet operating under strict surveillance. In this exchange, acts of hospitableness are conditionally and partially extended to them, mediated through their capacity to provide labour and leisure for paying guests. On the other hand, guests receive a novel visit to the prison through the consumption of hospitality, without truly experiencing its deprivation.

The Clink case operates as a carefully curated and negotiated zone, suspending the hostile logic of incarceration to reframe the prison as a site of meaningful human encounter and an embodiment of 'hospitality for social good'. In doing so, it invites guests not to consume punishment or deviance, but to witness and actively contribute to rehabilitation, while for students it is a departure from crime and into dignified, purposive work, even inside prison walls. In this liminal space of freedom and captivity, hospitality and incarceration, normality and deviance, hospitality enables both sides to negotiate the tensions between past identities and future possibilities, marking a transition from punishment to professionalisation, from stigma to possibilities of redemption and a new start. The contradictions and dualities inherent within this setting enable a triadic power dynamic between prisoners, visitors/diners and prison authorities. One may argue that the staged and sterile environment of a training restaurant becomes a spatial and temporal 'in-between-ness' (Germann Molz & McIntosh, 2013, p. 87), where hospitality is embodied, practiced and problematised, while the expected roles of hosts and guests are temporarily suspended (Dikeç, 2002). Interactions within such an unusual space could bridge from Derrida's hostile welcome, 'hostipitality', towards Irimias and Mitev's (2025) assertion of 'hospidarity', a solidarity-led alliance formed in the confined environment.

The juxtaposition of hospitality provision, training and incarceration adds a touch of excitement to 'liberate' visitors to enter the carceral system, whilst offering a 'normal' contour to the prisoners' incarcerated life by performing as hospitality providers (Turner, 2016). Diners may find themselves in an inverted social dynamic; those whom society has deemed transgressors are now in a position of care and service. This role reversal may provoke reflections about redemption and rehabilitation for visitors. Meanwhile, for prisoners, the 'in-training' status may symbolise unique 'rites of passage', where trainees develop the skills necessary for their post-release lives. In this sense, The Clink reorients the visitor curiosity about the 'dark appeal' of the prison towards empathy, civic responsibility and solidarity through prison hospitality encounters. By bringing visitors and prisoners together in a normalised social setting, we argue that hospitality can become a force for humanising prisoners and relabelling them as individuals, students and as skilled workers, away from the label of prisoners as a homogenous mass (Chan, 2026). However, such encounters could arguably risk reinforcing public stereotypes by exoticising the prison experience, where visitors seek the thrills of 'safe dangers' while continually reaffirming The Clink students' prisoner status, deepening the 'us' and 'them' divide (Jewkes, 2024). More broadly, the training restaurant may foster a performative rehabilitation, which may produce a worrying dichotomy between the 'desirable inmates' who serve inside this precarious restaurant environment, and the 'others', the visitors, who are firmly rooted on the outside and who experience the prison life from a position of relative privilege and safety.

Conclusion

This research letter offered a novel conceptual discussion of the complex manifestations of hospitality in an incarcerated context. Through interrogating leisure in an incarcerated context, this letter hopes to provoke and unsettle normative boundaries of hospitality vs. hostility, stranger vs. familiar, or free vs. incarcerated, or indeed encounters defined by the rigid host-guest dichotomy (Dikeç, 2002). By accepting shifting identities and temporarily suspended hierarchies, hospitality can serve as a critical lens in

future empirical studies to uncover the complex issues about social inclusion, rehabilitation, post-release integration and community engagement (Towne et al., 2023). Hospitality can also expose ambivalences in human interactions within spaces that are often on the fringes of society. In settings like prisons, displaced communities and conflict zones, hospitality, as we have argued, can be a catalyst for social good, engaging those on the margins in activities that not only support them but also help to change how they are perceived by others. As such, hospitality has the capacity to foster peace, reduce stigma and support transformation.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Maria Gebbels:** Conceptualization, Project administration, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Isabella Qing Ye:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Disclosure statement

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