

Care and Sociability in London's Barbers and Salons After Dark

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Abstract

This paper is about barbers and hair salons in London, England, open beyond the traditional retail hours of 9:00 to 18:00. Observation and interviews with managers took place before and after the COVID-19 lockdowns and against a backdrop of regular debates about nightlife, gentrification, the sustainability of local high streets, and austerity. There is extensive research on barbers and salons in terms of community and identity; this paper adds to that literature but centres the night and argues that after dark they also function as important spaces of care and as social infrastructure. The salons examined were mostly what Dutta refers to as ‘diasporic spaces’ and provided the opportunity for sociability, the exchange of knowledge, and care. They were also evidence of how venues after dark vary in meaning according to different practices as well as different discourses of the night.

Keywords

night, hair salons, third place, care, social infrastructure

Introduction

The research on which this paper is based emerged out of a workshop about nightlife in South London in 2019. The workshop was primarily attended by local club and pub managers, police and security staff, and council officers from planning and licensing departments. Much of the day was spent discussing pressures on local venues such as handling noise complaints and anti-social behaviour, concerns about policing, and managing business rates and costs. While on a guided walk afterwards, one author of this paper asked about the barbers and salons around the area that stayed open late. Of interest was whether they were ever included in discussions about planning and managing the area’s nightlife, or indeed whether they were considered nightlife at all. Though often open until 10:00 p.m. and sometimes later, it transpired that they were not typically understood in these terms.

Alongside our interest in what was happening in the salons after dark, we became increasingly aware of their importance to local communities and their precarity. Rising land costs and redevelopment are a threat across London, and plans to relocate some salons in Peckham due to

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work on the local train station were widely covered in the local press (Brinkhurst-Cuff, 2017). In this paper, we argue that being open late is equally worthy of attention. The areas in which the research took place were all subject to pressures resulting from gentrification and regeneration, and nightlife was a component of this. Equally, though there were competing claims to space, venues like salons or barbers were rarely featured in the wider discourses of nightlife. A contention of this paper is that, though often overlooked, salons and barbers contribute to the vibrancy of local high streets after dark, and being open late is important to the community networks and social effects that are supported and generated. A motivation for this argument is Brandellero et al.'s (2025) point that 'many of the questions around multicultural living together . . . can only be fully grasped within the context of circadian rhythms' (p. 11). Migration is well versed as a spatial concept and salons and barbers have long been recognised as community hubs for new and established migrant and minoritised communities (Dutta, 2025). What the discussion below illustrates is that these relations and communities are also about 'when' as much as 'where'. Though we start from the basis that the night matters, we also argue that 'nightness' and what that means, to who, and with what affects is not the same across all spaces after dark. There are two components to this argument. The first is that the night is not singular and rather than being a neutral backdrop, is constitutive of different relations and social connections in different spaces. Community, care, friendship and sociability happen geographically as well as temporally, in both pubs as much as salons, but not in the same way or with the same motivations. The second point is that there is a value to this care and, that it happens at night and is often rendered as less visible, is also significant (MacQuarie, 2023). We turn to Latham and Layton's (2019, 2022) work on social infrastructure to develop this and consider the sort of sociability the salons and barbers engender and how this overlaps and differs from other nocturnal spaces. Of particular interest is what they refer to as 'infrastructures of social life', these being the public and semi-public spaces like cafes and libraries where people gather and where the opportunity arises for social connection, the building of trust, and possibly care. Care (Bowlby, 2012; Bowlby & McKie, 2019) is important to literature on social infrastructure, as are questions about who conducts that labour, how it is rewarded, to whom it is distributed, and how it builds up over time. Again, we argue that the 'when' is significant and question in what ways the exchange and value of care and the relations enabled by social infrastructure are temporally contingent. To develop this, we argue care is not only an outcome but 'an analytical lens to understand the maintenance and repair of a shared world, including our socio-political and physical environments' (Raap et al., 2022, p. 869). Care is a means to explore the ways labour, precarity, sociability, and relations between people happen, where and when. Horton and Penny (2023) note that 'informal infrastructures of mutual support sustain those unable to afford market-based options or who face barriers to exclusionary and depleted public provision' (p. 1713). This highlights questions of how this labour is distributed and sustained within structures and geographies marked by inequality, and how that geography is also temporal. What happens when other social infrastructure spaces are closed or are inaccessible? Equally, given the ways nightlife is central to discourses of urban vibrancy in the United Kingdom, which spaces are being included or excluded from regenerative visions?

The paper begins with the methodology and research aims. The questions that guided the research are discussed, as are the disruptions to the research that occurred due to COVID-19. The paper then situates the salons within the wider literature about social infrastructure and care and asks how the night further shapes what these terms mean and the sort of relations and practices of care that develop within them. In conclusion, we argue that the salons and barbers are constitutive of distinctive forms of sociability and care that owe in part to them being open late but also to how the night informs certain practices.

Research Plan

As noted, the research started in late 2019 after a guided walk around an area well-known for nightlife. We already knew many of the workers and clients reflected London's diversity and an early question was how the later hours, which often meant closing after 9:00 p.m., might reflect domestic, leisure and work schedules, as well as opportunities or constraints experienced at night. From informal observation, we knew that some people did not go to the salons for haircuts alone but also to watch television, eat, and chat. Ossman (2002) distinguishes between three types of salons: the high-end type associated with specific names and branded products, the quick turnover salons that in London are often found in shopping centres and high streets, and the type explored here which is more embedded in suburban high streets. These salons are what Liebelt (2016) refers to as 'the neighborhood or proximate salon' and are associated with women's concerns and 'female-solidarity' (p. 188). These terms lend themselves to the themes of interest here – community, sociability, and intimacy – all of which have an affective pull in the study of salons and barbers. The research fits within this context and seeks to explore how such spaces operate as sites for affective bonds (and what sort), and how these are maintained, contested, and constituted at night and with what effect. It also starts from the basis that though literature on night spaces often centres the importance of community and intimacy (see Thurnell-Read, 2021), as does the literature on salons, they are not interchangeable spaces. Research on more traditional night venues such as pubs will often refer to relations and emotions associated with the night: pleasure, fear, sociability, friendship, and so forth. Salons, even when generating similar affects, are subject to quite different discourses, however, even though they are open late. As illustrated by Latham and Layton's (2019) work on social infrastructure, different spaces do different things and whether 'community', 'care', 'intimacy' or indeed 'the night' mean the same thing across different spaces after dark is a question that hovered throughout the research.

Salons and barbers in three areas in the north, south, and south-east of London were examined. They were chosen as they all featured salons that remained open after 8:00 p.m. while many other nearby services and shops closed. The venues were not selected exclusively on the basis of their attracting a specific clientele. Important work on salons, race, ethnicity and identity is discussed later, but the venues chosen for this study attracted a broad range of clients, and it was their being open late and servicing local communities which were the main criteria. This does not erase the fact that they were typically managed by women of colour and West Asian/Middle Eastern men, but the study also included salons managed by white women and some which attracted a mixed clientele. In this sense, the research sits within similar studies about conviviality (Wessendorf, 2014) and how diverse communities in cities like London 'rub along' but there are important caveats here. First, to centre the themes of care and social infrastructure is to recognise that the labour that underpins this is gendered and racialised. Second, it is essential to examine the economic underpinnings to this in that the areas were marked by competing claims to space, pressures resulting from gentrification, and unequal geographies of social infrastructure. The care occurring in the venues was therefore entangled within wider struggles around space occurring in their neighbourhood and what was accessible or inaccessible. While recognising that the three areas differed, they were comparable in this sense of being demographically diverse, on the edge of inner London, and subject to gentrification. They were also 'local' venues that catered to local communities. These were not the fashionable salons found in some parts of London with designer interiors, social media profiles, or where it is essential to pre-book. Nor were they the chain stores found in shopping centres or on some high streets. Instead, they all featured televisions or had mainstream music playing, flyers for local services and events were on the walls or coffee tables, posters of models with fashionable haircuts were in the windows, generic haircare products were sale, and staff and clients were typically in their thirties and upwards. Finally, though they were in areas where the majority of shops closed around 6:00 p.m., nightlife was integral to the regeneration happening outside. In London, nightlife and regeneration are strongly related (Assiter,

2024; Pieroni & Naef, 2019; Kolioulis, 2018) but while nightlife, diversity and regeneration were all entangled in these areas, services like salons and convenience stores are not included in the official discourse promoting nightlife.

The interviewees were conducted on an agreement of anonymity, and the precise locations of the salons and barbers have also been anonymised. It is possible to explain more about the neighbourhoods in which they are located, however. The context outlined in this section also reflects the dynamics of who is welcomed, listened to, and provided care within the salons across the day and into the night. The discussion does not take for granted that this is shaped by the economic relations of those who can pay for services. This is particularly the case in how they demonstrate sensitivity through care and through catering to the rhythms of work, consumption, and the domestic lives of the communities they served.

What is referred to here as the north-east area was a long street located within the borough of Haringey. In terms of 'regional ethnic diversity' as it is phrased by the Office for National Statistics, London is the most ethnically diverse region in the country and in Haringey, 57% identify as white, with Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African being the second largest community at 17.6% and Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh at 8.7% (see ONS, 2021 for further details). While the borough includes areas which are associated with established wealth, such as Highgate and Muswell Hill, Haringey is the sixth most deprived borough in London (of 32 boroughs plus the City of London), and 29th in the country out of 296 (Gov.uk, 2025). The street on which the salons were located was mostly two to three stories with shops and services including affordable greengrocers, mobile phone stores, estate agents, 99p shops, food outlets, betting shops, and of course the barbers and salons. After traditional retail hours, most shops were closed with only the salons and barbers open alongside some new fashionable bars, and several kebab and chicken shops.

In the south, the salons were located in the borough of Lambeth which spans from tourist sites such as the London Eye down to the border between inner and outer London. It is the 14th most deprived borough in London and the 70th most deprived in the country (Gov.uk, 2025). Fifty-five per cent of the population identify as white, with Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean, or African being the second largest at 24%, followed by Mixed or Multiple Identities at 8.1% (ONS, 2021). Rather than one street, as was the case in Haringey, the venues were dispersed around a busy commercial and retail centre. The area was significantly more gentrified than Haringey and has been so since the early 2010s, but remains very much at the heart of debates around social change in London and how that is highly racialised and classed. The salons were nestled among other shops and services including an active nightlife which included aspirational bars, clubs, and restaurants. Like in Haringey, the barbers typically featured a television screen and a couch where men would congregate to chat, and the women's salons were smaller with one to two chairs or, if larger, sold jewellery, hair and cosmetic products, and usually had music playing.

The final area was in the borough of Southwark. Like Lambeth and Haringey, the area is undergoing gentrification and the salons were located in a shopping mall and arcades and the high street. In the 2021 Census, 51.4% of the population identified as white, with Black, Black British, Black Welsh, Caribbean or African accounting for 25.1%, Asian, Asian British or Asian Welsh at 9.9% and Mixed or Multiple ethnic groups being 7.2% (ONS, 2021). For deprivation, it ranks 67 across the county and for London ranks at 12 (Gov.uk., 2025). Southwark includes popular tourist sites such as Tate Modern and Southbank and, to the south, Crystal Palace. It is also undergoing significant change, with areas such as Peckham and Elephant and Castle strongly associated with gentrification (Lees & Ferreri, 2016). In the area where the venues were located, the women's salons were typically small with many in arcades and one to two chairs, while the barbers were on the main streets alongside shops and services that very much represented the changes taking place; 99p stores, gambling shops, chicken shops, and market stalls sat alongside shops selling vintage clothing or artisan breads as well as wine bars which opened late.

In late 2019 and early 2020, ten semi-structured interviews were conducted in the early evenings with managers alongside observational work. The interviews lasted from 10 to 45 min and were sometimes broken up while clients came and went. The questions were directed to the managers/salon workers, but at times, clients joined in. They were asked what role they believed they served in the community and if the night was significant to that, what users did in the salon and when, and what might be lost if they were to close. Though more interviews were planned, the project came to a halt in February 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Early findings were presented at conferences in 2020 and 2021, but we felt there was a need to return to and develop the existing data. In 2024, six further interviews were conducted in the same neighbourhoods. All interviewee names have been removed, and the three areas have been referred to by their geographical location – north-east (NE), south (S), and south-east (SE) London. Before turning to the findings, we situate the study in relation to literature about the night, social infrastructure, and care.

Literature Review

The location of salons and barbers, who they cater to, and the ways different communities inhabit and make use of them mean they are enmeshed within and produce wider economic, social, spatial, and political contexts and relations, which are further modelled by race, class, and gender (Lukate, 2022). It is a contention of this paper that time is also important in this context. Following Brandellero et al. (2025), time is constitutive of how public and semi-public spaces are lived, planned for, managed, and who for. The times people work, their domestic schedules, whether they have leisure after dark, or whether they feel safe venturing out at all, reflect cultural norms, often around gender and age, as well as economic capital and what is open. Like public spaces in the day, public spaces after dark are also a site for various forms of inclusion and inequality as well as struggles over meaning (Brandellero et al., 2025; Sharma, 2014; Williams, 2008), and the reproduction of capital. The night is a deeply affective realm; it is policed through a range of overt and subtle technologies (Brands et al., 2015), and the discourses through which it is understood reflect how social and domestic lives at night are constrained or enabled. The backdrop to this research included frequent debates in the media about what happens in London after dark, inclusion and exclusion, and how it is being managed and promoted. Other concerns included the belief that venues and services close too early (Cooban, 2024; Cunningham, 2023), the lack of diversity, operating costs, venues closing (Burchiellaro, 2023; Campkin, 2023; Deakin & Thurnell-Read, 2025), and conflicts between residents and venues. Like other Western cities (Acuto et al., 2021), London's nighttime has also become subject to greater management and intervention over recent decades, including publishing various reports about London's 'night-time economy' (GLA, 2018, 2019), and councils launching strategies and citizen assemblies hoping to better understand, manage and promote their night-time offer (see, for example, Camden, 2024).

Though London's nighttime is contested and subject to debate and competing interests, salons, barbers and spaces like supermarkets or service stations are rarely examined, even though many open very late. Equally, though the literature on salons is extensive, it does not typically address what happens at night. As a way of bringing this together, the discussion now turns to some broad themes in the study of salons before exploring where this work overlaps or sits alongside that of other night spaces. It then briefly introduces the themes of care and social infrastructure and why the night is important to conceptualising them, before moving on to the research findings.

Much of the work about salons and barbers foregrounds themes including Black entrepreneurialism, resistance to or the reproduction of beauty norms (Black, 2004; Ward et al., 2016), belonging and migration (Lefort, 2026), their impact on crime in local neighbourhoods (Boehme et al., 2023) and social cohesion. Related topics include mental health and masculinity (Ogborn et al., 2022) and their significance for women of colour in regard to belonging, employment, intimacy,

and identity (Ngandu-Kalenga Greensword, 2022; Tarlo, 2019). Extending the theme of community and identity, McCann's (2024) work explores resistance to gendered norms and how LGBTQ+ clients and hairdressers explore and do different identities through the 'encounter between bodies, involving touch and physical management' (McCann's, 2024, p. 1275). The intimate relations between clients and hairdressers are explored further in research which makes visible emotional labour, as initially explored by Hochschild (2012), and is developed by Holmes (2018), who provides insight into the friendships that can develop between client and hairdresser. A final common theme in the study of salons which also overlaps with the work on night spaces and extends work on intimacy and labour is care. For Gabauer et al. (2021), 'no clear-cut definition of care in urban studies has emerged' (p. 5) but it refers to certain features, namely a 'relationship between something or someone that needs to be looked after, someone who is in a position to provide that attention, and all the complexities that such a relationship would involve' (Gabauer et al., 2021, pp. 16–17). Care is often associated with places like refuges, schools, or community centres or, at night, hospitals, care homes (Bowlby, 2012) and private homes. Following Liebelt (2016), Dutta (2025) argues that in salons, social and emotional proximity emerges from practices such as touching the hair, talking about personal issues, cleansing rituals, and other intimate practices, which also overlap with practices of care.

Oldenburg's (1989) work on third places also circulates (Boehme et al., 2023; Low, 2020), especially in the mainstream media, and resonates with the work on social infrastructure. In the months following the COVID-19 pandemic, third places were routinely presented as an antidote to the isolating experience of COVID as well as the isolation and alienation frequently associated with late-industrial, neoliberal society. Despite these broad claims and the tendency to romanticise third places (Wexler et al., 2017), it remains useful for thinking about how hair salons do function between the public and private, where intergenerational regulars and newcomers mix, as ports of entry for newcomers, and where information can be obtained and shared.

Literature on nightlife often promotes similar discourses about sociability, connection, and belonging. Though the night is often conceived in terms of fear and exclusion, it is also understood through notions of community (Melbin, 1978), which extends into research about trust and security (Hardley & Richardson, 2021), friendship, and intimacy in spaces such as pubs, bowling alleys (Jackson, 2020), club scenes (Giaevar López, 2022) and, of course, the home (Pelzelmayr et al., 2021). Like the practices of care seen in salons, it is also tied up with the sensual, intimate, the embodied and even the magical (Adams et al., 2007; Oldfield, 2019; Shaw, 2015). Like salons, intense affects are associated with the night and night-time spaces, but they are not always positive. In the United Kingdom, venues and streets after dark are also spoken of through tensions about change, commercialisation, decline (Assiter, 2024), community and the lack of (Nofre, 2023), and anti-social behaviour. These concerns reflect how nightlife has become somewhat burdened in the United Kingdom with not only promoting economic benefits, but also expectations around a sense of community and belonging that is presumed to be otherwise missing (Eldridge & Roberts, 2008). This is important to the study conducted here, in that the night in Britain is where debates around access and inequality are playing out, and it is tied up within discourses of citizenship making and idealised visions of vibrant urban centres. In this context, the night is an important site for exploring existing forms of inequality where competing claims to space are happening and where social infrastructure is limited or outside of the more dominant neoliberal discourse.

Salons, barbers, and more traditional night spaces like pubs and bars are therefore conceivable in similar terms and the deep connections they solicit and the affects they generate. Nonetheless, even if open at night, they are not interchangeable and while community, trust, and intimacy circulate through how each is understood, what that means differs. The night and how it is conceived and experienced is not a uniform thing that shapes all spaces equally. The night is not singular; in the same way the 'day' is not singular and does not have a uniform meaning or effects. What it

means to be out after dark motivates different affects depending on context, the company we keep, the purpose of our outing, among other things. To illustrate this, we now turn to the interviews and discuss how nightness informs the ways social infrastructure and care operate in the salons.

Findings

We come to a range of different questions here and are aware that many concepts have been introduced. To provide some anchorage, the findings focus on two themes: neighbourhood change and socialising and care. The findings are not intended to be a precise account of the salons individually, or the areas they are located. Instead, they illustrate certain debates about urban change, social infrastructure, and the night.

Change and Regeneration

Research about gentrification in London will sometimes refer to nighttime venues, but barbers and salons are rarely understood as facing the same threats, even though they are similarly vulnerable to rising costs and regeneration. All three areas were undergoing significant redevelopment, and this should be seen against wider changes in the sector. There are approximately 63,800 hair and beauty businesses in the United Kingdom, with 58% of people being self-employed, and over 85% women (NHBF, 2024a). Notably, a report by the National Hair and Beauty Foundation found that ‘hair and beauty salons in White ethnic areas have shown higher probability of surviving past their third anniversary, while Black, Black British, Caribbean and African outlets face lower survival rates’ (NHBF, 2023). In written evidence to Parliament, the group also called for ‘local authorities and decision makers to ensure that the views of hair and beauty businesses are fully factored into local plans and development’ (NHBF, 2024b). Salons and beauty venues remain a common feature of British high streets, as the above figures indicate, but the challenges they face are compounded by the challenges facing local high streets (Georghiades, 2025). In London, gentrification is well-documented (Horton & Penny, 2023; Hubbard & Lees, 2018) as are its effects on people at the intersection of different identities, especially class and race (Watt, 2006). In this context, spaces of social infrastructure are of key importance in the maintenance of social bonds and support. For Horton and Penny (2023), ‘more than spaces for sociality, social infrastructures are essential networks of social reproduction and survival, especially for diverse working-class communities’ (p. 1713). The interviewees reflected this:

... when they’re doing their regeneration and all that they need to build spaces for social gathering. Everybody wants to enjoy the summer before we start to wear jackets again. It’s very important, space, especially for the youth because we older adults can manage, we come to the salons, but you see the youth, no. Everywhere is closed now – the youth clubs ... they need more social space. (SE Worker)

Comments such as this illustrated care for other members of the community, the pressures local areas are under, and the importance of providing spaces for socialising. The cost-of-living crisis was having a notable effect at the time of the interviews, as was the loss of essential support services which across Britain included the closure of public toilets, youth and other community centres, and other social infrastructure. At night, the salons were of even greater importance and, in some cases, one of the few non-alcohol-related venues open. Against this backdrop, managers expressed concern about their sustainability. One complained that people were watching online videos to learn how to cut their hair, resulting in fewer store visits. Another manager noted,

The area has changed ... a lot of changes ... [it’s] gone posh ... Some of the old community are leaving and new communities are coming in ... Don’t know where they’re going but I know new people are

coming in . . . Before mostly ethnic background, but now it changes . . . now different ethnicities, they are more mixed . . . [NE Worker]

Socialising and Care

While economic pressures were extensively discussed, they continued to provide a space for local people to socialise, rest, and get their hair cut after dark. The concept of the third place has often been applied to salons and is evidenced in the role they play in knowledge exchange for newly arrived as well as established communities. Migration can be a theologising experience (Hanciles, 2008) and new and established communities will exchange information about housing or employment in religious spaces. The salons also provided this opportunity for newer communities to learn about the area. Sharing information about schools was especially common. As one manager explained:

We get all sorts of people, all ages . . . and let's face it a barber is one of the first places people come to communicate when they come to cut their hair . . . It's a landmark not only to cut their hair but also it's educational as well . . . we exchange information, like now . . . It's a landmark yes, people who have just come into the country come straight here to meet relatives or friends. (NE Worker)

This quote, and the one below, address the question raised earlier about the experience and production of community in areas of population churn and subsequent precarity. As has also been documented in many studies on salons, their purpose goes well beyond cutting hair:

I don't live in this community, but people come here . . . people move around, they come in, they have a drink . . . Loads of people come in here to socialise, drink or eat . . . and new people come in, they don't know where to stay . . . and when they discover here they're happy . . . (SW Worker)

Another customer from the south-east expanded on this:

I like to come here because I meet different people, we interact, we meet friends . . . gets me out of the house . . . when I came there was someone here so I rest here, I had a nap . . . if you are bored you come here, you have a friend (referring to the hairdresser) you have a chat – you make new friends, you meet strangers, it's good. (SE customer)

A manager from the south also noted that after dark, there was little else to do in the area:

I was thinking of doing hula hoops outside . . . for people who are not good at it, just some exercise and entertainment – so not just hair and beauty but also get customers to get fit as well! I want to start it for everyone here, children, anyone who wants to take part . . .

The interviewees universally argued that the salons performed a number of functions that made communities feel safe through sharing information, sometimes having political debates, and often mutually consuming drinks, eating, music and, importantly, watching sporting events. The interviews did not extensively discuss changes in care from day to night, but we took these and other examples as evidence of practices more likely to happen after dark:

. . . we have a lot of people coming to watch football, you have people all nationalities coming from train stations and they stand at the windows watching the football. (NE Customer 1)

One Cameroon fan explained that he could only access live matches at his local barber, for example. The barber went on to say:

All sorts of nationalities, families come; today it's tennis, tomorrow football, we have people coming in to use the toilet . . . people trust this place, that we will be friendly. (NE Worker)

Watson (2009) refers to various practices of care in British markets such as being recognised, keeping an eye on someone or general interactions; everyday actions such as popping in to say hello, waving, nodding, and similar acts of recognition, dropping in to watch a game or leaving a child while running errands were also observed and discussed in the venues. Delivery drivers dropped in to wash their hands or use the bathroom, and in one case, a manager spoke of a young man running into the barbers to seek help after being chased by other youths one night. These acts were integral to their status as social infrastructure, particularly when other spaces were so often closed at night. From the north, this sentiment was shared specifically about their use by older people at night:

This salon is a community salon especially for retired men . . . when they feel bored at home they come and sit here . . . I give them a drink . . . I see it as a community salon . . . When young ones come they cut their hair and go, but the elderly they stay, they crack their jokes, they stay – it acts like a bingo [hall]. . . (he laughs). (NE Worker)

From the south, a worker also said:

Older people come to sit and chat . . . they feel they're safe, they're less lonely . . . in the evening they come in and sometimes people come in for a coffee or a cup of tea, make an appointment and stay for a coffee . . .

A final quote which supports Dutta's (2024) work was their role as spaces for women to share information:

When there's trouble in the family, some people come to the salon to talk to us . . . we have women who come and pray, and downstairs there's a space I put information, numbers if they need help . . . where women can talk safely . . . lots of women who come here don't have a voice, they can take pictures of the information I put up and they can call, they can say what they want to say . . . specially women who are isolated, that's why I say to the girls here they are safe and they can talk, specially if they're experiencing difficulties.

Care links to other sites of care and can be seen in these simple everyday acts of sharing phone numbers, listening, and talking. The salons are part of a geography which is essential and constitutive of what social infrastructure and a 'good society' (Latham & Layton, 2019) means. In the absence of other nocturnal spaces where communities can socialise or where other spaces might be exclusionary, the salons and barbers are not just somewhere for a haircut but also for exchanging vital information for those who are isolated. The salon workers' valuable knowledge of the geography, local cultures and what is required for local communities is a resource that illustrates how social infrastructure owes to people's 'energies and efforts' (Latham & Layton, 2022, p. 600). This brings us to the final discussion, where we explore further who is doing that labour and what it means at night.

Discussion

Recurrent themes in the study of the night as well as salons and barbers are care, community, and intimacy. A question guiding this research was to what extent is the night significant, and in what ways. Rather than being a detailed account of individual salons, the paper has sought to bring into proximity the themes of care, social infrastructure, and the night. It has sought to do this for two

reasons: first, the night in the United Kingdom is often caught between competing narratives including exclusion and crime but also promoting 'vibrant' urban nightscapes. Aspirational leisure spaces are central to this discourse, but focusing only on them risks excluding services like supermarkets, petrol stations, salons and barbers that are also open late. Second, the night matters and its association with intimacy, care, and sociability is important to how the salons operated. An objective here was to understand how the labour of care was a component of the sociability of these spaces after dark. While we have generalised across the venues, we have sought to extract some key points and speculate on their significance by bringing together sociability and care in non-traditional nocturnal spaces. To provide some focus here, we echo Gabauer et al.'s (2021) argument that COVID-19 highlighted the importance of care in urban settings. The mainstream press certainly celebrated the reopening of salons and they were strongly associated with all that is perceived to be 'good': community, belonging, conviviality, and intimacy. After the easing of lockdowns, reports also emphasised the importance of night spaces and a similar set of ideas was put into motion about what was at stake and what had been lost (Nofre, 2023). While in agreement with the direction of these arguments, care, social infrastructure, and community are not apolitical terms. As with other essential workers such as nurses and delivery drivers, there was a disjuncture between the celebratory discourse and the reality of those whose working conditions remained fraught (see also Nash & Pinto, 2025). Care must be taken to not romanticise the spaces or the people who provided such essential work.

What this paper has attempted to foreground is how this labour, and what attracts some clients, is about the significance of such social spaces in their local area at night. This is not altogether new and the research fits within other studies on these themes. Education and workplaces (Amin, 2002), cafes (Hall, 2009), parks, markets, and swimming pools (Watson, 2019), public transport, pavements, and the like enable different intensities of connection and disconnection as a result of the constant flow of bodies, affects, technologies, and practices in urban environments. But as important as it is to ask what enables these social relations to happen and where, the form they take and between whom, so too is it important to ask how the night might shape these relations. By articulating sociability, care, and the night, we have offered some exploratory thoughts about what happens when many services are closed or bound up with social capital. The hours people work, the accessibility of other night venues, individual and cultural patterns of sensing safety after nightfall, domestic schedules and housing conditions, and the norms of going out after dark will all constitute how care, sociability, and social infrastructure spaces are understood, enabled, and laboured.

It is not just any night that shapes this, however. Salons differ from other night-time venues and exist in a somewhat vague relationship to the dominant discourses of the night in the United Kingdom which is more about promoting economic sustainability on the one hand, or decline on the other (Assiter, 2024). By exploring salons, we have sought to illuminate not just how these are important night spaces, but also what the night means and the ways different forms of sociability can vary by context. Salons are not like a school or workplace, and they are not like a pub either, where the sensory effects of music, alcohol, lighting, and design support specific affects and forms of sociability. By virtue of the acts that happen within salons, the touching, watching television, washing hands, the opportunities for socialising they afford, and the intimate acts of body care, they are constitutive of quite specific forms of social interaction. As noted, there is a tendency in the United Kingdom to want the night to resolve the issues of the day like loneliness or alienation. What we argue here, however, is that night varies in meaning. To reiterate, what community, care and social infrastructure mean and 'do' needs to be considered in a temporal context. As important, the night is not just a natural phenomenon or a singular variable; what it means, how it is experienced, how it orients us, and how it is integral to competing uses and economies of place will mean different things in different settings.

A point to end on is that these are not simply 'compensatory' spaces or alternatives to pubs or other leisure venues. Latham and Layton (2019, 2022) ask if such spaces merely substitute

for the lack of state infrastructure. Also, as we have addressed, are social infrastructure spaces the same across the day and night? It would be amiss to suggest the salons merely provide what the state has otherwise failed to do or that they akin to nightlife as more generally understood. The problem with this argument is that it does not identify what it is the salons actually do, that is, if not singular, unique, and special to the people who frequent them. Seeing salons as merely compensating for a lack of state infrastructure or the same as a pub says little about what sort of care is enabled, what might that mean when it fails, or its economic context. It also does not reveal much about how spaces after dark are used and understood differently from other spaces of sociability in the daytime, like libraries or cafes. Salons and barbers are part of a wider network of spaces that make up the broader urban social infrastructure and use of places after dark. They open up questions about what the temporal means in articulation with certain practices and illustrate how this then shapes and orientates specific forms of citizen-making practices and care after dark. The care, intimacy and community they offer might rest outside of the more dominant sense of nightlife as represented through bars or clubs, but they are essential spaces. That they are often overlooked in the wider night-time discourse alerts us to how the night is being depicted in limited terms, but where its meaning is also contested.

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