

Perception of the Bar Waitress Profession by the Population of Lubumbashi

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Abstract: *This study analyzes the perceptions of hotels by the population of Lubumbashi, focusing on a central question regarding how actors view these establishments both inside and around them. The formulated hypothesis suggests that hotels are perceived as places of debauchery, prostitution, and rest. This hypothesis is based on preliminary observations and exploratory readings conducted prior to the study. To achieve the research objective, a psychosocial survey method was employed, combining interviews, observation, and content analysis. The results reveal that hotels are perceived as sources of income, places of work, and spaces for accommodation or assistance for people in difficulty. Hotels are also seen as professional activities carried out within an organized framework. However, some actors also consider hotels as places that encourage criminal activities, prostitution, and debauchery. These negative perceptions coexist alongside the positive functions of hotels. Overall, the results confirm the initial hypothesis formulated in this study.*

Keywords: Social representation, hotel

1. Introduction

The issue addressed in this study is based on the perception of the bar waitress profession by the population of Lubumbashi, drawing on the concept of perception as both a cognitive and social process. It highlights judgments often based on appearance and prejudice, rather than on the actual professional requirements. Waitresses are frequently associated with negative stereotypes, despite the skills and qualities required in this occupation.

Given this reality, the central research question is how the population of Lubumbashi perceives the profession of bar waitress. The formulated hypothesis assumes that this occupation is viewed in a demeaning way, often seen as involving “easy” or uneducated women with low qualifications. However, it is also considered as a normal job, carried out by active women. The main objective of this study is to identify these different perceptions in order to contribute to the revaluation of the bar waitress profession. The choice of this topic is justified by academic, social, and scientific motivations. It aims to provide useful insights for stakeholders in the sector to improve working conditions and the image of these professionals.

Methodologically, the research relies on a psychosocial survey approach, allowing direct contact with participants. Techniques used include interviews and direct observation for data collection. Content analysis was employed to process and interpret the information gathered in the field. Finally, the study is delimited in thematic, spatial, and temporal terms. It falls within the field of social psychology and focuses on the city of Lubumbashi. The research period spans from October 2025 to March 2026, with fieldwork carried out regularly in bars during service hours.

2. Theoretical Foundations

This section presents the theoretical foundations of our study, clarifying the key concepts and approaches that provide the framework for analyzing social representations related to hotels in Lubumbashi.

2.1. Definition of Concepts

Defining concepts helps avoid contradictions that may arise from different understandings of the same term. It removes ambiguity, as a term can carry multiple meanings. To prevent any confusion, we define here the central concepts of our study: social representation and hotel.

2.1.1. Social Representation

According to Jodelet (1997, p. 36), a representation “is a form of knowledge socially elaborated and shared, with a practical purpose, contributing to the construction of a reality common to a social group. It is not merely a reflection of reality but functions as a system for interpreting reality, organizing relationships between individuals and their environment, and guiding their practices.”

Moscovici (1984, p. 132) specifies that social representations are “a way of interpreting the world and understanding our daily reality, a form of social knowledge that a person constructs more or less consciously based on who they are, who they have been, and what they project, guiding their behavior.” Abric (1997) and Roussiau & Bonardi (2001) add that representations serve a practical function in understanding and adapting to social reality.

For our study on hotels in Lubumbashi, we consider social representation as having both iconic and discursive dimensions. It exists between the individual and the social, with a central system around which peripheral elements revolve. These representations serve as a framework for understanding and influence behavior, incorporating stereotypes that, to evolve, require transformation of the central system.

2.1.2. Hotel

According to Mashiny (2011), a hotel is an accommodation establishment that offers furnished rooms or apartments for rent. It hosts transient guests or long-term stays and, except in rare cases, is not a permanent residence.

Pizam (2009) defines a hotel as an organization providing lodging, dining, and leisure services. Its goal is to satisfy the needs and comfort of clients by offering a temporary but complete experience.

Thus, a hotel combines several departments: front desk, housekeeping, technical services, food and beverage, administration, and ancillary services. This organization aims to ensure comfort, safety, and convenience for visitors throughout their stay.

2.2. Theories Related to Social Representation

This section is devoted to the theories that will allow us to discuss the results. Therefore, it is divided into two subsections: the approach to the notion of social representation, inspired by Denise Jodelet, and the theory of symbolic interactionism developed by David Le Breton.

2.2.1. Approaches to the Notion of Social Representation (excerpt from Jodelet, D., 1994)

The notion of social representation, notably developed by Denise Jodelet (1994), refers to complex phenomena present in social life. It encompasses various elements such as beliefs, values, attitudes, opinions, and images, organized into coherent knowledge about reality. This common-sense knowledge allows individuals to make sense of their environment and guide their actions. Social representations constitute a form of knowledge that is socially elaborated and shared, distinct from scientific knowledge. Introduced by Durkheim and further developed by Moscovici, this concept highlights the importance of social interactions, exchanges, and communication in constructing collective ideas. They thus contribute to the formation of a shared reality within a social group.

As systems of interpretation, social representations influence behaviors, communication, and relationships among individuals. They play a role in processes such as identity construction, knowledge dissemination, and social transformations. They also reflect individuals' social belonging through shared norms, values, and experiences.

Finally, social representation is both a product and a process of thought. It results from a mental activity through which an individual relates to an object, real or imaginary, interpreting and reconstructing it. Thus, it constitutes a specific form of thinking, marked by its social character, which helps to understand how individuals perceive and interpret their reality.

2.2.2. Symbolic Interactionism

Symbolic interactionism views the individual as an active actor who constructs the meaning of their environment through social interactions. According to Le Breton (2004), the actor mobilizes interpretive abilities to assign meaning to the situations they experience. Therefore, social reality is not fixed but is constantly constructed and reconstructed. This approach emphasizes the symbolic dimension of human relationships, showing that individuals act according to the meaning they attribute to things and to others.

From this perspective, society is seen as a dynamic process in continuous evolution. Social meanings emerge from interactions between individuals, as emphasized by Blumer. Interaction is not limited to speech but also includes gestures, glances, and postures. These elements form a symbolic language that contributes to the construction of social meaning.

This theory is relevant to this study because it helps understand how actors construct their perceptions of hotels in Lubumbashi. The meanings attributed to hotels result from lived experiences and daily interactions between individuals. Norms and values are not rigidly imposed but are constantly negotiated and reinterpreted. Each actor adjusts their behavior according to context and personal interpretations. The individual is never passive, as they analyze situations and act accordingly. Ultimately, social reality depends less on objective facts than on the meaning that actors attribute to them.

2.3. State of the Question

Humans are neither born alone nor do they learn alone, as every experience takes place within a shared frame of reference (Mucchielli, 2004). It is within this perspective that our study is situated, taking into account the influence of the social environment on perceptions. Accordingly, we reviewed previous studies related to our topic. These studies help identify convergences and divergences with our analysis and highlight the originality of our approach.

According to Jodelet (1984), the study of social representations illuminates the socio-cognitive mechanisms at work in social thought. It constitutes an important alternative to classical models of social cognition in psychology. Social representations are linked to language, ideology, and collective imagination. They play a central role in guiding social behaviors and practices. By their nature, they allow the historical, social, and cultural dimensions of studied phenomena to be reflected. Thus, they occupy an essential place in the analysis of human behavior.

For Robert (1984), isolated behaviors have limited social significance when considered individually. However, when organized into styles and strategies, they take on greater social meaning. Social norms influence the perception and interpretation of these behaviors, and they guide how individuals adjust their attitudes depending on the context.

Our study stands out due to its spatial framework in Lubumbashi, its contemporary relevance, and its targeted population. It uses a field-based sampling method and a psychosocial survey approach with observation, interviews, and content analysis. The results show that hotels are perceived both as sources of income, workplaces, and accommodation spaces, but are also associated with criminal activity and debauchery. These varied perceptions illustrate the complexity of social representations of hotels and overall confirm our initial hypothesis.

3. Presentation of the City of Lubumbashi

Lubumbashi, the second-largest city in the Democratic Republic of Congo, is a dynamic and cosmopolitan urban center located in Haut-Katanga Province. It is characterized by high population density and a diverse economy centered on mining, commerce, and services. The city hosts numerous bars, restaurants, and hotels, which serve as important social spaces for its residents. These establishments play a vital role in daily life, providing both leisure spaces and employment opportunities, particularly for young women working as bar waitresses. In this context, public perception of this profession directly affects its social value and recognition. Studying these perceptions allows for a better understanding of social representations related to the hospitality and restaurant sector in Lubumbashi.

Lubumbashi is also distinguished by its cultural and social diversity. Its population consists of multiple ethnic groups and workers from other provinces, resulting in a variety of behaviors and perceptions regarding service professions. Bars and restaurants are spaces where clients, employees, and outside observers intersect, increasing the visibility of the work performed by waitresses. This social mix makes perceptions of the profession complex, balancing professional recognition with stereotypes related to morality and gender. Understanding these perceptions thus requires analyzing the city's urban, economic, and cultural context.

The nightlife and bar attendance in Lubumbashi contribute to shaping the social image of waitresses. Daily interactions among clients and staff, often observed in these settings, produce judgments and representations that can be positive, neutral, or stigmatizing. Perceptions of this profession are influenced by economic, social, and cultural factors unique to the city. Waitresses must navigate professional expectations, client relations, and implicit social norms. Studying Lubumbashi from this perspective highlights tensions between recognized work and social stereotypes, while emphasizing the importance of revalorizing this profession locally.

4. Methodological Framework

The study population refers to all individuals or units targeted by a scientific investigation. According to Berther (1987, p. 22), "the population is defined as statistical units or individuals meeting a common definition and constituting the collective of interest." M. Mucchielli (2004, p. 6) adds that the survey universe is "the set of human groups concerned with the objectives of the survey." Tshibambe Kalonda (2013, p. 32) further notes that the population consists of individuals located in a given space with characteristics relevant to the researcher. For our study, the population includes residents of the city of Lubumbashi, both men and women, considered as objects of research.

The population distribution by commune in Lubumbashi is as follows: Annexe (384,234 residents, 23.78%), Kamalondo (34,719, 2.14%), Kampemba (361,396, 22.36%), Katuba (291,784, 18.06%), Kenya (108,260, 6.70%), Lubumbashi (247,757, 15.33%), and Ruashi (187,132, 11.58%), for a total of 1,615,282 inhabitants. Given the large population, it was

impossible to work with all residents due to time, resources, and feasibility constraints. It was therefore necessary to extract a representative sample of Lubumbashi residents.

Regarding sampling procedures, Albarello (2007, p. 301) emphasizes that sample size does not depend on the total number of individuals and that representing a fixed percentage of the population is inaccurate. The sample is a fragment that allows an overall evaluation of the studied group. Since our study is qualitative, we opted for diversity among participants to gather varied perspectives. Participant selection was based on relevance to the research topic.

We chose a field-based sample, taking the city of Lubumbashi as the working universe. This approach allows for understanding the entire environment as a coherent unit, without concentrating all observations in one location. The defined working universe is treated holistically so that each observation contributes to understanding the broader environment. Field-based sampling is particularly suitable for qualitative studies where the objective is to capture interactions and representations in their natural context.

For data collection, we combined direct observation with semi-structured interviews. Direct observation allowed us to capture the practices and interactions of actors around hotels in Lubumbashi. According to Chapoulie, cited by Kaminski, observation is "a qualitative research method involving the researcher's personal and prolonged observation of situations and behaviors." This method enabled us to produce detailed field notes, recording what was seen, heard, or observed within hotels over a two-month period.

The interviews complemented the observations by allowing the collection of participants' perspectives and representations. According to Abric (2011, p. 75), in-depth interviews are an essential method for studying representations because they produce discourse that reveals individuals' logics of action and rationalities. We employed both structured and semi-structured interviews: the former providing a structured framework, and the latter allowing participants to express themselves freely. These interviews helped identify recurring themes and complemented the analysis of interactions observed in the field.

Finally, the interviews were classified into three main types: exploratory, main, and control. Exploratory interviews allowed us to identify themes and points of interest, establish networks, and refine the research problem. Main interviews delved deeper into the research question and provided the core material for analysis. Control interviews were used to verify and cross-check information, highlighting the uniqueness of each case. Data collection was guided by the principle of saturation: when responses began to repeat, it indicated that the information had been fully captured.

5. Data Presentation and Analysis of Results

The results of our field research were obtained through observation and interviews with participants of all genders, without any discrimination based on their categorization.

5.1. Understanding the Profession of Bar Waitress

A bar waitress is a woman responsible for welcoming customers, seating them, and informing them about the variety of available drinks. She carries and serves beverages, prepares bills, handles payments, and monitors customer behavior in the workplace. This job generally requires organizational skills, communication abilities, and the capacity to manage interactions with different types of clients. In countries with strict professional standards, such as certain hospitality institutions, this position is accessible to individuals with a university degree or a professional certificate in hospitality and catering, potentially complemented by a bartender-specific qualification. These credentials help in understanding service management, professional ethics, and customer expectations.

However, in the Democratic Republic of Congo, this profession remains widely accessible even without prior education or experience. Employment may be offered through indefinite or short-term contracts, depending on the needs of the establishments. In the following sections, we analyze how the population of Lubumbashi perceives this profession, examining its advantages and disadvantages, the influence of clients, and associated social representations.

5.2. Waitressing as a Full-Fledged Job

Waitressing is a legitimate form of employment. It is a paid position, governed by a work contract that qualifies it as an “employment” rather than mere “work.” A bar waitress provides service in the dining area, at the counter, or on the terrace, offering hot, cold, or alcoholic beverages according

to customer choices. She ensures the maintenance of equipment, glassware, and premises, respecting hygiene standards. Her duties may also include selling complementary products such as tobacco or billiard tickets.

For Prisca, a waitress at MDI Bar on Changalele Avenue in the Carrefour Gambela neighborhood, this work is no different from that of a mine employee, as both receive a monthly salary. According to her, every profession has value and requires specific qualities from the worker. A mother of two, she is proud of her job, which allows her to ensure the well-being of her family. Despite the sometimes negative perception of her profession, she remains indifferent to judgment, as long as her life and her family’s life remain stable and peaceful.

5.3. Waitresses as Prostitutes

In Lubumbashi, bar waitresses are often stigmatized and labeled as prostitutes. Yet, there is no such thing as a “lowly job,” and this work, like any other, deserves respect. Many women and girls in this profession are underestimated or disparaged. Sabrina, a waitress at Kaisari Bar near the Carrefour roundabout, emphasizes: “I have a degree in computer science, I am not a prostitute, and I never will be.” She works as a waitress due to a lack of opportunities in her field of study, and despite her family’s disapproval, she sees the position as a means to achieve her goals: saving for a passport and plane ticket to continue her studies abroad. According to her, it is essential to behave with dignity and remain focused on personal ambitions.



In the same bar, Miriame, a 38-year-old single woman, explains that her salary is not sufficient to meet her needs. She admits to using her appearance and charm to attract certain clients and earn extra income, a practice she refers to as “seated prostitution,” limited to partners she chooses within the bar and not street prostitution. For her, this practice responds to economic constraints and poor management by the owners, who do not provide adequate pay to their employees.

Prostitution, generally defined as engaging in sexual acts for pay with an indeterminate number of partners, does not exactly describe what Miriame does. She prefers to describe it as polyandry, considering each client as a chosen partner rather than an act of prostitution in the strict sense. This distinction illustrates that the reality of bar waitresses in Lubumbashi is complex and nuanced, blending survival strategies, personal choices, and social perception.

5.4. Clients as Provocateurs

Bar waitresses are in constant contact with clients, which is central to their work. The clientele in bars is diverse: men and women, rich and poor, literate and illiterate, educated or not. Each interaction is therefore unique and can influence the social perception of the profession, which is often judged through the behavior of the waitresses and the expectations of the clients. This diversity makes the client-waitress relationship complex and sometimes ambiguous.

The work of a bar waitress includes welcoming and seating customers, presenting available beverages, serving in the dining area, at the counter, or on the terrace, as well as preparing bills and handling payments. The waitress must also maintain the bar, glassware, and premises according to hygiene standards. Some have the opportunity to sell complementary products such as tobacco or billiard tickets, expanding their professional responsibilities.

For many women in Lubumbashi, this profession is stigmatized and often associated with prostitution. Some waitresses, like Sabrinna, a computer science graduate, work solely to meet their needs or finance their education, rejecting any notion of prostitution. Others, like Miriame, believe that their appearance and charm allow them to supplement their income through sexual relations with clients, but only within the bar, not in the streets. Economic motivations and insufficient salaries explain these behaviors.

Clients themselves have varied perceptions. Some, like Richard, believe it would be dangerous to engage sexually with waitresses due to health and family risks. Others, like Patient, acknowledge that some clients flirt with waitresses under the influence of alcohol or on impulse, while female clients like Choudelle criticize waitresses who use their charm to seduce and obtain financial advantages.

Thus, the perceptions of the bar waitress profession in Lubumbashi reflect a social complexity in which paid work, economic survival, stigmatization, and client relationships coexist. Some waitresses work solely for their salary and independence, while others supplement their income through sexual practices with clients. These varying attitudes reflect the diversity of social representations and provide a better understanding of the profession's reality in the Lushois context.

5.5. A Waitress as a Mother

A mother is the female biological or adoptive parent of a child, the male biological or adoptive parent being the father. In French, a mother is defined as "a woman who has given birth to, raises, or has raised one or more children." In the context of bar waitresses in Lubumbashi, it is evident that most are mothers. They may have one, two, three, or more children, often raising them alone because the fathers are absent or irresponsible. This situation gives these women a dual responsibility: providing for their household and ensuring their children's education. Their role goes beyond professional function and occurs within a complex family and social framework. Despite challenges, they continue to work with dedication and perseverance.

Falonne, met on the terrace of "Par rapport à Par rapport" on Avenue du 30 Juin, exemplifies this reality. A mother of two children, a 9-year-old boy and a 6-year-old girl, each with a different father, she takes full responsibility for her family. Through her work as a waitress, she manages to meet the material and educational needs of her children. She expresses pride in her job, which allows her to balance professional life and parental responsibilities. Her experience shows how waitressing becomes a means of resilience for mothers in a context lacking paternal support. Being a mother and working in a bar in Lubumbashi thus involves multiple responsibilities and a strong sense of organization. This situation also reflects the complexity of social representations surrounding this profession in the city.

6. Discussion of Results

According to Jodelet (1984), social representations structure individuals' perceptions and behaviors within a given context. In our study, we observe that residents of Lubumbashi assign various meanings to the waitress profession, ranging from economic valorization to social stigmatization. These perceptions reflect how representations influence social judgment. Waitresses adapt their behaviors according to these implicit expectations. The interaction between social norms and professional practices is therefore evident.

Abrie (2011) emphasizes the role of representations in guiding individual actions. Our results show that some waitresses use charm or relational strategies to increase their income, illustrating how they conform to or resist social representations. These practices do not necessarily constitute prostitution but rather a strategic adaptation. The study confirms that the meaning attributed to a profession is contextual and socially constructed.

According to Mucchielli (2004), human experience cannot be understood outside a frame of reference. In Lubumbashi, residents evaluate the waitress profession according to their experiences and values, explaining the positive or negative perceptions expressed. The profession is thus interpreted through cultural and social filters specific to the population. This contextualization is essential to understanding the diversity of perceptions and their effects on waitress behavior.

Robert (1984) notes that the meaning of individual behaviors gains full significance when integrated into a social system. Waitresses in Lubumbashi adapt their practices according to the expectations and constraints imposed by clients and employers. Observed behaviors, such as relying on tips or managing client relations, illustrate this logic. The coherence between social perception and professional action confirms the relevance of a psychosocial analysis in this context.

7. Contribution of the Results

This study enriches existing theories in hospitality and customer service and allows the residents of Lubumbashi to better understand the role of hotels. The study employs a milieu-based sample, which is uncommon, to observe waitresses. These women take orders, serve clients, prepare bills, and handle payments while maintaining the equipment

and the service area. Their central role in the operation of the establishments is thus highlighted.

The profession of waitress has several perceived advantages, including the opportunity to receive tips, an active work pace, and social interaction with customers. Work often ends at a reasonable hour, unlike traditional jobs, allowing for free time after service. The human aspect and constant interactions are valued by the participants.

However, the job also has negative aspects. Waitresses often work on weekends and public holidays, face difficult colleagues, and are exposed to alcohol and fatigue. These constraints can lead to stress, irritability, and disengagement, affecting service quality and the well-being of the workers.

Waitresses constantly interact with diverse clients, which can create pressures and delicate situations. Some use their charm to increase their income, highlighting the complex balance between professionalism and survival strategies. Insufficient pay and lack of support exacerbate these tensions.

8. Conclusion

This research analyzed the social representations of hotels and the profession of bar waitress in Lubumbashi. The collected data show that these professions are essential to the local economy, despite stigmas and preconceived notions. The concepts of social representation and hotel guided the study by providing a clear analytical framework. Observations and interviews revealed the complexity of interactions among waitresses, clients, and employers. Therefore, understanding these professions goes beyond simple professional tasks.

The bar waitress profession offers notable advantages, such as human contact, the opportunity for tips, and flexible working hours, but it also has significant constraints. Stigmatization, weekend shifts, and poor working conditions affect the social perception of this profession. Testimonies from waitresses and clients captured the diversity of experiences and individual motivations. These results emphasize the importance of contextualizing each profession within its social and economic environment.

This study enhances existing knowledge in hospitality and service industries and provides a foundation for future research on service professions in Lubumbashi. It encourages greater social and economic recognition of these often-devalued professions. The conclusions highlight the importance of supporting workers under decent and rewarding conditions. They contribute to a broader understanding of issues related to social representations and professional practices, opening the way for concrete actions to improve both the perception and working conditions of service professions.

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