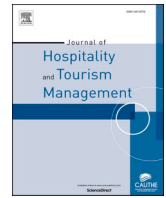


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Occupational stigma in line-level hotel jobs in sub-Saharan Africa: A youth perspective

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1. Introduction

According to the International Labor Organization just over one in five African youth were not in employment, education or training (NEET) in 2019, and this state of joblessness has been steadily increasing. With 200 million people aged between 15 and 24, Africa has the highest youth population in the world. In 2013, Africa was identified as the world's poorest inhabited continent. According to the World Bank, youths account for 60% of all Africa's jobless (ILO, 2020).

A multitude of sources have acknowledged the importance of tourism to Sub-Saharan Africa (SSA)'s economic development, job creation, poverty alleviation, and social livelihoods (African Development Bank Group, 2018). The travel and tourism sector contributed 24.7 million jobs in Africa, representing 6.9% to its GDP, and 6.5% of total employment (WTTC, 2021). Paradoxically, one of the most significant issues that people working in tourism hospitality face relates to occupational stigma (Kusluvan, Akova, & Kusluvan, 2022; Li, Liu, Zhang, & Huan, 2020; Li, Song, Wang, & Huan, 2021; Rasmussen & Dziwengo, 2017; Shantz & Booth, 2014; Wildes, 2005; Williamson, 2017). Li et al. (2021) defined occupational stigma in tourism "as an unclean, repugnant, or disgraceful profession that is considered as unhygienic and dangerous, dishonorable, or morally corrupt in the mind of the public" (p. 551). Line-level jobs in the tourism and hospitality literature are associate with the labels: dirty, worthless, subservient, unequal power, low in status, low-skilled, semi-skilled, transitory, precarious, not real jobs, poor working conditions, low wages, long working hours, limited career opportunities, unfair performance appraisal, docility, servility, slaves, servants, women, serving alcohol, and permissive environment (Baum, 2019; Harris & Pressey, 2021; Li et al., 2020, 2021; Shantz & Booth, 2014; Shigihara, 2018). Labeling line-level jobs as such discredits their value and the value of the people who perform them (Kusluvan et al., 2022). Thus, occupational stigma can negatively shape public opinions and attitudes toward certain occupations making them unpopular in society (Li et al., 2020). Williamson (2017) poignantly argued, "there is a stigma attached to hotel work", discouraging youth

from seeking employment in the sector (p. 4). Wildes (2005) found "that restaurant servers who feel stigmatized because of their work will both leave the restaurant industry and not recommend a job in the restaurant industry to a friend or family member" (p. 2).

Despite widespread societal stigma attached to tourism-based hospitality jobs, research on occupational stigma in tourism hospitality is still negligible (Harris & Pressey, 2021; Jerez-Jerez, Melewar, & Foroudi, 2021; Kusluvan et al., 2022; Li et al., 2020, 2021; Shigihara, 2018; Wildes, 2007; Williamson, 2017). Moreover, to our best knowledge no study has empirically examined youth's reactions to occupational stigma in a Sub-Saharan African context. This study is a follow-up on an earlier research commissioned by a government non-profit organization, which initial purpose was to assess industry and hospitality training needs in country members of West African Economic and Monetary Union (Fig. 1). Interestingly, in the process of gathering data from tourism hospitality experts in the region during a 28-day fieldtrip, a remarkably consistent narrative about stigmatized occupations in tourism hospitality emerged in all the 61 interviews. Interviewees unanimously bemoaned the negative image of the industry and lamented the difficulty of recruiting young people to perform line-level hotel occupations. Local experts wanted to understand why those jobs were not attracting the African youth, despite the so much needed source of income.

The interviews, in line with the naturalistic inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), instigated in me the inherent curiosity to independently pursue the research further in order to comprehend why Sub-Saharan African youth tend to decline such jobs, despite rising unemployment rates and the enormous financial challenges they face (The World Bank Group, 2021). To put it bluntly, because of poverty issues, one may assume that young Sub-Saharan African would take up whatever jobs available to them to secure an income. Of course, this assumption is myopic because as many authors have argued, firm-level determinants (e.g., salary, management style, etc.) alone do not explain youth's ambivalence towards certain service jobs (Rasmussen & Dziwengo, 2017). For example, Rasmussen and Dziwengo (2017) found that youth involved in waste

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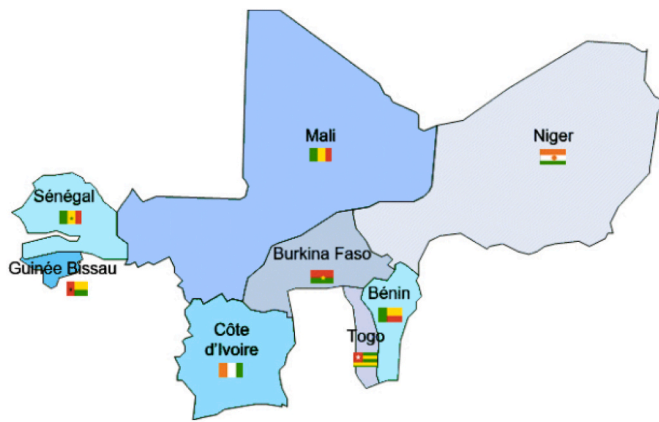


Fig. 1. Study region.

management in Mombasa's slums and elsewhere expressed pride and civic engagement in playing a constructive role in the community; "money alone was not enough for the jobs to be seen as acceptable" (p. 10). Therefore, the research question of this study that warrants an answer is: how does occupational stigma manifest in this Sub-Saharan African context? In other words, the purpose of this exploratory study is to understand why, despite the desperate need for employment, line-level jobs in international hotels -receptionists, cooks, waiters, room attendants, are denigrated by the Sub-Saharan youth. The reason to focus on line-level jobs, as explained further, strongly emerged from the occupational rhetoric of local industry experts. Occupational stigma in the tourism and hospitality sector remains associated with an elevated likelihood of experiencing barriers to working in this sector, and disentangling the factors shaping perceived occupational stigmas remains critical both to employment and firms' performance (Li et al., 2020; Shigihara, 2018) in the participating countries.

This study moves from the dominant narrative about employment in tourism hospitality and the operational aspects of the jobs and turns to Goffman's (1963) theoretical underpinning of "social stigma", Pinel's (1999) "stigma consciousness", and Ashforth and Kreiner's (2013) and Valtorta et al.'s (2019) "stigma taint", for a socio-cultural understanding of the intricacies of occupational stigma in tourism hospitality in Sub-Saharan Africa and its effects on employment. Such an understanding contributes to the tourism hospitality literature on occupational stigma and its implications, which are grounded in the research context, can help to de-stigmatize line-level hotel jobs in these countries and positively reposition them in the society.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Social stigma

Goffman (1963), who originated social stigma, defined social stigma as an "attribute that is deeply discrediting". This attribute is webbed in a bundle of negative stereotypes which members of the in-group use to discriminate against members of the out-group. The out-group sees the stigmatized person as an individual possessing an "undesirable difference", reducing him/her "from a whole and usual person to a tainted, discounted one" (Goffman, 1963, p. 3). Stigma has been defined as a social process of stereotyping, labeling, judging, and discriminating. Social labels can have a profound impact on the lives of the people to whom these labels are applied (Link & Phelan, 2001, pp. 363–385). In Goffman's terminology, stigma ascribes a virtual identity to the stigmatized while disregards their actual identity. The virtual identity, which is linked to perceived undesirable traits, strips the stigmatized of all authentic personal characteristics, persists and affects the feelings and behavior of the stigmatized, making them experience status loss and discrimination (Link & Phelan, 2001, pp. 363–385). While individuals

are often the targets of stigmatization, an organization or entire occupations can become stigmatized (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Baum (2019) has repeatedly critiqued society's tendency to look down on tourism and hospitality jobs in general. Correspondingly, occupational stigma can lower the attractiveness of the entire industry (Hampel and Tracey, 2017).

2.2. Occupational stigma

The transition from social stigma (Goffman, 1963) to occupational stigma is well established (Valtorta, Baldissari, Andrighetto, & Volpato, 2019). Occupational stigma in the tourism sector remains associated with an elevated likelihood of experiencing barriers to working in this sector, and disentangling the factors shaping perceived occupational stigmas remains critical both to employment and firms' performance (Li et al., 2020; Shigihara, 2018).

Certain jobs are associated with distinct work features and dehumanizing images (Valtorta et al., 2019). Such jobs align with the narrative of dirty work, which are linked to poor working conditions, excessive workloads, servile roles, deviance, crime, manipulation, deception, etc. Jobs perceived as "bad" have low status and prestige (Harris & Pressey, 2021). The occupations literature suggests that stigmatized identities arise from "dirty work", which Hughes (1951, pp. 313–323) described as physically, socially, or morally tainted occupations (Valtorta et al., 2019). Stigma can be so pervasive that its taints harm the wellbeing of the stigmatized (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Goffman, 1963; Shigihara, 2018; Wildes, 2007). Regardless of how essential the job is, as Shigihara (2018) reported, stigma is attached to the job as being distasteful, disgusting, polluting and threatening of moral order.

A rich body of scholarship describes how individuals struggle with various types of occupational stigma (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Valtorta et al., 2019). Employees who feel a stigma associated with their work are more likely to seek employment elsewhere (Wildes, 2005). Borrowing from the stereotype literature (Steele, 1997), Wildes (2007) argued that employees who perceive that their work is negatively stereotyped resort to disidentification or disengagement resolves. They either accept the job with the belief that it is a temporary occupation, or simply distance themselves from it all. Stigmatized persons believe that by dissociating from the stereotyped occupation they protect themselves from identity threat (Steele, 1997). Steele defined identity threat in relation to the negative stereotypes attributed to a group, which become defining factors of the in-group's real identity. Pinel (1999) argued that the stigmatized do not have uniform reactions to their stereotyped status and that the effect of stigma depends on the extent to which the stigmatized is conscious about the stigma.

2.3. Stigma consciousness

Pinel (1999) proposed that targets of stigma internalize the feeling of stigma in different ways depending on the extent to which they expect to be stereotyped by others, and labeled this process "stigma consciousness". Pinel and Paulin (2005) argued that those who believe in their stigmatized status exhibit a heightened sensitivity towards the stereotypes with which they are judged by society. They indicated that stigma consciousness of being an employee in the service profession predicts the intent to leave the job, and supported that feeling disrespected mediated the relationship between stigma consciousness and turnover rate. Wildes (2007) discovered that stigma consciousness was highest for restaurant servers aged 18–35 and lowest for those aged 36–45. Restaurant servers who felt high levels of occupational stigma consciousness were more likely to indicate intentions to leave and were less likely to recommend their jobs to others. Shantz and Booth (2014) surveyed call center employees and found that as occupational stigma consciousness increased, occupational identification and work meaningfulness decreased, and consequently organizational production

deviance increased while company performance decreased. Ashforth and Kreiner (2013) explained that people are confronted to stigma taints when carrying out a job perceived as a low-status dirty job.

2.4. Taints of occupational stigma

In modern society, work is central to people, as it represents one of the main sources of identity, self-expression, self-worth, and self-presentation (Valtorta et al., 2019). On the other hand, some occupations are perceived as ‘dirty work’ (Hughes, 1951, pp. 313–323) and, by extension, the individuals who perform them come to be seen as ‘dirty workers’ (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013). Ashforth and Kreiner (2013, p. 83) identified three types of dirty work and the taint that they have on those who perform them: physical taint, social, and moral. *Physical taint* is associated with “waste, death, etc. (e.g., garbage collector, mortician, sewer worker) or is performed under dangerous or noxious conditions (e.g., soldier, construction worker, miner)”. Individuals doing these jobs are tainted in metaphorical language as ‘not clean’. In the dirty work literature ‘not clean’ connotes labels such as impure, revolting, disgusting, degrading, deceptive, immoral, etc. (Valtorta et al., 2019). *Social taint* is connected to occupations having a servile or demeaning role vis-à-vis others, such as chauffeur, butler, and other service jobs (Mejia et al., 2021). *Moral taint* refers to occupations that are perceived by societal values (e.g., exotic dancer, pawnbroker) as uncivil, deceptive, or sinful. The three are not mutually exclusive, and many occupations may be exposed to multiple forms of taint. Prostitutes were found to have the highest ratings in all three types of taint (Valtorta et al., 2019). The authors argued, “taint perceptions are associated with distinct work features and different dehumanizing images” of workers into objects, a disease, or animals (p. 964). Workers in the physical taint cluster were most strongly associated with biological metaphors, whereas workers in the social taint cluster were perceived as most similar to objects, and those in the moral taint cluster were perceived as most similar to animals. As an example, they argued, metaphorically, the prostitute is tainted as a walking toy (objectified), and a ‘malicious virus’ (biologized), with ‘no moral values’ (animalized). The importance of taint is its ‘stickiness’ to the person’s identity and its dehumanizing role and the effects that it has on occupation perception and turnover.

2.5. Occupational stigma in tourism hospitality

Service jobs have long been viewed as low-level and servile (Kreiner et al., 2006). Occupations that align with the characteristics of dirty job project the same characteristics onto those who partake in them, which in turn exacerbates the tendency to quit or not to join at all (Harris & Pressey, 2021). Li et al. (2021) introduced “occupational stigma judgment” to assess how the public judge stigma and whether the judgment is biased or true. Research revealed societal contempt for certain jobs, such as restaurant and hotel workers because they are associated with low status, poor working conditions, and servile relationship with customers (Shantz & Booth, 2014; Shigihara, 2018). Jobs considered bad do not provide sufficient means necessary for an acceptable standard of living. Harris and Pressey (2021) discussed cruise ship occupation in light of dirty work and stigma, and argued that work in this occupation aligns with “poor working conditions” and “servile roles”, which collectively position the workers as dirty workers. What makes an occupation stigmatized is the manner in which it is socially positioned in the mind of the recruiter, service provider, service receiver, and potential employee (Terry, 2014). Terry (2014) found the occupational rhetoric of Filipinos working on cruise ships to revolve around the workers’ conformity to, representation and perpetuation of docility, subservience, disciplined and flexible attitude and behavior towards the labor recruiter, management, and customer. Their naturalization into a ‘happy and smiling’ worker makes them “collectively considered members of a subservient class” (p. 90).

Restaurant jobs are also tainted because of dirty work characteristics

(Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Restaurant work is considered ‘not real’, seasonal, transient, lacking a living wage, of poor working conditions and low job satisfaction, insecure, and inflexible (Shigihara, 2018; Wildes, 2007). The literature also explained that restaurant employees deal with filth, distasteful tasks and servile relations with others, are exposed to physical and mental strains and sexual harassment (Shigihara, 2018). Analogically, Shigihara (2018) explained that people stereotype restaurant work as “socially undesirable”, “dirty”, “bad” or “not real”, and correspondingly dominant opinion portrays restaurant employees in derogatory terms, such as “unskilled and uneducated” (p. 90).

Also, tour guiding is among the most criticized occupations in the industry and suffers from high occupational stigma, wherein tour guides are labeled in the Chinese news and social media as “bad”, “dirty”, “dodgy”, “insulting” and aggressive (Li et al., 2020, 2021; Shantz & Booth, 2014). Such characterizations and the precarious nature of tourism hospitality work position these jobs negatively in the mind of employees and prospect workers (Wildes, 2007). Hence, occupational stigma can lower the attractiveness of the entire industry (Hampel and Tracey, 2017). Previous research supported that stigmatized service jobs negatively correlate with the intent to stay and to recommend the jobs to others (Wildes, 2005; Li et al., 2021; Ariza-Montes, Arjona-Fuentes, Han, & Law, 2019; US National Restaurant Association, 2019). More recently, Kusluvan et al. (2022) examined the role of occupational stigma and occupational-self-esteem on career commitment on undergraduate tourism hospitality students. They found that occupational stigma has a negative effect on career commitment and that occupational self-esteem has a positive effect on career commitment. Stigmatization reduces the hospitality experience of the stigmatized (Moufakkir, 2015, 2020). Despite the importance of stigma, stigma specific studies in the hospitality literature are limited (Li et al., 2020; Li et al., 2021; Moufakkir, 2020).

3. Method

Overall, beyond a scatter of investigations, the nature of tourism work in sub-Saharan Africa remains “*terra incognita*” (De Beer, Rogerson, & Rogerson, 2014), because of accessibility challenges (p. 38). Sub-Saharan Africa includes 46 countries with a wide range of culture, languages, and stages of economic development, but also cultural commonalities, relationships and connections, and relative regional uniqueness. This exploratory study is delimited to country members of West African Economic and Monetary Union (Ikechukwu, Ezeuduji, & Mbane, 2017). The research takes a regional system approach to explore occupational stigma in the region. “The concept of a system seeks to explain a certain phenomenon by seeing it anchored in its environment, something larger than itself, the phenomenon being a component of this environment” (Nir, 1987, p. 195).

A triangulation of focus groups with interviews is undertaken to enhance data richness (Lambert and Loisele, 2007). The focus group method provides data in a social context and offers the potential to emphasize group interaction and a greater opportunity to derive understandings that reflect the lived experience of the participants (Patton, 1990). I met twice with the same group via Zoom in July 17 and August 8, 2021, to ensure data credibility, referred to by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as “prolonged engagement”. These sessions allowed me to reach theoretical saturation. Afterwards, to overcome the difficulties of regional research and get more depth and width (Nir, 1987), in August 25, 2021, I conducted WhatsApp phone interviews in two country members because of ease of access to participants.

3.1. Selection criteria and sample

Besides the initial interviews, the literature also supports “that many hospitality and tourism graduates fail to enter the industry” and do not intend to make a career in the sector (e.g., Mooney, 2016, p. 9). Population trends also suggest that the number of young people in SSA

entering working-age population will be rising for years to come. Thus, the sensible selection criteria for the focus group’s homogeneity were (a) youth and (b) not working in the industry.

The focus group of this study was conveniently composed of five males and five females aged between 21 and 25 years old (Table 1), recruited using the snowball sampling technique facilitated by a former student of mine from Mali. This sampling technique is often used to reach populations that are difficult to access.

I followed the focus group protocol proposed by Bader and Rossi (1999). First, I introduced myself as an academic and independent researcher with no affiliation to any tourism hospitality organization or business company. I also explained my role as the moderator. Then, I introduced the research purpose and informed the members about their voluntary participation, anonymity and confidentiality. Members understood that they were free to express their views, to respond to the views of others, and that there was no right or wrong answer.

Focus group questions were inductive and naturalistic, and centered on occupational stigma and the reluctance of the youth to work in tourism hospitality. The participants were asked to discuss the projective open-ended question: “Why do you think Sub-Saharan African youth are not attracted to tourism hospitality jobs?” after which probes for more clarity and follow-up engagement questions were used. The focus groups were conducted in English, audio-recorded and transcribed. Each session lasted about 90 min. Interaction between group members was dynamic and the group discussion free-flowing.

Afterwards, between May 27 and June 8, 2022, I conducted convenient online interviews via WhatsApp with 11 participants from Mali, and seven participants from Senegal facilitated by a former student of mine from Senegal (Table 2). Because religion comes out as a core explanatory factor in the focus groups, I focused my interviews on Muslim participants. The participants were assured anonymity and confidentiality. They were asked to elaborate on occupational stigma in line-level hotel jobs. The interviews were audio-recorded and took on average 20 min to complete. Theoretical saturation was achieved and no new themes emerged. The interviews corroborate the findings of the focus groups completely.

3.2. Data analysis

I started the analysis of both transcripts with *open coding* by making constant comparisons for similar concepts, using the participants’ own words in the transcript for color-coding emerging thematic patterns (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). After that, through inductive reasoning, I went back to the literature aiming to assess and foster fit with appropriate bodies of literature (Corley & Schinoff, 2017). Therefore, a doubly iterative process took place by (a) moving from data to emerging themes and (b) from literature to the constituent concepts captured in vivo. I shared the transcript with one colleague from Senegal and another from Mali, asking them for a separate reading to confirm, reject, or add themes. For example, whereas I identified “a job for losers” as a theme, their recommendation was that the theme does not stand out as a strong one and recommended to integrate it within the theme “identity threat”.

Table 1
Focus group members’ profile.

Name	Country	Gender	Age	Religion	Occupation
Aboubakar	Mali	Male	25	Muslim	MA student
Aminata	Senegal	Female	23	Muslim	Digital marketer
Bijoux	Burkina Faso	Female	24	Christian	Mother at home
Fatimatou	Niger	Female	21	Muslim	MA student
Joe	Senegal	Male	25	Christian	Social worker
Matara	Mali	Male	25	Muslim	Educator
Nwafou	Togo	Female	21	Muslim	BA student
Serge	Burkina Faso	Male	24	Christian	Educator
Ode	Benin	Female	22	Christian	Sales
Mamadu	Guinea Bissau	Male	21	Muslim	Sales

Table 2
Interviewees’ profile.

Name	Country	Gender	Age	Religion	Occupation
Mahamadou	Mali	Male	23	Muslim	Student
Mamadou	Mali	Male	24	Muslim	Student
Aminata	Mali	Female	24	Muslim	Unemployed
Moussa	Mali	Male	23	Muslim	Student
Samake	Mali	Male	25	Muslim	IT employee
Adama	Mali	Male	22	Muslim	Unemployed
Mohamed	Mali	Male	25	Muslim	Engineer
Ndiaye	Mali	Female	23	Muslim	Entrepreneur
Aminata	Mali	Female	23	Muslim	Student
Mariam	Mali	Female	22	Muslim	Sales
Aboubakar	Mali	Male	25	Muslim	Student
Khadiyatou	Senegal	Female	22	Muslim	Student
Mbaye	Senegal	Male	25	Muslim	Instructor
Souleymane	Senegal	Male	25	Muslim	Sales
Aminata	Senegal	Female	23	Muslim	Airport
Malick	Senegal	Male	19	Muslim	Unemployed
Adama	Senegal	Male	25	Muslim	Unemployed
Rita	Senegal	Female	22	Muslim	Student

Also, they recommended that “religion and gender roles” should be included together as is supported in the literature (e.g., King, 1995). I also met twice, online, with two focus group members for member checking, as proposed by Creswell (1994), to secure accuracy and trustworthiness. The depth of the focus groups and interviews allowed me to understand occupational stigma in this particular culture, of which we know too little, from an emic perspective.

4. Findings and discussion

Four themes strongly emerge from the focus groups and are supported in the interviews, explaining the reluctance of Sub-Saharan youth to take up certain jobs in tourism hospitality. These four themes identify how occupational stigma manifests in the study’s research context. They are: the hotel space and identity taint, religion and gender roles, an amalgam of service with servitude and servility, mimicry and the Nouveaux Riches.

4.1. The hotel space and identity taint

Hotels are socially stigmatized and occupy in the social imaginary a panoptical space for elopement, nightstand, and “Dirty Weekend Specials” (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006, p. 765). Pritchard and Morgan (2006, p. 762) (also Allan, 2016), who critically reviewed hotels as a social construct, identified “the hotel as a complex, culturally contested and ideologically laden liminal place” that offers “a range of opportunities for transgressive behaviour and sexual adventure”.

There is a strong sentiment that working in the industry attracts and encourages prostitution and other social ills such as delinquency and deviance. The literature about sex tourism and its impacts on local communities is well established (e.g., Sanchez Talor, 2006). Jobs in international hotels and restaurants are stigmatized as socially and morally tainted (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Valtorta et al., 2019), in the sense that they are stigmatized as servile, deceptive, sinful, and degrading. One member explains, “even if you are innocent, in the eye of people you are guilty. You see, people act according to the expectations of family and friends even if there is a disagreement of opinion. So, they prefer not to be associated with all these things going on in the hotel”. Another one concurs, “many of our elders think that there are many things which are not ‘halal’, which means forbidden by religion, going on inside hotels, so they don’t like it. Even if you as a serious personal you are not doing it, this is what they think about it. It is difficult to make them understand. They may trust you but they don’t trust what is going on inside the hotel”. Another one adds, “automatically, hotels are

associated with bars, drinking alcohol, prostitution, and so even your friends can judge you. They think that if someone has something to hide they go to hotels. So, for many people, hotels are enigmatic, dark and fishy places. So, if you want to hide you go to hotels". Another one clarifies, "even me, when I go to a hotel as a guest for a drink, but I felt like everybody was watching me. I didn't feel comfortable, like if I was hiding something. So, when you are walking toward the hotel you feel like you are walking like a thief running away from the watching eyes, and when you are leaving you are afraid to see those eyes again. You see, whether outside or insides, as long as you are close to the hotel you are watched".

Furthermore, informants explain that the attractiveness of these jobs has to do with social stigma and perceived identity threat. One informant says: "young people simply do not want to work in hotels, you know. They refuse. They think that it is better to stay without a job than to work with tourists. They are more thinking about what their families and friends will say about them. People associate these jobs with many stereotypes". Jobs are stigmatized based on the stereotypes that people hold about them (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999). Young people working in hotels and restaurants for tourists, as one participant puts it, are stigmatized as "bon a rien/good at nothing". Another one says: "In Niger, I think that serving someone is always seen suspiciously and is devaluing. There is a cultural problem. For them [the youth] hospitality is waiting and front-desk, and that's it ... Even old people say that the young work there because they can't find another job".

Moreover, informants agree that working in tourism hospitality is associated with low education jobs and occupations characterized as dirty. They associate dirty jobs with prostitution, religiously haram/unlawful doings, servitude/servility, and gender roles. A participant argues, "youth, they know that the jobs are perceived as low-paying jobs with no career advancement, and those doing them are with low-level education". Members also concur that many chose to remain unemployed rather than take up these jobs. A member comments, "here, in Africa, because it is a collectivist society, young people are not afraid of starvation. They know that there is always a family member who will share food with them. So, they don't see the use of working in these jobs". Another one adds, "actually, you don't need that money. I am saying this to tell you that you don't starve if you don't work. You will always find your family to help you out and take care of you. See, there is always other options for me whether with an auntie or an uncle, etc. I prefer this way than people saying bad things about you. Working in a hotel is not something that make you pride. I think it is because there is always something hiding about hotels". Another one corroborates, "they will call you a loser, a prostitute, a servant, to give you bad names, sometimes even to your face. You don't want bad names to you".

Theory suggests that stereotype threat is essentially frustrating (Steele, 1997), because labeling taints the true identity of the stigmatized (Goffman, 1963). Steele (1997) and Pinel (1999) explained, when an occupation is negatively stereotyped as dirty work its holder reacts upon stigma and resorts to either disidentification (distancing themselves from the occupation) or disengagement strategy (leaving it behind). According to Wildes (2007), the majority of service employees opts for disengagement. Similarly, "Africans", one participant advances, "are proud people and they think more about what other people say about them and it is difficult for some people to work in these jobs, you know, because people say bad things about them". Generally, as Ashforth and Kreiner (2013) argued, people want to think positively of themselves and look to others for approval. When a significant portion of society views members of certain occupations as dirty workers, the latter may experience a severe identity threat. Informants agree that line-level hotel workers are stereotyped and prejudiced. One member argues, "even if I want to work in a hotel I will not do it because people will think that I am a prostitute or that I occasionally do it with tourists. So, I don't want to be called a prostitute. Even if my family accept that I work there, they will not be comfortable about what people say about me. I prefer to be away from it".

Hotels are also famous for sexual harassment of female employees by managers and supervisors. Focus group members refer to the hotel manager as a man who has the power at work and who would ask his female employees for sexual favors in return for career advancement. One member clarifies: "girls working there live in constant fear of losing their job if they don't sleep with the manager, especially if the girl is pretty. He will always try with her". Another one corroborates, "this is why me, as a girl, I will never work in hotel, because if you are not a prostitute you are giving sexual favors to your boss. Even if you are not doing that's what people thinks about you, even your family and your friends". Another member supports, "honestly, especially if the girl is beautiful. Whatever morals she has, people won't see her as a good girl. They think that all is about money, that she is either a prostitute or she is giving favors to the manager. Really, if she is beautiful and working in a hotel? You know what I mean?". These observations are not surprising. "There is certainly a darker side to hotel management than most hotel managers will admit, with businesspeople seeking prostitutes and male escorts, and some doormen and concierges arranging everything for guests -from drugs to escorts and all kinds of illegal things" (Pritchard and Morgan (2006, p. 767). According to Pearlman and Bordelon (2022), the restaurant and hotel industry is ripe with sexual harassment. Mkono (2010) concluded that sexual harassment is not uncommon in Zimbabwean hotel workplace, with coworkers, managers, and customers as perpetrators.

4.2. Religion and gender roles

Religious values have a significant influence on occupation choice and employees' performance and integrity (Zahid, 2017). Informants agree that religion is another occupational stigma factor influencing youth's perception of tourism hospitality jobs. They discuss occupational stigma and religious values in terms of what the "hotel" represents and what is allowed/halal and what is forbidden/haram in their belief system. Prostitution and consumption of alcohol were the main issue. A member advances, "in hotels, you have bars and money, two evils that attract young people to what is Haram. So, the question is not about the hotel but what happens inside remains hiding, in the dark side". Another one explains, "it is even riskier sometimes to pass by the hotel, especially when you are a married woman. If they see you they will tell stories about you, like you are a prostitute ... or you have a rendez-vous clandestine with a lover". Another member clarifies, "although you will find many families supporting prostitution because it is a means of making money, prostitution is a sin, it is haram". Informants agree that prostitution is common because of poverty. One member says, "poverty also pushes you to do bad things. You can find a 20 years old girl who is taking care of all her family. How is she doing that? Hotels attract prostitution. When you are good Muslim you don't do it. You see what I mean Although prostitution is illegal in most African countries". African government officials and religious leaders have publicly characterized prostitution as incompatible with African culture and moral values. According to Mgbako and Smith (2011), for example, African women engaged in prostitution experience deep societal stigma and discrimination. Consequently, the hotel space is also associated with sin.

Furthermore, People's attitudes and behaviors are intrinsically attached to religious interpretations (e.g., Putnam & Campbell, 2012). One member explains, "interpretation of the sacred book can be a problem because people use their own opinion. People are not well informed about religion. Certain people just believe whatever we tell them and others don't have good intentions because all is to manipulate people for money and power. Even within Sunni groups we have many groups, and opinion may differ between groups. Religious leaders can agree on something and disagree on others. And if you do something that does not please the group you belong to you have to hide yourself or they shame you". A participant clarifies, "even when it comes to investing in the hospitality sector, it is a problem linked to religion. There is this entrepreneur who stopped investing in the development of a hotel

because of his family, and the pressure not to invest lawfully earned money in what is perceived as a dark business. He wanted to build a high standing hotel here in Niamey because the need for such a development exist. It was just before the Francophonie music festival. We said we have made a call to all the operators to come together and invest in this project of a high standing, the man had all he need for the investment. Now when he could start with the project, his family come together to tell him that his father said that his money must not be invested or used for hotel. And you can see, this is the problem. This is the problem of Niger". Religion, therefore, remains a significant component of social life on the African continent. "To ignore religion, as a matter of obvious political and even economic importance, threatens the credibility of academic investigations". Religion "gives authoritative answers to how people should live" (Ludovic, 2021, p. 47).

As gender is never independent of other social systems, the status of gender in Africa is integral to the people's religious beliefs, and consequently ignoring this connection would be misguided (King, 1995). In Africa, informants concur that, "working in the kitchen is considered a women's job, as one member supports, "I don't see me cook for myself let alone for others. The kitchen is for mothers. Even my mother sent me out. As to my father, he will take me by the ears. No, there is no place for me in the kitchen". Another member submits, "In Ivory Coast, no, this is against our culture and religion. Woman's role is to take care of the children, cook and clean at home. Even women and young girls accept this: the man must take care of me. There is a sort of an explicit contract and everyone must honor it". Kilson (1976) noted that gender is central to African religions and society more generally. Gender roles and gender stereotypes are cultural representations of what is expected of a man and a woman. In tourism hospitality, they have consequences at the individual, interactional and institutional level (Figuerola-Domecq and Segovia-Perez, 2020). Gender construction in general in Africa, and its effect on occupational stigma is, inextricably linked to patriarchal interpretations of religion and the evaluation and multidimensional complexities of African religious traditions (Islamic, Christian, and indigenous) (e.g., Oyeronke, 2005).

4.3. An amalgam of service with servitude and servility

For the focus group members, service connotes servitude or "servants" serving the *White man*", a sentiment linked to colonialism, captured in this powerful statement of an informant who says: "I know I am not a slave, but I can't help feeling that I don't want to be a slave anymore. I would never work as a waiter to serve 'the white man' ... you know, you feel people are looking at you all the time, even friends and members of your family". Another one clarifies, "race is always with me at the job. There is no easy fix. We are confronted with deep-seated, complex, and highly personal assumptions and attitudes ... no, no, no, honestly, I don't see myself making their beds. This is what we feel".

Moreover, the feeling of having a servile role in relation to "emotional labor" (1983) comes out as a strong constrainer. Keeping a smile on the job regardless of mood or temperament is potentially damaging to workers' sense of self and identity (Leidner, 1999). One informant says, "you understand, it is not easy when you feel it, you must show your smile but you are not happy inside you because you know you are like serving them because of salary money". Macdonald and Sirianna (1996, pp. 1–26) argued that people working in the service economy, especially women, find it difficult to maintain dignity due to the demands of emotional labor. A member comments, "the idea of serving white people comes as something negative with a strange feeling. I know, it is difficult for you to understand, but what I mean is that I am serving them with a smile and I have to be polite and do what they want. You feel you are disempowered". Another member highlights, "there is also the perceived lack of respect and the feeling of doing their demands [truckling to the master]. What I want to say is that they don't behave like us. They don't respect our culture. They hardly ask for local food. Yes, you see, they are here just to buy a good time. They don't

even talk to us. We know that. They do what they want. They don't think about how the people think about them. They have money. They have power. You are there to smile and serve. You feel like you have no dignity, just like old times".

4.4. Mimicry and the Nouveaux Riches

Another theme that strongly emerges from the focus groups relates to Bhabha (1984) "mimic man" and colonial imitation –the colonized emulating the behavior of the colonizer. Local Africans who patronize hotels are perceived to behave in the manner perceived to be similar to that of the white tourist, and are caricatured by respondents in a much more dramatic way. They are stereotyped as vulgar and pretentious Nouveaux Riches Africans. Their portrayal appears to be a powerful reason why African youth do not want to work in hotels. Participants believe, they are showing off, arrogant, and ill-mannered Africans who emulate the behavior of the white men. A member captures this well when he says: "they go to hotels and act like the tourists, thinking that because they have money they can command you to do things for them, like they own you or something like that. Sometimes, I think the tourists are more respectful than them. Frankly, the rich Africans are too much. Just see how they treat their servants at home and it will give a reason why people don't want to work in those places. Their behavior does not make you somebody who want to serve them in hotel". Another one says, "they also contribute to local prostitution because they have the money to spend on hookers. They go to hotel".

Taking the expression of one group member, they are also mocked as "wanna be whites" and are critiqued for emulating the Other whose manners, ironically, they disavow. The members' discourse is formulated in Bhabha's (1984) postcolonial theory, which asserts "the colonized will forever be "not quite/not white" or "almost the same but not quite" (p. 130). One member convincingly reiterates, "African people are proud, and sometimes the ill-mannerism of the customer nouveau riche is insulting. It is ironic because you want to become like them whites so that you too can show your social status as someone who has money and can spend money". Another one supplements, "people think it is shameful to serve people who are of a lower status than you or from a lower social class even if they have money. You are a noble man. People from certain families should not do this. It is like singing for me because I am from a tribe or a noble bloodline I am not allowed to sing let alone serve in hotels. You see, there are many things that prevent people from doing what they want. We call them "les interdits or taboos". You don't do it because this is how it is. It is collective psychology. Even if today he is poor, he convinces himself: I should not serve because I do belong to the lineage of nobles. So many young people have this African pride even if they don't belong to tribe or bloodline. But, I must add that if you go far in history we all belong to a noble tribe. So, you see in Africa everyone is a noble". Hence, the deep-rooted saying: "Saya ka foussa ni malo ye/better die than lose your pride" (in Bambara dialect of West Africa by a member from Mali). The Malian participant maintains that pride cuts deep into occupational stigma.

5. Conclusion and theoretical implications

The purpose of this study was to understand how occupational stigma manifests in the study's tourism and hospitality context, in order to comprehend Sub-Saharan youth's ambivalent attitude toward line-level hotel jobs. The curiosity to pursue the study in the light of stigma theory (Goffman, 1963) came as a logical response to a follow-up study commissioned by a government non-profit organization, which purpose was to explore industry needs in the participating countries. Interviewed local tourism and hospitality experts lamented the youth's rejection of these jobs, and were looking for answers and strategies to attract them to participate. Surely, the literature offers insights about how occupational stigma manifests in society, but no direct contextual answers were available because no empirical study about occupational

stigma in Sub-Saharan Africa was found. Therefore, this study contributes to theory on occupational stigma in two interconnected ways, beyond Western conceptual boundaries. It explains how occupational stigma is manifested in this economic and cultural context, and it sheds light on how line-level hotel jobs are hereto tainted.

The findings show that occupational stigma is manifested in four ways: the hotel space, religion and gender roles, an amalgam of service with servitude and servility, mimicry and the *Nouveaux Riches*. That is, youth base their “occupational stigma judgment” (Li et al., 2021) on how they perceive the hotel space and the image and reputation line-level job employees have from the public. First, focus group members strongly agree that “stigma consciousness” (Pinel, 1999), or the extent to which they believe line-level hotel jobs are stigmatized by the public, is high. This is consistent with other research, which found a heightened stigma consciousness among restaurant workers (Wildes, 2005) and tour guides (Li et al., 2021). Consequently, employees who feel stigmatized because of their work will not only quit their job but will not recommend restaurant jobs to family members or friends (e.g., Wildes, 2005). Kreiner et al. (2006) and Harris and Pressey (2021) argued that occupational stigma also exacerbates the tendency to not join the stigmatized jobs at all.

Second, the hotel, as a culturally contested place (Pritchard & Morgan, 2006), creates a sense of mistrust, infecting the image of line-level occupations and employment attractiveness. Focus group members consistently and unanimously support that line-level jobs have no occupational personality, are socially and morally tainted, constitute a serious identity threat to occupational members, and are consequently denigrated by society and youth. They are not perceived as decent and dignified occupations. Instead, they are labeled as more evil than necessary occupations, which many SSA youth prefer to disengage from. The social and moral taints (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Valtorta et al., 2019) attributed to these jobs, and which qualify them as “dirty work” (Harris & Pressey, 2021; Hughes, 1951, pp. 313–323), are perceived to be much stronger than their monetary benefits. This observation is in line with the study by Rasmussen and Dziwengo (2017) who found that the youth involved in waste management in Mombasa’s slums exhibited community pride for a job they considered dirty, low paid, but necessary for the community’s wellbeing.

The youth associate line-level hotel jobs with derogatory connotations, such as evil, prostitution, sexual harassment, deceptive, dark, manipulation, gendered, loser, servitude, servility, and mimicry, which in turn strongly contribute to “identity threat” (Steele, 1997), jeopardizing the “actual identity” not only of the individual employee but also that of the family, by association (Goffman, 1963). In other words, the stigmatized occupation taints socially and morally the identity of the employee and correspondingly leaks out to also taint the identity of their family members.

Third, line-level hotel jobs are stigmatized based on religious beliefs and gender roles in society. The participants submit that the hotel is perceived as a place of sexual promiscuity (e.g., Pritchard & Morgan, 2006), a space where people hide from the general public to engage in unlawful sexual behaviors, prostitution, and alcohol drinking. In Islam, prostitution, gambling and alcohol are considered haram/unlawful activities, and those who partake in them are judged as sinners. In addition, there is also the belief that females are exposed to overt and covert sexual harassment in the hotel space, whether from the manager or the customer. The participants also emphasize the gendered roles attributed to working in the kitchen, purporting that, for example, cooking is the duty and sphere of females only. Gender roles and religious traditions in Africa, in this sense, are intrinsically linked to Islamic religious beliefs, perpetuated by tradition and the patriarchal system (King, 1995; Oyeronke, 2005).

Fourth, because of colonial sentiments, Sub-Saharan Africans associate service provision with serving the “white man”. Moreover, there is also the sentiment that the local African “*Nouveaux Riches*” are mimicking the attitudes and behaviors of the “white tourist” from whom

the public opinion tries to dissociate (Bhabha, 1984; Kreiner et al., 2006; Leidner, 1999; Lucas, 2015). The contested irony of mimicry is that the “black man” who is condemning the perceived “superiority” attitude and behavior of the “white tourist” in the hotel is now a local customer under the scrutiny of the same “black gaze” who detaches him/herself from the adopted behavior judged as negative. Analogically, the hotel service job is stigmatized as servile: dirty.

Finally, as mentioned earlier, previous research supported that stigma negatively correlates with the intent to join, to stay, and to recommend a job in the industry (Ashforth & Kreiner, 2013; Wildes, 2007). Ashforth and Kreiner (2013) argued that an occupation perceived as dirty work distances the worker from the job, the worker from the customer, the out-group from the worker, and society from the industry. Indeed, the challenge of tourism hospitality in SSA is to recruit young people who, because of occupational stigma, distance themselves from the jobs. There is, thus, a need to de-stigmatize (Li et al., 2020, 2021) line-level hotel jobs and reposition them positively in the mind of people. For this to happen, action must be taken to overthrow the perception of servitude and embrace “occupational legitimacy” (Hampel & Tracey, 2016) and the conscious provision of a service. The focus group discussions point to the need to address occupational stigma at all three levels: workplace, individual, and community. The literature, in line with the study’s findings, suggests many recommendations relevant to leveling down occupational stigma consciousness among Sub-Saharan African youth. Examples are presented below.

6. Practical implication

At workplace level, fostering a positive occupational identity through employer branding and company values can influence employees’ perceptions and positive organizational citizenship behavior (Jerez-Jerez et al., 2021). This can be achieved through internal marketing, such as offering employees training about occupational stigma and service provision (Wildes, 2007). Also, combatting sexual harassment in the hotel space is critical. Prevention strategies include setting company’s codes of conduct, staff training, implementation of workplace policies on sexual harassment, and the establishment of an effective complaint and reporting system (Pearlman & Bordelon, 2022).

At the individual level, based on Pinel and Paulin’s (2005) three identity work activities, African youth should be encouraged to engage actively in changing the meaning attached to line-level hotel job (*reframing*), focus on the positive side of the job (*recalibrating*), and focus on the non-stigmatized aspects of the job (*refocusing*). These can help prevent loss of identity to occupational stigma, build job dignity and worker’s respect.

At the societal level, since culture has much to do with occupational stigma (Goffman, 1963), the present study argues that an understanding of occupational stigma is intrinsically linked to the understanding of neo/colonialism and the social narrative of a sensitive and uncomfortable haunting past of exploitation and oppression. Lucas (2015) argued that being compelled to demonstrate servility to others erodes one’s pride. Validating Williamson’s (2017) call for making line-level hospitality jobs attractive to the youth, “we need to work harder at promoting narratives that describe service work as a high skill, rewarding, crucial component of our economy” (p. 6). Focus should be on narratives that distinguish between servitude and service (Wildes, 2007). This could be achieved through promoting dignity in tourism hospitality work. Bolton (2007) defined dignity as “closely associated with issues of respect, worth, esteem, equality, autonomy and freedom” (p. 7). Hodson (2001, p. 3) defined work dignity as “the ability to establish a sense of self-worth and self-respect and to appreciate the respect of others”. In this regard, the media can play an important role in de-stigmatizing the industry (Li et al., 2020; Mejia et al., 2021; Phung, Buchanan, Toubiana, Ruebottom, & Turchick-Hakak, 2021).

Furthermore, installing dignity in tourism hospitality occupations through professionalism and “practical legitimacy” (Hampel & Tracey,

2016), as one participant proposes, is crucial: “youth need to think about these jobs as real jobs, a profession, and a way to earn a salary”. Since dignity is not much fixated on money (Lucas, 2015) but more on one’s pride vis-à-vis the other, building a work culture of pride by promoting a philosophy of taking pride in one’s job can lead to work dignity and contribute to changing societal perceptions about line-level hotel occupations and legitimize the hotel as a space for genuine hospitality. The benefits of tourism hospitality should be promoted to the public. To de-vilify the hotel and attain approval in society, focus should be on the “moral legitimacy” (Hampel & Tracey, 2016) of the hotel profession with a narrative that shows contribution to the advancement of society, economically as an employment provider, culturally as a host of national and international visitors, and socially as a dignified occupation.

7. Limitations and further research

Like any other research, this study has a few limitations that warrant identifying. First, focus groups do not allow for generalizability of the findings. More research is needed to validate the qualitative findings of this study. Country specific research may be helpful. Second, since the research focus of this study was on youth who have never worked in hospitality, future studies could examine occupational stigma in existing hotel employees and hospitality students and find out how stigma is manifested and internalized in this context. It is possible that differences in stigma perception exist between line-level employee groups. Third, examining how the media portray these jobs could be valuable. A content analysis of media reports could be revealing to how stigma is manifested in the popular media. Fourth, quantitative research using, for example, gender, employment seniority, education, and generational cohorts as controlling variables could also inform policy and management towards building a sustainable work force in the sector.

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