

Evangelia (Lia) Marinakou

Bournemouth University, Faculty of Business and Law, Business School

Talbot campus, Dorset House, Poole, BH12 5BB, UK

Emarinakou2@bournemouth.ac.uk

Are hospitality employees ready to serve customers with dementia? Impact on frontline employees' wellbeing

Dementia is a progressive condition involving cognitive, behavioural, and psychiatric decline, affecting over 55 million people globally and projected to reach 150 million by 2050 (WHO, 2021). Its impacts extend beyond individuals to caregivers, families, and partners (Hayden et al., 2022). Although UK tourism has increasingly adopted accessibility initiatives for a £12 billion market, the needs of people with hidden conditions such as dementia are often overlooked. While accessible tourism has gained prominence alongside developments in disability studies, much research has focused on policy and practice, with limited attention to disability-related stigma despite policy commitments to inclusivity and equality.

Recent research shows that tourism activities can enhance the well-being of people with disabilities, including those with dementia, by promoting happiness, enjoyment, and positive cognitive and emotional responses, and may even slow aspects of aging. However, evidence on how individuals with dementia engage in tourism, whether independently or with caregivers, remains limited, highlighting the need for more empirical research (Kristiansen et al., 2023).

Developing a dementia-friendly visitor economy requires holistic policies, increased awareness, improved customer care, suitable facilities, innovation, and comprehensive staff training. While existing initiatives mainly focus on spatial design and healthcare training (Michopoulou, 2019), studies indicate a significant gap in hospitality staff preparedness and attitudes toward dementia (UNWTO, 2016). Tourism is increasingly recognised as a non-pharmacological intervention that can improve mental health and quality of life for people in early-stage dementia (Buckley, 2023). Enhancing staff knowledge and reducing stigma can improve service delivery, create more meaningful experiences, and offer business opportunities such as addressing seasonality. Value co-creation in tourism further emphasises collaboration between tourists, service providers, and stakeholders to generate shared benefits.

The focus is on the importance of personalised, co-created tourism experiences that actively involve tourists, highlighting the critical role of service providers - especially frontline employees - in supporting customers with dementia. Although individuals with dementia often need additional assistance in unfamiliar environments, many hospitality employees lack adequate training, awareness, and resources to meet these specialised needs, despite organisational links to Dementia Friendly Communities. Key challenges include developing welcoming attitudes, effective communication skills, and appropriate support practices.

Hospitality work also involves high emotional labour, and serving vulnerable groups such as people with dementia can intensify emotional exhaustion and negatively affect employees' well-being (Giousmpasoglou et al., 2025). While staff training research has focused largely on healthcare, there is limited empirical evidence on the emotional resilience, empathy, and burnout management of hotel employees. Addressing these gaps is essential to improve service quality, employee support, and the overall experience for customers with dementia and their caregivers.

This study used a *mixed-methods approach* involving hotel employees and managers in Dorset who serve customers with dementia. Data were collected through *mixed-methods approach*, overt observations following dementia-friendly training, and reflective online diaries. Participants were purposively recruited via industry networks and events, such as the Bournemouth Area Hospitality Association (BAHA) Recognition Awards. Dorset was an ideal location for this research, offering a unique demographic and gerontological perspective, with a significant concentration of residents aged over 65 and an increasing prevalence of dementia (Dorset County Council, 2019). Interviews explored employees' awareness of dementia, emotional labour and exhaustion, and training needs. Observations and diaries examined staff attitudes, behaviours, and well-being after training. Interview data were analysed deductively, while observational data were analysed thematically using an inductive approach supported by recording sheets and checklists.

The *preliminary findings* suggest that frontline employees must demonstrate empathy, an essential component in enhancing the customer service experience. This requires them to adopt the perspective of the customer with dementia, which can lead to increased anxiety, particularly in the absence of adequate awareness, training, and support from their organisations.

The current study seeks to integrate expertise from tourism and hospitality human resources management, tourist behaviour, psychology, and dementia. It focuses on providing evidence that demonstrates a shift from theory to practice regarding hospitality businesses' engagement with dementia-friendly initiatives. By linking tourism experiences and dementia interventions to their impact on hotel employees' mental health and well-being, this research aims to enrich the social, medical, and hospitality literature. It provides an introduction to innovative training methods designed to support employees serving this unique market. Furthermore, tourism can be viewed as a means not only to improve the quality of life for individuals with dementia, but

also to empower employees with knowledge about dementia, ultimately reducing emotional exhaustion and enhancing their overall well-being.

REFERENCES

- Buckley, R. (2023) Tourism and mental health: Foundations, frameworks, and futures. *Journal of Travel Research*, 62(1), 3–20. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00472875221087669>
- Dorset County Council, (2019) *Dorset health overview and scrutiny committee*. Available at: www.dorsetccg.nhs.uk/dementia
- Giousmpasoglou, C., Papavasileiou, E.F., Marinakou, E., Hall, K., Kyritsis, T., & Radhakrishnan, N. (2025) Unmasking the surface acting and emotional exhaustion of frontline employees in UK's fine dining sector. *International Journal of Spa and Wellness*, 8(2), 137–154. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24721735.2025.2469002>
- Hayden, S., McIntosh, A., & Gillovic, B. (2022). Understanding dementia and its relevance for the hospitality industry. *Hospitality Insights*, 6(1), 6-8.
- Kristiansen, S., Olsen, L.S., & Beck, M. (2023). Hospitality in dementia-friendly environments is significant to caregivers during hospitalisation of their loved ones. A qualitative study. *Journal of Clinical Nursing*, 32, 2790–2801.
- Michopoulou, E. (2019) The future of global hospitality: What is going to really matter?. *International Journal of Spa and Wellness*, 2(3), 171-172.
- World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), (2016), *Manual on Accessible Tourism for All: Principles, Tools and Best Practices – Module I: Accessible Tourism – Definition and Context*, UNWTO, Madrid.
- World Health Organization. (2021). *Ageing and health*. World Health Organization, WHO. Available at: <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/ageing-and-health>