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RESEARCH LETTER



Captive tourists and *hospidarity*: caring obligations in Dubai's tourism crisis

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ABSTRACT

Captivity denotes a condition in which freedom is constrained, and this experience can arise when tourists are unable to leave a destination during periods of armed conflict. In 2026, airspace restrictions across the Middle East immobilised Dubai, abruptly turning a hyper-mobile transit hub into a setting of enforced immobility. Tourists in the city lost agency as their roles shifted from visitor to captive, accompanied by distress. Drawing on the concepts of lockdown captivity, characterised by loss of the tourist role and felt entrapment, and *hospidarity*, understood as coordinated, continuous care that generates safe transitional spaces, we conceptualise this condition as *war-lock-in*. We further argue that this framework extends beyond the present case and can be applied to a wide range of disruptions such as extreme weather, infrastructural failures, and political unrest that similarly require destinations to reconfigure hospitality capacities into safe transitional spaces.

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Airspace closure; captivity; Dubai; hospitality; solidarity; war-lock-in

Introduction

In late February 2026, the escalation of armed conflict in the Middle East triggered security-driven airspace closures across the Gulf, immobilising Dubai as a global tourism hub. A destination long positioned as exceptionally safe and hyper-mobile was transformed into a site of enforced immobility, revealing the fragility of tourism ecosystems (Alvarez et al., 2022; Hillebrand, 2022; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). For tourists in Dubai, the sudden loss of outbound tourism destabilised the tourist role itself, producing experiences of entrapment and uncertainty. This letter addresses that moment of rupture and asks: *what happens when a destination designed around safety and flow is forced to hold tourists instead of moving them on?*

Research on lockdown captivity (Irimiás & Mitev, 2021) defines captivity as an unwanted condition in which individuals lose freedom of movement and the ability to perform expected roles (Gibson & Yiannakis, 2002), producing feelings of entrapment and distress (Wolff & Larsen, 2013). Dubai's 2026 crisis reveals a closely related but analytically distinct condition: war-lock-in. War-lock-in refers to security-induced immobilisation in which tourists are unable to leave a destination due to externally governed mobility decisions. While the aetiology differs from pandemic lockdowns (Gössling et al., 2021), the experiential patterns converge: tourists report a wish to escape, and a sense of being

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Dubai air mobility and tourism under security-driven disruption (indexed)

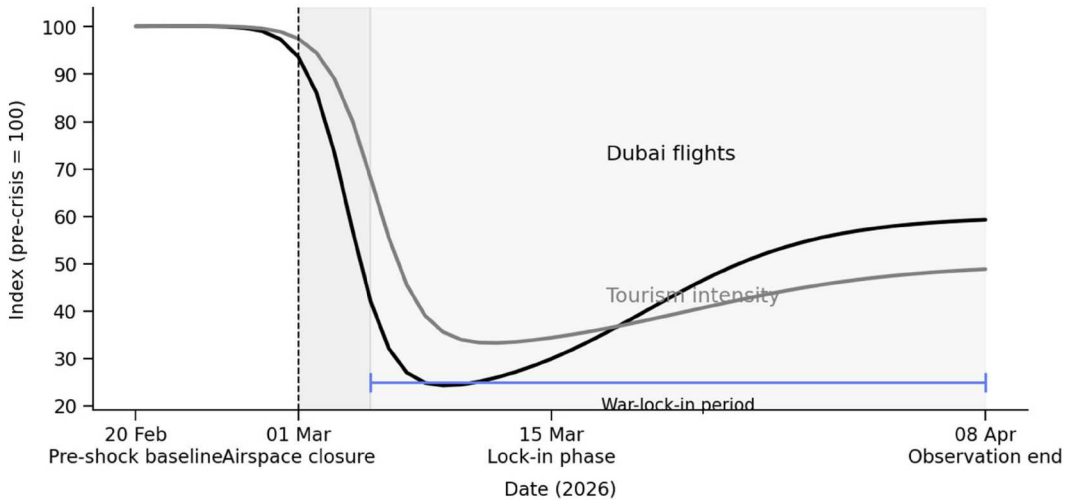


Figure 1. War-lock-in period in Dubai. Sources: FlightRadar24; www.dubaidet.gov.ae OpenAI's GPT-5-class large language model was used. Daily flights at Dubai International and Al Maktoum airports and a relative tourism intensity indicator are indexed to pre-crisis levels (=100).

trapped. We argue that in Dubai, war-lock-in manifested through three interrelated forms of captivity: (1) infrastructural captivity, as airport closures and suspended flight schedules prevented departure; (2) informational captivity, as uncertain timelines inhibited informed decision-making; (3) financial captivity, as prolonged stays and fare surges imposed unplanned and unavoidable costs. These dimensions transform captivity from an abstract psychological state into a destination-produced condition, aligning war-lock-in with service captivity understood as constrained choice, voice, and power (Rayburn et al., 2020; Rayburn et al., 2024).

Destination vulnerability and the collapse of the 'tourist utopia'

War-lock-in can be read as the activation of latent destination vulnerability. As Alvarez et al. (2022) argue, vulnerability is not created by crises but exposed by them, when chronic dependencies surface under shock. The Dubai case illustrates how war-lock-in disrupts a dynamic tourism ecosystem (Hillebrand, 2022). The crisis revealed vulnerabilities across physical, institutional, and economic dimensions. This fragility is inseparable from Dubai's construction as a 'tourist utopia'. Dubai functions as a tightly managed space of exception, designed to privilege spectacle, circulation, and short-term consumption (Simpson, 2016). Such environments perform safety through control; when tourism fails, the utopian promise collapses (Ghaderi et al., 2025; Stephenson, 2014). War-lock-in thus exposes the structural contradiction of hyper-mobile destinations: the very systems that enable seamless tourism intensify vulnerability when disrupted. The rapid and asymmetric disruption of Dubai's tourism system is followed by tourism intensity decline; while flight activity recovers within weeks, tourism remains persistently depressed across the observation period (Figure 1).

Methodology

This study draws on press content analysis established in tourism crisis research (Mayer et al., 2021; Walters et al., 2016) to examine tourism disruption in Dubai. News articles are suitable data for capturing real-time interpretations of unfolding events. The dataset comprises 29 articles published between 28 February and 14 April 2026 in the *New York Times* and the *BBC* (see Appendix). Articles

were identified through systematic keyword searches related to Dubai, tourism, airspace closures and stranded travellers, and screened for tourism relevance. Analysis followed an iterative abductive analysis, combining sensitising concepts from captivity and crisis with inductive identification of patterns.

Findings

Tourism research has long conceptualised tourists as value-driven actors and value as subjective, experiential, and dynamic. War-lock-in represents a moment of acute value destruction, as tourists lose agency, and the ability to enact the tourist role. As the quotes show, tourists' expressions of disbelief 'I can't believe there is no way for us to get out' (NYT1) and emotional strain 'pretending we're having a normal holiday to the children when there are explosions in the sky' (NYT3) reflect precisely the affective contours of lockdown captivity, now intensified by war. At the same time, the Dubai's response in covering accommodation and meals for over 20,000 stranded visitors (NYT8), reallocating hotel capacity, and prioritising repatriation, demonstrates the emergent logic of hospidarity.

Figure 2 models a stable setting in which tourists can perform their usual roles, and the destination such as Dubai projects an image of being insulated from risk (Simpson, 2016). As a quote from NYT3 shows: 'Dubai has long been recognised for its infrastructure resilience, governance and crisis response capabilities.' A sudden shock disrupts this equilibrium: tourists lose agency, their mobility contracts, and access to reliable information becomes uneven. The shock strips tourists of their customary roles, producing disorientation and the perception of being 'captive'. A destination that performs safety is suddenly forced to perform care through containment. Conventional crisis management is insufficient. What emerges instead is hospidarity – a hybrid of hospitality and solidarity-defined as the coordinated mobilisation of hospitality expertise to treat immobilised individuals as guests rather than cases (Irimiás & Mitev, 2025). Hospidarity enables this shift by reconfiguring hospitality infrastructures into safe transitional spaces that stabilise agency. In Dubai, it took form through extended accommodation, meal provision, welfare support, visa flexibility.

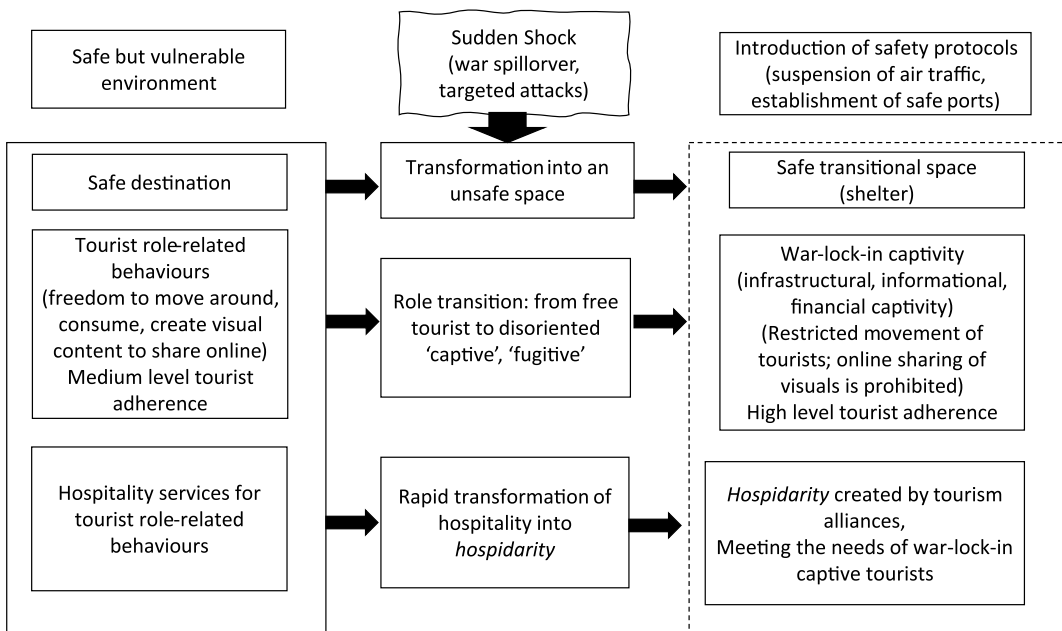


Figure 2. Hospidarity and the creation of safe transitional spaces to care for war-lock-in tourists. *Source:* elaborated by the authors based on hospidarity theory and the content analysis of press articles.

Figure 2 reframes crisis response not as a linear flow from role loss to recovery, but as a regime shift. Transformation of hospitality infrastructures into safe transitional spaces can ‘hold’ people materially and emotionally (Mayer et al., 2021; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019; Walters et al., 2016) and induce tourists’ high level of adherence to safety protocols: ‘UAE exercises strict control over the flow information out of the country. Photographing, sharing or posting images of sites where missiles or drones have struck is not allowed’ (BBC12). Timely activation of hospitality is essential because role transition unfolds quickly. Destinations that recognise this shift and implement hospitality early are better positioned to limit secondary harms, maintain trust, and restore a sense of normality: ‘I know I shouldn’t be shopping, but I can’t help it.’ (NYT13). In this way, the safe transitional spaces strengthen the destination’s resilience. Captivity can be destination-produced, and hospitality is the mechanism that allows destinations to temporarily absorb stranded tourists without collapsing their safety claim.

Concluding remarks

The concepts of war-lock-in captivity and hospitality extend far beyond the current Dubai crisis, offering a transferable framework for understanding how tourists become vulnerable when their mobility and agency collapse (Su et al., 2025; Ritchie & Jiang, 2019). Captivity shows the moment when individuals lose the freedom to choose and control their movements (whether due to airspace shutdowns, natural disasters, political unrest, or transport failures) transforming the tourist role into that of a distressed subject (Irimiás & Mitev, 2021; Wolff & Larsen, 2013). Hospitality captures the practical response required when hospitality infrastructures become protective holding environments. From a management perspective, the findings highlight the need for tourism stakeholders to move beyond conventional service provision and develop adaptive, care-oriented responses during sudden shocks. We argue that formal crisis governance often operates too slowly. *Hospitality*, by contrast, can act immediately. Policymakers should support the rapid establishment of safe transitional spaces.

Limitations and future research paths

The analysis focuses on a select corpus of English-language news coverage; and not on social media content. This limitation is partly structural, as the sharing visuals related to security incidents is restricted in the UAE. This letter extended captivity research by conceptualising war-lock-in as a destination-level form of service captivity. Future studies can explore how destinations, together with hospitality stakeholders, create safe transitional spaces and care for tourists when sudden shocks—such as armed conflicts, epidemics, or extreme weather conditions—occur? How varying captivity trajectories across destinations and tourism ecosystems are produced? How can harbours create and maintain safe transitional spaces for cruise tourists who feel captive due to viruses such as hantavirus? How can hospitality be rapidly transformed into *hospitality* (solidarity-boosted hospitality), and by whom? How can *hospitality* stakeholders implement safety protocols and respond to the needs of ‘captive’ tourists? Furthermore, how can digital platforms and sharing-economy actors contribute to *hospitality* by coordinating real-time support networks, peer assistance, and inclusive access to resources in times of crisis? As tourism systems face increasingly frequent shocks, recognising war-lock-in and operationalising *hospitality* may become central to foster destination resilience beyond short-term recovery.

Author contributions

CRedit: **Anna Irimiás:** Conceptualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing; **Ariel Zoltán Mitev:** Conceptualization, Writing – review & editing.

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