

Beyond the gaze: “I-Thou” relationships in sightseeing bus tourism

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ABSTRACT

This study, grounded in Martin Buber’s dialogical philosophy, investigates the potential for authentic “I-Thou” relationships in tourism. For this purpose, we take the case of sightseeing bus tours, which are often perceived as inherently disconnected experiences. Utilizing a mixed-method approach, including interviews with local stakeholders and an open-ended questionnaire for residents, the findings reveal that even seemingly inauthentic tourist experiences, like bus tours, can facilitate meaningful connections. Through a Buberian lens, the research suggests that mutuality, openness, connectedness, and authenticity form “I-Thou” relationships in tourism. The study offers theoretical contributions for future research in terms of a more positive outlook on tourist experiences and discusses practical implications of the findings.

“All journeys have secret destinations of which the traveler is unaware.”

– attributed to Martin Buber

1. Introduction

Tourism has long been understood as a visual practice shaped by staged encounters and consumption patterns (Larsen, 2014). Drawing on Foucault’s (1976) “medical gaze,” Urry (1990) introduced the “tourist gaze” to describe the objectifying, spectacle-driven way tourists engage with destinations. This gaze, akin to viewing through barriers, has been critiqued for delineating inauthentic, detached experiences.

For instance, Wassler and Kirillova (2019) argue that to enable genuine human relationships, concepts like “gaze” (and even “tourism”) should be transcended. Responding to this call, our study explores whether authentic, reciprocal relationships can emerge even in typically detached settings such as sightseeing bus tours.

Rooted in Austrian-Israeli philosopher Martin Buber’s (1878–1965) dialogical philosophy, our approach contrasts the aforementioned objectification with “I-Thou” relationships, marked by mutual recognition, empathy, and openness (Buber, 1921). Avnon’s (1993) interpretation of Buber’s community ideal—a shared relation to a living centre—guides our understanding of the research setting. In this case,

the chosen location of Bergamo (Italy) becomes the shared centre that potentially enables connection among tourists, residents, service providers, and other stakeholders. This is defined as a Buberian “social space”, a shared space that enables I-Thou relationships to emerge (Avnon, 1993).

We apply this framework to sightseeing bus tours, often seen as emblematic of tourist bubbles (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Larsen et al., 2021). Such tours are typically defined by predictability and detachment (Edensor, 2007, 2020; Jaakson, 2004; Jüttner, 2024), offering curated experiences disconnected from everyday local life. Yet, by including the perspectives of local stakeholders through interviews and questionnaires, we aim to explore whether and how such mobile experiences might foster authentic engagement.

Our study thus reframes sightseeing tourism as a space of potential connection rather than passive consumption. By adopting a Buberian lens, we seek to move beyond deterministic critiques of these types of tourism and instead highlight the possibilities for mutual presence, dialogue, and meaningful relationships in shared tourist spaces.

2. Literature review

The concept of the “tourist gaze” (Urry, 1990; Urry & Larsen, 2011) describes how tourists visually engage with destinations, typically

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through a detached, observational lens. Larsen (2001) furthermore introduced the “travel glance” to capture the fleeting, cinematic perception tourists experience while in motion—by car, train, or bus—contrasting with the static, photograph-like gaze. Both frameworks, however, prioritize visual consumption and overlook authentic human relationships.

Recent scholarship has critiqued these models as overly passive (Wassler & Kirillova, 2019; Samarathunga & Cheng, 2021), advocating for more embodied, interactive perspectives. The Gaze 3.0 (Urry & Larsen, 2011; Larsen, 2014) indeed expands the notion to include emotional, social, and sensory engagement, framing tourists as active co-creators of experience (Jordan & Aitchison, 2008; Maoz, 2006; Canavan, 2020; Calvin et al., 2024). Echoing MacCannell (2001), this approach highlights tourists’ agency to resist institutionalized gazes and seek deeper meaning.

Additionally, tourists increasingly reflect on their identities through travel (Canavan, 2020). Kahana’s (2024) “inward gaze” captures this introspective dimension, emphasizing tourism as a space for self-transformation. Parallel to this, the concept of the gaze has evolved to include host perspectives—such as the “host gaze” (Chan, 2006), “mutual gaze” (Maoz, 2006), and “reverse gaze” (Gillespie, 2006)—revealing complex power dynamics and reciprocal interactions (Samarathunga & Cheng, 2021).

Larsen’s Gaze 4.0 (2024) reflects these shifts, emphasizing embodiment, performance, sustainability, and digital mediation. This progression from visual detachment to relational enmeshment resonates with Buber’s philosophy, particularly his “I-It” and “I-Thou” distinction (Buber, 1921). In “I-It” relations, others are seen as objects; in “I-Thou” encounters, mutual presence and recognition are central.

Ndubisi (2020) underscores key elements of the “I-Thou” as follows: mutual discovery, openness, reciprocity, and authenticity in his case study on an African relational worldview and Western dialogical philosophy. He argues that both ideologies offer meaningful responses to the growing individualism and alienation of contemporary society, with Buber mainly challenging the overemphasis on the isolated self and instead promoting a model of life grounded in human connection.

Though not a research method, Buber’s thought has informed various disciplines—from humanities (Meindl, 2021; Ndubisi, 2020) to education (Asakavičić et al., 2022), theology (Lysemose, 2021), psychology (Tweed et al., 2023), and social justice (Margulies, 2023). In tourism, its application remains limited, though relevant studies exist. Cipolla (2004) contrasts “I-It” tourism with “I-Thou” hospitality, while Henning et al. (2011) empirically demonstrate Buberian relationships in Japanese tourism contexts. Most significantly, Wassler and Kirillova (2019) argue that truly authentic host-guest encounters require transcending an objectifying tourist gaze.

This study responds to that call by reimagining sightseeing bus tours not as spectacles, but as relational experiences grounded in Buberian values, transforming tourism from passive observation into meaningful encounter.

3. Methodology

3.1. Philosophical underpinnings and study context

The methodology follows the core principles of Martin Buber’s relational philosophy in terms of both, method and positioning of the researchers. Buber posited that human existence is defined by two primary modes of relation: the “I-It” and the “I-Thou.” These modes of relation significantly emphasize the fundamental nature of human interaction, and the depth of engagement required for meaningful research, where relationships should move towards the “I-Thou”.

To overcome the “I-It” - an “engineered gaze” for the bus tour - this study underscores the importance of the Buberian values of mutual relationships, openness, reciprocity, and authenticity – the basics of an “I-Thou” relationship (Ndubisi, 2020). Based on those values, the

mixed-method approach adopted for this study was developed, including interview questions and a questionnaire investigating these concepts, as will be explained in the next section.

A Buberian stance was also adopted to inform the researchers’ pre-conceptions. Conversely, embracing an “I-Thou” orientation fosters genuine engagement and mutual recognition between researchers and participants. By approaching research as a relational encounter rather than a transactional exchange, researchers can create an atmosphere of openness, trust, and empathy. This facilitates deeper exploration of participants’ lived experiences, enabling researchers to uncover nuances, complexities, and contradictions that may be overlooked in a more detached approach.

The city of Bergamo in Italy and Bergamo City Tour are chosen as the case for this study. The Bergamo City Tour, a sightseeing service offered by City Red Bus, operates in the urban centre of Bergamo, a city characterized by its ancient core in the Upper Town and a modern section in the Lower Town. The chosen tour primarily focuses on the Upper Town, an area steeped in history and encircled by Venetian walls, distinguished as a UNESCO World Heritage site. Utilizing a combination of trains and electric minibuses, the service navigates through the city’s labyrinthine streets and historic squares. The timing of the tour is planned to optimize tourist satisfaction, employing a circular system that allows passengers the flexibility to embark and disembark at various stops. The accompanying narrative, delivered through pre-recorded audio guides, has undergone a thorough revision process to ensure clarity and ease of use. For the service in Bergamo City Tour (operated by City Red Bus Srl in Bergamo), the commentary is currently delivered via multilingual audio-guide, not a live speaking tour-guide, although Red Bus has also offered human guides on board. Additionally, the tour’s route is strategically crafted to encompass key tourist attractions within the city’s “tourist bubble,” prioritizing areas of high interest while offering tourists the opportunity for a tailored and immersive experience.

3.2. Method

While Buber’s philosophy has rarely shaped data collection methods directly, it informed our study’s methodological stance by emphasizing openness, dialogical engagement, and relational authenticity (Wegerif & Major, 2019). We applied this lens to Bergamo as a social center and the Bus Tour as a physically bounded yet dialogically open space—what Praglin (2006) calls *das Zwischenmenschliche*, the “in-between space” of authentic encounter.

To explore the emergence of I-Thou relationships in this setting, we employed a mixed-method approach (Truong et al., 2020) to capture multiple perspectives from the social center. As Venkatesh et al. (2016, p. 443) argue, this approach strengthens inferences and allows for a diversity of views.

In the first phase, we conducted four in-depth interviews with local stakeholders involved in the Bus Tour, including staff and a certified guide. Initially guided by purposive sampling, this phase evolved into snowball sampling, yielding approximately 4 h of translated material. Interview prompts focused on mutuality, openness, reciprocity, and authenticity in service design.

In the second phase, findings from these interviews informed an open-ended questionnaire distributed to 209 residents of Bergamo (convenience sampling), with an additional close-ended question: *Do you feel that local bus tours represent you as a Bergamo resident?* The sample comprised 60.3 % provincial residents, 34.4 % from the Lower Town, and 5.3 % from the Upper Town. Questions mirrored the interview themes, inviting residents to share experiences and suggest improvements in fostering authentic relations.

In the third and final phase, insights were revisited in semi-structured interviews with two tourism experts from the Urban Commerce District, who reflected on how local interpretations of authenticity could inform service development. The interviews lasted between 30 min and 1 h each.

Data were manually coded the lead investigator through open and thematic coding, following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) five-step framework. The process began with repeated readings of the Italian transcripts to achieve familiarity with the data, followed by initial open coding to capture meaningful units of text. Codes were then grouped and refined into preliminary themes. Buber’s texts were re-examined iteratively throughout the process to ensure philosophical alignment between emerging themes and the theoretical framework by the other authors. Discrepancies in coding or theme interpretation were discussed until consensus was reached. All data were collected in Italian and translated into English by the first author, then back-checked for accuracy and conceptual fidelity by the others. These steps aimed to strengthen the transparency and trustworthiness of the analytic process.

4. Findings

4.1. General information from questionnaires

The perceptions of Bergamo’s residents regarding their representation through local bus tours vary across different parts of the city as shown by our questionnaire data. Overall, residents feel positively represented by the bus tourism offer, although this perception differs depending on their area of residence. In the Upper Town, which is the most touristic area, 88.9 percent of residents report feeling represented. This proportion decreases to 71.9 percent among residents of the Lower Town, and to 69.1 percent for those living outside Bergamo.

4.2. Mutuality: “even locals can Be turned into tourists”

Buber defines mutuality (Gegenseitigkeit) as a relationship where “my Thou works on me, how I work on him” (Buber, 1921, p. 16), which can be linked to the “mutual gaze” in tourism (Maoz, 2006). This excludes objectifying relationships (Wassler & Kirillova, 2019), instead emphasizing a process of “formation” and “construction.” Some respondents observed a growing mutuality in Bergamo, particularly with the expansion of bus tour itineraries into less touristic areas. Locals now engage more actively with tourism, as evidenced by one resident noting that merchants in Città Bassa, once rarely visited by tourists, now actively welcome them. Several industry experts agreed, suggesting that involving locals in tourism planning fosters greater enthusiasm and engagement.

4.3. Openness: “authenticity for those who are really interested”

Buber’s concept of openness (Offenheit) contrasts with forced relationships of belonging and emphasizes allowing the “other” to enter one’s private sphere. This aligns with the critique of the “touristisque” (Wassler & Kirillova, 2019), which separates tourists and locals into fixed categories through objectification. Industry experts mentioned the importance of portraying a complete picture of the city, including less popular areas, to avoid shielding tourists from the reality of the destination. Openness also emerged in discussions about autonomy, with experts stressing the need to provoke curiosity and encourage further independent exploration. The “Capital of Culture” award has helped increase openness by allowing locals to engage more with tourism.

4.4. Connectedness: “becoming part of the lived reality”

Connectedness (Verbundenheit) is Buber’s concept of active engagement, where individuals move from passive dependence to active interaction with others (Jüttner, 2024). In tourism, this involves creating a true connection rather than just a “guided tour.” Residents noted that tourists have become part of their daily lives, with some local businesses now actively engaging with tourists. Industry experts emphasized the need for human guides to facilitate connectedness, enabling visitors to experience the lifeworld of the destination. Notably,

connectedness was linked to the length of stay, with several experts noting that extending the stay beyond the bus tour increases meaningful engagement with less visited areas.

4.5. Authenticity: “I really know - rather than I have been”

Although Buber rarely uses the term “authenticity,” his notion of “Wirklichkeit” (actuality) can be understood as a genuine encounter. Glasson (1974) notes that Buber defines authenticity through the “I-Thou” relationship, where both parties fully recognize each other as unique beings. This contrasts with the objectifying “touristisque” gaze (Wassler & Kirillova, 2019). An industry expert pointed out that tourists often say “I have been there” rather than “I really know it,” reflecting the challenge of fostering authentic connections. Although authenticity is difficult to control, experts agreed that creating unique, quality experiences rather than focusing on quantity helps achieve this.

5. Discussion and conclusion

The general sense of positive representation as shown in the questionnaire data is significant when viewed through the lens of Buber’s philosophy. As noted by Giles (2023), a positive attitude—such as the feeling of being accurately and respectfully represented—forms a necessary foundation for the development of an “I-Thou” relationship. In this context, the residents’ favorable perceptions provide a meaningful entry point for further exploring the Buberian concepts of mutuality, openness, connectedness, and authenticity, as revealed through the broader questionnaire and interview data (see Fig. 1).

Mutuality, as conceived by Buber, refers to a relationship in which individuals come to discover themselves through interaction with others. In the tourism context of Bergamo, this notion becomes tangible as residents in previously non-touristic areas are increasingly engaging with tourists. This shift indicates an expansion of bus tour itineraries and a change in the dynamics of local involvement. Involving locals in tourism planning has led to heightened enthusiasm and engagement from residents, exemplifying a process of reciprocal discovery. This transformation resonates strongly with Buber’s concept of mutuality, as tourism has not only altered how tourists experience the city but has also allowed locals to rediscover their own environment through the eyes of

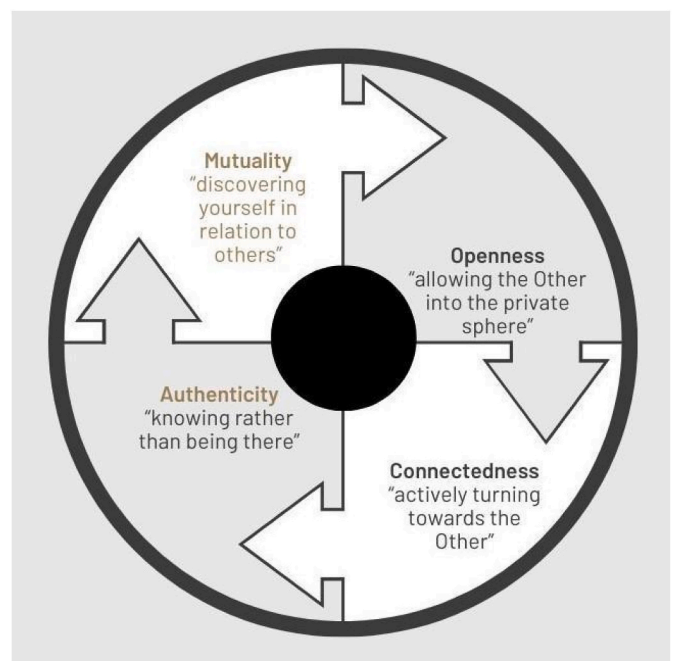


Fig. 1. “I-Thou” relationships in tourism.

visitors. This is evident in the growth of local restaurants and in locals themselves taking on the role of tourists, experiencing their city anew.

Openness, in Buber's terms, entails allowing the "other" to enter one's personal sphere, enabling a true dialogical relationship that transcends pre-established categories such as "tourist" and "local." This concept aligns with the work of Wassler and Kirillova (2019), who argue for moving beyond these rigid distinctions to create space for more authentic and inclusive interactions. Shypunov and Kovalchuck (2021) similarly emphasize that openness facilitates genuine tourist experiences. Respondents in the study highlighted the importance of presenting a holistic portrayal of Bergamo, advocating for the inclusion of lesser-known areas in tour itineraries. This desire reflects an openness to redefining the boundaries of the tourist experience and to encountering the city as a layered, multifaceted space. Such openness enables encounters that reflect Buber's vision of authentic dialogue, emerging from the suspension of fixed roles and categories.

Connectedness, which for Buber involves an active turning toward the "other" and the formation of a constructive alliance, also emerged strongly from the data. Tourists are increasingly becoming part of the local reality, contributing to and benefitting from the evolving sense of place. Tour guides were found to play a key role in facilitating this connection, creating the conditions for relationships that go beyond superficial engagement. This challenges stereotypes of sightseeing tours as passive or inauthentic experiences, as suggested by Jüttner (2024), and instead reveals their potential to foster meaningful interactions. Our findings also indicate that bus tours can be associated with extended stays, contradicting the "hit-and-run" image often attributed to such forms of transport tourism. Experiences like sharing local food products contribute to a sense of situated connection, reinforcing the idea that connectedness can be cultivated even in traditionally scripted tourist encounters.

Buber's idea of authenticity centers on genuine recognition and encounter, resisting the objectification of the other. Authentic relationships, in this framework, arise not simply from the presence of mutuality, openness, and connectedness, but from a deeper acknowledgment of the other's reality—what Buber terms "Wirklichkeit." In the case of Bergamo, authenticity was shown to be context-dependent and not entirely controllable by experience providers. Each destination's uniqueness necessitates bespoke experiences that prioritize quality over quantity. This reinforces Buber's assertion that true authenticity cannot be manufactured or fully planned, but must emerge in the moment of encounter.

From a theoretical standpoint, this study offers thus several important contributions. It introduces a Buberian framework for analyzing tourist experiences, presenting an alternative to dominant paradigms such as the tourist gaze (Urry, 1990) and travel glance (Larsen, 2001). Whereas these earlier theories focus on visual consumption and often imply distance and objectification, Buber's "I-Thou" framework suggests that even structured tourism formats can allow for moments of genuine human encounter. Our findings challenge the view that sightseeing bus tours are necessarily superficial, showing instead that such settings can become spaces for authentic interaction when mutual recognition and empathy are present (Wassler & Kirillova, 2019; Urry & Larsen, 2011).

Buber's philosophy also offers a compelling addition to other foundational perspectives in tourism philosophy and sociology. For example, Goffman's (1959) dramaturgical lens highlights tourism as a series of staged performances in a front- and backstage, whereas Heidegger's concept of "being-in-the-world" suggests that tourists share spaces with locals and other actors. Zygmunt Bauman (1996) distinguishes tourists from vagabonds, the first being free to choose and the second being displaced out of necessity. Buber challenges these power asymmetries and tourism as a space for mere mobility, proposing tourism as a space for possible human transformation.

Our findings also resonate with tourism literature on authenticity, commodification and host-guest relationships. Early studies on authenticity in tourism emphasized objective traits—such as "pure"

cultural objects or traditions (Chhabra, 2019; Reisinger & Steiner, 2006) and the notion of "staged authenticity" (MacCannell, 1973)—which align with Buber's "I-It" mode of relating, where interactions are utilitarian, instrumental, or distanced and result in "commodified" tourism products (e.g. MacLeod, 2005; Shepherd, 2002). In contrast, the growing focus on constructivist and especially existential authenticity (Nguyen, 2020) reflects a shift toward an "I-Thou" orientation, a shift also evident in our data. Our study thus conceptually relates to Wang's (1999) understanding of existential authenticity, which is grounded not in the objective features of tourist sites or objects, but in lived, intersubjective experiences—those that foster connection with the self, others, and place. This parallels Buber's insight that "I-Thou" encounters are characterized by presence, mutual recognition, and openness, enabling transformation rather than passive consumption.

These findings echo Buber's idea that authentic relationships arise when individuals meet each other not as objects or social roles, but as whole, present beings. As tourists increasingly pursue personal meaning, emotional resonance, and shared understanding in their travels, the "I-Thou" framework offers a powerful interpretive lens. It helps illuminate how tourism experiences can transcend spectacle or performance, becoming instead genuine encounters marked by relational depth and mutual presence.

This perspective builds on the work of Cipolla (2004) and Henning et al. (2011), who argue for the potential of authentic host-guest relationships in tourism. The bus tour, typically critiqued for its inauthenticity and commodification (Edensor, 2007, 2020; Jaakson, 2004), is reimagined here as a possible site for "I-Thou" relationships, contingent upon mutual engagement and a shared sense of place. The residents of Bergamo generally feel positively represented by the tours, suggesting a fertile ground for reciprocal discovery (Ndubisi, 2020). In many cases, locals have become tourists in their own city, and tourists have contributed to the local narrative, blurring the boundary between host and guest.

Two key insights emerge in this regard. First, the involvement of local stakeholders is essential in fostering these authentic interactions. Second, the dynamic interplay between tourists and residents challenges static understandings of identity and role. This approach resonates with Buber's emphasis on community as a space where people relate through a shared living center. Avnon's (1993, p. 55) interpretation of Buber's concept of community is particularly apt: "men who have a common, immediate relation to a living center and just by virtue of this common center have an immediate relation to one another." In Bergamo, the destination itself becomes this shared center, drawing together tourists, residents, local businesses, and authorities in a web of interconnected relationships.

Openness and connectedness further illustrate how authentic tourist experiences are embedded in relational dynamics. As noted by scholars such as Brown and Osman (2017), Chhabra (2010), Jordan and Aitchison (2008), Maoz (2006), and Urry and Larsen (2011), the roles of gazers and gazees are continuously negotiated. Our findings support the view that openness should be conceptualized as a predisposition rather than a passive condition, shaping the depth and quality of tourist encounters.

This relational approach also adds a new layer to debates about authenticity in tourism. Buber's distinction between "I-It" and "I-Thou" relationships aligns with critiques of the static gaze in traditional tourism theory. The "I-It" mode, characterized by objectification, reflects a depersonalized interaction where the other is viewed as a utility. In contrast, the "I-Thou" relationship implies a depth of engagement and mutual subjectivity that can indeed take place in tourism contexts, particularly when participants are open to such encounters. The recognition of place as a social center reinforces this understanding, offering a useful conceptual tool for further studies in tourism.

These insights also lead to practical implications. The study demonstrates that even structured, often criticized tourist formats like sightseeing bus tours can foster authentic "I-Thou" relationships,

provided they are designed and implemented with relationality in mind. Tour operators should consider redesigning these experiences to include interactive elements that allow tourists to engage in dialogue and co-create meaning. Encouraging tourists to share their own perspectives and integrating resident voices in tour planning can strengthen mutual recognition and engagement. Residents, with their local expertise and unique perspectives, have much to contribute to the shaping of these experiences and should be seen not merely as passive subjects but as active co-producers of the tourist narrative.

Policy makers, too, have a role to play in promoting these deeper encounters. By including less-visited areas in tour itineraries, they can encourage more inclusive and immersive experiences. This redistribution can also ease pressure on over-visited sites and spread the economic benefits of tourism more equitably. Spontaneity and unplanned interactions should be welcomed as part of the experience, not excluded by rigid scheduling. Tour guides are central to this vision, which on other Red Bus tours are present on board. Moving beyond the role of mere information providers, they can become facilitators of narrative storytelling and relational connection. Through anecdotes, personal stories, and the sharing of local culture, guides can help tourists perceive the destination through the lived experiences of its inhabitants. Recognizing guiding as a relational practice allows for a shift toward more emotionally engaging and authentic experiences. Marketing strategies should similarly evolve. Rather than merely promoting landmarks and attractions, they should emphasize opportunities for genuine connection and cultural exchange. Such an approach is likely to appeal to a growing segment of travelers seeking more than visual consumption—a segment that values transformation, meaning, and relationship.

Finally, our study needs to acknowledge some limitations. Martin Buber's "I-Thou" philosophy emphasizes mutual presence, openness, and authentic encounter—a vision of human relation rooted in reciprocity and respect. However, this ideal sits uneasily within the domain of commercial tourism, where interactions are often shaped by profit motives, standardized experiences, and asymmetrical power relations. In such settings, tourists may "consume" cultures or people as products, while hosts may perform rehearsed roles to meet expectations, reinforcing an "I-It" dynamic.

This structural commodification of experience poses a fundamental challenge to dialogical engagement. Buber's concept assumes a relational equality and ethical immediacy that is difficult to achieve when interactions are framed by market transactions and limited time. Tour guides, for example, may not have the space or agency to fully engage with tourists as equals, and tourists may remain passive observers rather than dialogical participants.

We should also keep in mind that, while Buber's "I-Thou" philosophy provides a compelling framework for authentic human connection, its application in tourism must contend with real-world complexities. In pluralistic societies, tourist interactions are often shaped by economic interests, cultural asymmetries, and power imbalances between hosts and visitors, rather than just by a mode of travel. Dialogical philosophy can be overly idealistic, overlooking how structural forces limit the possibility of true mutuality.

Beyond the limitations discussed, future research could apply the "I-Thou" framework to tourism forms such as ecotourism, heritage tourism, and voluntourism. These contexts often foster slower, more immersive, and ethically engaged encounters that align with Buber's notion of reciprocal, present relationships. Such settings may provide fertile ground for observing "I-Thou" moments, particularly through qualitative methods like ethnography or dialogical interviews, which are well suited to capturing intersubjective experiences.

CRediT authorship contribution statement

Philipp Wassler: Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Giulia Rigo:** Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Conceptualization. **Andrea Pozzi:** Writing

– original draft, Supervision, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Rossella Baratta:** Writing – review & editing, Validation, Supervision, Conceptualization.

Impact statement

This study redefines the understanding of authenticity in tourism, demonstrating that even structured experiences, like sightseeing bus tours, can foster genuine "I-Thou" relationships. By challenging the notion that such tours are inherently superficial, the research highlights how mutuality, openness, connectedness, and authenticity can emerge within these settings, reshaping tourism as a space for meaningful human connection. These insights pave the way for more inclusive and profound touristic experiences, affirming that deep interpersonal bonds are possible across various types of travel encounters.

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