

MASTERARBEIT | MASTER'S THESIS

Titel | Title

Seeking out poverty in places of affluence. Existential authentication in poverty tourism and its sociopolitical-ethical implications in European welfare state cities.

verfasst von | submitted by

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angestrebter akademischer Grad | in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Science (MSc)

Wien | Vienna, 2025

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt | UA 066 664

Degree programme code as it appears on the
student record sheet:

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt | Degree Masterstudium DDP Urban Studies
programme as it appears on the student record
sheet:

Betreut von | Supervisor: Henrik Reeh

Abstract in English

Historically, humans have always searched for existential authenticity as the pursuit of personal meaning through travel experiences. Given the continued quest therefor in contemporary tourism activities, poverty tourism as a way of meeting ‘the other half’ of modern urbanized societies has become an important engine for local industries in favelas, barrios and townships of the Global South. Recently, poverty tourism has ‘returned home’, starting to appear in European welfare state cities, in the format of guided walking tours led by experiential experts. This incites different sights and images of local urban precarity and engagements therewith, which is expected to influence the emergence of ‘authenticity’ through poverty tourism experiences. At the same time, the dream of authenticity has resulted in sociopolitically-ethically ambiguous outcomes, at times contributing to the voyeurization, exoticization and exploitation of precarious local residents, then offering grounds for mutual social recognition, empathy and solidarity. To allow for a more meaningful engagement with the latter, the concept of existential authentication has been advanced with insights on experiential and ‘place’-based learning, as well as Paulo Freire’s sociopolitical theory on humanization and Axel Honneth’s socio-ethical Theory of Recognition.

This master’s thesis is a mixed methods phenomenological study of existential authentication in poverty tourism of European welfare state cities and reflection on its potential sociopolitical-ethical implications, applied to five poverty tour initiatives in cities of Vienna (AT), The Hague (NL) and Copenhagen (DK). A social constructivist discourse analysis of online reviews and interviews with tour guides and participants, participatory observations and autoethnographies, and a reflexive analysis of my personal research diary offer insights into the various participant profiles and motivations for partaking in poverty tours, the goals of poverty tours – both in theory and practice –, the experiences of poverty tours vis-à-vis the construction of ‘authentic’ images and sights of local urban precarity, and, lastly, the emergence and consequences of ‘authentic’ encounters with local urban precarity in poverty tours (as experienced in relation to sights and images of local urban precarity, and the figure of the guide).

Results showcase that existential authentication is a highly ambiguous dialectic process that, sometimes, incites empathy for an equally unique human being, then, evokes fear of a radically different ‘Other/ed’ – nevertheless, always being involved in processes of mutual person formation. When poverty tours enable both sociopolitical and hopeful learning, more socially sustainable and ethically-responsible encounters with difference in both local tourism sectors and the cities being toured become possible – as showcased by the creation of a first typology on poverty tours in European welfare state cities.

Abstract in German

Historisch haben die Menschen schon immer nach existenzieller Authentizität – als das Streben nach persönlicher Bedeutung – gesucht durch Reiseerfahrungen. In Anbetracht der anhaltenden Suche danach im zeitgenössischen Tourismus ist der Armutstourismus als eine Möglichkeit, die ‚andere Hälfte‘ der modernen urbanisierten Gesellschaften kennenzulernen, zu einem wichtigen Motor für die lokale Wirtschaft in Favelas, Barrios und Townships des globalen Südens geworden. In jüngster Zeit ist der Armutstourismus ‚nach Hause zurückgekehrt‘ und beginnt, in den Städten der europäischen Wohlfahrtsstaaten in Form von geführten Wandertouren unter der Leitung von Experten aufzutreten. Dies führt zu unterschiedlichen Sichtweisen und Bildern der lokalen städtischen Prekarität und der Auseinandersetzung damit, was die Entstehung von ‚Authentizität‘ durch Armutstourismus-Erfahrungen beeinflussen dürfte. Gleichzeitig hat der Traum von Authentizität zu soziopolitisch-ethisch undeutlichen Ergebnissen geführt, die zuweilen zur Voyeurisierung, Exotisierung und Ausbeutung von Menschen in prekären Verhältnissen vor Ort beitragen, dann wieder Gründe für gegenseitige soziale Anerkennung, Empathie und Solidarität bieten. Um eine sinnvollere Auseinandersetzung mit Letzterem zu ermöglichen, wurde das Konzept der existentiellen Authentifizierung mit Erkenntnissen über erfahrungs- und ortsbezogenes Lernen sowie Paulo Freires gesellschaftspolitische Theorie der Humanisierung und Axel Honneths sozioethische Theorie der Anerkennung erweitert.

Diese Masterarbeit ist eine phänomenologische Studie mit gemischten Methoden zur existenziellen Authentifizierung im Armutstourismus europäischer Wohlfahrtsstaaten und eine Reflexion über dessen mögliche sozialpolitisch-ethische Implikationen, angewandt auf fünf Armutstour-Initiativen in den Städten Wien (AT), Den Haag (NL) und Kopenhagen (DK). Eine sozialkonstruktivistische Diskursanalyse von Online-Rezensionen und Interviews mit Tourguides und Teilnehmern, teilnehmende Beobachtungen und Autoethnographien sowie eine reflexive Analyse meines persönlichen Forschungstagebuchs bieten Einblicke in die verschiedenen Teilnehmerprofile und Motivationen für die Teilnahme an Armutstouren, die Ziele von Armutstouren – sowohl in Theorie als auch Praxis –, die Erfahrungen von Armutstouren im Hinblick auf die Konstruktion ‚authentischer‘ Bilder und Sehenswürdigkeiten der lokalen städtischen Prekarität und schließlich die Entstehung und die Folgen ‚authentischer‘ Begegnungen mit der lokalen städtischen Prekarität bei Armutstouren (wie sie in Bezug auf Sehenswürdigkeiten und Bilder der lokalen städtischen Prekarität und die Figur des Führers erlebt werden).

Die Resultate zeigen, dass existenzielle Authentifizierung ein höchst vieldeutiger dialektischer Prozess ist, der manchmal Empathie für einen ebenso einzigartigen Menschen hervorruft, dann wieder Angst vor einem radikal anderen ‚Other/ed‘ hervorruft – was dennoch immer in Prozesse der gegenseitigen Persönlichkeitsbildung eingebunden ist. Wenn Armutstouren sowohl gesellschaftspolitisches als auch hoffnungsvolles Lernen ermöglichen, werden sozial nachhaltigere und ethisch verantwortungsvollere Begegnungen mit Differenz sowohl im lokalen Tourismussektor als auch in den bereisten Städten möglich - wie die Erstellung einer ersten Typologie zu Armutstouren in europäischen Wohlfahrtsstaatstädten zeigt.

Acknowledgements

Over the last two years, I was both privileged and challenged to travel all over Europe in the company of classmates, teachers and practitioners from various cultural, disciplinary and institutional backgrounds. In this fluid state of being, walking and redrawing my traces in unfamiliar 'places' every few months¹, a little 'communitas'² of people emerged. Together, we influenced and nurtured each other; helping each other grow into our own person. I express my sincerest gratitude to my family, my friends from my home town and my old university city, and the *companions de route* that I encountered along the way – staff, 4citizens and all friendly faces (Marina!) who truly made Brussels, Vienna, Copenhagen and Madrid worthy of a place called 'home'. From organising shared meals – 'shared cooking' is up for debate (making a salad doesn't count) –, to hurrying to the best bakeries, engaging in deep political and psychoanalytical talks, or simply joking around: these memories will always stay close to my heart. When reflecting back on the past four semesters while putting the final touches on my master's thesis, I come to realize that my intellectual-empirical engagements with existential authentication in poverty tourism also hold a grain of truth for the experience of 4CITIES – especially as a young adult who is carefully renegotiating herself in relation to the world.

A special mentioning for prof. dr. Henrik Reeh is at its place: your insightful comments – obtained through long talks and similar email threads; time was never an issue – propelled this research forward. Instead of directing me, you enabled me to grow at my own pace with subtle hints and reflective notes, turning initial doubts into – I may hope – nuanced views and findings. Fellow student Daniel Viana was also an indispensable partner for shared thinking, or simply enjoying the research stages of 'being lost and found' together. Lastly, let's not forget the guides, the administrative-organizational pillars 'behind-the-scenes' and the participants of all these tours, who embarked with me on this journey: you were all willing to make time for me, and share your insights and your thoughts, which is much appreciated. Without question, Martin and Nadine (*Wiener Nimmerland*), Ronja Bruijns-Shoblak (*Ronja's straatwandeling*), the guides at Ghetto Tours and Julie (*Gadens Stemmer*) all attempt to make room for difference in their own, unique way. Simply subscribing to this and offering me a welcoming, safe environment to learn both as a person, and as a sociologist and urban scholar, meant everything to me. I wish you lots of luck with the continuation of your tours, and I hope that my research may contribute to more ethical encounters in your initiatives and far beyond.

All the best,

Elien

¹ Alluding to Michel de Certeau in '*L'invention du quotidien. Vol. 1, Arts de faire*' (first published in 1980; reference to English version in 2012).

² Introduced in Victor Turner's '*The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure*' (first published in 1969; reference to the 9th edition of 1991).

List of tables

Table 1. Conceptual and empirical research questions.....28

Table 2. A typology of guided walking tours on urban precarity in European welfare state cities.....64

List of figures (see annex)

Fig. 1. Trajectory of SHADES TOURS' " <i>Armut & Obdachlosigkeit</i> "-tour, created with ArcGIS StoryMaps (interactive map: https://arcg.is/0bKS5S0).....	79
Fig. 2. Trajectory of SHADES TOURS' " <i>Sucht & Drogen</i> "-tour, created with ArcGIS StoryMaps (interactive map: https://arcg.is/jzPb51).....	79
Fig. 3. Trajectory of <i>Wiener Nimmerland's</i> tour, created with ArcGIS StoryMaps (interactive map: https://arcg.is/1Hjq80).....	80
Fig. 4. Trajectory of <i>Ronja's straatwandeling's</i> tour, created with ArcGIS StoryMaps (interactive map: https://arcg.is/1rXPK9).....	81
Fig. 5. Trajectory of Ghetto Tours' tour, created with ArcGIS StoryMaps (interactive map: https://arcg.is/OTXzP1).....	82
Fig. 6. Trajectory of Gadens Stemmer's tour, created with ArcGIS StoryMaps (interactive map: https://arcg.is/18HXzn0).....	83

Table of contents

Foreword: An urban history of meeting the Other – understanding today’s quest for existential authenticity	8
1. Introduction: poverty tourism’s quest for existential authenticity and its sociopolitical-ethical implications in European welfare state cities	10
2. State of the art.....	11
2.1 Authenticity in tourism research: from object-related authenticity to existential authentication	11
2.1.1 A history of existential authentication in travel and tourism: creating meaning in and through liminal space	14
2.1.2 Existential authentication and ‘the gaze’ in travel and tourism: Charles Taylor’s reconciliation of ‘the tourist gaze’ and ‘ <i>le regard</i> ’	16
2.2 Existential authentication in poverty tourism: ‘meeting the Other/ed’ between voyeurism and transformation.....	19
3. Conceptual framework: advancing existential authentication	22
3.1 Guided walking tours: an experiential and ‘place’-based account of existential authentication.....	22
3.2 Paulo Freire’s humanization: a sociopolitical account of existential authentication.....	24
3.3 Axel Honneth’s Recognition Theory: a social-ethical account of existential authentication.....	25
4. Problem statement and research questions.....	27
5. Methodology and methods	30
5.1 Existential and hermeneutic phenomenology.....	30
5.2 Research setting and sampling	32
5.3 Methods of data collection and analysis	33
5.4. Research quality indicators of Lincoln and Guba (2007)	36
6. Analysis and results	37
6.1 Who participates in poverty tourism in European welfare state cities, and why?	37
6.2 What are the intended goals of poverty tourism in European welfare state cities, and how do they ‘play out’ in practice?.....	42
6.3 What are tour participants’ experiences of poverty tourism in European welfare state cities in relation to ‘the tourist gaze’ on local urban precarity?.....	44

6.4 Which experiential elements contribute to the intra- and interpersonal emergence of ‘authentic’ encounters with local urban precarity within poverty tourism in European welfare state cities, and how are these encounters negotiated for purposes of existential authentication?	47
6.5 What do ‘authentic’ encounters with local urban precarity in poverty tourism in European welfare state cities produce, especially with regard to mutual existential authentication for local social change?	53
7. Discussion and conclusion	60
7.1 Research limitations	65
7.1.1 Biased participant sampling and high non-response rates.....	65
7.1.2 Language barriers	65
7.1.3 Ethical research relations and the issue of informed consent.....	66
7.2 Recommendations	67
7.2.1 Future research.....	67
7.2.2 Policy recommendations	68
Reference list (in APA).....	69
A. Academic literature	69
B. Grey literature	76

Foreword: An urban history of meeting the Other – understanding today's quest for existential authenticity

While I'm sitting on a terrace in Alicante – listening in on a conversation in English about nearby places to visit and Spain being 'locked in time' –, an "I'm sorry, excuse me" reaches my ears. I look up, meeting the eyes of a young man my age. He is carrying a reusable shopping bag around his right shoulder and holds out his hand. I lower my gaze to look at the content of his palm. "Do you have-"; "No, I'm sorry", I interrupt him, and I shift my attention back to my plate. After repeated unsuccessful attempts with 'my fellow diners' at opposite tables, he closes his fingers around some eurocents and takes his leave. While I'm annoyed at his 'rudeness' – disturbing me at an 'inappropriate' place and time – I can't help but feel a pinch of guilt when seeing him disappear into the urban streets.

Source: adapted excerpt from autoethnographic fieldnotes – May 2, 2025

Although I am writing a master's thesis on poverty tourism in particular, experiences with urban precarity in everyday life are inherently part of this exploration. After all, as argued by sociologist John Urry in his influential work 'The Tourist Gaze' (1990), tourism is a reflection of broader social operations, identities and cultures that are characteristic of present-day societies (Urry, 1990). In my desire to meet 'the other half' of European welfare state cities through tourism activities, and likewise, my occasional ineptitude to truly engage therewith in everyday life, I believe that inherent dialects in processes of existential authentication are exposed. Attracted by these ambiguities – felt within myself but also observed in the relationalities enacted in poverty tourism and beyond –, I argue that an in-depth examination of tour participants' experiences of existential authenticity and reflection on their potential sociopolitical-ethical implications can tell us more about human encounters between various sociocultural groups in general. Poverty tourism is 'merely' a magnifying glass for studying an inherently human quest towards existential authenticity in and through our engagements with the difference of the world.

This quest has historically been tied to stages of modern urbanization, as exemplified by literary reports on those living at the margins of recently (post)industrialized urbanized societies. A famous example thereof is German industrialist and philosopher Friedrich Engels' "Conditions of the Working Class in England" (1848), on the labour and housing conditions of a newly emergent class of urbanites in recently industrialized cities of Salford, Manchester and Liverpool. A few decades later, Danish journalist and photographer Jacob A. Riis documented the 1880s' tenement housing conditions of New York City in his publication "How the Other Half Lives: Studies Among the Tenements of New York" (Riis, 1970). Jacob Holdt, likewise a Danish photographer and writer, provides a more contemporary account in "American Pictures: A Personal Journey Through the American Underclass", wherein he captured mundane sights of racialized socio-economic inequalities in the United States of America during the 1970s on photographic film (Holdt, 1985).

Through in-depth ethnographies and participatory observations with those impacted by urban precarity, authors deliberately pursued encounters with the Other/ed; sometimes establishing empathetic relationships that no longer allow for seeing them as such, then resulting in voyeurism and romanticization. The same ambiguities can be perceived in the reception of these works, either contributing to the instalment of poverty-

reductive and -preventive social policies and urban infrastructures, or resulting in sensationalizing and exoticizing accounts for the readers' own entertainment and curiosity. Although the exact sociopolitical-ethical impact of such quests for existential authenticity perhaps cannot be univocally measured, it is clear that 'something' is happening herein that is worthwhile pursuing.

On the following pages, I invite you to walk with me,

Have an enjoyable read,

E.S.

1. Introduction: poverty tourism's quest for existential authenticity and its sociopolitical-ethical implications in European welfare state cities

Authenticity has become a leading concept in tourism and society as a whole (Aupers, Houtman & Roeland, 2010; Bispari, 2024; MacCannell, 1999). When going on vacation, tourists desire to have a 'genuine' or 'real' experience of the localities being visited. This refers both to the truth value of 'objects' such as cultural-historical culinary traditions, monuments, and customs and practices, as well as the *sense* of authenticity that is intrinsically experienced in connection to others – whether or not incited by authentic objects. In postmodern times of 'hyperreality'³, however, distinctions between 'real' and 'fake' objects have become unattainable – as exemplified by the popularity of highly staged tourism activities (e.g., Disneyland). At the same time, this has not hindered tourists' continued quests for authenticity, thus implying a greater emphasis on the *experience* of authenticity: tourists are not simply in search for authenticity, but authentic experiences – felt in a deeply embodied sense and in communion to others – serve as a mediator for finding broader meaning about the own existence in the world; a process that is termed '*existential authentication*'⁴ (Wang, 1999).

Poverty tourism as the touring of urban precarity (e.g., homelessness, housing insecurity and inadequacy, addiction, squalor and street violence, and forced displacement) is particularly concerned with existential authenticity, being both tourists' motivation for and outcome of engaging with 'the other half' of affluent European welfare state societies (Fenzel, 2012; Sheldon, 2010). However, these encounters foster ambiguous sociopolitical-ethical outcomes, sometimes enabling mutual social recognition, empathy and solidarity to occur between tour guides and participants, then idolizing or pitying guides as 'precarious' individuals only (Burroughs, 2014; Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2019). Considering the continued popularity of 'authenticity-seeking' alternative tourism – including the increase in poverty tourism initiatives worldwide – the concept of existential authenticity remains to be a highly relevant field of inquiry towards the development of more socially sustainable and ethically-responsible engagements in tourism places and cities as a whole (Freire-Medeiros, 2013; Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2018).

Since the early 2010s, poverty tourism has started to appear in cities of European welfare states in the form of guided walking tours by experiential experts (i.e., guides who are experiencing or have experienced urban precarity themselves) (Dolezal & Gudka, 2007). This differs from earlier operationalizations of poverty tourism, often occurring in areas of highly visible/ized and clustered urban precarity (i.e., so-called 'slums') in the Global South: here, guides often do *not* belong to the local communities themselves, and tourists can experience urban precarity in a sensorily-detached way, being seated behind a car window (Selinger &

³ Alluding to 'Travels in Hyperreality' (1986) by semiotician and literary writer, Umberto Eco. The example of Disneyland is also derived herefrom.

⁴ Whereas *authentication* refers to the process of becoming authentic, *authenticity* refers to the outcome of such processes of authentication; similar to the difference in meaning between 'identity' and 'identification' (Schwarz & Williams, 2020).

Otterson, 2010). Both the difference in setting (i.e., European welfare state cities) and format (i.e., guided walking tours led by experiential experts) imply other 'authentic' experiences of the object encountered (i.e., more 'hidden' sights and images of urban precarity) and the touring itself (i.e., more 'intensely experienced' embodied, relational and spatial engagements with urban precarity). In response, alternative processes of existential authentication to "traditional" poverty tourism in the Global South are expected to emerge, potentially inciting alternative sociopolitical-ethical outcomes as well. The concept of existential authentication is advanced by unraveling insights on experiential learning occurring in 'places' of bodies, spaces and mental frameworks, and delving into Paulo Freire's sociopolitical process of humanization (Freire, 2017) and Axel Honneth's intersubjective Recognition Theory (Honneth, 1995). This allows for an exploration of existential authentication that is oriented towards personal and local social transformation within the framework of poverty tourism.

In this master's thesis, I will investigate processes of tour participants' existential authentication as they are taking place in five poverty tours, set in Vienna (AT), the Hague (NL) and Copenhagen (DK), and reflect on their potential sociopolitical-ethical implications. To allow for meaningful empirical engagements, I will first outline the current state of the art regarding existential authentication in tourism studies and practice – including an in-depth description of poverty tourism – (section 2), before embedding the concept of existential authentication into experiential learning in 'place', Paulo Freire's process of humanization and Axel Honneth's Recognition Theory (section 3). An existential and hermeneutic phenomenological mixed methods approach – more precisely, a social constructivist discourse analysis of online content (i.e., reviews of poverty tours), as well as interviews and a focus group discussion with guides and tour participants, combined with participatory observations and autoethnographies conducted during touring, and a reflexive analysis of my personal research diary (section 5) – will eventually enable a breakdown (section 6) and discussion (section 7) of research findings.

2. State of the art

2.1 Authenticity in tourism research: from object-related authenticity to existential authentication

The concept of authenticity was first introduced as a potential field of inquiry in tourism studies by anthropologist and sociologist Dean MacCannell, in works based on his doctoral research⁵ (MacCannell, 1973, 1999). Although MacCannell intended his writings for fellow social scientists who were likewise critically concerned with upcoming transformations in tourism, it was primarily received by architects and humanities scholars at that time. However, under subsequent cultural, performative and mobilities turns in tourism studies – highlighting the sociocultural, relational and embodied dimensions of tourism –, it did gain traction

⁵ 'Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings' (1973) and 'The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class' (first published in 1976; reference to edition in 1999).

among tourism researchers from the social sciences in the 1990s (Bapiri, 2024; Christou, 2023; Russo & Richards, 2016; Wang, 1999). Authenticity has remained to be a 'hot topic' in tourism research and practice ever since, resulting in various definitions and paradigms for understanding processes of 'authentication', or becoming 'authentic' (Bapiri, 2024). At the same time, this multiplicity in conceptualizations render authenticity a slippery notion for study. In response, tourism scholar Ning Wang brought order to existent categorizations of authenticity in tourism research, distinguishing four types: 1) **objective authenticity**, 2) **constructivist authenticity**, 3) **postmodern authenticity**, and 4) **existential authenticity** (1999).

1) **Objective authenticity** refers to the extent to which an object's inherent truth value can be measured on the basis of absolute and objective criteria (e.g., a museum item). However, an object's truth value does not necessarily reflect how it is *experienced* to be authentic, as highlighted by MacCannell's concept of 'staged authenticity'⁶ (Wang, 1999). Inspired by sociologist Erving Goffman's symbolic interactionist theory on front- and backstages, 'staged authenticity' implies a partial performativity of an object's 'authenticity', thus rendering the object an *aura* of authenticity that is independent from its inherent truth value. Whereas tourists try to experience the back regions of tourist places and activities – engaging in private spheres to bypass highly staged versions of 'authenticity', as typically encountered on touristified front stages – tourists are rather captured in 'staged back regions'; being neither pure front-, nor backstage. Examples hereof are fish nets and driftwoods as decorations in 'authentic' seafood restaurants – giving an allure of being 'behind-the-scenes'; a staged "presence" of fishing activities. In doing so, MacCannell believes that locals can preserve objectively authentic versions of their, e.g., culinary traditions, monuments, and customs and practices from potential intrusion and influence by tourists (MacCannell, 1999). In critique, social historian and educator Daniel J. Boorstin voiced a concern for the disappearance of object-related authenticity under tendencies of commodification. In his work on 'pseudo-events'⁷ – i.e., events that are artificially manufactured and reproduced for purposes of media coverage only – , he argues that objects' truth values become hollowed out, when catering to tourists' expectations of 'authenticity' (Boorstin, 1962).

2) In response, **constructivist authenticity** emerged. Here, the meaning of authenticity does no longer refer to a fixed truth value that is inherent to certain objects, places or people. Rather, it becomes continuously renegotiable in light of changing sociocultural norms, views, paradigms, and contexts that render the notion of 'authenticity' meaningful. These sociocultural constructions of 'authenticity' are infused with power dynamics, originating from social structures embedded in local tourism industries and societies as a whole (Wang, 1999). Tourism scholar Erik Cohen's concept of 'emergent authenticity'⁸ emphasizes how meanings of 'authenticity' arise and, likewise, disappear under processes of commodification. Using the example of Bedouin culture – i.e., a nomadic culture found in Arabic countries and Israel – Cohen illustrates

⁶ Introduced in 'Staged Authenticity: Arrangements of Social Space in Tourist Settings' (1973) and 'The Tourist: A New Theory of the Leisure Class' (first published in 1976; reference to edition of 1999).

⁷ 'The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America' (1962).

⁸ Introduced in 'Authenticity and Commoditization in Tourism' (1988).

how Bedouins perform seemingly ‘traditional’ or ‘authentic’ dances, culinary dishes, and dress and costume, while these stylized versions may neither be historically-culturally accurate, nor reflect contemporary Bedouin everyday life. Instead, the ‘authenticity’ of objects emerges in accordance with tourist expectations of what ‘the “real” Bedouin culture’ should look like. The latter, in turn, is dependent on images and imaginaries installed by tourism industries and other societal frameworks of significance. Thus, ‘authenticity’, as perceived by tourists, is the provisional outcome of an ongoing process of cultural adaptation and renegotiation between local communities and demands from tourism markets. Cultural practices are not fixed in time, nor isolated from any ‘outside’ influence – represented by the figure of the tourist –, but fluidly shaped over time, embedded in multiple intersecting and ever-changing contexts (Cohen, 1988).

3) With the disappearance of definite, external references to an object’s truth value, **a postmodern notion of authenticity** arises. Inspired by the concept of ‘hyperreality’⁹ – as introduced by semiotician and literary writer Umberto Eco (1986) –, sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard observed a quest for ‘genuine fakes’ in postmodern societies. In the 1950s and 1960s, consumer cultures reached full maturity, employing effective techniques and technologies of imitation that, at times, rendered copies indistinguishable from the ‘real’ or ‘original’ version of an object. When the copy replaces its original – or is perceived as ‘original’ when it has no historical referent –, ‘simulacra’¹⁰ emerge that come to replace and thereby distort prior understandings of reality. With the dissolution of boundaries between ‘fake’ and ‘real’, the meaning of ‘authenticity’ has collapsed in on itself, becoming a mere matter of consumption of symbols and signs wherein a quest for ‘genuine fakes’ is legitimized when this enables intense experiences of ‘authentic’ emotions such as pleasure, nostalgia and awe (Baudrillard, 1981). A contemporary example thereof is the desire for vintage and retro items and experiences among young adult consumers, who were not yet born during the eras that these objects make reference to. ‘Authenticity’ thus no longer refers to an object’s inherent truth value, but becomes a matter of experience only (Wang, 1999).

Instead of attempting to *define* (in)authenticity – as pursued in early tourism research concerned with objective authenticity –, tourism studies have gradually become involved in questions of how authenticity is *used*, by whom, and for what purposes; and what authenticity *does* (Rickly, 2023). Since the moral turn of the early 2010s in tourism research, tourist practices, activities and places are acknowledged as being shaped by *moral*-sociocultural norms and values that, in turn, are embedded in power dynamics. This contributed to recent engagements with existentialism and other moral philosophical traditions, ushering in **an existentialist conception of authenticity and processes of authentication** (Rickly, 2022; Rickly, Vidon, & Knudsen, 2021).

4) Existential authenticity and authentication refer to the outcome, respectively process of intra- and interpersonal experiences of ‘authenticity’. ‘Authenticity’ is felt through intense affective and sensory engagements with the world, and the other met herein. Our positionality in certain ‘places’ – being our

⁹ Introduced in ‘Travels in Hyperreality’ (1986).

¹⁰ Introduced in ‘*Simulacres et Simulations*’ (1981).

bodies, everyday spaces, or mental frameworks for perception, interpretation and evaluation –, as well as ‘the fleeting moments’ that occur at the crossroads of physical and sociocultural intersubjective encounters, offer grounds for self-identification and the formation of a sense of belonging (Rickly-Boyd, 2013). Existential authentication is deeply intertwined with travel and tourism, since the latter function as ‘liminal spaces’ in which current norms and values are suspended for renegotiation of the Self in relation to the world (infra). However, in current tourism research, all instances of experiential authentication are uncritically equalled to existential authentication, which is not necessarily the case, calling forward a deeper theoretical engagement with the concept of existential authentication (Rickly, 2022).

Existential authentication is indebted to the moral philosophical tradition of **existentialism**, which explores themes of human existence in a reality that is inherently devoid of any meaning (e.g., freedom, alienation, suffering, anxiety and death). According to German philosopher Martin Heidegger¹¹, an existentially authentic life is obtained when acting in accordance to a personally meaningful life project. In realizing that there is no absolute or ‘higher’ meaning to human existence – including those posited by arbitrary social norms and goals –, and confronting the life-threatening angst that this realization evokes head-on, one becomes fully liberated to shape and pursue a uniquely meaningful life plan. This requires an individual’s actions to be consistently oriented towards their personal life goals, irrespective of the knowledge that they are always in a state of being-toward-death. Although conformist behaviour – e.g., to tourist expectations of ‘authenticity’ – would allow for a denial of the latter, it simultaneously evokes a self-alienation that prohibits the emergence of truly authentic ways of living (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006).

2.1.1 A history of existential authentication in travel and tourism: creating meaning in and through liminal space

A tourist is a person who chooses to dwell in an **unfamiliar** place from ‘home’ – either referring to an unfamiliar physical or mental ‘place’ (Jafari, 1977).¹² In encountering the extraordinary in people, places and activities, tourists aspire to find **a more ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ reality beyond their own** (MacCannell, 1999). This existentialist conceptualization of authenticity has its **roots in the emergence of modern societies**. Since the late 17th century, sociotechnical transformations under modern industrialization and urbanization, and associated intellectual movements of Enlightenment and, later on, existentialism, ushering in new understandings of the Self vis-à-vis a radically-altered world. Whereas, priorly, notions of authenticity had mostly been reserved to a transcendental entity only (i.e., God), it became an intrinsically human and personal feature with the decline of belief in all-encompassing mythical, magical and spiritual sociocultural-

¹¹ Although Heidegger (1889-1976) never defined himself as ‘existentialist’, his thinking corresponds to the basic principles thereof. Other prominent figures in existentialist philosophy and literature are Søren Kierkegaard (1813-1855), Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Jean-Paul Sartre (1905-1980), Simone de Beauvoir (1908-1986) and Albert Camus (1913-1960) (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006).

¹² This definition of tourists allows for local tourism, i.e., locals as tourists (re)discover their ‘home’ by engaging differently therewith, as such attaching new meanings to their locality.

moral accounts of the world. Consequently, human beings were confronted with highly fragmented and alienating elements of modern social orders; being placed in societies that were now stripped from any inherent meaning¹³. In response, existentialism called for the pursuit of a personally meaningful life project beyond contemporary boundaries of existent ways of being, knowing and doing (Aupers, Houtman & Roeland, 2010). Travel and tourism as 'liminal spaces'¹⁴, wherein radical difference can be met, have historically served purposes of existential authentication; finding and carving out a place for the Self in and through encounters with the world (MacCannell, 1999; Turner, 1991)

The first accounts of authenticity-seeking travel can be traced back to the ritual of **religious pilgrimage**. According to anthropologist Victor Turner, a pilgrimage to another 'place' from home opens up engagements with a '**liminal space**'. Here, travellers are not only suspended between two *physical* spaces, but they also find themselves in a sacred space-time for introspection and reflection, in which norms of everyday life become transgressable. On this 'limen' or threshold for self-identification vis-à-vis 'usual' ways of being, knowing and doing, travellers can either choose to transform themselves into another state of mind, or reaffirm their pre-existing identities. In relating themselves to other potential ways of being-in-the-world, travellers give expression to their existential authenticity, evoking personal meaning in the process. Moreover, they do so in 'communitas' with other travellers, inciting intense feelings of solidarity, intimacy and togetherness on the basis of a shared human existence (Ting & Kahl, 2016; Turner, 1991).

The same experience of liminality has been observed among participants in the **Grand Tours** of Europe during the 18th and 19th centuries. In visiting cities such as Paris and Rome, and traversing the peaks of the Alps in-between destinations, aristocratic and wealthy young men engaged in a rite of passage towards adulthood, discovering and redefining their own authentic person vis-à-vis displays of high culture and presumably 'untainted' (by societal norms) natural landscapes. The arrival of tourism industries since the beginning of the 20th century merely commodified this intrinsically human desire for existential authenticity, turning 'travellers' into 'tourists' (MacCannell, 1999); although many attempt to break away from the label of 'tourist', relating it to explicitly commodified places and activities – deeming the latter 'inauthentically' generic and fake (Cohen, 1979). Since the 1960s, **backpacker travel** and other kinds of '**alternative**' tourism¹⁵ (e.g., 'ecotourism', 'voluntourism', 'responsible tourism', 'ethical tourism', 'sustainable tourism', 'slow tourism' and 'off-the-beaten-path tourism') demand unique and individually-tailored forms of travel that are 'in touch' with the visited locality and its inhabitants (Matoga & Pawlowska, 2018; Triarchi & Karamanis, 2017).

¹³ See Max Weber's concept of '*Die Entzauberung der Welt*', introduced in '*Wissenschaft als Beruf*' (first published in 1917; reference to edition in 1989); see Peter L. Berger's work 'The Sacred Canopy. Elements of a sociological theory of religion' (1967) for a more recent account thereof in the field of sociology of religion.

¹⁴ Introduced by Victor Turner in 'The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure' (originally published in 1968; reference to edition of 1999).

¹⁵ 'Alternative' tourism is defined in opposition to the 'mainstream' mass tourism of 'sun, see, beach'-packages that emerged at the beginning of the 20th century. However, since the 1960s, alternative tourism niches have increased in tourist numbers and tourism types, becoming the new mainstream themselves (Eadington & Smith, 1992). Worldwide, tourism has currently become one of the fastest growing industries, with a particular focus on 'authenticity-seeking' travel observed among young persons (Ting & Kahl, 2016).

The desire for creating personal meaning through existentially authentic travel experiences has, however, resulted in morally ambiguous tourism encounters and detrimental sociopolitical outcomes – at times, exoticizing, commodifying or erasing local cultures, instigating intercultural conflicts, and imposing ethnocentric neocolonial and class-based norms on local populations (Butler, 2016; Salazar, 2017). In these kinds of tourism, existential authenticity serves both as a motivation for, and consequence of participating therein (Fenzel, 2012; Sheldon, 2010). In explaining the sociopolitically-ethically ambiguous outcomes of existentially authentic travel and tourism, the concept of ‘the gaze’ as the ‘place’ of encounter with an unfamiliar reality from our own proves to be indispensable.

2.1.2 Existential authentication and ‘the gaze’ in travel and tourism: Charles Taylor’s reconciliation of ‘the tourist gaze’ and ‘le regard’

The concept of ‘the gaze’ has been an important mechanism for understanding ‘authenticity’ early on in tourism research (Wasslera & Kirillova, 2019). The most explicit usage thereof can be found in sociologist John Urry’s notion of **‘the tourist gaze’**. Although Urry never mentioned ‘authenticity’ in his work¹⁶, ‘the tourist gaze’ – which describes how tourists’ perceptions, interpretations and evaluations of different activities and places are structured by certain tourism images and imaginaries – fits well within the definition of constructivist authentication (supra). Drawing on Michel Foucault’s concept of ‘the medical gaze’¹⁷, Urry employs the notion of ‘the gaze’ in tourism contexts to explain for the dominant presence of ocular cultures – and other sensorily engagements¹⁸ – in structuring dominant ways of ‘seeing’ and desiring certain tourism aesthetics, activities and places over others. Social media posts, starchitectures, liveable city indexes and other city marketing tools create and circulate certain images and imaginaries of tourist places and activities. Especially images and imaginaries of ‘the extraordinary’ or ‘unusual’ vis-à-vis tourists’ own life worlds appeal to an intrinsically human quest for existential authenticity (supra). The construction of ‘unique’ experiences – or impressions thereof – drives and simultaneously is driven by demands for commodification in tourism industries. In doing so, tourists are socialized into particular and often class-based ways of perceiving, interpreting and valuing certain ‘authentic’ images and imaginaries over others. Tourist expectations of, e.g., ‘authentic’ Vienna, The Hague or Copenhagen, are thus being installed in personal and collective memories, which, in turn, contribute to the becoming of a ‘symbolic authenticity’ – i.e., an object is affectively and culturally experienced as ‘authentic’, when this corresponds to priorly installed signs and symbols of

¹⁶ ‘The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies’ (1990).

¹⁷ i.e., a biopolitical disciplinary tool for social control and surveillance, reshaping understandings of the human body in its gaze. In diagnosing and pathologizing certain physical and mental features over others, medical institutions install and impose a particular normative system of knowledge onto the human body, engaging in a biopolitics that dehumanizes the experience of disease and allows for some kinds of living to become less valued than others. Introduced in *‘Naissance de la clinique’* (1963).

¹⁸ Clarification made in response to initial critique of ‘the tourist gaze’ as emphasizing sight over the influence of other sense. Introduced in reworked, later edition of *‘The Tourist Gaze: Leisure and Travel in Contemporary Societies’* (Larsen & Urry, 2011).

'authentic' objects. Although the tourist gaze is embedded in power dynamics of tourism industries and broader societies, various images and imaginaries of 'authentic' touristic objects co-exist, challenging or reinforcing current understandings of 'authenticity' towards newly-emergent 'authenticities' (Urry, 1990).

In contrast, an existentialist notion of the gaze (i.e., *le regard*) has been developed by philosopher Jean-Paul Sartre¹⁹. According to Sartre, *le regard* is an intrinsic element of the human experience; it mediates the sociopolitical-ethical relationships between the Self and the world, as encountered in and through another subject's gaze. However, in meeting ourselves through the other, we humans simultaneously become to recognize ourselves as both subject and object. This implies a tension in existential authentication, rendering such processes inevitably incomplete. In imaging ourselves through the eyes of another conscious human mind (i.e., a subject), we discover elements of ourselves that we would not have encountered on our own. In doing so, a more meaningful life project and 'truthful' self-image emerge; encouraging subjectification under existentially authentic processes of self-identification. At the same time, we feel judged and exposed in the gaze of another thinking entity, acknowledging ourselves to be 'mere' objects in their worlds of perception and experience. This incites a sense of self-consciousness and shame that presses for conformist behaviour in compliance with socially dominant norms and values of 'desirable' life goals and trajectories, presumably 'worthwhile' pursuing. Instead of becoming a 'being-for-itself' or *être pour-soi* – i.e., existing purposively in and through those actions that render our lives personally meaningful – we humans are a 'being-in-itself' or *être en-soi*, when caught up in another one's gaze – i.e., living without any awareness of consciousness and possibility to impose our own will onto ourselves. Thus, *le regard* restricts our human freedom to shape and act in accordance with a personally meaningful life project, and influences our self-conceptualization, rendering truly authentic encounters impossible in travel and tourism, and beyond (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006).

In contrast to both Urry's and Sartre's conceptualizations of 'the gaze' – which imply that 'authentic' encounters in travel and tourism only serve tour participants' self-identification –, Wasslera and Kirillova identify the gaze as a potentially transformative pathway for visitors *and* local communities involved in tourism activities, provided that a **shared life project** is pursued (2019). Simone de Beauvoir – likewise an existentialist philosopher who collaborated with Sartre on multiple occasions –, advanced Sartre's notion of *le regard*, in response to the observation that one's quest for existentially authentic living can always be obstructed by another's pursuit thereof. Existential authentication supposes an unrestricted individual liberty to pursue a personal life project, potentially limiting the freedom of another in the process. Instead, she suggests that, when exercising one's own personal liberty in enactment of an authentic life, the limits thereof are placed where the recognition of and respect for another person's freedom is jeopardized. In other words, existential authenticity is only experienced when acting in accordance with a *shared* life project in relation to others, calling for more socially sustainable and ethically-responsible encounters in tourist places and society

¹⁹ Introduced in '*L'Être et le néant : Essai d'ontologie phénoménologique*' (originally published in 1943; reference to edition of 1976).

as a whole. This, in turn, requires the development of a sense of empathy based on the acknowledgement and adherence to a shared human existence under similar social conditions (Rickly, Vidon, & Knudsen, 2021). This version of existential authentication, i.e., offering grounds for personal and local social transformation through *mutual* subjectification, will be operationalized infra (see conceptual framework).

It must be noted that – although this thesis investigates existential authentication – constructivist processes of authentication are inherently implied as well. After all, as stated by political philosopher **Charles Taylor's notion of 'authenticity'** in relation to modern understandings of the Self²⁰, a 'true' being does not emerge in isolation – i.e., in the independent pursuit of a personally meaningful life project. Instead, authentication entails a **dialogical process occurring within certain societal frameworks for significance and morals**. Sociocultural and ethical internalized horizons of meaning – which themselves are reflective of broader values, beliefs and practices, present in certain groups or societies – enable the emergence of an 'authentic' experience, and render some experiences more 'authentic' than others. Consecutively, meanings of 'authenticity' become renegotiable in different experiences thereof (Taylor, 1989).

When applied to the concept of 'the gaze' in tourism research, Urry's tourist gaze allows for a 'making sense' of existentially authentic encounters, while the latter disrupts earlier notions of 'authenticity' for newly emergent perceptive, interpretive and moral frameworks thereof. Both **'the tourist gaze' and *le regard*** are thus involved in a continuous process of **mutual reconstitution**. However, the tourist gaze's embedment in power dynamics of tourism industries and other societal spheres – more precisely, the continuous fabrication of 'authentic' tourist experiences that is implied under processes of commodification –, undermines the intrinsically human quest for truly meaningful or existentially authentic encounters. In catering to tourists' expectations, engagements with locals and local cultures often contribute to the emergence of essentialized and objectified versions thereof, and tourists find themselves in a self-referential loop of internalized normative ways of perceiving, interpreting and evaluating reality and their own placement therein. As a result, processes of personal and mutual existential authentication are hampered. At the same time, the intrinsically human quest for encounters with 'the unfamiliar' challenges the familiar normative frameworks that are posited by tourism sectors from within these industries, offering opportunities for reimagining the Self in relation to the other nevertheless.

The dialectics in processes of existential authentication and their sociopolitically-ethically ambiguous outcomes – as established by different notions of 'the gaze' in authenticity-related research – support notions of travel and tourism as 'liminal spaces' that can either enable tourists' self-affirmation, or transform the Self in relation to the 'objects' (including people and places) encountered on their journey (supra). I argue that this becomes most clear in instances of poverty tourism as a peculiar type of 'authenticity'-seeking tourism that is undergoing recent changes. In the gaze of 'the other half' of – in this case – affluent European welfare

²⁰ Developed in his work 'Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity' (1989).

state societies, poverty tourist are reflected back upon themselves. Tourists encounter the world – and their own place therein – in and through the figure of a ‘radically different Other/ed’²¹ – implying the presence of structures of oppression that render processes of (mutual) existential authentication highly morally ambiguous.

2.2 Existential authentication in poverty tourism: ‘meeting the Other/ed’ between voyeurism and transformation

Poverty tourism is a kind of alternative tourism that focuses on themes of material-discursive precarity or long-term uncertainty – such as homelessness, addiction, forced displacement, housing insecurity or inadequacy, squalor and street violence –, often framed as ‘poverty’ in non-academic contexts. Its meanings and operationalizations differ depending on the ‘places’ wherein and purposes for which it is employed; in general, the term carries a stigmatizing connotation in both tourism studies literature and practice²². Poverty tourism is often used synonymously to ‘slum tourism’ and ‘ghetto tourism’, albeit the former does not necessarily engage in or with designated areas of highly visible/ized precarity such as slums and ghettos (Steinbrink, 2012). It is closely related to ‘ethnic tourism’ in racialized neighbourhoods (Drew, 2011), ‘creative tourism’ in gentrifying areas (Drew, 2011), and ‘dark tourism’ that displays and sometimes idealizes sites of human death and suffering (Burroughs, 2014).

Poverty tourism originated in **Victorian England**. At the second half of the 19th century, socio-economically affluent aristocrats, bourgeois industrialists, and urban magistrates went ‘**slumming**’ in the impoverished working class neighbourhoods of London’s East End. In encountering their societal ‘other half’, they engaged in norm-transgressive activities, moving beyond one’s own socio-spatial familiarity and venturing among those of lower social class (Dürr, 2012). While some visited the slums to indulge in adventure and excitement, others used this as an educational opportunity, instigating advancements in social policy and urban infrastructure in the wake of their visits. The organized practice of ‘slumming’ soon crossed the Atlantic Ocean, taking mostly affluent and white North Americans on a walk through the socio-economically deprived areas of cities such as New York and Chicago. Often, these neighbourhoods housed a disproportionate

²¹ When writing ‘Other/ed’ instead of ‘other’, reference is being made to postcolonial psychiatrist and philosopher Frantz Fanon’s reconceptualization of Sartre’s *le regard*. Whereas Sartre viewed *le regard* as an existential encounter between two equal subjects-objects, Fanon employed ‘the colonial gaze’ to explain unequal colonizer-colonized relationships, focusing on the incomplete subjectification of (formerly) colonized persons in and through processes of objectification and dehumanization that are encompassed in the colonial gaze. In doing so, Fanon explicitly brought in dimensions of power for explaining the psychological and existential state of a ‘radically different Other/ed’ in the face of societal structures of oppression. Similarly, poverty tourism does not suppose tourist encounters with an equal human being, but engages with an underprivileged or Other/ed group in contemporary welfare state societies. The notion of ‘the colonial gaze’ was introduced in Fanon’s *Peau noire, masques blancs* (1952).

²² Although I recognize that the concept of ‘poverty tourism’ can stigmatize research participants (i.e., guides, operators and tour participants), this is not my intention. I employ the term in accordance with scientific discourse that acknowledges ‘poverty tourism’ as tourism focused on themes of urban precarity, while trying to engage with the ambiguous ethics thereof that render the term so normatively charged in the first place.

amount of African-Americans, adding a racialized dimension to the class-based practice of slumming (Fenzel, 2022; Steinbrink, 2012).

In the 1970s, poverty tourism became globalized, attracting affluent citizens from the Global North to tour socio-economically vulnerable/ized urban areas of the Global South. In the 1990s, poverty tourism established itself as a substantial driver for urban tourism industries in some parts of South Africa, Latin America and India under the guise of **'township tours'**, respectively **'favela tours'** and **'barrio tours'**, and **'slum tours'**, making up for at least one fifth of all local tourism activities. From then onwards, tourism researchers started to engage substantially with poverty tourism, including visitors' and residents' personal motivations to engage with poverty tourism and the impact of these encounters on both tourists and the visited localities; more critical accounts thereof are emergent since a recent moral turn in tourism research (Fenzel, 2022; Steinbrink, 2012).

Poverty tourism has **either been deemed voyeuristic, then personally and socially transformative**, depending on its format and underlying norms and values under specific urban tourism regimes (Selinger & Outtersen, 2010). Especially its embedment within commercialized tourism sectors is heavily contested, according to some inevitable resulting in exoticizing, spectacularizing, romanticizing, and depoliticizing accounts of 'authentic' images and imaginaries of local urban precarity – as exemplified by notions of 'poverty porn', 'human zoos' and 'human safari tours'. Here, 'authenticity' may only be reflective of pre-existing tourist expectations, irrespective of the actual lived realities of local urban precarity. As a consequence, local communities are not recognized, neither in the extent of their suffering, nor as fully-fledged and multidimensional human beings beyond their stigma; any further advancements in poverty reduction and prevention are hampered in the process (Dolezal & Gudka, 2007; Fenzel, 2012; Freire-Medeiros, 2013; Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2019; Nisbett, 2017). With, at times, a lion's share of tour revenues going to (inter)national travel agencies and tour operators, local populations are often finding little benefit in return for hosting and enabling tourists' journeys towards existentially 'authentic' self-identification (Fenzel, 2012; Halilem, Diop, & Pasquier-Fay, 2024).

In contrast, some scholars reimagine poverty tourism as 'pro-poor tourism', wherein profits gained are reinvested in local communities, as such aiding in local poverty reduction and prevention. Tourists do not only bring financial resources, but also foster intercultural dialogue for sociopolitical learning, reconfiguring images and imaginaries of 'authentic' local urban precarity that may combat territorial stigmatizations and stereotypes, and denounce lacking or failing social provisions and urban infrastructures to evoke positive local social change (Burgold, 2014; Dolezal & Gudka, 2007; Fenzel, 2012; Freire-Medeiros, 2013; Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2019; Selinger & Outtersen, 2010). As exemplified by a recent case study in Johannesburg (South Africa), co-creative experiments wherein tourists and residents engage on *an equal footing* are especially promising in offering grounds for both personal and mutual transformation (Booyens & Rogerson, 2019).

Recently, poverty tourism has ‘returned home’ to the European continent. Since the early 2010s, ‘homeless tours’²³ have been making their appearance in European cities such as Amsterdam (NL), Barcelona (ES), Berlin (DE), Hamburg (DE), Copenhagen (DK), Vienna (AT), London (GB), The Hague (NL), Prague (CZ) and Utrecht (NL), exploring themes of homelessness and housing insecurity, addiction and/or refuge. Being a relatively recent phenomenon in these contexts, only little research has been conducted yet on poverty tourism in particular²⁴ – excluding associated tourism types such as ethnic tourism, creative tourism and dark tourism (Dolezal & Gudka, 2007).

In contrast to the initial ‘poverty tours’ in Victorian London, contemporary European poverty tourism occurs under the coverage of **urban welfare regimes**. Such systems of coordinated social services and infrastructures – designed to prevent and reduce urban precarity – contribute to the emergence of less explicit expressions thereof. In doing so, poverty tourism in European welfare state cities distinguishes itself from “traditional” poverty tourism contexts (i.e., favelas, barrios and townships of the Global South)²⁵, where highly visible/ized portrayals in areas of designated and clustered precarity – so-called ‘slums’ – are dominant. Likewise, the *touring* of images and sights of local urban precarity in these contexts is expected to take on different shape as well.

Additionally, the formats of poverty tourism differ: whereas touring in the Global South can also take place from behind the window of a car for presumed safety reasons (Selinger & Outtersson, 2010) – only the format of **guided walking tours** has so far consistently been observed in poverty tourism initiatives on the European continent. The latter implies a more sensorily-engaged and direct encounter with urban precarity. Moreover, these are without exception led by **guides who experience or have experienced urban precarity themselves**; which has not always been the case in “traditional” poverty tourism contexts (Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2019).²⁶

²³ Although a literature review by Dolezal and Gudka shows disagreement over the conceptualization of ‘homeless tours’ within the umbrella of ‘poverty tourism’ (2007), I argue that its shared focus on themes of urban precarity renders it as such.

²⁴ Noteworthy are two case studies, including ‘Unseen Tours’, a social enterprise that organizes guided walking tour on and by homeless people in London (UK) (Dolezal & Gudka, 2007), and ‘Route 99’, a collective of migrant women that organises walking tours based on their precarious integration experiences in Berlin-Neukölln (Burgold, 2014). Related, Butler, Curran and O’Gorman conducted an evaluation study of a pro-poor tourism initiative in Govan, a rundown neighbourhood of Glasgow (UK). After an extensive literature review with search terms ‘homeless tours’, ‘poverty tourism’, ‘slum tourism’ and ‘ghetto tourism’ via search engines of Limo (KU Leuven), the Royal Danish Library (University of Copenhagen) and u:search (University of Vienna), similar research in continental Europe has not been identified.

²⁵ This is not to say that there are no welfare states or other forms of social coverage in the Global South. However, most poverty tourism initiatives in the Global South that have been studied priorly and exist nowadays do not occur in matured welfare states.

²⁶ Besides from these *observed* differences, initiatives in European welfare state cities deliberately posit themselves against the label of ‘poverty tourism’ and the derogatory meanings and sociopolitical-ethical concerns that are attached thereto by subscribing to labels of ‘social tourism’, ‘reality tourism’, ‘responsible tourism’ and/or ‘ethical tourism’ instead (Dolezal & Gudka, 2007; Rolfes, 2010). Such symbolic marketing seems to respond to the presence of alternative conceptualizations of ‘authentic experience’ in the touring of urban precarity.

3. Conceptual framework: advancing existential authentication

Tourists' quest for existential authenticity does not necessarily result in mutual social recognition of and benefits for both tourists and local communities. This is especially the case in poverty tourism, where unequal positionalities under – in this case – existent welfare state regimes render 'the gaze' as an existential and intersubjective meeting point highly morally ambiguous, enabling the emergence of detrimental sociopolitical outcomes (Rickly(-Boyd), 2013; Rickly, 2023; Selinger & Outtersen, 2010). In response, I believe that **the concept of existential authentication must be advanced** to allow for the exploration of more socially sustainable and ethically-responsible encounters in tourist places and cities as a whole. This requires an in-depth engagement with **1) the experiential** (i.e., affective, sensorial and relational) **and 'place'-based features of guided walking tours** as sites for existential authentication, and processes of existential authentication seen through the lenses of **2) Paulo Freire's theory on 'humanization'** (Freire, 2017) and **3) Axel Honneth's Theory of Recognition** (Honneth, 1995).

3.1 Guided walking tours: an experiential and 'place'-based account of existential authentication²⁷

Recently emergent poverty tourism initiatives in European welfare state cities are often formatted as guided walking tours, which implies a more affective, sensorial and relational – i.e., experiential – encounter with urban precarity in particular 'places' than those provided by "traditional" learning methods such as documentaries, lectures, and books. According to a revised version of pedagogue David A. Kolb's experiential learning cycle, experiential education departs from embedded and concrete experiences in particular places and times, followed by critically reflexive observations, context-specific abstractions, and applications to other settings towards the creation of a systemic body of knowledge or lived understanding of "the" world (Morris, 2020). Experiences are shaped in relation to our socially-inscribed bodies, the socio-material spaces in which our bodies are situated, and the internalized sociocultural normative frameworks or discourses for perception, interpretation and evaluation in which we have been brought up and socialized (Palmer, 2018).

Under earlier conceptualizations of guided walking tours in tourism studies, tour participants have mistakenly been dismissed as active agents in experiential learning; instead, they have been perceived as **'passive audiences'** that uncritically accept the narratives that are being presented on these tours. In combining insights from recent tourism studies, pedagogy, as well as mobile and sensory research, more and more scholars are starting to redefine guided walking tours as collaborative and creative experiential activities for personal and sociopolitical transformation (Hallin & Dobers, 2012; Nilsson & Zillinger, 2020; O'Neill et al., 2021; Zillinger, Jonasson, Adolfsson, 2012).

Understandings and expectations of 'authentic' places and local urban precarity according to 'the tourist gaze' are constantly being questioned and (re)constituted with and through all bodily senses (Larsen and Urry,

²⁷ This section is based on an essay that I developed within the framework of prof. dr. Henrik Reeh's course 'Urban Culture and Cultural Theory' at the University of Copenhagen in December 2024.

2011). The sensorial and mobile experience of walking opens up a different reading of the bodies, spaces and narratives that are temporarily inhabited (O'Neill et al., 2021). Herein, negative emotions (e.g., guilt, anger) can be both appalling and productive, fostering grounds for non-participation in poverty tours or subverting social dominant understandings of local urban precarity for purposes of politicization (Everingham & Motta, 2022). **Guides allow for structuring these fleeting impressions and associated affects into comprehensible frameworks** for perception, interpretation and evaluation potentially reimagining the meanings and sights of 'authentic' local urban precarity in its wake. Through the performance of narrative motives (e.g., suspension, climax, dramatization, and mystery) guides craft a coherent urban imaginary for its audiences to 'make sense' of the city that is being toured, and the urban precarity taking place therein. Although this representation cannot possibly hold all elements of local urban precarity into account – i.e., the conveyance of all personal lived accounts thereof is impossible –, it offers a simplification that allows for **an understanding of the complexities of local urban precarity**, emerging across different places and times (Hallin & Dobers, 2012).

In contrast to some poverty tourism initiatives in the Global South, led by local community outsiders, guiding in European welfare state cities entails the telling of personal stories by experiential experts. Such 'autotopographies' – i.e., walking performances that narrate and create identities of, in this case, formerly homeless, addicted, ... persons and reflexivity thereon – provide alternative and grounded discourses to touristified images and imaginaries of the places being toured; questioning the credibility or authenticity of, for instance, 'liveable' welfare state cities (Huss, 2022; *infra*). Through the collective act of 'sensuous dwelling' (Palmer, 2018), **tour participants renegotiate the guide's story, co-creating new frameworks for understanding and acting upon local urban precarity together** (Küpers & Wee, 2018). Herein, affective responses, place-based spontaneous occurrences (e.g., the sound of breaking glass; greetings from passerby) and particular horizons of meaning for perception, interpretation and evaluation – that are themselves the outcome of earlier experiences, affects and reflections thereon – run along (Hallin & Dobers, 2012).

In sum, although tourists' understandings of 'authenticity' are partly dependent on the tourist gaze, which is infused with global and local power dynamics of representation (Hallin & Dobers, 2012), guided walking tours as experiential modes of learning occurring in specific 'places' of bodies, spaces and internalized discourses ground processes of existential authentication, opening up opportunities for challenging pre-existent notions of local urban precarity towards personal *and* local social transformation (O'Neill et al., 2021; Rickly-Boyd, 2013). However, experiential and 'place'-based learning in itself does not necessarily provoke such transformations, when this is not consistently embedded in broader sociopolitical frameworks for learning. *Infra*, Paulo Freire's critical dialectic and dialogical pedagogy, and the establishment of 'humanization' in its wake, will allow for the emergence of a kind of existential authentication that serves alternative self-identification and mutual subjectification for local social change.

3.2 Paulo Freire's humanization: a sociopolitical account of existential authentication

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian educator and policymaker. In his most famous work, 'Pedagogy of the Oppressed', Freire employs Hegelian, Marxist and anti-colonial theory to counter "traditional" modes of learning for revolutionary personal and societal transformation. Rather than having a teacher-instructor deposit absolute "truths" or "facts" into ignorant pupils as absorbent 'sponges' – i.e., 'the banking model of education' –, Freire proposed a new kind of learning that departs from and is steered by the experiential knowledge of students themselves under continuous encouragement of a teacher-facilitator. This '**problem-posing pedagogy**' engages with students' lived realities of oppression, relating them to broader systemic features (e.g., of modern capitalism, racism) that enabled these experiences to occur in the first place. Through a dialectic and dialogical process of **praxis** – i.e., simultaneously engaging with theory and action, practice and reflection – a critical consciousness or '**conscientização**' emerges. Current ways of being, knowing and doing are being questioned as 'admirable', challenging the underlying norms and values that render it as such (Freire, 2017).

Students do not only start to perceive the mechanisms and effects of oppressive social structures in everyday life, but they also reflect on their own entanglement therein: they come to understand their beliefs and knowledge of the world, as well as their self-conception and future aspirations to be socially shaped, installing certain ways of thinking and acting over others that hinder 'authentic' living and produce persistent inequalities. In that sense, privileged pupils are both oppressor and oppressed, being encapsulated in certain frameworks of significance and morals that run counter to their intrinsic human being. This realization incites negative feelings of guilt, unease and indignation. At the same time, a sense of empathy and solidarity emerges from the learned perception of a shared human existence under particular social operations (Freire, 2017).

Both positive and negative emotions are productive in evoking a self-recognition that emphasizes a person's agentic power in either maintaining *or* renegotiating social systems of inequality and oppression. When a sense of '**hope**' is installed for personal and local social change, insights obtained through the development of *conscientização* can be translated into concrete actions for alternative enactments of the social relationships that constitute our lived realities (Freire, 2014). In recognizing, acting upon and freeing oneself from systems of oppression, new understandings of the Self in relation to the – once – 'radically different Other/ed' are opened up, serving processes of '**humanization**': both formerly privileged and underprivileged actors acknowledge themselves to be equal human beings as the basis for truly 'authentic' (co-)living (Freire, 2017; McLaren & Jaramillo, 2011).

This is especially relevant for existential authentication in and through encounters in poverty tourism. Guides as precarious individuals have been rendered a 'radically different Other/ed' under oppressive social structures in, e.g., national education and labour systems, often having been dealt less favourable social and intergenerational chances for personal development and social mobility than others. In addition, socially

dominant individualized narratives of ‘success’ contribute to stigmatizing images and imaginaries of urban precarity, while concealing urban precarity as the inevitable ‘other side’ of affluence in modern capitalist urbanized societies (Laermans, De Cauter, & Vanhaesebrouck, 2018; Rosati, 2012). As a consequence, guides’ knowledge and experiences are often lacking from or socially delegitimized in socially dominant discourses on local urban precarity.

In the dialogical act of touring poverty, guides and more privileged tour participants (in terms of education, social and/or economic capital) bring in their own unique perspectives and trace systemic linkages between them to co-create a new body of knowledge on local urban precarity. In touring sights and images of local urban precarity and collaborative reflecting thereon, once supposedly ‘familiar’ and ‘clear’ understandings of local urban precarity are rendered ambiguous and questionable, opening up different relationalities to the Self and the local precarious populations implied in these tours. A shared human existence is uncovered, contributing to the establishment of a sense of empathy and solidarity between tour participants, guides, and those populations that the latter represent (McLaren & Jaramillo, 2011).

Notwithstanding the profound contributions of Freire’s work, it has been critiqued for being **too idealistic**, lacking clarity on the concrete forms and directions that humanization must take: the ‘authentically human existence’ towards which the process of humanization should be oriented remains undefined. Thereby, Freire allows for unethical interpretations thereof, such as those posited by ultraleft radicalism (e.g., totalitarianism and authoritarianism) or opportunism (e.g., legitimization of arbitrary violence and deception) (Schugurensky, 1998). To offer an **empirically grounded basis for humanization**, I hereby turn to critical theorist and sociologist Axel Honneth, and his Theory of Recognition.

3.3 Axel Honneth’s Recognition Theory: a social-ethical account of existential authentication

Axel Honneth (1949) is a German philosopher and sociologist, and third-generation Critical Theorist connected to the renowned *Frankfurter Schule*. Inspired by Marxism, Critical Theorists attempt to unveil the operations of social life through the study of human experience, relying on dialectic thinking and the concept of ‘false consciousness’ – i.e., the mental oblivion to social operations of exploitation, oppression and inequality and their psychological-existential effects, originating from the ideological, material and institutional concealment thereof. In contrast to so-called ‘armchair intellectuals’ at the turn of the 20th century, thinkers of the *Frankfurter Schule* pursue a more action-oriented sociology, in which they move beyond a ‘mere’ description of social reality but actively aid in diagnosing – and, sometimes, acting upon – the sociocultural processes that contribute to the emergence of observed social pathologies (Honneth, 1995).

According to Honneth, his precursors in the *Frankfurter Schule* – e.g., Max Horkheimer (1895-1973), Theodor W. Adorno (1903-1969), Herbert Marcuse (1898-1979), and Walter Benjamin (1892-1940) – neglected to define **the ethical criteria of ‘the good life’**. Whereas Honneth’s mentor, Jürgen Habermas (1929), was able to do so through his theory of communicative rationality – stating that communication is the

basic tenant of social life, and those with the most 'rational' arguments are able to set the ethical conditions thereof – Habermas did not substantially engage with questions of power in defining what is to be deemed 'rational'. Building on German philosopher Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's Jena Writings (1805-1806), while grounding his theory in the empirical research of sociologist, philosopher and psychologist George Herbert Mead (as well as other sociopsychological, sociological and historical insights) – Honneth argues that the normative presupposition for communication is **social recognition**: the mutual expectation among hypothetical conversational partners to be deemed a moral and unique person that is worthy and deserving of love, rights and solidarity in each other's eyes (Honneth, 1995).

While drawing from Hegel's take on Hobbes' and Machiavelli's initial struggle for *self*-preservation as a **struggle for intersubjective recognition** instead, and including Mead's theory of 'me' versus 'I', Honneth states that we as humans are caught up in an endless dialectic and dialogical process of universalization and particularization, objectification and subjectification in the formation of the Self and our relation to the world. Whereas we can only know ourselves to be a unique individual as the object in another one's gaze – which compels us to conform to the norms and values of an internalized 'generalized other' (i.e., Mead's concept of 'me') –, we struggle for expressing our particularity, for going beyond and expanding existent norms and values as installed by this 'generalized other' (i.e., Mead's concept of 'I'). This is the continuous struggle for social recognition, propelling human history forward²⁸ (Honneth, 1995).

Social recognition is developed through relations of 1) **love**, 2) **rights** and 3) **solidarity**, that, in turn, allow for the emergence of a psychologically-existentially stable self-identity grounded in 1) **self-confidence**, 2) **self-respect** and 3) **self-esteem**. When one of these conditions – i.e., the intersubjective formation of self-confidence, self-respect and self-esteem – is not met, a person is left feeling **disrespected**. **1) Love** is created through the initial separation of an infant from their mother. Herein, an infant becomes to recognize themselves as a separate entity from their mother. When the mother showcases unconditional love for the child irrespective of their initial separation, this installs a sense of **self-confidence or -trust** in the child's own ability to effectively identify and act upon their personal needs and desires in the near and far future. **2) Universal rights** entail the provision and effective appeal on civil, political and social rights for each person. In exercising one's rights successfully, we humans can come to identify and **respect** ourselves as a being that is capable of autonomous, ethically-responsible decision-making. **3)** When a person's unique traits and abilities – including their personally meaningful life project – are valued as being derived from and simultaneously contributing to a shared human fate, a sense of **self-esteem** is installed. This is intersubjectively formed through acceptance within a particular sociocultural group, inciting feelings of

²⁸ e.g., the extension of civil rights to more layers of society from the 18th century onwards, and the simultaneous expansion and deepening of the concept of 'rights' when complementing 'civil' rights with 'political' and 'social' rights during the 19th and 20th century. The latter acknowledges that the provision of civil rights in itself is insufficient, when its uptake is prohibited under – e.g., precarious – conditions of indecent human living.

empathy and **solidarity** – i.e., an intense sense of ‘communitas’ (see supra Victor Turner’s ‘liminal space’) – in its wake.

Guides on poverty tours have often been denied social and other rights under precarious living conditions, and have been ignored in their suffering (e.g., walking past homeless persons). Nevertheless, they can overcome and mobilize feelings of shame and lack of self-respect and -esteem tied to earlier experiences of disrespect by engaging in the struggle for recognition in communion with tour participants. In their quest for existential authenticity, tour participants can publicly reaffirm the guide as a multifaceted and unique person that is worthy of respect, with whom they share a human essence or fate in the world. In doing so, *‘Sittlichkeit’*, or, a system of intersubjective relations based on love, respect and solidarity emerges as the basis for ethical life (Honneth, 1995). Tourists’ existential authentication in encountering ‘the other half’ of welfare state societies does not necessarily serve personal self-identification only – as implied by notions of ‘the gaze’ in authenticity-related research (supra) –, but can foster mutual humanization when recognizing both tour participants *and* guides as moral and unique persons that are worthy and deserving of love, rights and solidarity.

4. Problem statement and research questions

With the **search for more existentially authentic experiences**, poverty tourism as a way of meeting ‘the other half’ of modern urbanized societies **ceases to be a “niche” market** in the alternative tourism sector. In recent years, poverty tourism initiatives have increased in number worldwide, expanding its activities to new settings and formats (Freire-Medeiros, 2013; Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2018). At the same time, this quest for existential authenticity results in **sociopolitically-ethically ambiguous encounters** between tour participants, guides and the local communities that the latter represent, sometimes evoking voyeurism, exoticization and exploitation, then offering grounds for mutual social recognition, empathy and solidarity (Burroughs, 2014; Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2019). Given that poverty tourism is expected to be here to stay, it is all the more important to study experiences of existential authentication herein, and reflect on its potential sociopolitical-ethical implications.

Poverty tourism has recently reappeared in Europe, evoking different sights and images of urban precarity under particular **welfare regimes**, and implying alternative engagements therewith through the format of **guided walking tours led by experiential experts**. I believe that these changes in poverty tourism can influence how existential authenticity emerges, thereby potentially renegotiating a different ethical balance between voyeurism and humanization through mutual social recognition as demonstrated by the notion of ‘the gaze’ (supra). This is especially relevant when looking at the **detrimental sociopolitical effects of ‘authenticity’-seeking tourism** in general – i.e., exoticizing, commodifying or erasing local cultures, instigating intercultural conflicts, and imposing ethnocentric neocolonial and class-based norms on local populations (Butler, 2016; Salazar, 2017) –, which shape urban spaces and conjure more and more anti-tourism sentiments

in its wake. Poverty tourism as a recently-emergent, understudied phenomenon in Europe that implies highly morally ambiguous encounters under tourists' continued desire for 'authenticity', offers **sites for reimagining alternative tourism practices and relationalities** towards the becoming of more socially sustainable and ethically-responsible local tourism sectors and cities (Sheldon, 2020).

In this master's thesis, I will answer the following research questions related to existential authentication and its potential sociopolitical-ethical implications in European poverty tours (see infra table 1). Since European poverty tourism is a relatively new and understudied phenomenon in its current settings and formats, a general exploration of tour participant profiles, communicated goals, and tour experiences is at its place to allow for meaningful engagements with processes of existential (and implied constructivist) authentication occurring therein. A phenomenological study of existential authentication in poverty tourism in European welfare state capitals, conducted within the framework of five identified poverty tour initiatives in cities of Vienna (AT), The Hague (NL) and Copenhagen (DK) between March 2024 and June 2025, will answer these research questions.

Conceptual research questions	Empirical research questions
<i>Who</i> participates in poverty tourism in European welfare state cities, and <i>why</i> ?	1) What are the most frequently observed sociodemographic and sociopsychological profiles of participants in poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen? 1.1) What are the primary motivations expressed by different participant profile groups to partake in poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen?
What are the <i>intended goals</i> of poverty tourism in European welfare state cities, and how do they 'play out' <i>in practice</i> ?	2) What are the communicated ²⁹ goals of poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen? 2.1) How do communicated goals of poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen relate to broader social, educational and political functions of poverty tourism, as observed in the literature thereon ³⁰
What are <i>tour participants' experiences of poverty tourism</i> in European welfare state cities <i>in relation to 'the</i>	3) What are tour participants' affective responses to poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen, and how do they narrate these? 3.1) How do tour participants' experiences of poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen reinforce or question pre-

²⁹ i.e., both communicated in-person by guides and via spoken/written public output on, for instance, official websites and social media by poverty tours' organizations.

³⁰ See supra section 2.2: redistributing (financial) resources (i.e., 'pro-poor tourism'), combatting territorial stigmatization and stereotypes, and politicizing sights and images of local urban precarity for local social change.

<i>tourist gaze</i> on local urban precarity? (focus on constructivist authentication) ³¹	existent notions of 'authentic' sights and images of local urban precarity under socially dominant city imaginaries?
Which <i>experiential elements</i> contribute to the <i>intra- and interpersonal emergence of 'authentic' encounters</i> with local urban precarity within poverty tourism in European welfare state cities, and <i>how</i> are these encounters <i>negotiated for purposes of existential authentication?</i> (focus on existential authentication)	4) On which intra- and interpersonal grounds do tour participants experience encounters with local urban precarity³² to be 'authentic' or 'staged' in poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen? 4.1) Which strategies do tour participants employ to psychologically-existentially cope with the disruptive force of feelings of ethical discomfort and internal turbulence that may arise from 'authentic' encounters with local urban precarity in poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen?
What do 'authentic' encounters with local urban precarity in poverty tourism in European welfare state cities <i>produce</i> ³³ , especially with regard to <i>mutual existential authentication for local social change?</i>	5) What are the consequences of 'authentic' encounters with local urban precarity in poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen for tour participants, guides and the local precarious communities that the latter represent? 5.1) How do 'authentic' encounters with local urban precarity in poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen serve existentially authentic self-identification, reinforcing or questioning pre-existent views and beliefs about the Self? 5.2) How do tour participants relate their 'authentic' encounters with local urban precarity in poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen to broader sociopolitical-ethical questions about inequality, urban precarity, and their own role in oppressive social orders?

³¹ Whereas this conceptual question mostly focuses on constructivist authentication – more precisely, the meanings that are attributed to local urban precarity and the cities being toured –, this will run along in experiences of 'authenticity' that serve existential authentication, and vice versa (see fourth conceptual question).

³² Local urban precarity is encountered in the sights and images being toured, as well as in the figure of the guide as a representative of local precarious populations.

³³ In processes of authentication, precursors (fourth research question; supra) and outcomes (fifth research question) are mutually constitutive. The distinction made between both is thus partly artificial for reasons of clarity. Some findings will be repeated with regard to both precursors and outcomes in a slightly different framing (infra).

	5.3) How do emotional responses evoked by ‘authentic’ encounters with local urban precarity in poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen (e.g., pity and compassion, admiration, sense of intimacy and togetherness) promote or impair potential transformative learning processes for personal development and local social change?
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Table 1. Conceptual and empirical research questions

Below, the phenomenological methodology and its mixed methods operationalization will be explained – including an outline of research quality indicators of Lincoln and Guba (2007), and entangled ethics (Stouten et al., 2025) –, before delving into findings for each conceptual research question separately. A final discussion and conclusion will frame these findings into theories and concepts of (existential) authentication – i.e. ‘liminal space’, ‘communitas’, ‘the gaze’, ‘humanization’ and ‘social recognition’ –, as established supra. With this research, I aim to contribute to a wider debate in tourism research on the direction of the concept of ‘existential authentication’ for more socially sustainable and ethically-responsible tourism developments and encounters with ‘difference’ in general – potentially reimagining urban and public space in its wake (Rickly, 2022).

5. Methodology and methods

5.1 Existential and hermeneutic phenomenology

A phenomenological research approach will enable insights into the phenomenon of existential authentication, as experienced in poverty tourism in European welfare state cities. Both an existential, and hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology will be adhere to, in order to explore the lived experience of existential authenticity (existential phenomenology) and the meanings that are given thereto (hermeneutic phenomenology). This requires an in-depth engagement with tour participants’ subjective reality during and after poverty tours, as well as knowledge of the wider cultural-historical frameworks in which they are embedded to make sense thereof.

Phenomenology is the study of phenomena (i.e., objects or processes) through the dissection of human experience. The term has been introduced by Hegel in his work on ‘*Die Phänomenologie des Geistes*’ (1807), but has been further developed by German-Austrian philosopher Edmund Husserl (1859-1938). In line with Cartesian thinking, phenomena occur in an outside world that only presents itself to human beings in their experiences thereof; thus, phenomena can only be knowable in and through human experience. Since human minds have ‘intentionality’ or ‘directiveness’ towards the world – i.e., the human mind possesses mental categories that reflect and allow for perceiving, interpreting and evaluating reality – valid knowledge on reality can be obtained; given that a process of ‘bracketing’ (i.e., becoming aware of and distancing oneself

from internalized sociocultural-moral assumptions) has occurred in advance. In doing so, a universal human essence or consciousness can be distinguished across various human experiences (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006).

Whereas Husserlian phenomenology is oriented towards the epistemological question of knowing (i.e., what is *knowledge*?), his student Martin Heidegger (1889-1976) took an ontological turn (i.e., what is the *world*?). In contrast to Husserl, Heidegger argued that the world is not predetermined and unambiguously knowable but continuously renegotiated in a relational and lived experience of 'being-in/of-the-world'. In other words, there is no 'outside' world, reflected in a presumed 'human essence' or 'consciousness', to be discovered. Sociocultural backgrounds cannot be controlled for or 'bracketed', but inevitably run along in our perceptions and interpretations of experience, and thus in our social creation of knowledge. Heidegger reinterpreted the understanding and operations of phenomenology; it is his theory and approach that will be adhered to in this master's thesis, more particularly drawing from his work '*Sein und Zeit*' (1923-1928) (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006).

For Heidegger, humans are '*Dasein*' ('Be-there'): we are always taking part *in* the world as beings *of* the world. This implies 'moods' or dispositions that are derived from the horizons of meaning in which we are embedded and socialized, allowing us to perceive, interpret and evaluate future experiences towards an understanding of "the" world. Instead of pursuing a 'human essence', multiple *experiences*, thus multiple mental and social *worlds*, can simultaneously co-exist. Herein, echoes from **hermeneutic phenomenology** can be heard, later developed by Heidegger's student, Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900-2002), in his work '*Wahrheit und Methode*' (1960). Hermeneutic or interpretive phenomenology draws heavily from hermeneutics, i.e., the initial interpretative study of bible texts (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006). In trying to understand the phenomenon of existential authentication in poverty tourism, a researcher interprets tour participants' narrations thereof against the backdrop of wider cultural-historical 'texts' or discourses on authenticity that enable an individual to *make sense* of their own experience as 'authentic' or 'inauthentic' (Hesters, 2022). In doing so, it is acknowledged that the concept of authenticity is malleable, and its different societal conceptualizations disclose or obstruct certain experiences thereof from actualizing, giving rise to distinct social processes and outcomes; summarized by the notion of 'the tourist gaze' (supra).

At the same time, Heidegger's *Dasein* is future-oriented, always reflecting and acting upon a future life trajectory or plan in the present. With the arrival of modern societies, all-encompassing mystical, magical and spiritual sociocultural-moral frameworks of 'the good life' or 'the ethical life' lost their meaning, rendering human beings *free* to shape their own meaningful life project (e.g., Friedrich Nietzsche's expression "*Gott ist tot*" in '*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*', 1882) (supra). However, this also implies an *obligation* to craft a meaningful life project ourselves within a world that is inherently devoid of any meaning and always in a state of being-toward-death. This realization evokes life-threatening angst or anxiety (expressed through hysteria, suicide, etc.). Some tend to avoid this by fleeing into the anonymous mass of 'Das Man' or 'They'; shaping their life trajectories in accordance with socially dominant norms and values. However, in doing so, a self-alienation has occurred that makes a truly authentic life impossible (Dreyfus & Wrathall, 2006). An exploration

of authentic human experience or Dasein thus also deals with existentialist themes of freedom, alienation, suffering, anxiety and death, calling for an **existential phenomenology** that engages with tour participants' lived and subjective experiences of 'authenticity' in poverty tourism, and how this impacts the formation of a sense of Self and questions of being-in/of-the-world for all actors involved.

5.2 Research setting and sampling

Primary fieldwork took place between April 2024 and October 2024, when five guided walking tour initiatives in Vienna (AT), The Hague (NL) and Copenhagen (DK) were visited and engaged with, either as a participant, participatory observer or interviewer. **Settings of Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen** were chosen, since these 'capital' cities – including The Hague as the unofficial political 'capital' of the Netherlands – are all embedded within **distinct national³⁴ and urban welfare regimes** that reduce instances of local urban precarity and render its expressions more implicit. Whereas in Vienna, poverty-reductive and -preventive services are mostly focused on increasing individual's employability and integration into the local labour market (Heitzmann & Matzinger, 2020), the current political right-wing environment in the Netherlands is expected to support further tendencies towards welfare chauvinism and populism as the limitation of welfare benefits and services to autochthonous citizens and 'common people' (de Koster, Achterberg, & van der Waal, 2021). Copenhagen's welfare regime is rather universal and extensive; as such, local urban precarity is less tied to socio-economic status than an indication of complex support needs (e.g., comorbidity of mental illnesses; addictions) (Benjaminsen, 2016).

Since the turn of this century, particular **imaginaries of 'liveable cities'** were formed in urban welfare regimes, playing a decisive role in tourist expectations of 'authentic' sights and images of local urban precarity. Vienna, Copenhagen and The Hague are – either internationally and/or nationally – renowned for being 'liveable cities'. Examples thereof are Vienna reportedly having 50% of its surface being green space, The Hague's international labour market, and Copenhagen's extensive bicycle infrastructure and waste-reduction programmes. The notion of 'liveability' is rather slippery, varying across different places and times³⁵ (Sharifi, 2016). Under the influence of Economic Intelligence Unit's (EIU, 2025) yearly Global Liveability Ranking³⁶ and associated city marketing, a depoliticized discourse of '(urban) liveability' as 'quality of (urban) life' has been created, circulated and installed; disconnecting the cultural-historical concept of 'liveability' from its prior

- ³⁴ Vienna: conservative welfare regime;

- The Hague: conservative-liberal welfare regime;

- Copenhagen: social democratic welfare regime (Cantillon, Seeleib-Kaiser, & van der Veen, 2021; Esping-Andersen, 1989).

³⁵ e.g., in Vienna, 'liveability' carries various culturally-historically meanings, related to garden movements of the early 20th century, informal settlements after both World Wars, the 'Red Vienna'-era during the interbellum, Friedrich Hundertwasser's environmentalist conception of 'liveability', EIU's framing of 'liveability', and so on. These frameworks of significance differ from 'liveability', as culturally-historically understood in The Hague and Copenhagen.

³⁶ Cities are ranked according to themes of stability, healthcare, culture and environment, education, and infrastructure (EIU, 2025). This echoes traditional pillars of welfare states, as firstly identified by social economist William Beveridge in his report in 1952, such as social security and pensions, healthcare, education, and housing.

guarantee of a decent standard of human living *for all* under existent welfare regimes. By portraying *every* urban inhabitant as having a high quality of life under universal urban infrastructures and services (e.g., quality schooling, efficient public transport), these imaginaries uncritically suggest that instances of local urban precarity are limited, and that those few cases do not represent ‘severe’ poverty – which socially delegitimizes and misrecognizes certain lived realities of local urban precarity (Weiss, 2019).

This becomes an especially pressing issue under **recent restructurings of welfare regimes**. In the immediate aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic and continued wars and conflict worldwide, current austerity politics – combined with tendencies towards welfare chauvinism and populism – have reoriented welfare societies into workfare societies: state-provided care is no longer unconditionally universal, but has become dependent on someone’s ability to perform paid labour, as well as their nationality and citizenship status. These welfare state restructurings are mostly being absorbed and accommodated on the local level, which is expected to contribute to an increase in explicit sights and images of local urban precarity (Gillepsie, Hardy & Watt, 2021; Katz, 1993). The discrepancy between expected sights and images of local urban precarity under contemporary depoliticizing ‘liveable’ city imaginaries and the actual expressions of local urban precarity under recent welfare state restructurings could offer interesting avenues for existential authentication in poverty tourism as the encounter with local urban precarity.

Since poverty tourism in European welfare state cities is a relatively recent phenomenon, **a purposive sampling of all legally identified poverty tourism initiatives** in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen was conducted by running online searches with key terms related to homelessness, housing insecurity and inadequacy, addiction, squalor and street violence, and forced displacement (e.g., refuge), in combination with ‘tourism’ or ‘tours’, in German, Dutch, Danish and English. This resulted in five identified poverty tourism initiatives: *Wiener Nimmerland* and SHADES TOURS in Vienna, *Ronja’s straatwandeling* in The Hague, and Ghetto Tours and *Gadens Stemmer* in Copenhagen. All tours deal with issues of homelessness (i.e., *Wiener Nimmerland*, SHADES TOURS, *Ronja’s straatwandeling* and *Gadens Stemmer*) – whether or not intersected by challenges of addiction (i.e., *Wiener Nimmerland*, SHADES TOURS and *Gadens Stemmer*) –, or the more general challenge of housing insecurity under state-led ‘ghettoization’ (i.e., Ghetto Tours). More information on the tours themselves and their trajectories, as well as their framing within local urban tourism imaginaries can be found in the annex (infra).

5.3 Methods of data collection and analysis

In understanding existential authentication in poverty tourism, and reflecting on its potential sociopolitical-ethical implications, I draw from my own experiences of poverty tourism, as well as observations made therein, and interviews conducted with guides and other tour participants. Guides are particularly relevant for having a long-term view on tour participants’ reactions, and giving insight into potential sociopolitical-

ethical implications of tourists' quest for existential authenticity. I employ a mixed methods approach of: 1) a **social constructivist discourse analysis** of **online content** (i.e., tour reviews), **interviews and focus group discussions** with guides and tour participants, 2) **participatory observations** and **autoethnographies** conducted during touring, and 3) a **reflexive analysis** of my personal **research diary**.

1) According to linguistic philosophy, experiences of existential authenticity are situated in and collaboratively renegotiated through everyday speech acts and discourses, which themselves are reflections of broader social structures and ideologies embedded in power dynamics. This implies investigating how the concept of 'authenticity' is rendered meaningful in societal discourses, as well as how these discourses affect people's lived realities thereof. A **social constructivist discourse analysis** of interviews, focus group discussions and online content serves the latter. By discovering 'interpretive repertoires'³⁷ related to the concept of 'authenticity' in research participants' accounts, I was able to trace connections between the individual 'texts' and wider societal discourses. Herein, I looked at how 'authenticity' is socially constructed, in which contexts, and with which particular material-discursive outcomes.

Through verbally communicated invites for research participation during touring, as well as open calls and personal messages sent via email and WhatsApp afterwards, I was able to obtain eighteen **interviewees** who had experiences with one or two of the identified poverty tourism initiatives. Over the course of June 2024 until April 2025, I interviewed thirteen tour participants of *Wiener Nimmerland*³⁸ – of which six³⁹ in a focus group discussion context –, the guide⁴⁰ of *Ronja's straatwandeling*, two tour participants⁴¹ of *Ronja's straatwandeling*, three guides of Ghetto Tours – including an official interview one-on-one⁴² after partaking in their tour –, four tour participants⁴³ of Ghetto Tours, and one guide⁴⁴ of *Gadens Stemmer*. Moreover, I conducted informal talks with tour participants during my participatory tour observations at *Wiener Nimmerland*. Interviews and focus group discussions were either occurring online via MS Teams or at a place of the participant's choosing, with the exception of one interview (i.e., Lilian's) via mobile telephone. Audio recordings were transcribed⁴⁵ via OTranscribe and analysed via NVivo.

³⁷ Interpretive repertoires are routinized patterns of argumentation, description, explanation and evaluation, found through the study of particular word combinations, frequency, positioning and use, that construct meaningful views of the world and the Self for purposes of self-identification and social interaction (Hesters, 2022).

³⁸ i.e., Lilian, Güntner, Adriana, José Bucio, Madeline, Rozalia Sos, Shellyn Fortuna, Soledad, Nikita, Patricia, Koen, Bert and Emilienne (see infra interviews in annex).

³⁹ Adriana, José Bucio, Madeline, Rozalia Sos, Shellyn Fortuna and Soledad (see infra focus group discussion in annex).

⁴⁰ Ronja Bruijns-Shoblak (see infra interview in annex).

⁴¹ Patricia and Koen (see infra interview in annex).

⁴² Guide F (see infra interview in annex).

⁴³ José Bucio, Madeline, Shellyn Fortuna and Soledad (see infra focus group discussion in annex).

⁴⁴ Julie (see infra interview in annex).

⁴⁵ Transcripts of all interviews and one focus group discussion, and notes from informal talks during participatory tour observations can be found in the annex (infra). Not all interviews and talks have been audio recorded to prioritise building rapport and gaining trust, especially when establishing first contact. All audio recorded material is acquired with proof of informed consent (see annex).

In addition, **online reviews** of all identified poverty tourism initiatives have been consulted in May 2025, accessed on the initiatives' websites and social media (i.e., Bruijns-Shoblak, n.d.; (Facebook) Gadens Stemmer, n.d.; Ghetto tours, n.d.; SHADES TOURS, n.d.; Wiener Nimmerland, n.d.), and commonly-used online review platforms of Google Reviews (Google Maps, n.d.), Tripadvisor (n.d.) and Trustpilot (n.d.). After preliminary anonymized analysis, reviews showcased similar findings to those derived from interviews and informal talks.

2) Participatory tour observations allowed me to observe how tour participants' facial expressions, bodily movements and exclamations interacted with the guide's, the narrative on urban precarity being told and their spontaneous place-based surroundings, giving me tentative insights into how knowledge on local precarity was being received, contested and co-created through the collective act of its touring. Moreover, the setting enabled informal talks with tour participants, inviting them for an official follow-up interview afterwards. Participatory observations have only been conducted in *Wiener Nimmerland*-tours. After all, I have only been able to establish sufficient rapport with the guide and operator of this initiative (i.e., Martin and Nadine) to guarantee informed consent of those who are being observed (see infra research limitations). In addition, my own **autoethnographies** while touring – written down extensively in the case of SHADES TOURS and *Gadens Stemmer* (see annex) – provide accounts of my lived experiences of poverty tourism.⁴⁶

3) I kept a **research diary** of my personal engagements with local urban precarity – as encountered on poverty tours, as well as in the figure of a beggar, publicly intoxicated or homeless person in my everyday life. After all, both 'feed' into each other, restructuring my mental frameworks for understanding local urban precarity, as well as my affective and agentic reactions in relation thereto. The research diary spans from June 2022 until May 2025 and does not necessarily narrate experiences in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen only. Over this course, the diary has continuously been subjected to **reflexive analysis** (see annex). Whereas reflection refers to the action of looking back on and evaluating past poverty tours in terms of their impact, reflexivity takes this a step further by reflecting on the own positionality and associated assumptions and biases that shape our engagements with(in) poverty tourism. In distinguishing between the immediate observation of an encounter versus the feelings and thoughts that this encounter evoked in me at the moment of happening or later on, I was able to recognize and dissect my embeddedness in sociocultural-moral and institutional 'places' – whether this was my body, the spaces that I (temporarily) inhabited, or the social environments wherein I was primarily, secondarily and tertiarily socialized – and the norms and values that these imply in shaping my assumptions, thoughts and reactions (Alvesson, Hardy, & Harley, 2008). The reflexive analysis of my research diary provided additional insight into my lived experiences of existential

⁴⁶ Notes of participatory tour observations and autoethnographies can be found in the annex (infra).

authenticity when encountered in the gaze of ‘the other half’ of European welfare state cities, and how this changed after partaking in poverty tourism.

5.4. Research quality indicators of Lincoln and Guba (2007)

To enable research quality, I adhered to Lincoln and Guba’s quality indicators for qualitative research, allowing me to flexibly adapt decisions and directions taken during research design and conduct (2007). Indicators include: 1) **credibility**, 2) **transferability**, 3) **dependability**, 4) **confirmability**, and 5) **research authenticity** (Lincoln & Guba, 2007). An **entangled ethics** (Stouten et al., 2025) allows for meaningful engagements with these indicators, in particular concerning the confirmability and authenticity of research findings. Entangled ethics is an ethical approach inspired by Karen Barad’s feminist new materialism that acknowledges the collaborative renegotiation of ethical risks and opportunities during research design and conduct. It is grounded in principles of a) relationality, b) response-ability and c) situatedness. Whereas relationality acknowledges that research findings are not created by a single researcher, but emerge from continuous engagements with other agents – including more-than-human actors⁴⁷ –, response-ability supposes a sensitivity for noticing and responding effectively to the ethical risks and opportunities that emerge during fieldwork⁴⁸. Situatedness confirms that my research participants and I are embedded in particular ‘places’ that structure our experiences, understandings and enactments of “the” world, including ideas of ‘authenticity’, ‘local urban precarity’, ‘Vienna’, ‘The Hague’, ‘Copenhagen’⁴⁹ (Stouten et al. 2025).

1) Credibility refers to the trustworthiness or internal validity of research findings as emerging from the identified mechanisms and no others (Lincoln & Guba, 2007). I aspire to hold various possible factors in existential authentication and its potential sociopolitical-ethical implications into account by a) entertaining prolonged engagements with guides (either in-person or online), b) having multiple peer debriefings with fellow classmates and teachers during in-person thesis seminars in July 2024, November 2024 and April 2025, c) conducting a negative case analysis with two participants who did not engage with poverty tourism on their own accord⁵⁰, d) triangulating different kinds of data (e.g., autoethnographies, participatory observations, interviews), and e) conducting a member-checking of preliminary research findings in June 2025 with those guides and tour participants who wish to engage herein⁵¹.

⁴⁷ e.g., the sound of breaking glass or a pigeon flying by (see infra analysis and results).

⁴⁸ e.g., I sensed that my university-trained manner of speaking and writing distanced myself socially-emotively from guides, thereby prohibiting attempts at building rapport and trust (see infra research limitations). This realization encouraged alternative ways of communicating, enacting research relations differently.

⁴⁹ e.g., I did not hold ‘race’ – especially Islam as a racialized feature – into account as a white majority person and foreigner when reflecting on my own experiences with local urban precarity in Denmark, while this was very important for Ghetto Tours’ guides, being part of an ethnic-racial Muslim minority in Denmark.

⁵⁰ i.e., family members Bert and Emilienne were invited by me to partake in a *Wiener Nimmerland*-tour without providing any knowledge on the tour in advance. They expressed criticality vis-à-vis the idea of poverty tourism, and the images and sights of local urban precarity being toured (see infra analysis and results).

⁵¹ Member-checking is scheduled after submission of this master’s thesis manuscript but before its defence at the beginning of July 2025 due to time constraints. I hope to incorporate potential insights gained from member-checking into the defence. Moreover, member-checking allows for simultaneous dissemination of research findings.

2) Transferability explores the extent to which research findings are applicable to wider research contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 2007) – in this case, related to European welfare state cities other than Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen. A thick description of the research process (see annex) provides insight into the local urban contexts and their particular elements in shaping research findings, and enables research replication in other settings; which brings me to the quality indicator of dependability.

3) Dependability showcases the consistency or reliability of research findings across different contexts (Lincoln & Guba, 2007). This requires a consistent use of frameworks and methodologies. The continuous supervision of this research process by prof. dr. Henrik – either by email or via in-person conversations – kept me ‘on track’ and redirected the research process when needed.

4) Confirmability pursues a certain degree of objectivity or neutrality of research findings, being aware of and responding to potential research biases (e.g., researcher bias and social desirability in interviews) (Lincoln & Guba, 2007). This has been pursued through a continuous self-reflexivity, which is grounded in an entangled ethics (Stouten et al., 2025).

5) Entangled ethics – in combination with member checking – is useful for pursuing **research authenticity**, which refers to the extent to which research findings are representative of research participants’ life worlds (Lincoln & Guba, 2007). Since one person’s experience and consciousness can never fully be grasped by another – existing as their own being, looking in on another from an outside perspective –; research authenticity remains difficult to achieve (Dreyfuss & Wrathall, 2006). As the concept of ‘the gaze’ showcased (supra), challenges in establishing research authenticity are reflective of wider ambiguities in existential authentication. Continuous dialogue with those who are involved in the co-creation of existential authentication in poverty tourism enables me to aspire research authenticity as closely as possible. Below, research findings are presented in accordance with priorly identified conceptual research questions.

6. Analysis and results

6.1 Who participates in poverty tourism in European welfare state cities, and why?

The five identified poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen showcase a great diversity in both sociodemographic and sociopsychological participant profiles, and personal motivations for participation. Five participant profiles are distinguished that, at times, partly overlap: 1) **youth**, 2) **policymakers**, 3) **local residents**, 4) those who are identified as ‘**socially engaged and educated**’ – including professionals and practitioners in the social, educational or health sector –, and, lastly, 5) those who are perceived as the latter’s opposite; being deemed **unreceptive** to the stories and perspectives shared in poverty tourism.

1) Youth, mostly aged between 11 and 16 years old, partake in poverty tours as part of an educational excursion⁵². Children are either pupils at a local school, or they visit the city within the framework of an ‘external’ school trip or multi-day voyage. Accompanied by their teachers, tours serve, on the one hand, prevention (e.g., educating children on the dangers of drugs and alcohol usage), on the other hand, raising awareness and building empathy towards societal ‘difference’ (e.g., homeless persons, ethnic-cultural Muslim minorities). Although their participation is often framed within mandatory school activities, often, a curiosity for the sights and images of local urban precarity, and the person of the guide is observed. This is especially the case when an (elder) family member is already professionally or voluntarily engaged with precarious people (see informal talks during participatory tour observations of *Wiener Nimmerland*⁵³).

However, children’s curiosity can be disproportionately oriented towards the ‘morbid’ aspects of local urban precarity, at times asking original but inappropriate questions to the guides, which requires the latter to redirect the conversation and adapt their overall story to avoid self-sensationalization and -spectacularization, as exemplified in the infra excerpt. In the case of school groups, guides focus on prevention and general information on, e.g., homelessness and drugs usage, rather than narrating personal experiences of trauma and severe urban precarity.

When walking from one station to the next with a group of local schoolchildren, I asked Martin – the guide of Wiener Nimmerland – if he ever adapts his story to different audiences. He responded to me that he “[...] would never tell kids that you won’t get off the streets without getting raped”, rather leaving all “juicy details” out. He concluded that adults, in contrast, need to be confronted with those details. The realization of what he had actually said rendered me momentarily speechless, enabling a silence to set in. At that moment, a child – who had apparently been eavesdropping on us – chipped in, asking Martin what “juicy” means. Martin immediately ‘switched gears’, turning around with a big smile and praising the child for his good English command, before continuing his tour at the next station.

Source: modified excerpt from participatory Wiener Nimmerland-tour observations on 07/06/2024.

2) Policymakers, such as politicians, governmental ministries and local governments, as well as indirect policymakers (e.g., judges), have been observed and reported as participants in poverty tours⁵⁴. The tours,

⁵² Besides from tours, guides also offer presentation and discussion moments on location, e.g., in classrooms. However, this implies a different experiential engagement with urban precarity than those offered by guided walking tours. Since presentation and discussion moments cannot be equated to poverty tours, the former is *not* considered in this analysis. A comparison of both ways of learning could serve future research (infra).

⁵³ e.g., a girl narrated how her elder sister – who studied Cultural Studies – imparted a great tolerance and concern for precarious people to her. I sensed that the girl in question had great respect and admiration for her sister, which partly reflected on her personal aspirations. Another girl explained how she had already extensively engaged with homeless persons, since her father manages a social restaurants where homeless persons and students meet (see annex).

⁵⁴ See participatory observations of a *Wiener Nimmerland*-tour with judges, interview with guide Ronja of *Ronja’s straatwandeling*, interview with guide F of Ghetto Tours (infra in annex).

set within the political ‘capitals’ of their respective countries, attract both local policymakers and those active in national institutions and other localities. Although policymakers are professionally involved in reducing or preventing local urban precarity as designers and implementers of laws and procedures, they are often never confronted with how these ‘play out’ in various operationalizations. In embarking on poverty tours as part of an educational team outing, public outreach or public service event, policymakers gain insight on how their laws actually function in various contexts, and how they are experienced by local precarious populations themselves; allowing for a reassessment of existing legal frameworks and measures. At the same time, policymakers built rapport with those affected and representative of local urban precarity, showcasing that they are engaged with the latter’s fate.

In order to learn more about local urban precarity, a certain pre-existing ‘open mentality’ is required. Both tour guides and some participants express the need for a certain willingness to listen and be receptive of the stories being told. However, when tour participants’ have different understandings of local urban precarity – including notions of its precursors and consequences – than those presented by the guide, verbal clashes tend to ensue, at times resulting in disrespectful questions and behaviour towards the guide. Especially policymakers – and other individuals – who adhere to a culturally conservative, populist ideology, often do not share the guide’s perspective on local urban precarity, as exemplified by an unpleasant experience of guide F of Ghetto Tours when welcoming a group of politicians.

“Our goal, at every tour we have, is to change people’s very strong opinions on us brown people in general. We have had some politicians come on our tour. The main reason is to instigate us. They didn’t want to have a fight, but a verbal fight with us. They were annoying us and saying some mean things. But we took it professionally and showed them that we can do it our way also. But this politician had his meaning: ‘Oh, so every hijabi (red., hijab-wearing person) can’t go to school or is oppressed by her family because she is a woman and she can’t show anything?’ Then some of the girls (red., hijab-wearing guides) answered “Well, do you need to see my hair? Do you need to see anything?”

Source: quote by guide F of Ghetto Tours from interview conducted on 12/11/2024

3) Local residents are a unique participant profile in comparison to “traditional’ poverty tourism in favelas, barrios and townships of the Global South, where they are mostly absent. In going on poverty tours, local residents rediscover their own ‘home’, looking at – once – familiar places through a new pair of glasses. They become acquainted with the precursors and instigators of well-known sights and images of local urban precarity (e.g., begging, squalor, public intoxication), and they start to meaningfully identify cultural practices of local precarious populations in urban spaces that were previously ‘hidden in plain sight’.

Often, local residents' curiosity is sparked by earlier physical encounters with poverty tours, running into the tour group when going about their daily life⁵⁵. In contrast to most participant profiles, who are in some way attracted by the topic of local urban precarity, local residents are initially encouraged by the sights and images of something 'unusual' or 'unfamiliar' happening in their everyday places. Although local residents are familiar with sights and images of guided walking tours – especially in highly touristified places of the inner city – the appearance of the guides (e.g., bright red or green hair; *Wiener Nimmerland*) and the places being toured (e.g., the inside of a metro station; *Wiener Nimmerland*) do not necessarily respond to such expectations. As a consequence, poverty tours are not often identified as 'touristic' activities by local residents.

4) Some participants already share a similar worldview as those presented by guides: these are deemed to be '**socially engaged and educated**', either implicitly by themselves, or by guides and other tour participants. In other words, they have an 'open mentality' (supra) to the perspectives offered on poverty tours due to a prior recognition of local urban precarity as a complex social problem. This participant profile either refers to individuals, or professionals and practitioners involved with precarious populations in the social, educational or health care sector (e.g., academics, social and youth workers, psychologists, nurses and doctors)⁵⁶.

However, this shared 'open mentality' presupposes a socialization into a cultural middle-class culture and education on critical paradigms on local urban precarity, thus challenging the 'open' character thereof (Michael, 2013). In practice, a class-based culture of 'tolerance' or 'progressiveness' that itself is not up for debate can be highly exclusionary and dismissive to, for instance, tour participants that openly question the legitimacy of guides' personal accounts (infra).

5) The latter is often perceived as "**those with fixed opinions and views**" (see interview with guide F of Ghetto Tours on 12/11/2024) by tour guides and other participants. This participant profile is regarded as entering poverty tours with 'the wrong' understandings of local urban precarity, and the unwillingness to reconsider these. They fit and adapt new images and sights of local urban precarity, as presented on poverty tours, into their own pre-existing frameworks for perceiving, interpreting and evaluating, thereby rendering their opinions and views thereon rather 'fixed'. Their sole purpose for tour participation is – supposedly – to reaffirm their own views and beliefs on local urban precarity, and, therethrough, reestablish a sense of moral

⁵⁵ e.g., during participatory observations of a *Wiener Nimmerland*-tour at Karlsplatz metro station – while wearing *Wiener Nimmerland*-merchandise – a passerby came up to me, asking me what the tour was about. Similar to other local residents who I had already spoken to during prior participatory tour observations, the man in question explained to me how he had already seen the tour group numerous times while going to and from his work, wondering what it entailed. At the end of our conversation, he took a picture of the *Wiener Nimmerland*-logo and website link on my T-shirt, and went on his way.

⁵⁶ e.g., tour participants Lilian and her niece, a retired Viennese doctor and respectively a student engaged in psychology and social work (*Wiener Nimmerland*). Tour participants José Bucio and Madeline (and myself), who are urban studies-students researching themes of homelessness and housing insecurity (*Wiener Nimmerland*). The couple of psychiatric health care workers who were also present at *Ronja's straatwandeling* when I participated therein.

and symbolic superiority vis-à-vis the guides and the local precarious populations that these represent (see interview with guide F of Ghetto Tours on 12/11/2024).

However, this reflects *guides' and other tour participants'* views and beliefs on less amenable tour participants; it does not necessarily refer to their own self-understanding and motivations for participation. There can be numerous motivations for tour participation beyond 'egoistic' self-affirmation, and the extent to which tour participants' think differently after their engagements in poverty tourism cannot be gauged by guides and other tour participants. Visible contestation can co-exist with the (emergent) presence of shared views and beliefs on local urban precarity, but these mental inner processes are often obscured to the outside world. For example, I had invited two family members (i.e., Bert and Emilienne) to participate in a *Wiener Nimmerland*-tour without them having any prior knowledge on, or interest in poverty tourism. Motivated by the opportunity to engage in a family activity, they participated nevertheless. Their body language (e.g., standing at a far end away from the tour group, beyond hearing distance) and speech (e.g., "I can already see from a distance what he – the guide – is like.") expressed adversity vis-à-vis the idea of poverty tourism and the person of the guide. However, informal talks and an interview afterwards (see annex) unveiled that their initial adversity had somewhat wavered since then, and offered explanations for their initial adversity (e.g., language barrier, as well as coming from a misrecognized positionality of growing up in precarious conditions themselves).

In sum, five participant profiles for poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen have been distinguished, which, at times, partly overlap. In comparison to "traditional" poverty tourism contexts, a more varied audience of – among others – locals and schoolchildren, are attracted. This can be linked to the explicit focus on preventive education, as well as its setting in unexpected places of affluence; showcasing urban phenomena that, in theory⁵⁷, can happen to everyone. Tour participants are **motivated by various reasons**, wanting to learn more about 'an unknown reality' (e.g., youth) or a theme they have always been quite invested in (e.g., 'socially engaged and educated'), chasing sensation and spectacle (e.g., youth) or being excited by something 'new' or 'unfamiliar' happening in everyday places (e.g., local residents), being attracted by the social setting of a group activity (e.g., "those with 'fixed' opinions and views", classmates in urban studies) or the access that is offered to a group which is usually out-of-reach (e.g., policymakers). Thus, authenticity-seeking tourism is **not primarily oriented towards 'egoistic' self-affirmation** – as stated by some authors on poverty tourism and related sorts (e.g., backpacker travel in Michael, 2013). Although poverty tours also serve purposes of self-identification, it does not necessarily result in *affirmative* self-identification – as infra findings will show –, nor is self-identification the sole motivation for participation (e.g., prior interest in local urban precarity, curiosity, social group context; supra).

⁵⁷ Notwithstanding socially unequally distributed chances to become precarious and, likewise, get out of precarious situations.

6.2 What are the intended goals of poverty tourism in European welfare state cities, and how do they ‘play out’ in practice?

Poverty tours in European welfare state cities aim to educate, both in a preventive and sociopolitical manner. **Prevention** is mostly focused on schoolchildren and other youth in non-institutional framings, employing guides’ own personal stories and experiences to discourage youth from “ending up in the same situations as I did” (see interview with guide Julie of *Gadens Stemmer* on 24/03/2025) – especially when tied to drugs and alcohol usage. This type of learning is unique to poverty tourism in European welfare state cities. In contrast to “traditional” poverty tourism in slums of the Global South, tourists – who are often affluent visitors from the Global North – do not expect to end up in similar situations of clustered and highly visible/ized instances of severe urban precarity. However, in welfare state contexts, tour participants can recognize urban precarity as a phenomenon that, in theory, can happen to everyone, including themselves; slipping through the cracks of social safety nets.

Sociopolitical learning as a type of critical pedagogy aims to reimagine local urban precarity as a sociopolitical process of (re)production in cities, highlighting local urban precarity as a systemic and complex social problem of more than individual responsibility only. Four goals of sociopolitical learning have been identified, namely 1) **combatting stereotypes**, 2) **raising awareness**, 3) **instigating action** and 4) **“taking back space”**.

1) In showcasing unexpected sights and images of local urban precarity through more nuanced and lived personal accounts thereof, guides **counter stereotypes** of local urban precarity – challenging individualizing and victim-blaming discourses in its wake. In doing so, guides attempt to undo stigmas that are tied to visible expressions and personal experiences of local urban precarity, recognizing themselves as equal to non-precarious persons.

2) When countering stereotypes of local urban precarity, the broader urban imaginaries wherein these are encapsulated (e.g., ‘liveable’ city) become renegotiable, **raising awareness** on the potential expressions of urban precarity in local urban and public spaces, and how urban precarity is experienced and rendered possible therein. The role of participants’ own actions in maintaining or reimagining local expressions of urban precarity is acknowledged as well.

3) When inciting reflexivity on the own agentic power⁵⁸ and installing a sense of hope for change, this **instigates actions** for local social change. Relations between affluent and precarious individuals become differently enacted, potentially contributing to alternative sedimentations thereof when inhabiting the same local urban and public spaces⁵⁹.

⁵⁸ e.g., by reflecting collaboratively on professionals’ and practitioners’ own practices and tools for reducing and preventing instances of precarity (*Ronja’s straatwandeling*).

⁵⁹ e.g., Nikita – a tour participant of *Wiener Nimmerland* – narrated how, after partaking in the tour, she tried to think and behave differently when encountering a group of drunk men in Praterstern, Vienna. Instead of showcasing fear and distrust – assuming the worst of intentions – she was able to co-exist with the men, perceiving them as ‘merely having fun’ instead (see interview in annex).

4) As a consequence, precarious individuals are able to “**take back space**” (see interview with guide Ronja of *Ronja’s straatwandeling* on 30/08/2024) in the city, challenging current models for urban (co-)living – more precisely, their underlying norms and values of what ‘a good (urban) life’ should be. Moreover, they reclaim their voice in the public debate on local urban precarity, sharing their perspectives on how it should be understood and dealt with in dialogue with non-experiential experts (e.g., scientists, social workers) and lay persons. At the same time, this also raises issues of representation, essentialization and belonging (infra), since one lived account of local urban precarity cannot be generalized to other personal experiences thereof (Vietti, 2022).

It must be noted that preventive and sociopolitical education entail **different** – and, at times, contradictory – **learning goals** that cannot be easily reconciled. Notwithstanding *communicated* goals, often **one of both is emphasized in practice**, depending on the audience (e.g., school groups) and the initial design of the tour and its storytelling. While preventive learning informs, e.g., youth on the dangers of alcohol and drugs usage, sociopolitical learning questions the social legitimacy of priorly-established knowledge on local urban precarity. For instance, while SHADES TOURS-tour on ‘Poverty & Homelessness’ stated the official number of homeless persons in Vienna, *Wiener Nimmerland*-tours challenge the credibility of this number – noting that only those who reside in a shelter are considered in official statistics.

Whether or not a poverty tour is mostly preventive or sociopolitical in nature is merely a matter of different priorities, but should not entail any value judgement. Nevertheless, different types of learning will have different outcomes for existential authentication as a potential tool for personal and local social transformation – as explored in this research. Sociopolitical education seems to be best-fitted for the latter, unveiling and challenging oppressive social orders. At the same time, preventive learning can also offer sites for contestation, for example, when participants ask critical questions, contradict guides, or showcase disbelief and disinterest, thereby delegitimizing the guides’ knowledge authority and the credibility of ‘the knowledge’ presented.

Moreover, **the embedment of poverty tours in local tourism industries** may hamper learning, especially sociopolitical learning which requires the incitement of negative affects among tour participants (infra). Although most poverty tour initiatives are social enterprises or self-employed persons, whose primary goal is *not* making profit, a certain degree of financial viability is required for ensuring their continued existence. In order to attract potential clients, poverty tours have to be **entertaining** besides from being educational. When encountering local urban precarity, especially the development of negative feelings of, e.g., guilt and unease among tour participants is avoided (Ruebottom, Buchanan, Voronov, & Toubiana, 2022) – albeit this could instigate reflexivity on current ways of being, knowing and doing for sociopolitical learning (Everingham & Motta, 2022). This is done, for example, by presenting ‘a happy ending’ to the guide’s story, who is now ‘in a better place’, both professionally and personally, and by downplaying experiences of trauma and severe urban precarity through humorous narrations thereof.

In a similar vein, information on the manners in which revenues through ticket sales are serving guides and the local precarious populations that they represent is often lacking, raising **questions on the communicated ‘pro-poor’ character** of some initiatives. For instance, insights from informal talks with guides of SHADES TOURS⁶⁰ seem to suggest that their income is uncertain, being dependent on the numbers of tours that they guide – including the number of tours that are ordered in, e.g., summers versus winter season – and the amount of monetary tips received on each tour. In contrast, *Gadens Stemmer* – i.e., the other non-profit social enterprise in my sample – ensures that all their guides have a fixed wage above the Danish minimum income (see interview with guide Julie of Gadens Stemmer on 24/03/2025).

6.3 What are tour participants’ experiences of poverty tourism in European welfare state cities in relation to ‘the tourist gaze’ on local urban precarity?

Poverty tours in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen are experienced in various manners, as observed in my own accounts as a tour participant, interviews with other tour participants, and online reviews of poverty tours. Most deemed the experience **‘confronting’**. Some tour participants considered guides’ narrations of their own personal experiences of local urban precarity **‘dramatic’ or ‘extreme’**, which at times installed a sense of **‘unrealism’**⁶¹. Other tour participants, such as Bert and Emilienne at *Wiener Nimmerland* (see interview on 26/04/2025), initially considered poverty tours to be **‘inappropriate’**: the guide in question could engage in more ‘productive’ and ‘sustainable’ paid labour activities – both for himself and the local precarious populations that he represents –, and they did not see any personal value in listening to his story. In addition, they experienced poverty tours as **‘foreign’**, entailing encounters with a reality of local urban precarity that is ‘alien’ to their own life worlds – which was especially emphasized by their rural backgrounds, where local expressions of precarity are taking different, more implicit shapes.

In contrast, most tour participants judged their experiences of poverty tourism to be **‘realistic’**, either corresponding to stereotypical images and sights of urban precarity in general⁶², or adding more nuance to local ‘liveable’ city-imaginaries. Although the latter **‘shocked’** participants, it did not ‘surprise’ them: in light of prior experiential knowledge of the city – e.g., as a local resident – ‘liveable’ city-imaginaries had already

⁶⁰ I have not conducted these informal talks myself, but I deem the source highly trustworthy. I cannot share the identity of this source due to risk of adverse treatment by the organization of SHADES TOURS. I wished to include the perspective of SHADES TOURS as well to potentially refute this claim, but, unfortunately, they were unable to participate in my research at that time (see infra research limitations).

⁶¹ e.g., after an accumulation of narrations of personal misfortunes, which became more and more severe at each stop of the tour, participant Koen of *Ronja’s straatwandeling* (see interview on 22/04/2025) wondered if one person can encounter that many instances of abuse and neglect. Koen was especially in disbelief when guide Ronja explained how losing her Dutch identification card disabled her from being officially reregistered, entering a housing contract and receiving medical care. The impact thereof seemed to be too ‘extreme’ to be true in light of the image that he had of the Netherlands as an effective state apparatus with digitalized administration; surely, there must be other means for reclaiming one’s official identity, Koen thought.

⁶² e.g., tour participant Güntner at *Wiener Nimmerland* (see interview on 22/06/2024) stated how guide Martin’s story was a typical story for many: growing up in the countryside without much parental supervision – or supervision by any adult –, using alcohol and drugs from a young age, ending up ‘in the big city’ of Vienna, and becoming homeless.

been questioned before partaking in poverty tourism. However, most had been unable to identify the *local* mechanisms that evoked uniquely place-based expressions of urban precarity in Vienna, The Hague or Copenhagen, having insufficient knowledge of *local* poverty-reductive and -preventive welfare measures – more precisely, of how these actually ‘play out’ in practice, at times maintaining instead of solving the issue of local urban precarity –, as narrated by Adriana, tour participant of *Wiener Nimmerland*.

“I grew up in Germany, so there you have [...] the saying that [...] ‘In Germany, nobody has to be homeless’. This always reinforces the stigma that people who are experiencing homelessness must be unwilling to get out of their situation. It puts this weird framing around what it means to experience homelessness, and be ill of addiction. These kinds of things, and the intersections between these things, are never truly taken seriously by the system (red., of poverty-reductive and preventive welfare measures). From what he (red., guide Martin of Wiener Nimmerland) has shared about the system is that it’s actually very backwards in comparison to other EU-member states, at least [related to] substitution, therapy, addiction, [something] that the system also doesn’t really want to help people with. These kind of things really gave a different perspective on like ‘Oh, Vienna is such a liveable city, and everyone is so well off there.’ Well, no, actually, because it has huge gaps in the city that deliberately push people out of the welfare regime. So, I think, that was the localized – not ‘surprise’, actually, it wasn’t surprising –, but it was something that I for sure learned with his [...] life story [...].”

Source: quote by Adriana, participant of Wiener Nimmerland-tour on 02/04/2024 and Ghetto Tours-tour on 10/09/2024; focus group discussion conducted on 31/03/2025.

In a similar vein, some were **surprised** to hear that **guides are native Austrian, Dutch or Danish citizens**; they expected local urban precarity to be tied to *glocal* structures of inequality, rendering especially newly arrived migrants and those with complex (mental) health conditions vulnerable.

On numerous occasions, the guides were praised for their ‘**vulnerability**’; here, ‘vulnerability’ refers both to the ‘**personal**’ content of a tour – i.e., telling a person’s life story, including events that could be shameful or traumatic – as well as the ‘**open**’ manner in which this is narrated – i.e., being receptive to all kinds of questions without seemingly omitting or justifying any discrediting or traumatic information. At the same time, tour guides’ well-intended accessibility and open stance towards any question incited feelings of **ethical discomfort** among some tour participants, as exemplified by a focus group excerpt below.

“I think it was really nice how he (red., guide Martin of Wiener Nimmerland) opened space for conversation. But I do remember him continuously repeating a phrase along the lines like ‘You can ask me any (red., emphasis added in intonation) question, and I’ll answer it’, or something. I think that was to create a sort of dialogue between people. But [...] that also made me think about navigating the line between telling your own story and having to bear your life to these audience members who might not ask respectful questions to the degree of this being an economic exchange. [...] [H]earing that

statement made me feel kind of concerned about how some people might take that statement in a way that was not necessarily respectful to his boundaries as a human, not just as a subject of this tour. He clearly put a lot of himself in this tour – and I think there are moments where it was more of a script and him kind of performing – but I remember there were also moments where he talked about losing friends to drug addiction, which were extremely potent, moving and affecting. [...] [I]t just made me wonder about the ethics, hoping that that line wasn't crossed with him, or [that] he wasn't pushed to commercialize his existence in a way that felt inauthentic or disrespectful to his own privacy that he is entitled to as a human.”

Source: quote by Soledad, participant of Wiener Nimmerland-tour on 02/04/2024 and Ghetto Tours on 10/09/2024; focus group discussion conducted on 31/03/2025.

The emergence of ethical discomfort, arising from a genuine concern for the guide's psychological-existential wellbeing, signals the presence of a sense of **empathy**. In this excerpt, Soledad perceives guide Martin beyond his role as offering a paid service, but recognizes him as a multifaceted person with his own feelings, thoughts, hopes and desires, who has a right of non-disclosure as well, setting boundaries to any potentially disrespectful questions. In doing so, he preserves his own 'authenticity' – undistorted by the need for commodification of his personal experiences of local urban precarity –, and retains a sense of dignity and self-respect. In contrast, whereas empathy allows tour participants to recognize, understand and *share* the guide's feelings and worldviews as if they were experiencing it themselves, **sympathy** only feels compassionate or pitiful *for* the guide; preventing any identification with the guide's affective world. The latter is often expressed through a **sense of 'feeling lucky'** for the own situation of privilege in comparison to the guide's, or by **admiring the guide's situation**; taking 'hats off' for guide's individual willpower and ability in turning their lives around for the better, or (partly) romanticizing their (past) suffering⁶³. However, such narratives misrecognizes the hardships and sufferings endured by the guide, and do not acknowledge tour participants' own role in maintaining and recreating local urban precarity, thereby depoliticizing this inherently social challenge (Benali & Kravets, 2022; Park, 2018). Moreover, a focus on individual responsibility obscures the importance of guides' networks and interactions with key figures in getting out of precarious situations. Often, both feelings of empathy *and* sympathy are incited within a person throughout the act of touring and after, drawing attention to the ambiguity of poverty tourism experiences.

Although many tour participants deemed their experiences of poverty tourism highly insightful – enthusiastically sharing their insights learned with family members and friends immediately afterwards – interviews conducted a few months later expressed doubts on the personal and societal impact thereof: they had not developed different views or beliefs vis-à-vis urban precarity, nor had it instigated concrete actions to aid in poverty reduction and prevention. In response, most considered poverty tourism rather '**pointless**'

⁶³ e.g., homelessness is sometimes romanticized by tour participants as living a more 'authentic' or 'pure' life in communion with other homeless persons, outside of 'alienating' consumerist and materialist societal norms and values, as narrated by guide Martin of *Wiener Nimmerland* in informal talks.

instigating feelings of **hopelessness and powerlessness** for change in local urban precarity. At the same time, many participants had left the tour feeling **‘moved’ or ‘touched’** by the personal stories that they had heard and the open manner in which these were told. Most reported a different spatial awareness of urban precarity⁶⁴ afterwards, associating local insights learned with other instances of urban precarity in other places⁶⁵. Although no measurable results can be uncovered at the time of writing, experiences of poverty tourism have certainly left ‘a trace’ in tour participants. After the tours, most tour participants felt **‘overloaded’**, requiring a moment for decompression and reflection on what they had just experienced, as offered by the concluding ‘coffee moment’, incorporated into *Ronja’s straatwandeling*.

In sum, when asked how participants had experienced poverty tours, a multiplicity of affective responses and narrations thereof emerged. Sometimes, these experiences questioned socially dominant sights and images of local urban precarity, then, they supported these. However, most times, various meanings of ‘authentic’ local urban precarity co-existed alongside each other: both lamentable and more implicit sights and images of local urban precarity can be deemed ‘realistic’ by one and the same person, in one and the same tour. Notwithstanding ‘liveable’ city-imaginaries – which render implicit sights and images of urban precarity in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen to be expected among non-local tourists – other local urban imaginaries, discourses on urban precarity in general, and past personal experiences with (local) urban precarity interact dynamically in a continuous renegotiation of ‘authentic’ sights and images of local urban precarity. John Urry’s notion of ‘the tourist gaze’ as structuring perceptions, interpretations and evaluations of ‘authentic’ sights and images of urban precarity in tourist places is thus more manifold and situational than it is often given credit for. Perhaps, the latter must be remodelled as a **‘tourist prism’**; sometimes, looking through one horizon of significance, then through another – or, more accurately, a combination of multiple, creating new meaningful frameworks in the process.

6.4 Which experiential elements contribute to the intra- and interpersonal emergence of ‘authentic’ encounters with local urban precarity within poverty tourism in European welfare state cities, and how are these encounters negotiated for purposes of existential authentication?

The extent to which sights and images of local urban precarity are considered to be ‘real’ or ‘authentic’ is not only dependent on the meanings that are given thereto – often embedded in imaginaries of the cities being toured – (supra), but also on the bodily- and intersubjectively-experienced encounters with local urban precarity on poverty tours. The latter is explored below by looking into the experiential elements that

⁶⁴ e.g., tour participant Shellyn of *Wiener Nimmerland* narrated how she identified handles on urban furniture in Vienna as ‘anti-homeless architecture’ after partaking in the tour. She expressed a desire to use these new ‘glasses’ professionally, for example, as an urban planner (see focus group discussion on 31/03/2025).

⁶⁵ e.g., tour participant Adriana of *Wiener Nimmerland* associated insights learned on urban precarity in Vienna to expressions thereof in her home city of Berlin (DE) (see focus group discussion on 31/03/2025).

contribute to the intra- and interpersonal emergence of ‘authentic’ encounters with local urban precarity – either encountered in narrated sights and images of local urban precarity, or represented by the figure of the guide.

Firstly, participants value the **‘grounded’ perspectives** ‘from below’ that are offered on poverty tours, deeming these more ‘authentic’ than highly touristified imaginaries of Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen, as communicated via city action plans, ‘official’ statistics and indexes, and other urban marketing tools. Guides offer a more ambiguous, ‘hidden’ and ‘local’ knowing of the cities in question, and the urban precarity taking place therein. In drawing on their own lived experiences, guides uncover the nuances of local urban precarity, offering access to a unique, local perspective of the places being toured that is often – whether or not intentionally – invisible/ized to tourists and other ‘outsiders’⁶⁶. In doing so, tour participants are able to get a glimpse of residents’ everyday life in the city – including that of the most precarious – whose ambiguities leave room for contestation of unified representations of Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen, such as those encountered in ‘liveable’ city-imaginaries.

When disrupting ‘official’ urban representations, guides paradoxically ‘play with’ stereotypes that were priorly installed by these same imaginaries, using it as a starting point for later questioning thereof. For instance, guides of Ghetto Tours deliberately named their initiative as such to evoke stereotypical sights and images of street violence and severe precarity (see interview with guide F on 12/11/2024). While touring, guides contrast these with sights and images of everyday life in a residential neighbourhood, showcasing high-quality and well-maintained public housing and urban infrastructure (e.g., playgrounds, apartments) and narrating memories of personal growth and joyful play in the neighbourhood. In doing so, they disrupt what it means to be called ‘a ghetto’⁶⁷ – as experienced by multiple tour participants (see focus group discussion on 31/03/2025).

Secondly, the format of guided walking tours offers an **embodied, direct way of learning** on local urban precarity, enabling more sensory and affective – or, ‘intensely’-experienced – engagements therewith⁶⁸. In comparison to commonly-used learning methods – which are often one-directional and theoretical (e.g., lectures, documentaries, books) – embodied learning offers a different and unique – thus, more memorable – kind of education, embedded in **place**. When touring the places in which local urban precarity has

⁶⁶ e.g., Ghetto Tours convey local ‘street knowledge’ on how to dress oneself and behave differently from gang members as part of an ethnic-cultural Muslim minority youth in Denmark. This is done to prevent potential confusion with gang members (e.g., in the case of kill shootings on the street) and recruitment by gang members (see interview with guide F on 12/11/2024). Such insights are often hidden to non-Muslim locals, let alone non-local tourists.

⁶⁷ Under racialized Danish housing laws – i.e., the so-called ‘ghetto laws’ in popular discourse –, neighbourhoods are labelled as ‘a ghetto’ on the basis of its inhabitants social-ethnic characteristic only – irrespective of the presence of crime and squalor, as expected when employing the term ‘ghetto’. This was also the case for the guides’ neighbourhood when growing up. In rendering certain residential areas ‘a ghetto’, the Danish government socially defines, e.g., the clustered presence of migrants from ‘non-Western’ backgrounds and their descendants, as ‘a problem’, which guides from Ghetto Tours explicitly contest.

⁶⁸ e.g., standing in a private basement during Ghetto Tours offered both ‘local’ knowledge and a unique sensorial experience on what it means to live in ‘a ghetto’.

happened, or, is currently happening, this enables a ‘tracing’ of its signs and symbols in space⁶⁹. Moreover, it allows for making reference to real-life events as they have occurred in space, evoking either a local collective memory⁷⁰, or imagination in its wake, as narrated by tour participants Patricia and Koen at *Wiener Nimmerland* and *Ronja’s straatwandeling*.

Patricia: “You are in the reality that he (red., guide Martin of Wiener Nimmerland) had been living. You experience where he had been sleeping, where he got his coffee, where he encountered someone on a bench.”

Koen: “You can almost feel it. You can taste it and feel it. It was also like being in The Hague (red., proceeds to talk about Ronja’s straatwandeling): you were standing next to the store where she (red., guide Ronja) bought her sanitary pads. You can imagine it better, [standing] in the moment there, than seeing it on a picture. That is different.”

Source: quotes by Patricia and Koen, participant of a Wiener Nimmerland-tour on 02/04/2024 and Ronja’s straatwandeling on 24/08/2024; interview conducted on 22/04/2025, excerpts translated from Dutch.

The guide as an **experiential expert** that speaks from an ‘authentic’ positionality is indispensable for the emergence of ‘truthful’ encounters with local urban precarity. Guides’ knowledge authority on local urban precarity is derived from their lived experiences thereof – in contrast to ‘mere’ theoretical knowing –, similar to the appreciation of embodied learning by tour participants (supra). After all, knowledge on lived experiences of local urban precarity can never fully be conveyed or translated, thus calling into question the ability of non-experiential experts – as well as tour participants, in a sense – to ‘truly’ understand and convey issues of local urban precarity. At the same time, *one* personal experience of local urban precarity – as presented by the figure of the guide – cannot be generalized to *all* precarious individuals in a locality, evoking questions of representation, essentialization and belonging (Vietti, 2022; infra).

Often, tour participants define themselves **in opposition to “traditional”, “commodified” or “touristified” guided walking tours**. Here, terms such as ‘commercial’, ‘commodified’ and ‘touristified’ do not refer to their denotations – after all, *all* poverty tours are situated within local tourism industries. Instead, they imply sights and images of, e.g., free walking tours and umbrella tours, which presumably ‘trample’ the inner cities of Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen with ‘hordes’ of tourists, offering cultural-historical narratives as advertised by local tourism boards that are to be most expected. In contrast, poverty tours are considered to be a unique, off-the-beaten-path kind of travel that is less profit-oriented and less detrimental on the locality and its inhabitants than the former. Participants experience them as highly personally charged and emotively

⁶⁹ e.g., finding a piece of packaging for pharmaceutical drugs in Karlsplatz; revealing an informal storage space for homeless persons behind Karlsplatz metro station wall (see participatory tour observations at *Wiener Nimmerland*).

⁷⁰ e.g., Güntner, tour participant at *Wiener Nimmerland* and local resident of Vienna, clearly remembered the eviction of the squat ‘Pizzeria Anarchia’, when this was narrated on the tour (see interview on 22/06/2024).

‘moving’. In that sense, both guides and tour participants do not label their activities as ‘poverty tourism’; deeming them as ‘something more’ than “mere” ‘poverty tourism’. In doing so, they refuse negative connotations that are tied to “traditional” instances of poverty tourism in the Global South (e.g., inciting exoticizing narratives and intercultural conflicts between visitors and locals). But, above all, they define themselves as ‘travellers’ that can escape the alienating and – at times – immoral influence of modern capital *tourism* industries for ‘truly’ authentic encounters with difference.

Paradoxically, when guides fail to incite the affectively-moving experiences needed for rendering such encounters ‘authentic’ in the first place – enacted through careful performance of their storytelling and interactions with their audiences (i.e., the *emotional* labour of guides in poverty tourism; Holst, 2019) – their tours are considered to be more ‘scripted’ or ‘inauthentic’, as showcased by tour participant José’s comparison of his experiences at *Wiener Nimmerland* and Ghetto Tours.

“For me, it (red., Ghetto Tours) felt more like a normal city tour. We have these stops and we go here, there’s some explanation, ‘Any questions around that?’, ‘No?’, ‘Yes?’, and then [we go to] the next stop, and the next [stop]. Kind of like these umbrella ones (red., tours) that you see in the city centre. So, it felt really different (red., from the Wiener Nimmerland-tour). Also, [...] the multiple narrators made it more difficult for me to connect on a personal basis, and it felt for me also a bit more scripted in that way. A bit more like a commercialized thing: ‘You’re the group, you come here, we give you the explanation, and then you have to pay for the service, in a way’, no? That was really different for me from the emotions that the Martin (red., Wiener Nimmerland) tour produced upon me.”

Source: quote by José, participant of Wiener Nimmerland-tour on 02/04/2024 and Ghetto Tours on 10/09/2024; focus group discussion conducted on 31/03/2025.

The person of the guide – more precisely, *the connection* that is felt to their person, which is dependent on their charisma, self-presentation, and communicative skills – can support the credibility of their perspectives on local urban precarity. Referrals among tour participants, positive encounters with other precarious people while touring (e.g., greetings) and prolonged engagements over time – which a single poverty tour cannot offer – also increase trust in the guide as a knowledge authority on local urban precarity. A structured and chronological narration, as well as tailored content to different audiences and their various expectations of the tour’s content, display certain ‘professional’ skills that meet tour participants’ expectations and standards for a paid – i.e., a commercialized – guided tour. Thus, although tour participants oppose themselves against the alienating forces that emanate from “commercialized” tourism formats (*supra*), they still require a certain standard of ‘quality’ – i.e., clear and customized narratives – to be met as paying clients of commercial poverty tours.

Successful commodification of guides’ personal accounts presupposes a sensitivity to class- and race-based norms and values, requiring guides to present and accommodate themselves in a manner that is

accessible (e.g., in ways of speaking, composure and clothing) to middle-class and often white tour participants. For instance, guide Ronja of *Ronja's straatwandeling* emphasizes her identity as a researcher, policy advisor “and other important things” enables her to “speak with everyone in the same language” and be taken seriously on an equal level to tour participants (see interview on 30/08/2024, translated from Dutch). In seemingly **sharing a similar culture** to guides and other tour participants, a sense of ‘communitas’ emerges which supports processes of existential authentication. At the same time, the ‘openness’ of this ‘communitas’ can be questioned, for instance, when more adversary stances vis-à-vis guides’ narrations are denounced and delegitimized as ‘irrational’ (e.g., “those [tour participants] with ‘fixed’ views and opinions”, supra) or when guides’ must present themselves ‘inauthentically’ from (some parts of) their Being, evoking questions of representation, essentialization and belonging in its wake (Vietti, 2022). This is narrated by guide F from Ghetto Tours, switching between front- and backstages of himself as part of an ethnic-cultural Muslim minority in Denmark.

“I have a way of talking with ethnically Danish people and then with my other friends. [...] I change my personality and professional level when I’m at the Ghetto Tours or work. We use – some of my friends call it – ‘the white man’s voice’ (laughs).”

“[I]t’s just the way we dress ourselves, speak. Some people talk with a big ‘t’, and then people assume that he’s a perker (red., derogatory Danish term for people from a Middle Eastern or Arab background). I’ve also tried to correct my Danish, so I have a very clean way of talking Danish, cause if I talk that way (red., with a big ‘t’), they (red., ethnic-cultural white majority Danish people) will put me in a box.”

Source: quotes by guide F of Ghetto Tours from interview conducted on 12/11/2024.

At the same time, the figure of the guide represents an alterity, allowing tour participants to **meet them as ‘the other half’ of their own life worlds in European welfare state societies**. The tourism context of poverty tours offers a socially legitimized setting for norm transgressive behaviour, justifying encounters with, and thereby rendering ‘radically Other/red’ guides and their perspectives accessible to, middle-class and often white tour participants. In addition, tourism offers opportunities for ‘slowing down’ to engage profoundly with the ‘unfamiliarity’ of local urban precarity, as encountered in the figure of the guide. This has been noticed by Soledad, tour participant at *Wiener Nimmerland* and Ghetto Tours.

“Well, I think with these alternative tours it’s really valuable: the access you get to interact with people that you normally wouldn’t. I just thought of a bizarre comparison, like a dating app. Where you meet someone, especially in our mobile life (red., as classmates within a student mobility programme), who’s from a place where you’re not from at all, and then you might have an excuse to have a conversation with them, and see where you’re living in a completely different context. [...] [W]ith Martin too, it’s not many people who feel like they can sit down on a bench and have a conversation with him that means

a lot to him. And that's not even [coming] from a place of necessarily prejudice against him. It's just the situation, the circumstances, and everything."

Source: quote by Soledad, participant of Wiener Nimmerland-tour on 02/04/2024 and Ghetto Tours on 10/09/2024; focus group discussion conducted on 31/03/2025.

However, meeting an 'Other/ed' is insufficient; tour participants can only engage in existential authentication once they recognize the guide as both object and subject. This requires a move beyond perceiving guides as 'precarious' only, recognizing them as multifaceted persons with whom tour participants share a human fate and essence nonetheless – and vice versa (i.e., guides *also* need to go beyond 'the tourist'). In turn, encounters must take place on an equal level, which presupposes mutual emotional vulnerability (i.e., being willing to disclose personal information and express 'unfiltered' emotive responses) (Everingham & Motta, 2022). However, guides' ambiguous roles and belonging – i.e., attempting to represent local urban precarity while establishing rapport with tour participants on the basis of staged class- and race-based self-representations – and feelings of sympathy among tour participants – i.e., expressed in idolizing or pitying narratives of guides – (supra), hinder the becoming of humanization. Moreover, mutual emotional vulnerability as a 'liminal' activity does not only pose opportunities for personal transformation of both guides and tour participants, but also implies risks for psychological-existential harm (e.g., becoming misrecognized; being 'disrupted' by intense feelings of guilt, anxiety and uncertainty). In response, both tour guides and participants have developed **strategies for maintaining a degree of psychological-existential safety and distance** in the face of 'authentic' encounters with local urban precarity, as given below.

Both guides and tour participants return to a familiar physical or social 'place' after touring (e.g., guide Martin of *Wiener Nimmerland* always needs to 'recharge' at his appartement). Moreover, people can have their guard up, holding parts of themselves back, for instance by not showcasing particular personal traits (e.g., a 'goofy' personality⁷¹) or initial emotive responses (e.g., crying to a 'touching' story⁷²). In addition, guides and tour participants can withdraw into their own positionalities – i.e., perceiving, interpreting and evaluating each other within their own sociocultural-moral frameworks only, without any understanding of the 'places' from which the other's ways of being, thinking and doing are coming from. Also, the group context of poverty tourism allows participants to retreat into a sense of social belonging; being among 'equals' in an environment that is devoid of any severe social judgement. At the same time, the group implies an aspect of social control, hindering the emergence of 'inappropriate' audience questions and behaviour vis-à-vis tour guides and, as such, providing the latter as sense of safety from potential disrespect as well.

Guides provide emotional safety to tour participants by 'building-up' their story in increasing intensity and concluding with 'a happy ending', referring to their current situation as being 'no more precarious' – although, e.g., drug addicts remain addicted (to pharmaceutical drugs) forever, evoking life-threatening withdrawal

⁷¹ See interview with guide F of Ghetto Tours on 12/11/2024.

⁷² See own experience at *Ronja's straatwandeling* on 24/08/2024.

symptoms otherwise. Guides create safety for themselves by only narrating and answering to those questions which do not require delving into any severely traumatic memories – thus distinguishing between ‘personal’ (i.e., about the own person) and ‘emotionally vulnerable’ (i.e., ‘unprocessed’, inciting intense and unpredictable emotive reactions) information shared. Moreover, guides present themselves in a ‘self-composed’ or ‘professional’ manner vis-à-vis tour participants. In addition, the employment of humour enables guides to engage in intercultural conflicts while rendering the implicit messages thereof more ‘digestible’ to tour participants, as such avoiding feelings of guilt, agitation and unease among the latter.

However, such **strategies of distancing hinder mutual personal transformation** of both guides and tour participants. Whereas guides cannot fully showcase their authentic Self – downplaying and thereby distorting their personal experiences of disrespect –, tour participants partly fail to recognize themselves in the figure of the guide as an equal human being who is both unique and similar to their own person. In that light, mutual existential authentication becomes possible when an **emotionally safe environment** is accounted for. For instance, guide Ronja’s ‘coffee moment’ – i.e., a collaborative discussion of the *straatwandeling* immediately afterwards at a local café – offers a collaborative space for decompression and reflection – including reflexivity on the own future practices for countering and reducing instances of (local) (urban) precarity. This occurs in a safe setting on equal footing, seated all around a table, while drinks are included in the ticket price (thus, preventing the emergence of any power hierarchies between those who can and cannot consume). A few days after the tour, an additional online meeting is set up between Ronja and tour participants, wherein they discuss the results of a take-home self-reflexive evaluation survey on the tours’ experiences and the potential short- and long-term personal and local social impact thereof (e.g., at participants’ work, in everyday life).

6.5 What do ‘authentic’ encounters with local urban precarity in poverty tourism in European welfare state cities produce, especially with regard to mutual existential authentication for local social change?⁷³

Whereas guides’ knowledge authority enabled the emergence of ‘authentic’ encounters with local urban precarity in the first place (supra), ‘authentic’ engagements add further to the guides’ **credibility** in a mutually-reinforcing loop. As stated earlier, guides’ credibility is partly dependent on the extent to which they are able to represent themselves in accordance with middle-class and white norms and values; thus, contributing further to a staging of the Self that is partly ‘inauthentic’ to a guide’s unique Being. In turn, **questions of representation, essentialization and belonging** are evoked (Vietti, 2022).

Often, guides’ narrations become one of a few personal ‘success stories’ alongside other experiences of local urban precarity, being perceived as ‘one of the good ones’ who were able to ‘make it out’ (e.g., see interview with tour participant Lilian at Wiener Nimmerland on 11/07/2024). In ‘taking up space’ in the public debate on local urban precarity through guiding (supra), some precarious local residents feel misrepresented,

⁷³ In processes of authentication, precursors (see section 6.4, supra) and outcomes (section 6.5) are mutually constitutive. The distinction made between both is thus partly artificial for reasons of clarity. Some findings will be repeated with regard to both precursors and outcomes in a slightly different framing.

evoking adversary and even hostile reactions vis-à-vis guides. This is aggravated by the touring of sights and images of local urban precarity, which entails deliberate – and, often, involuntary without any opportunities for informed consent – encounters with precarious local residents themselves (i.e., the critique of poverty tourism as ‘human zoos’)⁷⁴. Although guides acknowledge that they can only say something meaningful about their own lived accounts of local urban precarity, they are aware that tour participants may perceive them as a generalized spokesperson for precarious local residents. This installs a sense of pressure among guides to perform their “Self”-image in accordance with societally-valued – read: middle-class and white – manners of conduct, in order to avoid adding to any further potential stigmatisation of the populations in questions.

However, in presenting themselves more closely to middle-class and white cultural norms and values, guides – whether or not intentionally – distance themselves from those local precarious populations that they try to protect, rendering them into an ‘Other/ed’ from themselves. This has been observed in Ghetto Tours, wherein guides defined gang members as “the bad guys” who refuse to integrate and act in accordance with the rules of Danish society, as such reflecting negatively on the whole population of ethnic-cultural Muslim minority youth in Denmark (see interview with guide F on 12/11/2024). However, in doing so, guides draw moral and symbolic intra group boundaries, which fails to acknowledge intergenerational differences in educational and professional attainment and parental supervision, rendering some ethnic-cultural Muslim minority youth more vulnerable to recruitment by gang members than others. In contrast, some guides explicitly engage in self-sensationalization, rendering themselves compliant with stereotypical images and sights of, e.g., a punk squatter⁷⁵. In conclusion, guides’ role as an incomplete representative of general local urban precarity who is, simultaneously, trying to build rapport with middle-class and often white tour participants, results in an ambiguous sense of belonging, as explained by guide Ronja of *Ronja’s straatwandeling*.

“On the one hand, I am connected to homeless persons, but that group does no longer see me as one of them. [...] On the other hand, I belong to the middle-class – and I even start to grow out of that a little bit –, and I hang out with – what I would’ve called ‘important people’ in the past –, because I now work in the same sector or places. However, those people still see me as ‘homeless’. So, one group no longer sees me as one of them, and the other group still sees me as someone who came straight from the gutter. I do not fit into any [group], but that enables me to communicate well with everyone: I have experienced and taken bits and parts from everything.”

⁷⁴ e.g., guide Julie of Gadens Stemmer recalls an unpleasant encounter with a visibly intoxicated passerby, while standing close to ‘H13’, i.e., a centre in Copenhagen for medically-supervised drugs intake (see interview on 14/03/2025). The passerby in question interrupted Julie’s storytelling, delegitimizing her experiences of local urban precarity by calling her a liar. After multiple attempts by Julie, explaining that the tour merely offered a representation of her own personal experiences and kindly asking the passerby to leave, Julie had to depart instead, taking her tour group with her to another place nearby.

⁷⁵ e.g., guide Martin of *Wiener Nimmerland* deliberately paints his hair in bright colours (e.g., red, green) – inciting the appearance of a ‘stereotypical’ punk and anarchist squatter to be more recognizable to his audiences at first contact (even though Martin is no longer a squatter).

Source: quote by guide Ronja of Ronja's straatwandeling from interview conducted on 30/08/2024; excerpt translated from Dutch.

Furthermore, 'authentic' encounters with local urban precarity offer sites for tour participants' **self-identification** – **although this does not always occur through processes of *existential* authentication**. In meeting their societal counterpart in the figure of the guide as a representative of local urban precarity, and touring sights and images thereof with the guide, tour participants are able to define themselves – including their self-image and personal life project – in opposition to this Other/ed. Not only do some morally and symbolically identify themselves as being 'better off' than guides – enabling the belief in their own life goals as personally and societally meaningful in contrast to other's –, but they also partake in an activity that supports this life project and its associated self-image as a 'socially engaged and educated' person. In exhibiting a certain 'openness' and 'natural' ability to engage with local urban precarity, tour participants position themselves as 'travellers' against those who do not directly engage with local urban precarity, such as "traditional" tourists, defining their own aspirations and actions as more 'authentic' vis-à-vis the latter's.

As illustrated supra, this 'tolerance' reflects a class-based culture of similar-minded people – excluding those who do not share the same norms and values (e.g., "those with 'fixed' opinions and views"). In this case, tour participants demonstrate – mostly to themselves – that they are 'open' to be confronted with experiences of difference – while the 'difference' encountered is not truly existentially authentically engaged with. In being "open" to sights and images of local urban precarity, tour participants accept these as a lived reality that does not concern their own, as such maintaining a psychological-existential distance from local urban precarity that does not require any personal transformation and agentic action to take place (Lapina, 2022). At the same time, guides' partly staged self-identity does not allow for a mutual existential authentication either (supra). As a consequence, in 'authentic' encounters, moral and symbolic boundaries of 'We' versus 'They' are (re)produced 1) between tour participants (e.g., 'socially engaged and educated' versus "those with 'fixed' opinions and views"), 2) between guides and tour participants (e.g., when pitying or adoring guides), 3) between guides and other members of local precarious populations (e.g., guides as 'one of the good ones' who 'made it out'), and 4) between tour participants and other tourists engaged in "traditional" walking tours (e.g., 'social' or 'ethical tourism' versus "commercialized" tours of the inner city).

At the same time, 'authentic' encounters with local urban precarity offer opportunities for **transformative learning**, enabling the emergence of **an existential authentication** that serves mutual personal transformation of both tour participants *and* guides. Transformative learning implies a multiplicity of learning processes (i.e., affective, associative, collaborative, critical, hopeful, mutual, prolonged, reflexive, sensory and spatial learning), evoked through existentially authentic encounters with local urban precarity, for the development of a sense of empathy and solidarity between tour participants and guides (including the local precarious populations that they represent), altering their relationalities in its wake.

Affective learning refers to learning through the experience of both positive (e.g., generosity, joy) and negative (e.g., guilt, ethical discomfort) emotions. Especially negative and ambiguous emotions are productive to realise the own role in creating and sustaining urban precarity (Everingham & Motta, 2022), which is required for critical and reflexive learning (infra). At the same time, negative emotions are often reduced in commodified tourism contexts; tour participants as paying customers must be entertained while touring local urban precarity, ensuring an experience that is mostly pleasant rather than educational, thus misrecognizing guides' personal experiences of suffering and disrespect (Ruebottom, Buchanan, Voronov, & Toubiana, 2022). Moreover, tour participants engage in associative learning, relating sights and images of local urban precarity, as encountered while touring, to other instances thereof in different places and formats (e.g., encountering a homeless person in everyday life). Through continuous analytical comparison of different sights and images of urban precarity in the visited locality and beyond, a systemic body of knowledge emerges. Associative learning also ties into sensory and spatial learning, as well as prolonged learning: since guided walking tours take 'place' in bodies and spaces, learning on urban precarity becomes a sensorily- and spatially-embedded reading of 'traces' of urban precarity, both in the near and far future. For example, Shellyn, participant of a *Wiener Nimmerland*-tour, recalls how she has identified anti-homeless architecture in Vienna's Praterstern and other places throughout Europe ever since, potentially inspiring her in a future practice of urban planning (see focus group discussion on 31/03/2025).

Learning occurs in collaboration with the guide, tour participants, the places being toured and the occurrences and passerby happening herein, as well as prior experiences, discourses and mental frameworks for perception, interpretation and evaluation that influence the former. For example, when tour participants talk about their experiences afterwards with family members and friends, they encounter different views and opinions on (the touring of) urban precarity that may change their experiences retrospectively. Poverty tours also offer grounds for mutual learning, enabling guides to reconsider their past experiences and their current relationship vis-à-vis these memories in light of new information acquired in dialogue with tour participants and reactions from passerby. Guides develop communicative and social skills in practice, presenting their story in a clear and structured way while engaging different types of audiences. They also become socially recognized by tour participants as unique and moral individuals who have a valuable perspective to share, thereby offering grounds for reconciliation of earlier experiences of disrespect. The revaluation and elevation of guides' knowledge in the public debate as an alternative and socially legitimized view on local urban precarity reflects positively on their self-image and those affected by similar precarious conditions, as stated by Soledad, tour participant of *Wiener Nimmerland* and Ghetto Tours.

"[...] [A]s someone who has been involved in art, community, space, and teenagers, it is clearly moving and clearly would be powerful to be a teenager giving a tour of your neighbourhood to other people. To have your voice elevated in that way, and especially when it's a neighbourhood that is so stigmatised. In some ways, that is really exciting just point black, without even thinking of the tour

itself. Also, recognizing that something that a tour like that is bringing as much to the people giving the tour than the audience, was more at play in this tour to me (red., than in a Wiener Nimmerland-tour, wherein Soledad also participated). We also heard that some people were newer at participating, and others had been doing it a little longer, but you sort of can conceptualize what it means for everyone to create a narrative, or what it could mean, and how that might be a process that they're developing or get better at, or explore new things. [...] Overall, what sticks with me [...] is this idea around what it means to have teenagers, especially coming from immigrant families, talking authoritatively about what it means to live and grow up in Copenhagen, and authentically claiming that place."

Source: quote by Soledad, participant of Wiener Nimmerland-tour on 02/04/2024 and Ghetto Tours on 10/09/2024; focus group discussion conducted on 31/03/2025.

Mutual learning is, in turn, dependent on reflexive learning as a form of second-order learning – i.e., relating the information learned during poverty tours to the own life project, and reflecting on the latter's 'desirability' and 'meaningfulness' in the process. When poverty tours install actionable knowledge on the *social renegotiability* of those social orders that create local urban precarity and other oppressions, this can evoke existentially authentic personal transformation. Also, in recognizing the own agentic power, hope is instigated among both guides and tour participants for local social change. This, some interviewees argued (i.e., guide Ronja of *Ronja's straatwandeling*; tour participant Nikita of *Wiener Nimmerland*), requires a collaborative moment for reflection *in addition* to the tour. Touring urban precarity in itself is thus insufficient for provoking transformative learning, as hypothesized by tour participant Nikita when comparing her experiences of *Wiener Nimmerland* to a similar initiative with inmates in Berlin.

"I went to this classy thing in East Berlin two years ago. It was the prisoners themselves that gave the tour. I imagine a lot of them were traumatized, and then they were rehabilitated, and then this process became a way for them to deal with it. They give you a tour, and then (red., emphasis added in intonation) you follow this up with conversation 'What did we see?' I imagine people like my parents, who would not only be out of depth in Europe – because this is a completely different place –, but they are also coming from this very middle class mentality of what is 'right' or 'wrong', and how you should behave. I imagine that kind of demographic, just sitting and talking about it afterwards, even if there were things that they didn't necessarily understand themselves, through other people talking about it, maybe it could be a way where they were 'Oh, interesting. I didn't know about this at all'."

Source: quote by tour participant Nikita of Wiener-Nimmerland-tour, from interview conducted on 11/04/2025.

Paulo Freire's critical learning or pedagogy (supra) can be instigated by reflexivity. As stated supra, critical pedagogy is a dialogical and dialectical teaching that unveils and questions existent ways of being, knowing and doing under oppressive social orders. Through the formation of a critical consciousness or

conscientização, humanization of both tour guides as teacher-facilitators and tour participants as pupils in poverty tourism becomes possible. Local urban precarity becomes to be understood as a social problem that is inherently entangled with systemic features, shaping relationships between various sociocultural groups that are sedimented in urban and public space. At the same time, the emergence of a systemic narrative on local urban precarity is hindered when individual responsibility and social circumstances are particularly emphasized. Although well-intended – i.e., acknowledging the agentic power of those affected by local urban precarity as being more than a ‘victim’ of circumstances, who are simultaneously restricted in their social chances to act upon their precarious living conditions in comparison to others – this renders the story of local urban precarity one of overcoming personal social circumstances, instead of focusing on wider systemic elements that tie together various experiences of local urban precarity and related oppressions.

When critical learning does occur – generating the collective understanding of a shared human existence under societal systems of oppression (e.g., modern capitalism) –, it incites the development of a sense of empathy and solidarity among tour participants, guides and the precarious populations that the latter represent. Mutual social recognition, and the reimagination of local urban precarity as a social problem embedded in ‘places’ – including urban and public spaces –, renders poverty tours sociopolitical, challenging current models for urban planning and design that favour certain kinds of (co-)living above others⁷⁶. Themes of the ‘Right to the City’ – as initiated by urban scholar and sociologist Henri Lefebvre in 1968⁷⁷ – are thus implicitly touched upon and emergent during those poverty tours that evoke a sense of empathy and solidarity, as narrated by Güntner, who took part in a *Wiener Nimmerland*-tour as a teacher accompanying a class of secondary schoolchildren. At the same time, he noticed how tour participants’ situatedness or positionality – grounded in particular life worlds that install certain mental frameworks for perception, interpretation and evaluation of local urban precarity – can hinder the emergence of a critical account thereof.

“Last week, I went with a class [to the Wien Museum], and I showed them – in the [19]70s, they had the Arena (red., a formerly squatter cultural centre), where they were trying to build [a textile factory]– I’m trying to connect the topic (laughs), you know, ‘Who owns the city?’, and that was the question that was also asked in the museum. And I felt like that was also somehow addressed in that story (red., about the eviction of squad ‘Pizzeria Anarchia’, narrated by guide Martin). But I’m not sure if they really understood. We (red., the school) probably have a lot of kids – how am I gonna say? – their parents are from a more wealthy– our kids are probably closer to the people that own (emphasis) those houses (red., houses that are bought as financial assets, similar to the squat of ‘Pizzeria Anarchia’).”

Source: quote by Güntner, participant of Wiener Nimmerland-tour; interview conducted on 22/06/2024

⁷⁶ e.g., such as the premise that ‘consumption’ is required in most ‘public’ spaces, as stated by tour participant Nikita of *Wiener Nimmerland* (see interview on 11/04/2025).

⁷⁷ Introduced in ‘*Le droit à la ville*’ (1968).

As captured by Victor Turner's concept of liminality, mutual existential authentication through meeting the 'Other' – either in the person of the guide or tour participant –, entails both opportunity and danger to self-identification and -development (Turner, 1969). Mutual vulnerability is required for existentially authentic encounters (Everingham & Motta, 2022), offering both grounds for personal and local social transformation, as well as disruption of the Self – which incites existential angst, and in turn, evokes strategies of distancing for purposes of self-preservation (supra). Under current neoliberal capitalist societal structures – and the fast-paced rhythms of movement and encounter that these subscribe –, individualizing accounts of the Self often prevail over the emergence of empathy and solidarity (Laermans, De Cauter, & Vanhaesebrouck, 2018). Although travel counters this by allowing for linger and dwelling (supra), a fear of the Other – and the need for protection of the Self's personally meaningful existence (e.g., in the pursuit of work, a family with kids) – partly limits the sociopolitical-ethical potentiality of poverty tourism, as hinted at by tour participant Nikita of *Wiener Nimmerland*. At the same time, I argue that this potentiality for more socially sustainable and ethically-responsible tourism encounters (and engagements with difference in general) still speaks from Nikita's – and other interviewee's – personal reflections on their experiences of poverty tours, and the critical insights that these brought forward.

"If you're falling apart while reading the news, you can't function like that. You have to accept that there are certain things that you cannot change, and that you just have to do what you have to do. [...] Unfortunately, how we are able to survive under this [societal] system, is sort of distancing and dissociating. You cannot think about another group of people too much. You have to go to work, take care of a family, you have kids. You have to think about your own safety and environment, how are you gonna think about a bunch of drug addicts who are drinking and being out outside our building every night: 'Do I need to start having empathy for them?'"

Source: quote by tour participant Nikita of Wiener-Nimmerland-tour, from interview conducted on 11/04/2025.

7. Discussion and conclusion

As historical sites of concentrated capital accumulation and growth, it must not surprise that precarity has become most visible in cities, inciting various engagements therewith (e.g., by Friedrich Engels (1848), Jacob A. Riss (1970) and Jacob Holdt (1985)). Under recent austerity politics in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and persistent wars and conflict worldwide, restructurings of national welfare regimes will most likely produce more 'lamentable' sights and images on the level of European cities, rendering the call for systemic change most pressing (Gillepsie, Hardy & Watt, 2021; Katz, 1993). With the transition from 'welfare' to 'workfare' societies, social rights are no longer universally granted to every citizen as a moral human being, worthy of respect; instead, this has become tied to the ability to perform paid work. Combined with the recent flexibilization and precarization of labour markets – more and more people must, but are unable to engage in those activities that would grant them respect and self-esteem, rendering the struggle for social recognition all the more important (Schweiger, 2024). A struggle that is deeply urban; shaping and reshaping public and urban spaces in its wake – echoing Henri Lefebvre's concept of the 'Right to the City' (1968).

I started this exploration into poverty tourism in March 2024, believing that it could offer an – intrinsically urban – site for the sociopolitical-ethical struggle for social recognition (and implied personal and local social transformations) towards more socially sustainable and ethically-responsible encounters with difference. In embarking on my first poverty tour (i.e., of *Wiener Nimmerland* in April 2024), I encountered a different engagement with local urban precarity than I had ever experienced before. Instead of meeting local urban precarity in the lamentable sight of a beggar – with whom I felt I could never quite engage as persons on an equal level, being propelled forward by senses of guilt, fear or straight-out annoyance to hand-out money, while always leaving the scene with a sour taste – poverty tours seemed to offer places for actual dialogue and self-reflexivity.

At the same time, I quickly discovered that earlier scholarly accounts of poverty tourism – albeit within contexts of "traditional" poverty tourism in the Global South – were more critical of its sociopolitical-ethical potential; solely serving tourists' quest for a kind of authentic self-identification that will always remain wistfully incomplete. Under the influence of full-fledged tourism sectors, the intrinsically human quest for authenticity through encounters with the world – more precisely, encounters with an initial 'unfamiliarity' or 'difference' of the world vis-à-vis ourselves – has been exploited and become an impossible task, according to the earliest writer on 'authenticity' in tourism research, Dean MacCannell (1999). Instead of allowing for a truly existentially authentic self-identification, tourists are caught up in self-referential loops of 'authentic' conceptions of, e.g., addiction, homelessness and ghettoization in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen – as fabricated and installed by local tourism industries. In other words, tourists do not engage in any *real* confrontation with any *real* difference, thus being denied entrance into the 'liminal space' that travel once promised. In modern-day travel and tourism, existential authentication thus cannot exist (MacCannell, 1999).

Notwithstanding my initial idealism and MacCannell's valuable – albeit somewhat sceptical – account of existential authentication in poverty tourism, my extensive engagements with poverty tours over the last sixteen months call for a more nuanced answer to the question of poverty tourism, and what is actually happening herein. In engaging with the experiential and 'place'-based features (i.e., in bodies, spaces and mental frameworks) of existential authentication, and advancing such processes with Paulo Freire's sociopolitical concept of 'humanization' (Freire, 2017) and Axel Honneth's social-ethical Theory of Recognition (Honneth, 1995), I have opened up the study of existential authentication in poverty tourism as a potential pathway for mutual social recognition, installing new senses of belonging and relationalities, as enacted in urban and public space.

A mixed methods phenomenological study established insights into processes of existential authentication – including an engagement with constructivist authentication as mutually constitutive of the former – and reflected on its potential sociopolitical-ethical implications, as outlined in conceptual and empirical research questions (see supra table 1). My application to guided walking tours on local urban precarity in European welfare state cities of Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen enabled me to engage with a newly-emergent kind of poverty tourism, i.e., one that tours more implicit sights and images of local urban precarity in an embodied and 'place'-based manner, while meeting local urban precarity as well in the reciprocal gaze of the guide. These new formats and settings proved to play a significant role in the mechanisms of existential authentication.

First of all, various participant profiles and even more personal motivations for participating in poverty tours have been distinguished, questioned the premise that poverty tourism solely serves an 'egoistic' self-affirmation. In addition, poverty tours serve multiple goals of preventive and sociopolitical learning, often actualizing one over the other with regard to particular audiences (e.g., school groups) or in light of the tour's initial design. Entertainment functions as a 'hidden' goal under the requirement for commodification of tour experiences within the context of local tourism industries. This can obstruct the emergence of negative emotions, which is essential for sociopolitical learning.

The concept of 'the tourist gaze' as a metaphor for constructivist authentication has been renegotiated into 'the tourist *prism*', allowing for a multiplicity of urban imaginaries to co-exist and dynamically interact with mental frameworks for perception, interpretation and evaluation of 'authentic' sights and images of local urban precarity. Also, the experiential elements that allowed for an intra- and interpersonal emergence of 'authentic' encounters with local urban precarity – either met in the sights and images being toured, or the figure of the guide – have been identified, engaging more profoundly with existential processes of authentication (in addition to constructivist authentication). These elements include: the 'grounded' perspectives offered; an embodied, direct way of learning; place-based authenticity; the guide as an experiential expert; the person of the guide; the creation of a normative 'communitas'; the symbolic opposition vis-à-vis "commodified" tourism; and the meeting of 'the other half' of tour participants' life

worlds in European welfare states. At the same time, ambiguities have been observed herein (e.g., partly existentially inauthentic self-representation by guides; strategies of distancing that hinder humanization).

Reflection on the potential sociopolitical-ethical implications of 'authentic' encounters with local urban precarity observed how guides' credibility, tour participants' self-identification, and transformative learning for both has been fostered. However, again, ambiguities present themselves; at times, evoking moral and symbolic boundaries among tour participants, guides, precarious local populations and other tourists in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen, and disabling a truly existentially authentic self-identification of both guides and tour participants. At the same time, transformative processes of learning have been incited, perhaps not resulting in any measurable impact – yet –, but leaving 'traces' in the 'places' inhabited by guides and tour participants (i.e., their bodies, everyday spaces and mental frameworks) to be deciphered. Poverty tour experiences could be unveiled as contributing to newly-emergent co-creations of the 'places' through which local urban precarity is encountered, for more socially sustainable and ethically-responsible engagements in local tourism sectors and the city as a whole.

In conclusion, poverty tours offer a liminal experience of reflexivity on the Self, social-ethical relationships, and their sociopolitical outcomes in urban and public space (Ting & Kahl, 2016). Tourism as a socially legitimized setting for norm-transgressive encounters serves as the background for messy human social relationships – and the intersubjective struggle for social recognition and '*Sittlichkeit*' (Honneth, 1995) taking place therein. Poverty tourism, as the 'place' for meeting and being met in and through the gaze of 'the other half' of European welfare state societies, gives rise to particular dialectics, sometimes, inciting empathy for an equally unique human being, then, evoking fear of the 'Other/ed' – i.e., a pendulum movement that is experienced within one and the same tour, often by one and the same person. Existential authentication is thus neither occurring in an isolated, intrinsic manner only, nor is it straightforward in its processes and outcomes. Instead, it is a highly intersubjective and ambiguous happening, which is always engaged in *mutual* existential authentication of *all* actors that are indirectly and directly involved in poverty tourism.

Below, a typology of poverty tours in European welfare state cities is given (see table 2). It is classified on the basis of supra-identified narrational *and* experiential elements of constructivist *and* existential processes of authentication in poverty tourism – and inspired by existent typologies of guided walking tours (e.g., Barber, 2019; Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2018; Weiler & Black, 2015). From this, three kinds of poverty tours emerge: **1) preventive tours** (i.e., informing on local urban precarity), **2) critical tours** (i.e., questioning existent knowledge on local urban precarity, and **3) hopeful tours** (i.e., questioning and offering actionable alternatives to existent sights and images of local urban precarity).

Within the presumed 'totality' of local tourism industries, poverty tour initiatives can offer spaces for resistance to current ways of being, knowing and doing tourism as encounters between difference. As a prerequisite, poverty tours must engage in *critical pedagogy* (Freire, 2017), denouncing current social orders of oppressions that are present in European welfare regimes by employing the ambiguities of guides' lived

experiences of local urban precarity in a sociopolitical narrative for purposes of visibilization and contestation. In addition, poverty tours must install a *pedagogy of 'hope'* (Freire, 2014), offering alternatives to current engagements with local urban precarity – or reflecting on this together⁷⁸ – for the announcement of more socially-sustainable and ethically-responsible local tourism sectors and cities in general (Roy, Negrón-Gonzales, Opoku-Agyemang, & Talwalker, 2016).

⁷⁸ See the 'coffee moment' after *Ronja's straatwandeling*, as explained supra.

Type of tour	Narrative engagement with local urban precarity	Narrative engagement with associated urban challenges	Degree of interaction	Control of interaction	Interactional skills of guide	Organizational type	Examples
<i>Preventive tour</i>	Informing	Absent	Minimal	Tour guide	Presentation skills	Social enterprise	SHADES TOURS (Vienna), <i>Gadens Stemmer</i> (Copenhagen)
<i>Critical tour</i>	Denouncing	Present	Intermediate	Tour guide	Presentation, mediation and interpretation skills	Self-employment, NGO	<i>Wiener Nimmerland</i> (Vienna), <i>Ghetto Tours</i> (Copenhagen)
<i>Hopeful tour</i>	Denouncing and announcing	Present	Maximal	Shared among tour guide and participants	Presentation, mediation, interpretations and improvisation skills	Self-employment, (NGO)	<i>Ronja's straatwandeling</i> (The Hague)

Table 2. A typology of guided walking tours on urban precarity in European welfare state cities (based on Barber, 2019; Giddy & Hoogendoorn, 2018; Weiler & Black, 2015)

7.1 Research limitations

7.1.1 Biased participant sampling and high non-response rates

Bias is to be expected in participant profiles due to self-selection of interview participants to open invites and use of online reviews, as well as sampling from classmates and family members as tour participants. Whereas the former is assumed to express either strongly positive or negative views on their tour experiences – thus lacking more ‘neutral’ opinions in data analysis –, the latter could exhibit socially desirable interviewee behaviour in line with my research hypotheses, as expressed in personal conversations and on thesis seminars. Moreover, classmates and family members are expected to have closely related understandings of local urban precarity due to a shared interest in critical social sciences-perspectives and similar living conditions. This undermines the credibility of research findings. At the same time, family members Bert and Emilienne serve as a negative case analysis, taking on a more adversarial stance vis-à-vis the idea of poverty tourism and the sights and images of local urban precarity encountered therein. Thus, selection bias cannot be univocally determined. Unfortunately, I observed a high level of non-response among tour participants that were not priory acquainted to me; only two (i.e., Lilian and Güntner, see annex) chose to partake in the research.

In general, it proved to be difficult to establish and retain contact with research participants. For example, in the case of guides, incongruent time frames and schedules⁷⁹, means of communication⁸⁰, and manners of communication⁸¹ hindered prolonged engagements. This was especially the case when I was no longer physically present in the field and had to resort to online and telephonic contact only within the framework of my master’s programme’s continuous student mobility. Both identified non-profit social enterprise initiatives – i.e., SHADES TOURS and *Gadens Stemmer* – did not respond to my email and telephonic invites for an interview or overall involvement in the research, thus missing out on their particular, potentially more market-oriented perspectives for studying existential authentication and its sociopolitical-ethical implications in European poverty tourism. I also reached out to city councils, local tourism departments and travel agencies that function as intermediaries in poverty tourism encounters (either by setting up the necessary legal policy frameworks, marketing initiatives, or booking tours), resulting in non-response as well.

7.1.2 Language barriers

Fieldwork in Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen, and analysis of online reviews required me to speak, write and understand German, Dutch, English – and Danish, to a lesser degree. Whereas Dutch is my mother tongue and I currently have an English language proficiency corresponding to a level C2 within the Common European Framework of Reference for Languages, my French and especially German language proficiency is less

⁷⁹ e.g., an accumulation of booked tours in spring and summer, and the acquisition of a new guide, rendered the scheduling and conduct of an interview with Martin and Nadine from Wiener Nimmerland impossible.

⁸⁰ e.g., social media offered quicker response rates than communication via email and text message.

⁸¹ e.g., my class-based language use and long emails discouraged (fast) response rates.

developed. After eight years of French education and three years of German education in secondary school, I can express myself rather comfortably in French. However, my reproductive German writing and speaking skills are limited, which proved to be a challenge when engaging with tour participants during participatory tour observations in Vienna (see annex). Luckily, most research participants in Vienna were able and willing to engage in English, French or Dutch. When this was not the case, online translation tools and bodily expressions made up for any potential initial misunderstandings. In Copenhagen, a command of Danish proved to be mostly unnecessary due to a high level of English language proficiency in the overall Danish population. However, a language barrier was felt and expressed by me and my fellow tour participants when embarking on a Ghetto Tour: although guides spoke English, some seemed to express themselves less fluently or confidently than would have been the case in their native language (see focus group discussion in annex).⁸²

7.1.3 Ethical research relations and the issue of informed consent

I often noticed tensions between research participants' manners of engagement and my own, grounded in academic standards of rigorous scientific conduct that, at times, felt imposing⁸³. In response and after consulting my supervisor on these ethical doubts, I decided to adhere to an entangled ethics instead (supra), as such acknowledging ethics as a continuous and collaborative process of renegotiation. In doing so, I went beyond standards of ethics as a one-size fits all, and started listening and responding more effectively to opportunities for more ethical research encounters (Stouten et al., 2025). This was, for example, reflected in prioritising building rapport at first contact over obtaining relevant data for analysis; omitting technical jargon and long sentences from information letters and personal correspondence; and allowing participants to give informed consent and be represented in a manner that *they* preferred – regardless of if this was recorded or documented, and resulted in a coherent framework for participant representation.

Informed consent in particular proved to be challenging in the case of legal minors. Decisions regarding their involvement in research is often transferred to an adult legal guardian. This is done to protect children in light of their still-developing mental capacities; instead, adults are deemed to be able to make well-informed considerations about the potential advantages and disadvantages of research participation on their behalf (Carroll-Lind, Chapmana, Gregory, & Maxwell, 2006). Nevertheless good intentions, this standard for ethical conduct can inflict harm itself when denying youth decision-making power over their own situation, at times prohibiting or imposing research participation that runs counter to their own wishes (Stouten et al., 2025).

⁸² It must be noted that this Ghetto Tour exceptionally occurred in English, and that the youth who guided the tour are volunteers. Although they have perceived training, they are still learning in-situ on how to convey and present a story to different audiences, while reconciling the co-existence of six personal narratives in one tour.

⁸³ e.g., the idea that informed consent has to be recorded or documented, which was experienced as an unnecessary 'task' by most, and could evoke feelings of discomfort and distrust among some.

When conducting participatory observations with school children during *Wiener Nimmerland*-tours, I tried to obtain informed consent from their teachers as their guardians at the time of touring. I did so through a passive informed consent message, distributed via the official email address of *Wiener Nimmerland* to each teacher before commencement of their school group's tour. At the same time, I kindly asked teachers to give their students notice of my presence in the tour within the framework of my master's thesis. However, when presenting myself and my research at the start of each tour, I noticed that most pupils had not been informed by their teacher prior. During the tours themselves, I observed youth glancing at me writing in my notebook, or asking me what I would do with their data. In other words, I had not truly obtained *informed* consent, at least not by the youth who I was observing. Although data is anonymized and the research topic is not necessarily stigmatizing or harmful in any way to the youth in question, I doubt that they would have spoken out against research participation in the context of a supervised school fieldtrip, thereby partly forcing their hand herein.

7.2 Recommendations

7.2.1 Future research

Future research avenues can explore differences in existential authentication between poverty tours – i.e., as guided walking tours that tour sights and images of local urban precarity – and lectures, symposia and discussions facilitated by the same guides of poverty tours in places of their participants' choosing⁸⁴. The latter implies less experiential, dialogical and place-based ways of learning. At the same time, its embedment in a familiar physical and/or social place for participants can establish an emotionally safe environment to allow for the emergence of mutual emotional vulnerability and humanization. Furthermore, a more in-depth engagement with collaborative moments for reflection *in addition to* touring – in comparison to those poverty tour initiatives that do not provide therefor – is needed, as well as a more long-term monitoring of tour participants' learning cycles towards the potential incitement of mutual social recognition of both guide and tour participant. In doing so, the concrete personal and local social impact of poverty tour experiences can be measured. This would also require a profound exploration of local welfare regimes – and local imaginaries of 'deserving' and 'undeserving' welfare recipients linked thereto – to 'make sense' of individuals' learning outcomes in particular horizons of significance.

Additionally, the perspectives of *guides* in processes of constructivist and existential authentication has partly been neglected. Interviews with guides on their experiences of 'authenticity' in poverty tourism mostly yielded irrelevant data. After all, experiences are only partly conveyable, especially those tainted with human suffering and death are often downplayed or withheld. In light thereof, I did not deem it ethical to ask any questions that could evoke traumatic memories – especially considering the limited time for building rapport.

⁸⁴ Guide Martin of *Wiener Nimmerland*, guide Ronja of *Ronja's straatwandeling*, the guides from Ghetto Tours, and guide Julie of *Gadens Stemmer* engage in both types of educational activities.

Being a tour participant myself who organized shared visits with family members, classmates and teachers, I experienced a greater accessibility into *tour participants'* experiences of authenticity. However, by doing so, I reproduced symbolic and epistemological power imbalances in both research and society: tour guides' perspectives have historically been lacking in poverty tourism research, and those impacted by urban precarity are also under represented in societal debate as a whole (Selinger & Outtersen, 2010). Co-creative and participatory research approaches with low-threshold research methods (e.g., sensory methods and participatory-operationalized methods offer lower thresholds to participation) could allow for more direct accounts of guides on 'authentic' encounters, as experienced in poverty tourism.

Poverty tourism initiatives are shaped by the local tourism contexts in which they are allowed to emerge in particular formats and settings over others. A more comparative approach, invested in a study of Vienna's, The Hague's and, respectively, Copenhagen's local city marketing and tourism policy, could unveil nuances in current findings, potentially distinguishing typical elements of local tourism contexts for slightly-different kinds of authentication. Local, regional and national policy documents and action plans on tourism development offer relevant data, as well as interviews with local tourism boards and promoters, and consultation of the latter's official websites. A brief exploration of local city marketing and tourism policy in the cases of Vienna, The Hague and Copenhagen showcases engagements with 'sustainable tourism' and 'responsible tourism'. Although this seems to imply a supportive stance towards more ethically-responsible encounters in (poverty) tourism, future research has to look into how discourses of 'sustainable tourism' and 'responsible tourism' are conceptualized and actualized in practice for each city, as inspired by a recent study into the conceptualization of 'urban social sustainability' in scientific discourse (Barrado-Timón, 2020).

7.2.2 Policy recommendations

As the research findings show, commercializing tendencies of poverty tours disrupt the emergence of mutual social recognition and solidarity among guides and tour participants. Framing these tours within a less profit-oriented setting, such as education, could potentially serve sociopolitical – and, after installing a sense of 'hope' – transformative learning better. This would not only require a greater government investment of financial and human resources into both children and adult educational systems (including life-long learning programmes and team outings at work), but also calls for a cultural shift that encourages intersectoral knowledge exchange and collaboration for innovation of existent alternative classroom experiences and *sociopolitical* learning materials (in addition to preventive learning activities). The typology of poverty tours given in this master's thesis (see *supra* table 2) could function as a starting point for designing, operationalizing, piloting, testing and refining alternative learning tools.

Herein, guides cannot be held solely responsible for humanizing themselves vis-à-vis tour participants – as remarked by two tour participants⁸⁵ –, especially when tour participants' questions and behaviour

⁸⁵ e.g., see interviews with Soledad and Nikita in annex (*infra*).

potentially imply experiences of disrespect and psychological-existential danger. In response, guides require more psychological, communicative and organizational support, calling for a network of experiential guides across poverty tour initiatives in Europe to exchange best practices and relieve emotional pressures. Additionally, professionals (e.g., social and health care workers, civil servants, academics who have perhaps engaged in poverty tourism themselves) can also aid guides in the set-up of effective organizational structures, communications and psychological supports that enable their day-to-day operations. In return, guides can offer professionals collaborations on other projects, such as giving lectures or providing consultation as experiential experts (which guide Ronja of *Ronja's straatwandeling* is already offering as a paid service). Perhaps most importantly, guides are entitled to and must set boundaries to, e.g., the participant profiles that they accept on their tours and the kind of questions that can be posed, as such communicating clear expectations to tour participants on how guides can be engaged with. Although this would perhaps imply less truly critical and adversary encounters for breaking existent ways of being, knowing and doing, the emotional safety of guides must be guaranteed to allow for an existentially authentic encounter in the first place. Again, the ambiguities and contradictories in existential authentication vis-à-vis self-identification and personal transformation cannot be easily dealt with, as showcased here.

Furthermore, most poverty tours lack moments for collaborative reflexivity and dialogue, which is highly relevant for realizing tour participants' own agentic role in creating and maintaining urban precarity and "restoring equality" among tour guide and participants (translated excerpt from interview with guide Ronja of *Ronja's straatwandeling*). Inspired by *Ronja's straatwandeling* – more precisely, the 'coffee moment' that she built into the end of her tour –, I believe that the incorporation of distinctively reflective and dialogical activities into the tour can offer grounds for personal and societal transformation, especially when this occurs – literally and figuratively – on equal footing (e.g., all sitting down around a table; drinks are included in the ticket price). A take-home survey and/or a follow-up talk, as well as the establishment of a network of tour participants can foster reflexivity even more, harnessing the potentiality that was enacted during such moments of existentially authentic engagement. In sum, in reimagining the cultural practice of guided walking tours beyond the touring itself, a genuine encounter between tour guides and participants emerges that allows for a mutual existential authentication that serves both.

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