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**THESIS BOOK**

for the Doctoral Dissertation of

**Eylül Balaban**

Entitled

**“Beyond pace: Residents, sustainability and experience  
in slow tourism research”**

**Supervisor:**

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Budapest, 2025

**Institute of Sustainability**

**Department of Tourism**

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## **I. Background of Research**

Tourism has become one of the most influential sectors significantly contributing to the global economy. As highlighted by UN Tourism, 2024 showcased the resilience of the tourism industry, with 1.4 billion international arrivals. This figure represents an 11% increase compared to 2023, highlighting the strong post-pandemic demand, and reinforcing the industry's ongoing recovery (UN Tourism). However, despite this success, tourism also brings about a range of environmental impacts affecting destinations (Ivancsóné Horváth et al., 2023).

The current state of the tourism industry reflects a tension between two prevailing trends: there is a strong emphasis on experience-driven travel (González-Reverté et al., 2022), supported by rapid technological advancements (Gursoy et al., 2023), and on the other hand a growing interest in slower-paced tourism experiences that aim to enhance sustainability and mitigate the environmental pressures caused by mass tourism (Balaban & Keller, 2024). Mass tourism primarily refers to the large-scale movement of tourists to popular holiday destinations for leisure, typically involving standardized package deals aimed at a broader consumer base (Naumov & Green, 2015). This shift is particularly relevant, as climate-related challenges have been identified as one of the primary concerns for the sector's long-term recovery and resilience (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2024).

The growing desire for less harmful forms of living and traveling and the rise of sustainability concepts have led to the emergence of new tourism models (Conway & Timms, 2010). The concept of "slowing down" initially gained popularity in the food sector (Ozer et al., 2025) and proved to be successful; eventually, the "slow" prefix was later adapted to various sectors, including tourism (Fullagar et al., 2012).

Slow tourism has gained prominence in recent decades, offering tourists numerous benefits and meaningful experiences (Klarin et al., 2023). At the same time, it places residents at its center to emphasize their well-being and aims to enhance their quality of life (Chi & Han, 2020; Mavric et al., 2021). However, despite their central role, empirical research focusing on residents and their experiences within the context of slow tourism and cities remains limited.

### **I.1. The aim of the dissertation and research questions**

While scholarly interest in slow tourism continues to grow, there remains a need to understand the current state of the literature better and to identify the key recurring themes and concepts

within this area (Balaban & Keller, 2023). Therefore this dissertation aims to address these highlighted existing research gaps. Building upon these considerations from the literature, the research question (RQ) is the following:

*“What has academic research revealed about slow tourism and its practical applications, and how do residents and tourists influence its experiences and practices?”*

To address this research question, the phenomenon of slow tourism was examined through a range of conceptual perspectives. To present the research findings, an article-based dissertation has been structured, which comprises three complementary publications exploring slow tourism from theoretical, analytical, and practical perspectives: a book chapter (B1) and two journal articles (P1, P2).

The first publication (B1) adopts a multidisciplinary approach, combining insights from slow movement, slow food studies, and urban governance to conceptualize slow tourism within the broader Cittaslow movement. This publication establishes the theoretical foundation of slow tourism and clarifies how slow tourism principles intersect with sustainability, slow food, and quality of life.

The second publication (P1) employs a systematic literature review to analyze slow tourism research published between 2010 and 2021. It maps methodological approaches, geographic focus, and thematic trends, identifying underexplored gaps, particularly about residents and their participation in slow tourism.

The third publication (P2) addresses these gaps through an empirical analysis of user-generated content, examining how resident interactions and service experiences shape tourist loyalty and online narratives. This approach captures the lived realities of slow tourism from a visitor’s perspective and demonstrates the centrality of resident engagement to the slow tourism phenomenon.

## **1.2. Conceptual framework**

Drawing on the existing literature and the research gaps identified in the theoretical framework, slow tourism has been gaining greater attention and an expanding presence in academic discourse. This growing interest is primarily linked to the impact of the pandemic, a connection widely recognized in the literature.

Based on the research objectives, the primary research question of this dissertation (RQ) (*What has academic research revealed about slow tourism and its practical applications, and how do residents and tourists influence its experiences and practices?*) has been formulated, along with five supporting sub-questions that are explored across the three studies included in this dissertation. The Table 1 further provides the conceptual framework and outlines the research questions (Q1–Q5) that guide this dissertation.

<b>Research Objectives</b>	<b>Related Research Question</b>	<b>Related Publication</b>
To provide a conceptual overview of the Cittaslow movement by examining its principles and selection criteria, and to assess its role in shaping both the theoretical and practical foundations of slow tourism.	<i>Q1: How do principles and selection criteria of the Cittaslow movement shape the theoretical and practical understanding of slow tourism?</i>	B1
To examine the methodological frameworks used in slow tourism literature and identify significant research gaps, focusing on studies published between 2010 and 2021.	<i>Q2: What methodological frameworks have been used in slow tourism between 2010 and 2021, and what significant research gaps can be identified?</i>	P1
To identify key geographical focus in slow tourism research, specifically in terms of countries, and to examine prevailing and emerging trends, particularly in articles published between 2010-2021.	<i>Q3: Which countries were the focus of slow tourism literature between 2010 and 2021, and what patterns emerged in the destinations examined?</i>	P1
To examine how tourists perceive the quality and authenticity of their interactions with residents, within the context of their overall slow tourism experience.	<i>Q4: How do tourists describe their interaction and engagement with residents in slow tourism destinations, based on online reviews?</i>	P2
To contribute to the understanding of how resident involvement influences tourist loyalty and shapes online narratives within the context of slow tourism.	<i>Q5: How do residents' interactions and service experiences in slow tourism destinations influence tourists' revisit intentions and use of electronic word-of-mouth platforms such as TripAdvisor?</i>	P2

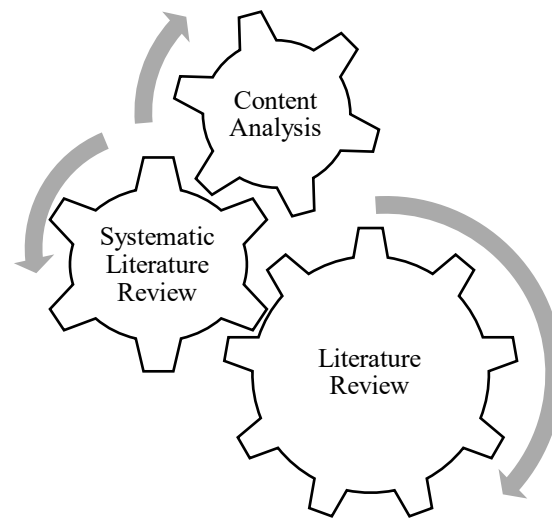
**Table 1. Research objectives and related questions (author's own elaboration)**

## **II. Methodology**

Qualitative research methodologies employed in this dissertation: literature review, systematic literature review, and content analysis. The systematic literature review adopts a mixed-method approach. These methods were selected to address the primary and sub-research questions outlined in Table 1, as described in section I.2, *Conceptual framework*.

Over the past decades, there has been a growing recognition of qualitative methodologies within tourism research (Ivanova et al., 2020). This trend marks a significant shift, reflecting qualitative methodologies' increasing legitimacy and acceptance in tourism studies (Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015). Given their exploratory nature, qualitative methodologies offer valuable depth in understanding tourism phenomena, particularly regarding social and cultural dimensions. They ultimately enrich the overall scope of tourism research (Wilson & Hollinshead, 2015).

Qualitative research is context-dependent, which makes it less standardized and more challenging to replicate. It is also characterized by an interpretive and naturalistic approach, which focuses on exploring phenomena within their real-world context. This approach involves collecting diverse empirical inputs, such as case studies, interviews, and visual materials. (Riley & Love, 2000). Figure 1 below visualizes the qualitative research methods used in each publication (B1, P1, and P2), how they complement each other and the overarching conceptual framework.



**Figure 1. Conceptual framework of employed research methods**  
(author's own elaboration)

### ***Literature review***

As an initial step in this dissertation, previously published academic studies were reviewed, and the official websites of the International Cittaslow Network and Cittaslow Türkiye were analyzed. The primary objective of this process was to offer a comprehensive outline of key concepts, including slow movement, slow food, slow tourism, and Cittaslow. It also aimed to explore the relationships between these concepts. Accordingly, a qualitative literature review

methodology is employed in the first publication (B1) to support this aim. It uses a critical narrative literature review, offering a descriptive and interpretive approach that fits well with the early stages of research. This method aligns with the research aim of comprehensively understanding slow tourism's key concepts. The publication demonstrates how these concepts intersect and present real-life practices. It thoroughly explores the Cittaslow concept, including how a city can join the Cittaslow Network and the selection criteria involved. Examining these key concepts in the first publication sets the foundation for the second publication (P2), a systematic literature review of the slow tourism literature.

### ***Systematic literature review***

As the second publication of this dissertation (P1) a systematic literature review (SLR) method is adopted to explore slow tourism literature in depth. The SLR mainly focused on the period between 2010 and 2021 to identify key concepts and emerging trends, particularly in research methodologies and geographical scope. In recent years, the SLR method has gained significant attention in academia, especially with an increasing number of tourism scholars incorporating it into their research (Cakal & Aykol, 2021).

Huang et al. (2023) highlighted the importance of using a mixed-method approach in an SLR. Hence, this combined method emphasizes the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative methods. This inclusive approach allows the qualitative component to explore narratives and contextual insights. At the same time, the quantitative aspect supports analytical rigor and structure, and SLR in this dissertation adopts this approach.

The second publication (P1) thoroughly explores slow tourism literature through a SLR, focusing on the period between 2010 and 2021. This SLR maps recurring themes in slow tourism literature, key concepts, methodological approaches, and the geographical focus of slow tourism across countries. One key contribution lies in identifying underexplored topics in slow tourism, particularly residents and their involvement, which sets the ground for the third publication (P2).

### ***Content analysis***

Content analysis (CA) is a widely used method in the social sciences, especially to analyze various forms of communication, particularly textual data, and recently, its application in tourism studies has notably increased (Barreda & Bilgihan, 2013; Vitouladiti, 2014; Camprubí & Coromina, 2016). Based on the SLR conducted as P1, it was discovered that scholars

predominantly employ in-depth interviews in qualitative research and surveys in quantitative research (Balaban & Keller, 2024). Thus, content analysis is employed in the third publication (P2) of this dissertation to address an overlooked method in the literature. UGC was analyzed as the final step of this research to identify common themes and patterns related to residents living in Cittaslow and their role in supporting slow tourism. TripAdvisor, one of the largest UGC platforms where tourists can share their experiences and leave reviews, has been analyzed to achieve this aim.

The third publication (P2) uses textual data from TripAdvisor, and analyzes the meaning of the content. A qualitative approach through discourse analysis is adopted to examine how resident interactions and services experience shape tourist revisit intentions and online narratives. The analysis relies on UGC to explore key concepts from visitors' perspective in slow cities.

### **III. Findings and conclusions of the dissertation**

**Main research question (RQ):** “What has academic research revealed about slow tourism and its practical applications, and how do residents and tourists influence its experiences and practices?”

**Response to the research question:** Slow tourism literature primarily focuses on the tourist perspective, emphasizing and analyzing demand-side factors. Despite residents' crucial role in slow tourism and the empirical analysis highlighting the importance of residents, the supply side remains underexplored. Additionally, the research revealed a geographical concentration on European destinations, accompanied by a methodological emphasis on qualitative approaches, particularly in-depth interviews. Slow tourism and its established connection to sustainability have been central themes in the literature. This dissertation reinforces that link, particularly through its emphasis on publications in tourism and sustainability-focused journals, further highlighting the critical role of sustainability within the context of slow tourism.

The empirical findings indicate social interaction with residents significantly shapes the tourism experience. Engagement with a destination is influenced by both the experiences and the quality of service. Positive experiences were highlighted as a crucial factor driving overall satisfaction and shaping future intentions to revisit. Although the existing literature has extensively explored slow tourism through the context of slow food, sustainability, Cittaslow development, and tourist behavior, it pays little attention to themes like well-being and the unique experiences destinations offer.

### **III.1 Shaping slow tourism through Cittaslow principles and criteria**

**Q1:** “How do principles and selection criteria of the Cittaslow movement shape the theoretical and practical understanding of slow tourism?”

**Response to Q1:** The Cittaslow movement highlights the philosophy of slowing down within communities, with a primary role in enhancing the quality of life for residents. The movement places residents at the center, aiming to improve their well-being. It is an international network connecting small towns with similar values. The movement’s orange snail logo represents core principles, including protecting environmental sustainability and preserving local values, which help protect the cultural identities of these towns. Moreover, local governments introduce new initiatives mainly to enhance urban infrastructure while providing new job opportunities to residents. Additionally, Cittaslow encourages the active participation of residents in decision-making processes, fostering cooperation and empowering communities to shape their future.

### **III.2 Methodological approaches and research gaps in slow tourism studies between 2010 and 2021**

**Q2:** “What methodological frameworks have been used in slow tourism between 2010 and 2021, and what significant research gaps can be identified?”

**Response to Q2:** The research identified qualitative methods as the most commonly used approach during the indicated period. Due to their exploratory and interpretive nature, qualitative methodologies offer rich, detailed insights that are particularly effective in understanding tourism. This development reflects the growing scholarly emphasis on qualitative approaches within tourism research. Among qualitative methodologies, in-depth interviews were the most frequently employed, followed by a lesser focus on content analysis. All other unnamed qualitative methods, such as focus groups and participant observation, remain largely underexplored. In terms of quantitative methods, surveys were used about half as often as in-depth interviews, highlighting a potential area for further development in slow tourism research. Moreover, mixed methods were even less common than quantitative approaches, suggesting that this area is also underexplored in the existing literature.

### **III.3 Geographical focus and destination patterns in slow tourism literature between 2010 and 2021**

**Q3:** “Which countries were the focus of slow tourism literature between 2010 and 2021, and what patterns emerged in the destinations examined?”

**Response to Q3:** The research indicated that Europe - particularly the UK, Italy and Poland - has been the most frequently studied region in slow tourism literature. Beyond Europe, Australia and Türkiye have identified as notable destinations, where slow tourism literature has seen considerable growth. The strong emphasis on European destinations is largely attributed to greater accessibility and awareness of the slow tourism concept. Common themes explored in the European contexts included slow food, slow travel, and sustainability. In the case of Australia, slow food was a key topic, often examined through various settings such as restaurants, festivals, food and wine events.

#### **III.4 Tourists' interactions and engagement with residents in slow tourism destinations based on online reviews**

**Q4:** "How do tourists describe their interaction and engagement with residents in slow tourism destinations, based on online reviews?"

**Response to Q4:** The analysis of TripAdvisor reviews revealed that tourists often emphasize their interactions with residents through emotional responses, which were generally positive. These connections typically occur at local markets and similar venues. Tourists extensively described their positive emotions and perceptions of residents in the context of social interaction. Negative interactions, however, were more commonly directed towards local shopkeepers.

Engagement is primarily associated with the services offered by local businesses; however, it extends beyond service interactions alone. The quality of service experiences plays a crucial role in fostering or diminishing tourist engagement. Overpricing and lack of attention to service quality have been identified as key factors leading to negative service experiences. Furthermore, the unique experiences tourists encounter at destinations were also identified as significant drivers of engagement.

#### **III.5 The influence of residents' interactions and service experiences on tourists' revisit intentions and electronic word of mouth in slow tourism destinations**

**Q5:** "How do residents' interactions and service experiences in slow tourism destinations influence tourists' revisit intentions and use of electronic word-of-mouth platforms such as TripAdvisor?"

**Response to Q5:** Based on the empirical research, social interactions can influence tourists' behavior, particularly their intention to revisit. However, at the same time, it is also influenced

by overall satisfaction, which is closely linked to other factors, including residents and social interactions. These elements can impact tourist behaviors, including their intention to revisit or electronic word-of-mouth (eWOM). However, recommendations to visit a destination are not always confined to slow tourism experiences, as they overlap with general tourism motivations.

### **III.6 Theoretical and practical implications of research**

#### ***Theoretical Implications***

Findings of this dissertation generates new theoretical insights emerged that deepen the understanding of slow tourism dynamics and strengthen its contribution to the literature. The first publication (B1) highlights the strong connections between slow tourism, slow food, and sustainability, showing how these concepts intersects and support each other. The B1 also shows that slow tourism has strengthened its popularity in Europe within the last two decades. Especially post-COVID-19 lifestyle changes, accessible transportation, and diverse travel modes across the continent primarily drive this increase. Beyond Europe, Australia emerges as a key country that embraces the slow philosophy and integrates it into current tourism practices. This integration appears recurrently in slow food restaurants and slow food-drink festivals.

The second publication (P1) displays that current slow tourism literature primarily concentrates on the demand side of tourism, examining tourists' behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes towards slow tourism. This focus leaves the supply side underdeveloped, especially the residents, and their role as central stakeholders in shaping slow tourism experiences. Scholars have mainly addressed residents' quality-of-life discussions in a few studies, but their broader contributions remain overlooked. This gap underscores the need to analyze how residents influence and co-create slow tourism practices.

The third publication (P2) is an empirical research study using a secondary data source to address the gap in residents by examining residents' roles from the visitors' perspective. Rather than focusing on a single destination, it utilizes slow tourism across multiple Cittaslow towns. By widening its scope, the P2 offers a broader perspective structured around four key dimensions, especially to understand the importance of residents' role: *Social Interaction*, *Engagement*, *Intention to Revisit*, and *(e)WOM*.

Additional key finding regarding the *Social Interaction* dimension, earlier results suggested that tourists mainly highlighted negative emotions and, hence overshadowing positive experiences.

In contrast, P2 shows that tourists describe positive emotions as much in detail as negative ones and even give them more attention than negative ones in some cases.

This publication contributes uniquely to the literature by introducing “*service experience*” as a core part of the *Engagement* dimension in slow tourism. Previous studies have largely overlooked this aspect. In addition, the analysis of the dimension, *Intention to Revisit* and *(e)WOM*, confirms earlier findings and further strengthens the existing patterns.

These studies (B1, P1, P2) strengthen residents as a foundational pillar of slow tourism. Moreover, demonstrate how residents’ involvement shapes tourist experiences through visitors’ eyes. This dissertation places qualitative methodologies at the core of its research design and generates in-depth insights into slow tourism. Future studies can build on this phenomenon with quantitative methods to compare findings, strengthen analytical depth, and respond to the need for mixed-method approaches in the slow tourism literature.

### ***Practical Implications***

The findings of this dissertation explain how slow tourism develops, highlight its socio-cultural and environmental benefits, and reveal the challenges it creates for destinations. These insights guide tourism professionals and local governments to design proactive strategies that maximize benefits while reducing risks.

For cities, local governments, and DMOs, the findings highlight the growing interest in slow tourism to promote sustainability and strengthen community-based activities. To secure long-term success and sustainability of destinations, tourism professionals need to apply slow tourism principles in destination planning and management strategically. As slow tourism has gained popularity over the last decades, destinations face a risk of over-promotion, which can also lead to overtourism or commodification of destinations. Therefore, tourism professionals must initially balance the growing demand to preserve authentic experiences. Then, to protect meaningful resident-tourist interactions, which together form the core of slow tourism (Manthiou et al., 2022). On the other hand, tourism professionals must also address undertourism, where too few visitors come to a destination. These challenges require careful planning in marketing strategies, pricing policies, and destination branding to ensure the sustainable future of slow tourism.

As residents are key stakeholders in slow tourism, their active participation, whether as local entrepreneurs or community members, is essential. Since residents of slow cities generally welcome new initiatives and are willing to participate in Cittaslow projects, especially during the early stages of tourism, planners have a significant opportunity to engage them (Klarin et al., 2023). Conversely, attracting large volumes of visitors risks undermining the authenticity and sustainability of the slow tourism. As a result, destination managers should take a cautious approach when categorizing slow tourism as a micro-niche. With thorough and strategic planning by DMOs, destinations can use such classifications to promote slow-themed experiences and activities.

For the tourism industry and local businesses, the findings suggest that social interactions and service quality are decisive in shaping tourist satisfaction within slow tourism destinations. It sets the objective of identifying how local businesses can strengthen visitor experiences through investing in targeted staff training that fosters an understanding of slow tourism values. Another important objective is emphasizing and examining the importance of collaboration between local governments, DMOs, and businesses. A related objective is ensuring local businesses align with the Cittaslow philosophy, which enhances engagement among residents and ensures a higher quality of service for visitors. This dissertation emphasizes how similar initiatives can support sustainable destination development while preserving authentic visitor experiences.

All the theoretical and practical implications of this dissertation are presented in Table 2 below.

<i>Theoretical and practical implication</i>	<i>Related Q</i>	<i>Publication</i>
Strengthen the connection between slow food, slow tourism, and sustainability in the literature	Q1	B1
Highlight a research gap by recognizing residents as key contributors to slow tourism	Q2, Q3	P1
Identify key themes and recurring patterns within the slow tourism literature	Q2, Q3	P1
Promote balanced destination marketing to ensure sustainability while preventing overtourism and protecting authenticity	Q1, Q2, Q3	B1, P1

Deepen understanding of residents' role by showing how positive social interactions create authentic experiences and strengthen tourist-resident relationships	Q4	P2
Link social interaction and engagement of tourists to revisit intentions and eWOM	Q5	P2
Reinforce the impact of social interaction and service quality on tourist satisfaction	Q5	P2
Emphasize the need for strategic planning and active resident involvement in slow tourism	Q4, Q5	P2
Highlight service experience as a key aspect of tourist engagement in slow tourism	Q4, Q5	P2

**Table 2. Theoretical and practical contribution of research** (author's own elaboration)

### III.7 Limitations and future research directions

This dissertation faces several limitations. First, the SLR is conducted before and during the COVID-19 pandemic, so this analysis does not include the post-pandemic effects. Future research might capture this phase because the pandemic has significantly reshaped the tourism industry. Researchers should examine whether post-pandemic conditions have further altered tourist behavior or travel patterns, especially regarding slow tourism. Second, the growing popularity of slow tourism is identified, but it has not been assessed for its potential recognition as a formal niche. Future research should track developments in niche tourism. Recognizing slow tourism as a distinct niche could reshape both the literature and the strategies of destinations.

The second limitation is the absence of primary empirical research, since the publications rely on previous research and secondary data sources. This reliance restricts the scope of the dissertation. Another limitation arises because the third publication focuses only on residents and their role in slow tourism from the visitors' perspective. To meet this aim, UGC is filtered according to that criterion, which narrowed the analysis. Future research should expand the scope by analyzing all relevant UGC without such filters, providing a broader and more holistic understanding of Cittaslow towns in the context of slow tourism.

These limitations indicate a need for further research and a more in-depth investigation, especially using primary data in slow tourism research. The findings of this dissertation serve as the foundation for future studies that help build and extend the literature in slow tourism. I am planning to expand the findings of this dissertation through the following research directions:

- Investigating residents' roles in slow tourism through in-depth interviews, especially with residents, to understand their perspective. This work will capture residents' perspectives on how much they engage in slow tourism activities and how their contributions support the promotion and development of the concept.
- Strengthening collaboration with local governments and DMOs in Cittaslow towns. This research will emphasize how residents contribute and how a cooperative role with institutions can advance and sustain slow tourism.
- Comparing at least two Cittaslow towns within the same country or region. This analysis will explore whether residents share similar beliefs about their roles in slow tourism, addressing an existing gap since most current studies focus on single destinations.

Collaboration with residents, community leaders, local governments, DMOs, and non-governmental organizations can be formed to conduct an in-depth analysis of these topics. Academic institutions and researchers across different Cittaslow towns can cooperate further. Additionally, a research network or consortium can strengthen coordination and promote knowledge exchange for future studies.

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## List of publications

### Peer-Reviewed Journal Articles

Balaban, E., & Keller, K. (2023). A lassú turizmus szakirodalmi áttekintése. *Turizmus Bulletin*, 23(2), 47-57. <https://doi.org/10.14267/TURBULL.2023v23n2.5>

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Balaban, E., & Keller, K. (2022). Slow tourism. In *A Magyar Regionális Tudományi Társaság XX. Vándorgyűlése*.

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### Book Chapters

Balaban, E. and Csapody, B. (2023) 'A „lassú mozgalom” főbb irányvonalai - Turizmus, étkezés és városirányítás', In: Keller, K. (szerk.) *A turisztikai niche termékek* Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó