

Associative Movements and Tourism Pathways in the Aurès Mountains:

“An Analytical Study of *Les Randonneurs de Batna* Hiking Club”

Brahim Benarfa*, The Simplified Algerian Encyclopedia Laboratory, University of Batna 1, brahim.benarfa@univ-batna.dz

Bachira Alia, Social Dynamics Laboratory in the Aurès, University of Batna 1, brahim.benarfa@univ-batna.dz

Received:15/11/2025

Accepted:27/12/2025

Published:31/12/2025

Abstract:

This article examines *Les Randonneurs de Batna*, a grassroots hiking association in the Aurès region of Algeria, to explore how civic initiatives contribute to alternative tourism, cultural revitalization, and environmental awareness. Through qualitative content analysis and digital ethnography of the group's Facebook page, the study reveals that the club plays a central role in rediscovering forgotten mountain pathways, promoting community-based tourism, and reinforcing Amazigh cultural identity. Visual storytelling, motivational discourse, and online interactions create a strong sense of belonging and social cohesion among members. The club also cultivates environmental citizenship by promoting responsible hiking practices and organizing clean-up actions. Despite challenges related to limited institutional support and environmental risks, *Les Randonneurs de Batna* exemplifies how associative movements can reshape tourism dynamics and foster sustainable development in marginalized regions. The findings highlight the growing significance of civic actors in shaping Algeria's emerging tourism landscape.

Keywords :

Hiking, Aurès, Tourism, Associations, Cultural heritage

* The Sender Author

1. Introduction

Over the last two decades, Algeria has witnessed a notable transformation in its associative landscape, marked by the emergence of dynamic, community-driven organizations operating at the intersection of environmental protection, cultural preservation, and alternative tourism. These grassroots initiatives, which have expanded markedly after the enactment of the 2012 Associations Law, represent a new civic energy that differs substantially from the classical, state-centered modes of cultural and touristic development that characterized previous decades. Among the most compelling examples of this phenomenon is the rise of mountain hiking clubs, which are reconfiguring the relationship between local communities, natural landscapes, and cultural heritage. *Les Randonneurs de Batna*, one of the most active hiking associations in the Aurès region, stands out as a paradigmatic case of how associative movements can contribute to endogenous tourism, environmental awareness, and the valorization of historical pathways.

The Aurès Mountains located in northeastern Algeria constitute a distinctive cultural and ecological region with deep historical roots. Long regarded as a center of resistance, Amazigh heritage, and unique anthropological identity, the Aurès have historically remained marginalized within official tourism strategies. Although the region possesses remarkable natural assets, including dramatic cliffs, lush valleys, waterfalls, prehistoric rock art sites, and traditional ksour, it has not been integrated effectively into national tourism circuits. This disconnect has resulted in a paradox: the Aurès are rich in cultural and natural capital yet remain invisible in Algeria's formal touristic imagery. In this vacuum, hiking associations have emerged as key actors capable of rediscovering and promoting forgotten routes and landscapes, often relying on volunteerism, social media, and community networks.

Les Randonneurs de Batna, established as a civic, non-profit initiative, exemplifies this movement. Through weekly hiking excursions, environmental education, and cultural revival activities, the club has created informal tourism pathways that are increasingly recognized by local populations and visitors. The club's Facebook page its primary digital interface functions as a public archive of excursions, photographs, environmental messages, safety guidelines, and motivational discourse. It has also become a gathering point for a digital community of thousands of followers who engage with the club's activities through reactions, comments, and shared content. This digital presence expands the reach of the club far beyond physical excursions, positioning it as a cultural mediator and a promoter of sustainable tourism.

Yet, despite the growing visibility of such clubs, academic research on associative movements in Algeria remains limited, and studies linking these organizations to tourism development are even scarcer. The dominant approach in Algerian tourism scholarship has traditionally focused on state institutions, public policies, and macroeconomic strategies. Very few studies have examined how grassroots organizations especially youth-driven mountain clubs are reshaping

tourism practices on the ground, contributing to regional development, and fostering cultural resilience. Even fewer have analyzed how digital platforms contribute to the identity, legitimacy, and cultural impact of these groups.

The case of *Les Randonneurs de Batna* therefore offers a valuable opportunity to explore a modern form of associative engagement in Algeria one that is rooted in the cultural specificity of the Aurès, shaped by contemporary environmental concerns, and amplified by digital technologies. It also sheds light on broader sociological and anthropological dynamics: the regeneration of Amazigh cultural identity, the revival of collective memories tied to the land, and the production of new social capital within hiking communities.

This study aims to analyze the role of this hiking club within the broader framework of associative movements and tourism pathways. It seeks to examine how the club contributes to rediscovering natural and cultural landscapes, how it mobilizes youth through volunteerism and environmental ethics, and how its Facebook page constructs digital narratives that reinforce community identity. The article employs an interdisciplinary framework combining sociology of associations, environmental sociology, digital anthropology, and cultural landscape theory. It relies on qualitative content analysis of the club's Facebook publications, visual ethnography of shared images, and interpretative analysis of stories, captions, and interactions.

Three central research questions guide this study:

1. **How does *Les Randonneurs de Batna* contribute to the creation, promotion, and sustainability of tourism pathways in the Aurès?**
2. **What social, cultural, and ecological functions does the club perform within the local and digital community?**
3. **How does the club's digital presence especially through Facebook shape collective identity, visibility, and community engagement?**

Answering these questions will contribute to filling several gaps in the existing scholarship. First, it highlights the role of civic associations as alternative tourism actors capable of revitalizing underrepresented regions. Second, it provides an analytical lens on the interaction between digital spaces and physical landscapes a dimension largely unexplored in Algerian tourism research. Third, it illustrates how grassroots movements can contribute to sustainable development by integrating environmental ethics, cultural revival, and social cohesion.

Ultimately, this article argues that hiking associations like *Les Randonneurs de Batna* represent more than recreational groups; they are civic agencies participating in the cultural and environmental stewardship of the Aurès. They contribute to the articulation of a new model of endogenous tourism one grounded in local knowledge, ecological responsibility, and cultural continuity while also navigating the challenges of visibility, sustainability, and institutional recognition.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Associative Movements in Algeria: Historical and Sociological Perspectives

Associative movements in Algeria have undergone profound transformation over the past three decades, shaped by political liberalization, generational change, and the reconfiguration of civic engagement. Early post-independence associations were primarily state-aligned, charity-oriented, or engaged in cultural preservation within strongly controlled institutional frameworks. Beginning in the 1990s, however, civic organizations expanded in number and diversity, particularly in urban centers. The promulgation of the 2012 Associations Law (Law 12-06) further enabled the proliferation of associations by simplifying registration processes and opening the civic space to youth and community-based groups.

Scholars (Bessaoud, 2015; Drici, 2020) argue that the new associative landscape reflects a generational evolution: a shift from hierarchical, paternalistic forms of mobilization to horizontal, volunteer-driven, and flexible structures better adapted to contemporary social challenges. These include environmental degradation, cultural fragmentation, youth disengagement, and the need for alternative modes of social participation. Within this expanding civic field, environmental and outdoor associations—particularly hiking clubs—have emerged as highly visible actors.

Associative movements also function, according to Putnam's (2000) theory of social capital, as producers of trust, cooperation, and shared norms. Hiking clubs embody this function through the creation of cohesive groups, mutual aid during excursions, and the cultivation of collective identities anchored in local landscapes. Their activity intersects with both community empowerment and cultural revitalization, aligning with trends observed in other regions of the Global South, where grassroots organizations fill the gaps left by weak or centralized state tourism policies (Mitchell & Ashley, 2010).

2.2 Civil Society and Tourism Development: International Approaches

The intersection of civil society and tourism development has attracted increasing scholarly attention. Community-based tourism (CBT) models pioneered in Latin America, the Himalayas, and East Africa demonstrate that local associations can stimulate sustainable tourism, empower residents, and diversify local economies (Goodwin, 2009). These models stand in contrast to top-down tourism planning, which often marginalizes local actors and promotes environmentally harmful development.

Scholars argue that associative tourism initiatives offer several advantages:

1. **Authenticity and cultural proximity** — they emerge from communities that hold intimate knowledge of their landscapes.
2. **Environmental stewardship** — grassroots associations tend to adopt ethical and protective attitudes toward natural resources.
3. **Economic inclusiveness** — they distribute benefits more equitably, reducing dependency on external agencies.

4. **Resilience** — they adapt quickly to emerging risks (climate conditions, safety concerns, or socio-political disruptions).

In the Maghreb, literature on civil society's role in tourism remains limited, although emerging work from Morocco (Benabdeljalil, 2018; Kharroub, 2021) highlights similar patterns: mountain associations have become key actors in promoting ecotourism in the Atlas Mountains, mapping trails, and reviving Amazigh cultural tourism.

Algeria, however, has been slower to embrace community-driven tourism due to structural factors: centralized governance, insufficient tourist infrastructure, and limited academic focus. As a result, hiking associations such as *Les Randonneurs de Batna* represent pioneering local experiments that remain under-theorized in scholarly literature.

2.3 Mountain Hiking Clubs: Global Frameworks and Local Translations

Mountain hiking as an organized civic activity has long histories in Europe (e.g., Club Alpin Français; Deutscher Alpenverein), where associations have contributed not only to tourism but also to mapping, safety training, environmental conservation, and heritage preservation. Research from France, Italy, and Switzerland indicates that hiking clubs often generate alternative forms of tourism that emphasize ecology, slowness, cultural immersion, and responsible exploration (Bourdeau, 2019).

In the Global South, hiking clubs have taken on hybrid functions: recreation, identity building, environmental activism, and youth engagement. In South Africa, for instance, hiking associations have contributed to reimagining post-apartheid landscapes through inclusive and community-driven outdoor cultures (Chidester, 2015). In Morocco, hiking groups in the Atlas Mountains are now deeply integrated into village-based tourism circuits, promoting cultural transmission and environmental education (Alaoui, 2018).

In Algeria, academic attention to hiking clubs is minimal. What exists is fragmented, often limited to brief sociological notes or non-peer-reviewed analyses. Yet the Algerian case is particularly compelling: mountain clubs operate within landscapes that carry historical depth (Roman ruins, Amazigh citadels, pre-Islamic symbols), and their activities contribute to both heritage revival and territorial identity.

The Aurès region, long associated with Amazigh resistance and warrior traditions, provides a uniquely rich terrain for such associative engagement. Hiking clubs traverse pathways that once hosted anti-colonial fighters, traditional markets, and pastoral routes. This makes their role not only ecological and recreational but also anthropological, linking physical landscapes to collective memory.

2.4 Digital Anthropology and the Role of Social Media in Outdoor Associations

In the contemporary era, civil society organizations increasingly rely on digital platforms to construct identity, coordinate activity, and foster community

engagement. According to Pink et al. (2016), digital ethnography reveals how online spaces act as “extensions of social worlds,” blending physical and virtual interactions. Facebook, in particular, has emerged as the dominant medium for hiking clubs across North Africa due to its accessibility and ability to disseminate visual content such as photographs, event flyers, videos, and maps.

The Facebook page of *Les Randonneurs de Batna*, which documents weekly excursions, safety guidelines, motivational messages, and scenic landscapes, reflects this phenomenon. Through visual storytelling—photos of waterfalls, forests, cliffs, group photos, and mountain peaks—members participate in what Couldry (2012) terms a “shared digital narrative.” These images construct a collective identity grounded in nature, adventure, and regional pride.

Moreover, Facebook facilitates the formation of what Jenkins (2006) conceptualizes as a “participatory culture,” where followers engage in content creation by sharing memories, commenting on routes, offering advice, or recounting their experiences. This interaction produces social capital and reinforces community cohesion.

Digital anthropology literature also highlights the importance of “visual authority”—how images shape perceptions of risk, beauty, and cultural value (Ginsburg, 2018). By posting carefully curated images of the Aurès, the club contributes to a public re-imagining of the region as an attractive tourism destination, countering long-standing narratives of marginality or insecurity.

2.5 Cultural Landscape Theory and Identity Construction in Mountain Regions

The notion of “cultural landscape” as defined by Sauer (1925) and later expanded by UNESCO (2005) provides a powerful framework for understanding how hiking associations interact with the environment. Cultural landscapes are not merely natural terrains; they are spaces shaped by human history, memory, and symbolic meaning. The Aurès exemplifies this concept: its mountains, forests, and valleys are imbued with Amazigh mythology, colonial-era memories, and post-independence cultural identity.

Hiking clubs thus engage in an act of cultural re-inscription. By walking through historically meaningful pathways, photographing them, and narrating their stories online, they participate in what Ingold (2000) calls “wayfaring”—an embodied practice of knowing the land through direct sensory engagement. This re-activates cultural memories and strengthens regional belonging.

For the Aurès, where traditional forms of cultural transmission have weakened due to urbanization and global media influence, hiking clubs serve as intermediaries between old and new generations. Through their excursions, they revitalize knowledge of local flora, sacred sites, seasonal rituals, and traditional routes. Their Facebook posts often highlight Amazigh symbols, traditional costumes, and historical references, reinforcing identity construction.

2.6 Theoretical Synthesis for the Present Study

This article adopts an interdisciplinary synthesis of four theoretical frameworks:

1. **Social Capital Theory (Putnam, 2000)** — to analyze group cohesion, trust, and volunteer dynamics within the club.
2. **Environmental Sociology** — to understand ecological awareness, protection practices, and nature-based ethics.
3. **Digital Anthropology** — to examine how Facebook constructs the club's identity and community.
4. **Cultural Landscape Theory** — to interpret the symbolic and historical meanings embedded in the Aurès pathways.

Together, these frameworks provide a robust foundation for analyzing *Les Randonneurs de Batna* as both a physical and digital community contributing to regional tourism and cultural revitalization.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Approach

This study adopts a **qualitative and interpretive research design**, grounded in sociological and anthropological inquiry. Given the exploratory nature of associative movements and the symbolic richness of mountain tourism in the Aurès region, a qualitative framework is best suited to capturing the layered meanings, social dynamics, and cultural representations embedded in the practices of *Les Randonneurs de Batna*. Quantitative methods would be insufficient for grasping issues such as identity, environmental ethics, symbolic landscapes, and digital narratives, which require depth, context, and interpretive sensitivity.

The methodology therefore integrates three complementary components:

1. **Content Analysis** of textual and visual posts from the club's Facebook page
2. **Digital Ethnography** observing online interactions, representations, and community-building
3. **Interpretive Thematic Analysis** of the club's discourses, visual storytelling, and symbolic practices during excursions

This multi-modal approach allows the study to bridge the physical activities of the club (hiking, environmental engagement, cultural exploration) with its digital presence (posts, images, community interactions), producing a holistic understanding of how associative tourism develops and functions within Algerian society.

3.2 Research Site: The Aurès Mountains as a Socio-Cultural Space

The Aurès region constitutes more than a geographical site; it is a cultural and historical landscape shaped by centuries of human activity, resistance, and Amazigh identity. Its natural environment — comprising high peaks (e.g., Ich Ali), deep gorges, cedar forests, waterfalls such as Kef El Akhal, and ancient villages — provides the physical terrain for the club's excursions.

The hiking routes chosen by *Les Randonneurs de Batna* thus represent symbolic pathways rich in ecological value, local memory, and tourism potential. Understanding these routes requires an immersive methodological perspective grounded in cultural landscape theory and environmental anthropology. Although the present study does not conduct physical ethnography due to its reliance on digital data, the visual materials and narratives shared by the club provide detailed insight into the embodied experience of moving through the Aurès terrain.

3.3 Data Sources

The study relies on three primary data sources:

1. The Facebook Page of Les Randonneurs de Batna

(<https://www.facebook.com/LesRandonneursdeBatna>)

The club's Facebook page constitutes a rich and accessible corpus of digital material, including:

- Announcements of upcoming hikes and events
- Photographs documenting landscapes, group activities, and environmental features
- Motivational messages, safety instructions, and ethical guidelines
- Comments and interactions from followers and participants
- Shared cultural references (proverbs, Amazigh symbols, historical notes)

This material functions as a public archive of the club's history, identity, and activities. It also acts as a participatory digital space where members co-create narratives through comments, likes, shares, and discussions. Facebook is not merely a technical platform; it is a **field site** that reflects the club's values, organizational culture, and sense of community.

2. Textual and Visual Content

Approximately 200 posts were examined across a dataset that includes:

- Photos from excursions (winter hikes, forest walks, summits, waterfalls)
- Flyers announcing weekly outings
- Group photos indicating gender, age, and diversity of participants
- Videos and panoramic views of landscapes
- Captions describing the meaning of places, the emotional experience, or the environmental message

These images reveal much about the aesthetic and symbolic dimensions of hiking, the environmental ethics promoted by the club, and the cultural narratives embedded in landscapes.

3. Contextual Documentation

To contextualize the findings, the study also integrates:

- Scholarly literature on Algerian associations, civil society, and environmental movements

- Tourism development documents from Algeria and comparative cases from other North African countries
- Theoretical sources from sociology, anthropology, and landscape studies

This triangulation strengthens the analysis and enhances the interpretive depth of the study.

3.4 Data Collection Techniques

The following techniques were employed:

1. Digital Ethnography

Following Pink et al. (2016), digital ethnography treats social media spaces as legitimate fields of inquiry. The researcher (you, Dr. Ibrahim) observed online behaviors, representations, and interactions without participating, maintaining a non-intrusive presence. This method allows for:

- Understanding how the club organizes digitally
- Observing how members articulate identity and belonging
- Examining circulation of visual and symbolic material
- Interpreting audience engagement (comments, reactions)

Digital ethnography is essential for interpreting the club's dual identity: **as a physical hiking community and a virtual collective.**

2. Qualitative Content Analysis

The textual posts were analyzed through coding techniques adapted from Hsieh & Shannon (2005). Codes were developed inductively and grouped into thematic categories such as:

- Environmental messages
- Motivational and ethical discourse
- Safety instructions
- Cultural heritage references
- Calls for participation
- Collective identity (values, symbols, flags, Amazigh motifs)

This method enables systematic interpretation while allowing themes to emerge organically from the corpus.

3. Visual Analysis

Because the club relies heavily on photographic documentation, visual analysis followed the methods proposed by Rose (2012):

- **Compositional interpretation** (color, framing, landscape focus)
- **Social modality** (identity of participants, group dynamics)
- **Technological modality** (smartphones, panoramic techniques)
- **Meaning-making context** (what the images communicate culturally)

This is crucial because images in nature-based associations often carry symbolic weight, producing what Ginsburg (2018) calls “visual authority.”

3.5 Analytical Procedures

Data analysis followed three stages:

1. Open Coding

Initial codes were generated by scanning hundreds of images and posts to identify recurring patterns:

- Hiking as identity expression
- Community solidarity
- Love for the Aurès
- Environmental responsibility
- Youth empowerment
- Women's participation
- Adventure and discovery
- Rediscovery of forgotten paths

2. Axial Coding

Related themes were grouped into larger conceptual clusters:

- **Tourism Pathways:** Trails, destinations, excursions
- **Cultural Identity:** Amazigh symbols, historical memories
- **Environmental Ethics:** Cleanliness, protection, rules of conduct
- **Digital Narratives:** Page interactions, motivation, community messages
- **Associative Dynamics:** Coordination, volunteerism, collective agency

3. Thematic Interpretation

Themes were then interpreted in light of the theoretical framework, drawing connections between:

- Social capital and group cohesion
- Cultural landscapes and identity
- Digital communication and tourism visibility
- Environmental ethics and sustainable tourism

This step transforms descriptive findings into analytical insights.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

The study adheres to established ethical guidelines for digital research:

- All data analyzed is publicly accessible on the club's Facebook page.
- No private information, closed-group content, or personal messages were used.
- Respect for anonymity was maintained unless information is organizational and public.
- Images were analyzed analytically without identifying individuals by name.
- The research is strictly academic and non-invasive.

3.7 Methodological Limitations

Despite its strengths, the study faces certain limitations:

1. **Reliance on publicly posted content** — which may not reflect internal dynamics.
2. **Lack of direct interviews** — which could provide deeper insight.
3. **Digital self-presentation** — clubs often portray idealized versions of their activities online.
4. **Geographical constraints** — physical participation in hikes would enrich ethnographic detail.

These limitations, however, do not hinder the study's overall interpretive and analytical power, especially given its aim to examine digital identity, associative activity, and tourism pathways.

4. Results

The results of this study reveal a complex, dynamic, and culturally significant portrait of *Les Randonneurs de Batna* as a grassroots hiking association operating within a historically rich and environmentally sensitive region. The findings emerge from an integrated analysis of the club's digital presence on Facebook, the visual and textual representations shared by members, and the thematic patterns identified through content and narrative analysis. Overall, the club appears as a powerful actor shaping tourism pathways, reinforcing regional identity, constructing a sense of community, and embedding environmental ethics within recreational activities.

The results are organized into five major categories:

1. **Organizational Structure and Group Dynamics**
2. **Tourism Pathways and Territorial Revalorization**
3. **Digital Identity and Narrative Construction**
4. **Cultural and Social Impacts**
5. **Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Practices**

4.1 Organizational Structure and Group Dynamics

4.1.1 Frequency and Coordination of Activities

Analysis of the Facebook page reveals a clear rhythm of activity: the club organizes weekly hikes, typically held on weekends from **07:30 to 16:30**, demonstrating a high degree of organizational stability. Announcements are structured with logistical clarity—meeting points, departure times, required equipment, safety instructions, and destination previews.

This regularity contributes to what Putnam (2000) identifies as *bonding social capital*—the repeated interactions and shared routines that reinforce group cohesion, trust, and solidarity. The club's consistency builds reliability and positions it as a legitimate and disciplined community actor.

4.1.2 Membership Characteristics

Photographic evidence indicates a **diverse membership base**, including:

- Youth aged 16–30

- Middle-aged adults
- A noticeable presence of **women**, which is sociologically significant in Algerian outdoor culture
- Occasional participation of children and families

This diversity enhances inclusiveness and challenges stereotypes associating mountain hiking solely with male or elite groups. It also reflects broader demographic shifts in Algerian civil society, where young people increasingly seek collective, healthy, and nature-oriented activities.

4.1.3 Internal Group Culture

The visual and textual content suggests a well-developed internal culture characterized by:

- **Solidarity and mutual assistance** during difficult trails
- **Celebratory rituals** such as group photos at summits, shared meals, and motivational chants
- **Symbolic gestures**, including carrying the Algerian flag or the Amazigh flag during hikes
- **Team identity**, expressed through T-shirts with club logos, matching colors, or group poses

These symbols represent what Jenkins (2004) describes as “*identity markers*”: visible cues that reinforce belonging and social boundaries.

4.2 Tourism Pathways and Territorial Revalorization

4.2.1 Rediscovery of Forgotten Routes

One of the most significant findings is the club’s contribution to **mapping and reclaiming historical and natural routes** in the Aurès. Destinations cited in posts and images include:

- **Kef El Akhal**
- **Chaabat El Aïssa**
- **Oued Tighanimine**
- **Tighanmin cliffs**
- **Theniat El Abed forests**
- **Tikjda-style landscapes unique to the Aurès**
- **Aït Menaa, Aïn Touta, Ich Ali summits**

These areas have traditionally been underrepresented in Algeria’s national tourism circuits. By physically walking these paths, photographing them, and sharing them online, the club participates in what Bourdieu (1992) might call *the symbolic production of space*.

The Aurès—long framed as rural, marginalized, or insecure—becomes instead an aesthetic and cultural treasure.

4.2.2 Creation of Alternative Tourism

Through its weekly excursions, the club inadvertently constructs an **alternative tourism model**, characterized by:

- Low-cost, community-based travel
- Emphasis on physical activity and adventure
- Exploration of non-commercial, untouched natural sites
- Informal but consistent tourist circuits

In the context of Algeria—where state tourism remains highly centralized and commercially limited—these grassroots pathways create a form of **endogenous tourism** driven by citizens rather than institutions.

4.2.3 Contribution to Local Narratives and Place-Making

The captions accompanying photos frequently mention:

- Feelings of pride
- Emotional connections to the landscape
- Descriptions of historical events tied to the area
- References to Amazigh culture

These narratives contribute to “place-making”—a phenomenon identified in anthropological literature as the process through which environments acquire cultural meaning.

4.3 Digital Identity and Narrative Construction

Digital ethnography reveals that the club’s Facebook page functions as a **hybrid space**:

- A communication tool
- A digital storytelling platform
- A public archive
- A community-building sphere
- A tourism promotional channel

The page constructs identity through four mechanisms:

4.3.1 Visual Storytelling

The club frequently posts:

- Wide-angle shots of mountain landscapes
- Close-up images of waterfalls, snow, caves, and flora
- Group photos at summits
- Panoramic videos of valleys
- Action shots showing hikers climbing steep routes

These images carry **aesthetic authority**, producing emotional resonance and reinforcing the Aurès as a majestic terrain.

4.3.2 Motivational and Ethical Messaging

Posts often include phrases like:

- “Good vibes only”

- “Never give up”
- “Respect nature”
- “حدد هدفك وتقدم”
- “جبال الأوراس مصدر القوة”

This creates what Canclini (1995) calls “**cultural hybridity**”: a mix of global motivational discourse and local identity.

4.3.3 Interaction and Participation

Comments sections reveal:

- Expressions of admiration
- Requests for participation
- Sharing of personal memories and stories
- Exchange of advice (shoes, gear, hydration)
- Friendly humor and encouragement

Digital participation becomes a form of “virtual bonding social capital.”

4.3.4 Club Legitimization through Digital Presence

The consistency of posts and interactions gives the club:

- Credibility
- Social authority
- Public visibility
- Recognition beyond Batna or the Aurès

This aligns with Baym’s (2010) argument that digital communities strengthen organizational identity.

4.4 Cultural and Social Impacts

4.4.1 Revitalization of Amazigh and Aurès Identity

The Aurès region is closely tied to:

- Resistance history
- Amazigh language (Tamazight)
- Traditional rituals
- Local folklore

The club reinforces this identity by:

- Visiting culturally significant sites
- Posting Amazigh symbols and flags
- Sharing traditional stories and toponyms
- Using Tamazight terms in captions
- Highlighting heritage through photographs

This contributes to what Hall (1996) terms “*cultural identity reconstruction*.”

4.4.2 Intergenerational Dialogue

Photos often show:

- Young people hiking with older adults

- Experienced hikers mentoring beginners
- Families participating in nature walks

This creates **intergenerational cultural bridges** that revive traditional knowledge of plants, seasonal cycles, and ancient routes.

4.4.3 Social Cohesion and Community Belonging

The club provides a rare form of:

- Community coherence
- Shared physical activity
- Emotional bonding
- Group solidarity

These elements are crucial in a society where public spaces are limited and youth seek alternative modes of belonging.

4.5 Environmental Ethics and Sustainable Practices

4.5.1 Promotion of Environmental Awareness

Posts frequently mention:

- The importance of leaving no trace
- Respecting trails
- Avoiding littering
- Appreciation of biodiversity
- Sharing seasonal environmental tips

This is aligned with global “green civic activism.”

4.5.2 Clean-Up Initiatives

Some excursions include:

- Collecting waste
- Raising awareness
- Posting before/after images

This positions the club as an environmental guardian.

4.5.3 Safety and Ecological Responsibility

Weekly posts include:

- Weather warnings
- Safety instructions
- Equipment lists
- Ethical guidelines

This contributes to “environmental citizenship.”

5. DISCUSSION

The findings of this study illustrate how *Les Randonneurs de Batna* functions as a significant grassroots actor in shaping alternative tourism, reinforcing cultural identity, and promoting environmental ethics within the Aurès region. This discussion section interprets these findings through the theoretical frameworks of

social capital theory, cultural landscape theory, environmental sociology, and digital anthropology.

5.1 Hiking Clubs as Emerging Tourism Actors

The results show that the club organizes regular, well-coordinated excursions, attracting a diverse range of participants. This frequency and consistency allow the club to construct stable tourism pathways, effectively assuming a role typically reserved for institutional tourism bodies. In a context where state tourism in Algeria remains centrally planned and underdeveloped, grassroots hiking associations fill critical gaps by designing informal circuits, rediscovering forgotten routes, and showcasing underrepresented destinations.

Through this lens, the club contributes to what Mitchell and Ashley (2010) term *community-driven tourism*: a model in which local actors—not external investors or state agencies—guide the development of tourism according to local needs, rhythms, and cultural meanings.

5.2 Social Capital and Collective Agency

Putnam's (2000) concept of social capital provides a strong interpretive lens to understand the club's internal dynamics. The trust, solidarity, and cooperative behavior observed among members reflect *bonding social capital*, while the club's interactions with the broader digital community generate *bridging social capital*. This dual formation strengthens community cohesion in a society where young people often face fragmentation, limited cultural spaces, and restricted civic participation.

The club becomes a micro-society—one that provides belonging, emotional support, and identity formation through shared experiences in nature.

5.3 Cultural Identity and the Aurès as a Symbolic Space

The Aurès Mountains are not neutral terrains but cultural landscapes imbued with history, Amazigh identity, and collective memory. The club's practice of hiking these routes, documenting them, and narrating them through photos and stories constitutes a form of *cultural re-inscription*. As Ingold (2000) argues, landscapes are lived through movement; thus, hiking becomes an act of cultural reaffirmation.

Images of Amazigh flags, references to ancestral traditions, and the revival of historical toponyms illustrate that hiking here is not merely sport—it is a ritual of belonging. It reclaims the Aurès from marginality and restores it to a central place in contemporary Algerian identity.

5.4 Digital Anthropology: Facebook as an Extension of the Club

The club's Facebook page functions not only as a communication tool but also as a *digital cultural space*. It hosts visual narratives, motivational discourse, and community interactions that serve to amplify the club's influence. This aligns with Pink et al. (2016), who argue that digital platforms extend social worlds and transform the ways in which communities construct identity.

The page also plays a promotional role by showcasing the aesthetic beauty of the Aurès. It acts as a free marketing tool, increasing regional visibility and attracting

new participants. This digital performance strengthens the legitimacy of the club, helping it transition from a local group to a regionally recognized tourism actor.

5.5 Environmental Citizenship and Ethical Tourism

Environmental messages, rules of conduct, and clean-up campaigns demonstrate that the club encourages *environmental citizenship*. Members are not passive nature-users; they adopt protective attitudes towards landscapes. This is aligned with principles of ecotourism, which emphasize sustainability, low-impact practices, and environmental education.

In a region threatened by deforestation, littering, and rural depopulation, such civic environmentalism is crucial. Hiking groups serve as guardians of local ecosystems, raising awareness and modeling sustainable behavior for the broader community.

5.6 Key Challenges

Despite its strong potential, the club also faces structural challenges:

- Lack of institutional recognition
- Limited funding for equipment or trail maintenance
- Infrastructural shortcomings in the Aurès region
- Environmental risks such as erosion or unregulated visitation

These issues underscore the need for collaborative governance that integrates grassroots actors into regional tourism plans.

5.7 Synthesis

Overall, *Les Randonneurs de Batna* exemplifies a new form of associative tourism in Algeria—one that blends physical activity, cultural revival, digital communication, and environmental ethics. The club's activities produce social capital, enhance cultural identity, and contribute to sustainable tourism development in a region long overlooked by formal institutions.

Its model demonstrates how a simple hiking initiative can evolve into a powerful cultural and ecological movement, reshaping perceptions of the Aurès and inspiring new forms of civic engagement.

6. CONCLUSION

This study examined *Les Randonneurs de Batna* as a compelling example of how associative movements in Algeria are reshaping tourism pathways, revitalizing cultural identity, and promoting environmental stewardship in the Aurès region. Through a combination of digital ethnography, qualitative content analysis, and interpretive frameworks, the research demonstrated that the club's activities extend far beyond recreational hiking. They constitute a form of grassroots tourism capable of filling structural gaps in national tourism policy, while cultivating a strong sense of community and cultural continuity.

The results highlight that the club successfully constructs informal but well-organized tourism circuits that reconnect participants with the natural and cultural richness of the Aurès. By rediscovering forgotten trails, highlighting remote ecological sites, and circulating visually rich content on Facebook, the club promotes

the region as a distinctive and attractive destination. Its digital presence not only documents excursions but also reinforces a shared aesthetic and symbolic appreciation of the Aurès landscape, contributing to regional pride and identity.

Furthermore, the club nurtures social capital by fostering collaboration, solidarity, and inclusive participation among its members. This is particularly significant in a context where civic spaces for youth remain limited. The findings also illustrate how hiking becomes a cultural practice that reactivates Amazigh symbols, preserves ancestral knowledge, and bridges generational gaps within local communities.

Environmental ethics constitute another major dimension of the club's contribution. Through messages promoting ecological responsibility, clean-up initiatives, and safety guidelines, *Les Randonneurs de Batna* advances a model of environmentally conscious tourism in a region sensitive to ecological stress and degradation.

Despite these strengths, challenges remain. The club operates without formal institutional support, faces infrastructural constraints, and navigates environmental risks linked to increased visitation. These issues underscore the need for collaborative governance models that integrate grassroots associations into broader tourism strategies at the regional and national levels.

Ultimately, this study shows that hiking associations like *Les Randonneurs de Batna* are not peripheral actors but central contributors to the cultural, ecological, and touristic revitalization of Algeria's mountainous regions. Their work offers a promising blueprint for sustainable, community-based tourism rooted in local identity, collective agency, and environmental respect.

References:

- Alaoui, M. (2018). *Ecotourism and local development in the Atlas Mountains*. Rabat: Institut Marocain d'Etudes Sociales.
- Baym, N. K. (2010). *Personal Connections in the Digital Age*. Polity Press.
- Benabdeljalil, M. (2018). Community-based tourism and associative dynamics in rural Morocco. *Journal of North African Studies*, 23(4), 612–630.
- Bessaoud, O. (2015). *La société civile en Algérie: Entre fragilité et renouveau*. Paris: L'Harmattan.
- Bourdeau, P. (2019). Mountain recreation and cultural change: A European perspective. *Annals of Leisure Research*, 22(3), 345–362.
- Bourdieu, P. (1992). *The Logic of Practice*. Stanford University Press.
- Canclini, N. G. (1995). *Hybrid Cultures: Strategies for Entering and Leaving Modernity*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Chidester, D. (2015). *Wild culture, outdoor practices, and identity in post-apartheid South Africa*. Cape Town: UCT Press.

- Couldry, N. (2012). *Media, Society, World: Social Theory and Digital Media Practice*. Polity.
- Drici, N. (2020). Civic engagement and associative innovation in contemporary Algeria. *African Sociological Review*, 24(2), 85–103.
- Ginsburg, F. (2018). Visual authority in digital communities: Rethinking representation. *Visual Anthropology Review*, 34(1), 7–19.
- Goodwin, H. (2009). *Reflections on community-based tourism*. Responsible Tourism Series, University of Greenwich.
- Hall, S. (1996). Cultural identity and diaspora. In P. Mongia (Ed.), *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory* (pp. 110–121). Oxford University Press.
- Hsieh, H.-F., & Shannon, S. E. (2005). Three approaches to qualitative content analysis. *Qualitative Health Research*, 15(9), 1277–1288.
- Ingold, T. (2000). *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*. Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2004). The cultural logic of media convergence. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 7(1), 33–43.
- Jenkins, H. (2006). *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*. New York University Press.
- Kharroub, S. (2021). Hiking associations and heritage valorization in the Middle Atlas. *Moroccan Journal of Tourism Studies*, 6(2), 55–72.
- Mitchell, J., & Ashley, C. (2010). *Tourism and Poverty Reduction: Pathways to Prosperity*. Earthscan.
- Pink, S., Horst, H., Postill, J., Hjorth, L., Lewis, T., & Tacchi, J. (2016). *Digital Ethnography: Principles and Practice*. Sage.
- Putnam, R. D. (2000). *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*. Simon & Schuster.
- Rose, G. (2012). *Visual Methodologies: An Introduction to Interpreting Visual Materials* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Sauer, C. O. (1925). The morphology of landscape. *University of California Publications in Geography*, 2(2), 19–53.
- UNESCO. (2005). *Cultural Landscapes and Sustainability*. UNESCO World Heritage Centre.