CRITICAL gambling studies



ISSN: 2563-190X. Available Open Access at https://criticalgamblingstudies.com

**ORIGINAL RESEARCH ARTICLE**

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APA Citation: Manzocchi, M., Galbignani, B., Lanfranchi, S., Romito, M., & Zanutto, G. M. (2026). Solidarity and Chance: Ethnographic Insights from an Italian Bingo Hall. *Critical Gambling Studies*, *7*(1), 31-42. https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs229

Article History:

Received April 28, 2025
Accepted February 3, 2026
Published June 24, 2026

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**Critical Gambling Studies**
Vol. 7, No. 1

# Solidarity and Chance: Ethnographic Insights from an Italian Bingo Hall

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Abstract: As in many other countries, bingo in Italy occupies a peculiar status: it exists in a gray area between the image of pathological gambling and a harmless pastime for the elderly. This marginal position within public gambling offers an opportunity to study the phenomenon beyond the pathological narrative. Through a team ethnography conducted in a bingo hall in Milan, we explored how practices of chance-taking intertwine with social dynamics of solidarity. Our observations reveal that engagement with chance—often through repeated losses—fosters a sense of shared fate among players, reinforced by collective superstitions and ritual behaviors that transform gaming tables into spaces of communal emotion. Individual wins become collective celebrations through ritualized redistribution of money, while losses are softened by mutual recognition and complaint. These practices create emotional bonds, particularly among marginalized groups. In this article, we interweave diary-like narrative reflections with theoretical analysis and contextualize our findings within Italy's gambling regulatory framework. Our aim is to restore dignity to bingo players, emphasizing the hall not merely as a site of consumption, but also as a space where social ties and emotional solidarities emerge and are sustained.

*Keywords: Bingo, solidarity, gambling, team ethnography, solitudes, Italy*

Article History: Received April 28, 2025; Accepted February 3, 2026; Published June 24, 2026
Available Open Access from https://doi.org/10.29173/cgs229

## 1. Entering the field

To enter the bingo hall, we must first cross the threshold of a gray building with opaque windows, a building whose appearance seems to embody all the socially prescribed meaning for those who frequent it. To the sometimes slightly "snobbish" eyes of students in the humanities and social sciences, the bingo hall appears as the materialization of the emotional flatness of the gambler[2].

For those of us unaccustomed to such spaces, simply walking through the ground floor of this building for the first time can be unsettling due to the multitude of slot machines, video poker terminals, monitors, and signs announcing payouts. The sight of the word "Bar" on the octagonal island in the center is almost comforting, an indulgence more in line with our usual habits. The few people present are all alone, each silently facing a slot machine; the staff seem to pay us no heed. At the back of the hall, next to the stairs, a sign (*Sala Bingo*) leads to a radically different setting. The stairs are indeed a portal marking a clear break from the previous environment: the lighting grows brighter, and we are enveloped by a pungent smell of disinfectant in stark contrast to the stale, smoky air of the ground floor. This cleansing ritual appears consistent with and functional for the image that several bingo players, as we discover, have of the slot machines a floor below: something sad and entirely different from what goes on in "their" hall upstairs.

The bingo hall is a rectangular space divided into two areas, separated by a glass wall, with one side designated for smokers. There are various circular tables alternating with pillars on which monitors are mounted to broadcast advertisements or announcements; in one corner, the large, random-number generator is positioned. Here, people interact with each other, sometimes animatedly. Naturally, we feel disoriented. We have arrived… and now what? We need to figure out where to position ourselves, how to play, how much the tickets cost, and all those norms of conduct that, through bodily

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[2] That the gambler is often not an emotionally detached person is something that a giant of Russian literature, Fyodor Dostoevsky, vividly illustrates in The Gambler (Dostoevskij, 1866/2014). Yet, we tend to forget this, favoring a more simplified image of the gambler: a sort of apathetic addict, incapable of stopping.

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experience, allow us to move fluidly in this physical and social space.

It is, first and foremost, a space for playing. We give it a try. How do we start? Bingo cards, at an average cost of two euros each, are sold quickly. Our slow pace in buying our first ones clashes with the frenetic rhythm around us. We realize in an instant that we are the only ones with just one card each. The women and men seated at the tables around us are playing at least three cards at once.

Suddenly, a female voice announces over the microphone that the game is starting. The chatter, in a kind of crescendo and decrescendo, becomes a liturgical murmur, blending hope and frustration in the hall. Dominating this soundscape of human hopes is the impersonal female voice listing the numbers drawn at a speed we did not expect: "18, 95, 75, 92, 62, 70, 38, 87, 47, 76, 49, 52, 34, 14, 3, 6, 82."

"SEH!"

Someone yells "Cinquina" (five-in-a-row). A bright red marker stick, very kitsch, is brought to the lucky lady's table. The match resumes quickly: "69, 8, 64, 99, 80, 24, 56, 37, 19, 71, 89, 91, 68, 63, 84, 51, 44, 7, 10, 5, 32, 17, 98, 93, 46, 66."

> My card doesn't seem particularly lucky, but I still get excited every time one of my numbers is called: "88, 43, 59, 85, 35, 29, 36." I realize the woman next to me is close to winning; I can hear her mumbling softly, but I can't make out the word, "31, 22, 61, 1, 90, 21, 55," "BINGO!" (Fieldnote, MM, 27/03/24)

A woman at a table behind us has won. Her tablemates congratulate her. To our great surprise, when the attendant brings her winnings of about three hundred euros on a tray, she starts distributing part of it to those who, by now, seem to be her friends. The winner, who comes across as a veteran around here, gets up, strolls around the hall, and continues this strange performance, sharing some of her winnings with other people nearby, which to us seems completely bizarre. She comes to our table and extends two euros to our neighbor.

## 2. Gambling: Between Italian Regulations and Scientific Discourse

Studying the phenomenon of gambling implies an interest in collective actions and complex social phenomena. We know that it spread very early on, taking on the character of a cultural universal. Among the artifacts found in Sumerian, Egyptian, and Chinese cultures, there is no shortage of various objects used for different games of chance: dice, stones, divinatory sticks, or game boards (Bloch, 1951). And, as evidence of the inherent controversies on the subject, we know that its regulation within different social and power systems has always been the subject of much debate. The origin of gambling prohibitions is traced back to Roman law, with the distinction between games of destrezza (skill) or ingegno (intellect) and those of alea, which were prohibited (Pelizzari, 2002). Even in various late medieval societies, a distinction was made between lawful games, such as chess, and unlawful games, such as dice (Ortalli, 2012).

However, it is only with the advent of modernity that gambling seems to acquire today's pervasiveness, as a consequence of three of its distinctive traits: the increase in social stratification, the more substantial circulation of goods and money, and high levels of collective and individual risk (Pryor, 1976). The opposition between risky, thrilling experiences and the predictability of routine seems to be central; an opposition which, if placed within societies founded on individual entrepreneurship and competition, can lead to seeking out the sensations guaranteed by gambling (Bloch, 1951; Pedroni & Scavarda, 2023). Furthermore, it has been highlighted how the modern concept of chance emerges simultaneously with that of risk, which plays a central role in the "ontological security" of individuals (Giddens, 1990/1994). Nonetheless, gambling implies a blind trust in expert knowledge systems, mathematically and computationally complicated, a type of trust that is also characteristic of radical modernity (Giddens, 1990/1994). Moreover, the lucky win in gambling provokes a curious split between reward and effort, thus challenging meritocratic logic and taking the form of a sort of magical ritual to relieve the pressure that such logic places on individuals (Reith, 2007). Another reason why the study of gambling offers a particularly revealing window into our times is that, as Malaby (2003) argues in his ethnography of dice gambling in Greece, gambling can be understood as a cultural practice through which people engage with and stage the contingency of social life. Far from representing an escape from uncertainty, play renders indeterminacy

tangible and meaningful through repeated, embodied encounters with chance. As will become clear in our ethnography, however, the outcome takes an opposite form: rather than producing "collective solitudes," as in Malaby's work, the engagement with chance in the bingo hall often generates practices of solidarity and mutual recognition.

Gambling proceeds represent a significant component of Italian tax revenues, with direct tax revenues amounting to 11.21 billion euros in 2022 (Agenzia delle Dogane e dei Monopoli, 2023). Furthermore, total state tax revenues in Italy amounted to 544.5 billion euros in the same year (Ragioneria Generale dello Stato, 2023). Consequently, public gambling contributed approximately 2.1% of total state tax revenue. It is also crucial to consider the social cost of gambling: a conservative estimate indicates an impact of over 2.3 billion euros in 2014, compared to state revenues of 7.9 billion euros in the same year (Lucchini & Comi, 2022).

The Italian gambling market is among the most significant on a global scale: in 2019, Italy's net gambling expenditure (losses) accounted for 5% (US $22.8 billion) of the global market, which was estimated at US $455 billion (Matteucci, 2022, p.330). In the 1990s, a turning point occurred in the gambling sector, leading to the creation of the peculiar concessions system: the state, holding the monopoly on gambling, relies on the services of private actors according to economic principles of greater efficiency, effectiveness, and cost-effectiveness, yet limiting the freedom of the various actors in the supply chain (Saltari, 2012; Sciarrone et al., 2023)[3]. Through processes of re-signification intended to erode the most stigmatizing factors surrounding gambling, games have progressively come to be regarded as a form of "supplementary and permanent" taxation (Rolando & Scavarda, 2016). However, the type of regulation implemented by policymakers has often been of an emergency nature (Sciarrone et al., 2023)[4]. Following these policies, bingo was also regulated in 2000.

Public opinion often becomes polarized between supporters of liberalization or prohibitionism. The former, in addition to leveraging the importance of gambling for Italian tax revenue, argue that liberalization is the only alternative to the proliferation of illegal markets, often citing the historical failure of various forms of prohibitionism. Positions more oriented toward prohibitionism, on the other hand, emphasize the social and health costs associated with gambling. These stances often arise from grassroots initiatives or are supported by municipal or regional authorities, which have an interest in minimizing healthcare costs. Thus, a series of non-linear processes, opposing forces, divergent interests, and the possibility of legislating at four different levels[5] have led to a regulatory framework that governs public gambling in an "asymmetric, multi-level manner with broad areas of opacity" (Sciarrone et al., 2023 p.74). In just a few decades, there has been a shift from a public monopoly to an "oligopoly of private concessionaires" (Matteucci, 2022 p.338), and a privatization of the benefits of state intervention has taken place (Sciarrone et al., 2023). In other words, we are witnessing what Tirole (2017) defines as the "capture of authority": a progressive reversal of power relations that sees the state dependent on public gambling revenues, which are, however, managed by private actors.

The Italian scenario also suggests rethinking the polarizing views that permeate the public debate. Regulatory opacity, in fact, leads to going beyond the legal-illegal dichotomy, making it more appropriate to speak of the interpenetration of the two spheres following processes of coexistence (Sciarrone & Storti, 2019). Indeed, gambling is a core business of mafia organizations that exploit this complex, multi-level framework to their advantage (Sciarrone et al., 2023).

From the perspective of the scientific literature that has analyzed gambling from the point of view of its users, there has clearly been a prevalence of a medical-psychological approach. This extremely extensive body of literature generally recognizes that gambling can constitute a possible[6] pathology,

[3] For more on how the various supply chains are structured, see R. Sciarrone et al., 2023.

[4] For example: through the Abruzzo Decree, aimed at raising financial resources to mitigate the damage caused by the 2009 L'Aquila earthquake, VLTs were introduced, as well as some instant-draw lotteries, the Lotto, and instant-pool numerical games.

[5] Respectively: European, national, regional, and municipal.

[6] This is possible because not all gambling is classified as pathological by psychiatry—although as with other mental disorders—the boundary between what is deemed "healthy" and "pathological" is blurry and constructed by the discipline itself.

officially defined as a psychiatric disorder by the American Psychiatric Association in 1980 (American Psychiatric Association, 1980). In the more recent *DSM-5* (American Psychiatric Association, 2013), the gambling disorder is defined as a behavior characterized by persistence and pervasiveness, causing marked distress or clinical impairment. Pathological gamblers are described as having psychological characteristics similar to other types of addiction, such as impulsivity, lack of self-control, and certain personality traits, including borderline, narcissistic, and antisocial traits (Marazziti et al., 2015). A recent systematic review has shown broad agreement that gambling addiction reduces quality of life due to poorer mental health (Moreira et al., 2023); highlighting comorbidity with higher levels of stress, impulsivity, cognitive distortions, and various other pathologies (such as anxiety, schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, mood disorders, and substance use disorders).

In Sean Wilcox's (2021) valuable genealogical analysis, employing a thoroughly Foucauldian methodology, it is shown that the medical model of problematic gambling developed from specific power dynamics, and that, through this model, individuals come to perceive themselves as ill and deviant. The transposition of the confessional apparatus, which occurred between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries from the religious field to the "scientific-medical" field (Foucault, 1976/2013), is revealed through a historical analysis of how discourse—i.e., a system of power that structures knowledge and reality (Foucault, 1970/2004)—developed in medical-psychiatric terms around problem gambling. In summary:

> […] this is the historical core of the medical model of problem gambling: a 21st century disease whose causes and treatments are firmly rooted in the 19th century moral objections to gambling deviance that it replaced. Through diagnostic and disciplinary techniques of confession, problem gambling persists as a medical disease with moral causes and a moral cure. (Wilcox 2021, p. 106)

In this context, our research group has chosen to address the phenomenon starting from a sociological approach, referring to the contribution of symbolic interactionism and studies on deviance as the outcome of labeling and social construction processes (Becker, 1963/2017). From this perspective, we have chosen to distance ourselves from etiological studies, which mostly employ a medical-psychological framework, and instead have been interested in how people experience being bingo players. Immersing ourselves among those who spend their days at bingo, we have attempted to grasp the meanings and practices of those who frequent this particular social world.

## 3. Studying bingo

Bingo represents a field of research capable of stimulating more markedly sociological and anthropological approaches within the study of gambling (Maltzahn et al., 2022). In a narrative review of 72 references on the academic literature concerning bingo, Maltzahn et al. (2022) have shown how, since the 1980s, it has provided a:

> (…) better understanding of groups of overlooked gamblers, corrects biases in gambling literature against bingo as a site of study, highlights the importance of social and structural factors in understanding gambling and employs methodological approaches that are congruent with the people and practices being studied. (Maltzahn et al., 2022, p.110)

In fact, as early as the pioneering research by Dixey & Talbot (1982), the social construction of the profile of female bingo players was highlighted, focusing on the dimensions of gender and class in practice. The topic was also explored in terms of harms to specific populations: David Hewitt and Maggie Hodgson (1994) were among the first to study gambling-related harms in Indigenous communities in Alberta, showing the relationship between long-term harm, bingo, and the use of gambling as a coping mechanism.

Given that bingo is an underrated form of gambling compared to other types, it is particularly interesting to understand the negotiations and conflicts among the state, businesses, and social groups involved in the supply chain (Bedford, 2019). It has indeed been shown that, partly because of regulations that equate it with other forms of gambling and partly due to marketing strategies of the promoting companies, bingo has recently been

taking on an increasingly "extractive" character, to the detriment of its community-based component (Bedford, 2019; Breen, 2009; Harrigan et al., 2015, Rockloff et al., 2016).

Focusing on recent ethnographic studies on this topic, much of the research adopts an intersectional feminist standpoint and centers on the condition of female players (Maclure et al., 2006; Cox et al., 2022). John Cox and colleagues (2022) study how bingo is integrated into social relationships that alleviate many of the financial problems and deeper existential anxieties of those living in precarious conditions. Also noteworthy are the findings of the ethnography by Chapple and Nofziger (2000), which highlight how and to what extent the desire to maintain social ties formed in the bingo hall influences one's willingness to continue playing. Similarly, the study by Ignazia Bartholini (2017)—to our knowledge, the only research in Italy that adopts an interactionist approach and qualitative techniques (semi-structured interviews, participant observations, and focus groups) in the study of a (Sicilian) bingo hall—shows how "within bingo halls a social capital is rebuilt that has been eroded outside" (Bartholini, 2017, p.244). The author demonstrates how bingo indeed fulfills a fundamental social function in the players' life stories, describing how alliances are formed, how particular beliefs are shared, and the difficulty of maintaining relationships formed inside the hall when outside it. As we will see, these issues also emerged in the fieldwork presented in this paper, which differs from Bartholini's (2017) study in being conducted in a radically different context: a metropolitan city. The original contribution of this article lies in analyzing bingo in its ritualistic dimension, by focusing on the forms of collective effervescence and the social ballets that take place within it.

*Laying one's cards on the table*

This work stems from field research carried out within a course on ethnography and participant observation as part of a master's program in sociology[7]. The choice of the field was made due to an initial curiosity about the world of gambling and, specifically, bingo. We were intrigued by the stigmatization that characterizes the representation of this practice and of its actors. We approached the field with a naïve outlook, without specific questions or hypotheses, eager to discover the sense that insiders attributed to it and beginning to focus our attention on the interactions among those present in the bingo hall. Since we were soon struck by the effort these actors put into consolidating reciprocal relationships, despite being superfluous to achieving the ultimate goal of the game (winning, in a context where there is one winner and many losers). We chose to observe, in particular, the forms of solidarity among the actors and the meanings these took on within the social world we were able to join, albeit for a limited time. Later, we decided to concentrate on two specific aspects that serve as *social lubricants* in the hall: the relationship with chance and money.

Regarding the timing and methods of the research, fieldwork lasted three months and took place in one of the two bingo halls in the city of Milan. Having several people conduct the research required adapting the classic, solitary approach to fieldwork (Cardano et al., 2023), including cross-reading fieldnotes, exchanging theoretical perspectives, and coding each other's notes, practices consistent with the collaborative ethnographic ethos described in the literature (Lassiter, 2005; Schensul & LeCompte, 2013). Being a research group allowed us to cultivate a collective reflexivity: "multiplying gazes, bodies, and positionalities makes it possible to generate deeper, more complex knowledge" (Giliberti & Queirolo Palmas, 2024, p.17). Discussing our observations helped reveal individual assumptions and biases, enriching the interpretative process. It also served as a method of validating findings and thus comparing meanings and interpretations produced during fieldwork and the drafting of the final report (Denzin, 1978). Conducting ethnography as a team then allowed us to intertwine note-coding to have a global rather than merely individual view of the experience, while confirming differences in how people perceive the same space. In this sense, we have embraced Heider's (1988) proposal that

[7] Our research group consisted of four master's students enrolled in the "Analisi dei Processi Sociali" (Social Processes Analysis) program at the University of Milano-Bicocca: Marco Manzocchi (MM), Beatrice Galbignani (BG), Sofia Lanfranchi (SL), and Giorgio Michele Zanutto (GZ); together with Professor Marco Romito, who supervised and supported the study.

disagreements among ethnographers are not only inevitable but highly valuable, as they reveal the constructivist nature of ethnography, thereby prompting critical attention to the personal and contextual factors influencing the research.

We conducted most of our field visits in pairs, though there were also occasions of solitary observation or visits in larger groups. We became regular visitors to the bingo hall, ensuring to visit at least three times a week. Choosing to go to the field at the same time with multiple pairs of eyes proved essential for minimizing costs and maximizing the research benefits; in fact, for a lower investment, we obtained more observational material and greater freedom to socialize with the people present. This was possible thanks to certain strategies, such as taking turns playing so that the other person could observe the matches or listening as a third party to the conversations colleagues were having with patrons of the hall.

As for our positioning, we conducted observations adopting a covert role (Cardano, 2011).

We therefore limited ourselves to playing and interacting with the social actors in the hall, without revealing the research objectives that brought us there. This choice was partly a necessary adaptation to the fact that the bingo hall is a private space with forms of oversight: one can only remain there on the condition that one is playing, and anything that interferes with the owners' profit objectives is considered an obstacle[8]. We felt that disclosing ourselves as researchers might have generated rumors which, upon reaching the owners, could have led to our being asked to leave. We also believe that perhaps our presenting ourselves as equals allowed players to interact with us without viewing themselves as study subjects labeled as deviant, and thus involuntarily internalizing the socially prescribed stigma.

During our observations, we remained attentive to our emotional engagement in the games, all of which was documented in our field notes, aligning with the principles of autoethnography, where the researcher's personal experiences are systematically analyzed to understand cultural phenomena, emphasizing the interplay between self and society (Ellis & Bochner, 2000).

Once the observation period ended and we had collected our material, we coded it using both top-down and bottom-up criteria, combining our experience with the theoretical concepts we had encountered in our readings.

## 4. The search for solidarity in the antagonism of play

During an average evening session, when the hall is most crowded and lively, about seventy players are present, seated at round tables of six. Based on the testimonies of several interlocutors we got to know in the hall, their fellow players are mostly situated friends: they interact much like friends do, but these bonds are rooted in the hall itself and seldom continue outside it. The only form of social relationship that seems to persist beyond its walls is romantic ones, of which there are only a few. Generally, bingo regulars meet inside the hall. Over time, they construct a network of relationships in that space that sometimes even show a certain level of intimacy, yet may lack some typical elements of a social relationship, such as knowing the name of the person they are speaking to in such a friendly way.

> I ask L. (F)[9] what the name is of the card seller who intrigues me, thinking they might be friends given how they interact. I'm surprised to find she doesn't know. L. (F) gestures for the girl to come over. I introduce myself. The girl's name is X. (F). L. (F) is now happy; she can call her by name and thanks me for that. (Fieldnote, BG, 11/04/24)

We heard a number of life stories marked by loneliness and a lack of ties: relatives 10,300 km away from Milan, widows whose deceased husbands got them hooked on the habit, mothers whose children live overseas. Bingo exerts a *centripetal force* that draws in many people, different from each other in age and nationality, yet united by solitude. It is also

[8] In this regard, *two of us,* during one of the earliest participant observations, were asked to leave by a bouncer at the request of a card seller, because they had skipped too many rounds of play and thus were not spending enough.

[9] To ensure the privacy of the people mentioned in our field notes, we decided to omit their full names, leaving only the initial letter. However, in order to convey a sense of gender and provide readers with better understanding, we have added an F/M marker based on stereotypical assumptions tied to a person's gender presentation and bodily hexis, fully aware of the associated overdetermination, which may not necessarily reflect the individual's actual gender identity.

important to highlight another characteristic shared by a portion of the hall's patrons: belonging to socioeconomically disadvantaged social classes. Although we did not systematically investigate this demographic aspect, our field observations align with the international literature on bingo, which widely confirms this correlation (e.g., Moubarac et al., 2010). In Italy, this specific intersection has been analyzed by Bartholini (2017) in reference to bingo, and by other scholars regarding gambling in general (D'Agati, 2005; Sarti & Triventi, 2012; Matteucci, 2022). Over time, these people meet, recognize each other, and create their own everyday atmosphere during the afternoon hours. Some are more reserved, limiting themselves to a few comments and a smile, while others dive in fully, almost feeling like a family: "Then they start talking about money and say: 'That comes and goes…' and G. (F) clarifies, 'but we're always here!' They laugh in complicity." (Fieldnote, SL, 23/05/24).

Therefore, relationships are at the heart of this place, making it a space that is both social and socializing. By taking part in the hall's collective ritual, gambling here seems also to play a role in the search for human presence. As Bartholini (2017) argues, the end of each round is a manifestation of solidarity, both for those who lose and those who win. It is precisely the desire to maintain the relationships forged inside the hall that serves as a primary source of attraction for regulars (Chapple & Nofziger, 2000; Bartholini, 2017). While there can be both descriptive and normative uses of the concept of solidarity (Laitinen & Pessi, 2014), we employ it here in a descriptive sense, referring to situated practices and interactions through which players build and sustain a sense of belonging within the hall, rather than to a moral or political ideal.

As hinted above, the sense of fate underlying hall solidarity is reinforced when people confront repeated losses and occasional wins. At this point, it is worth taking a closer look at the role played by the relationship with *chance*, caught between winning and losing, in the bingo hall.

## 5. Winning, losing, and the relationship with fate

The reality of bingo is that there are always only a couple of winners (Cinquina and Bingo) in a hall of about sixty players. Consequently, we quickly become very familiar with losing. Inside the hall, chance alone decides who wins and who loses. The rationality and disenchantment theorized by Weber (1919/1976) as peculiar to our times are a far cry from the relationship with contingency here. And yet trust in "expert" knowledge is needed to play (Giddens, 1990/1994). Indeed, one must assume the game is not rigged, only to then rely on the irrational and superstition in hopes of winning.

> Players relate to chance through various superstitious practices, both individual and collective. Among the most common personal ones is a sort of "ritual murmur" to summon the number they want: "While she's playing, the older lady calls out under her breath the numbers she wants to appear, sometimes even blurting out vaffanculo (Italian curse word expressing frustration)." (Fieldnote, GZ, 07/05/24).

In the context of the Milan bingo hall, superstitious gestures often take on a profoundly collective and interactional dimension. To participate in these shared performances, players must publicly display belief in such ritual gestures, regardless of how effective they may consider them in private. The outcome is often a sense of shared fate among table-mates. Frequent individual losses thus appear to be emotionally mitigated by this attitude, which transforms the experience from a subjective into an intersubjective one.

> At a certain point, SD (F) (a card seller) exclaims, 'But here you can't win anything!?' All of us at the table start cheering each other on, performing little rituals to attract luck. U. (M), who hadn't spoken until then, says excitedly, 'Come on, Table Eleven!' while touching the number marked on the table (which I had never noticed before). We all slap our hands on the table and laugh; the atmosphere feels like a tombola game. (Fieldnote, SL, 09/05/24)

More than its playful dimension, it is the relationship with chance, creating an easy topic of conversation and uniting people in loss, that is crucial for forming social bonds. You can sense that feeling of closeness that arises in adverse situations, akin to the effervescence triggered by an announcement of a train malfunction in a crowded commuter carriage, which suddenly makes people

who were ignoring each other a moment earlier start chatting.

Victory and defeat are central, collective moments in the dance of the game and are therefore governed by how much emotional expression players are allowed to show. Nobody in the hall likes losing, yet, as previously noted, common defeat creates a bond among the players, especially those sitting at the same table. When losing, it is perfectly acceptable to swear, but not to shout or make sudden noises, which draw the entire hall's disapproval.

In contrast to what has been observed in ethnographies of machine gambling, where play tends to be solitary and self-contained and social interaction is largely absent (Schüll, 2012; Cassidy, 2020), the tension of the game in the bingo hall is often experienced as a shared, collective emotion.

> Everyone at the table realizes we're about to win and supports us with smiles. M. (F), crossing her fingers, mutters: 'Come on, come on, come on.' I hope number twenty-eight comes up, the one we need. I feel strange; adrenaline is pumping through my veins, and for the first time, I really hope we win. We're so close. (Fieldnote, BG, 23/05/24)

Especially for seasoned players, the anticipation of winning accumulates as they invest in more cards, and they may feel it is somehow owed to them. Consequently, when it does happen, they may react restlessly: "The guy gets a cinquina and yells, Kittemmuort! (Neapolitan slang for expressing strong irritation, half-serious and theatrical) […] He also hits bingo in the same round and celebrates: 'Vaffanculo! Always the same one.' He's referring to the card." (Fieldnote, GZ, 26/05/24).

Once we grasp the emotional tension linked to winning and losing, it becomes essential to see how money acts as a genuine social lubricant.

## 6. Money as a "social lubricant"

The moments following a win are characterized by open display. The winner beams with excitement, calls friends or acquaintances, leaves tips for table-mates and the staff member who sold the winning card; in short, often involving as many people as possible in this celebratory act. It is precisely this gesture of redistributing part of the winnings that led us to examine the role of money, especially in relation to sociability and solidarity among those in the hall.

First and foremost, money is what allows one to play bingo, but not only individually. It also enables people to join the collective game who are not currently participating:

> Right before the round starts, L. (F) surprises me by handing out two euros each to me, to Giorgio, and to the other people at the table; then she offers to pay for four cards for S. (F) (like buying a round of drinks to celebrate her win). I thank her. I ask all three if this is a common thing to do. They answer yes, that this is the custom: "you share money with all table members and then you go around giving one to five euros 'for luck' to your friends around the hall." (Fieldnote, BG, 11/04/24)

Fieldwork revealed that redistributing part of one's winnings can be traced back to a practice of engaging with "luck"[10]. There is a magical-warding element in the act, but the interesting point is that this gesture is not done merely to ensure future wins for oneself. It also addresses the table-mates, a group within the group, and one's friends seated elsewhere. In a sense, the money being handed out is special because it was won by chance. Certainly, this act is also a norm within the bingo hall, akin to a code of etiquette that "good and earnest" bingo players are expected to follow, much like other customs. Finally, distributing money is an invitation to collective celebration, a facilitator and indeed a social lubricant. The act should be interpreted within the celebratory atmosphere of winning, marked by relaxation and shared joy at the table: distributing money thus seems to distribute part of the emotional high of winning. This dynamic strengthens fellowship among table-mates.

Sometimes, luck makes an appearance, and that is exactly what happened to two of us during our final day of participant observation in the hall:

[10] An emblematic example in this sense is the following excerpt from an interview in Bartholini's (2017) research: "If someone at our table wins, then perhaps fortune will also smile on those of us at his or her table, including me (Lucia, 44 years old)."

> I notice I've picked some promising cards; L. (F) points this out. Pointing to the second one, she says, "This one is good, it's lucky." With each new number called, the tension grows (…) I tell L. (F) I'm only a few away, three numbers, two numbers, just one left. "I only need 87," I say; (…) after a few numbers, she shouts to me: "Call it!" Trusting her, without even being sure, I yell: "BINGOOO!" as I raise my hands overhead; I mark the last number. It's hard to put the excitement of winning into words, especially under such unexpected circumstances. I'm in disbelief, a sense of numbness and dizziness washes over me, and I feel like I'm in a bubble. I can't make sense of anything. I'm overjoyed. I hug my table-mates, some of them congratulate me. It almost feels like I *deserve* the win. There's chaos around me. I turn to the ladies at the next table and, as though we were friends, I tell them: "It's my first bingo!" They're all happy, and I'm happy with them. Adrenaline courses through my veins; it's like a gift from the heavens landed in my hands, in *our* hands, luck has run its course. You never forget your first bingo. (Fieldnote, BG, 28/05/24)

> We walk out, waving both arms in the air in a sort of triumphant exit. *We actually got bingo!* We laugh all the way down the stairs: "Maybe we *really* will come back next Thursday." We leave the hall for the last time. (Fieldnote, SL, 28/05/24)

We wondered about our own win and what happened in the hall on that special occasion. First, we followed the custom of redistributing money naturally; but what's truly interesting is the hall's exceptionally enthusiastic response. Certainly, as mentioned, a win always shifts from an individual to a collective affair. Yet in our case, it was greeted with an unusual buzz, at least compared to what we had witnessed until then. This prompted us to think about how the subjects of our ethnographies *also* observe the ethnographers. Likely, the people in the hall had noticed a group of curious young people who befriended them and listened to their stories with genuine interest. Their attitude toward us oscillated, like a metronome, between moralistic discouragement and the pride of a mentor watching a novice learn the craft. And that very round, the "newbies" in whom they had decided to confide ended up winning! What better reason to indulge in the collective joy of winning before the next game began?

## Conclusions

This brief contribution has tried to provide a glimpse into the practices and interactions that enliven a particular gambling venue, drawing on our specific experience and that of the people we encountered there. Inspired by ethnographic work, our approach to the subject did not start from a pathological bias, but rather sought to grasp the complexity and socially shared meanings of that space. Adopting such a stance was made possible by the thick description approach, which allows one to go beyond superficial observation to perceive the deeper cultural meanings of social practices (Geertz, 1973). Equally essential was the genealogical analysis by Wilcox (2021), which brilliantly illustrates the historical and contingent processes through which medical and psychiatric discourse has constructed the pathological gambler's subjectivity.

This article has also briefly highlighted the unique features of the Italian regulatory framework, showing how heightened commercialization and the ongoing "capture of state authority" (Tirole, 2017) shape it. According to Bedford's (2019) thesis, these factors should negatively impact the communal dimension of bingo. We believe there is a strong link between the pathologizing, medical-psychiatric discourse and the growing commercialization of Italy's public gambling sector, a link underpinned by governmentality (Foucault, 2005) that deserves further investigation.

Regarding our fieldwork, in line with existing literature, this research also revealed the importance of social and solidaristic aspects as a driver for frequenting the bingo hall. We showed how it is specifically one's relationship with chance (generally a bad one), and the challenge it poses, that facilitates the creation of social bonds and fosters a sense of common fate. In encountering chance, superstition often shifts from an individual to a collective level, sometimes turning into a bona fide social dance at each gaming table. Losing is another factor reinforcing this sense of common fate, letting people

complain to someone next to them who shares the same predicament, forming solidarities. Then there is winning, which formally belongs to one or two people but becomes an occasion to celebrate with one's network, to celebrate, in short, the solidarity built precisely out of their shared defeats. Subsequently, we spotlighted the peculiar role of money, used superstitiously and redistributed among players in the event of a win, serving as a means of shared emotional involvement.

Unlike other gambling contexts, such as slot machine gambling, characterized by solitary and absorptive play (Schüll, 2012; Cassidy, 2020), the experience here remains profoundly collective. Likewise, the collective effervescence emerging in the bingo hall recalls, yet also departs from, that described by Geertz (1973) in the Balinese cockfight: while in Geertz's case it dramatizes hierarchy and rivalry, here it seems to transform chance into conviviality, though not without its subtle antagonisms. We believe that the motivation to step into the hall is profoundly social for many people: tied to those situated friendships (temporary but meaningful bonds formed in specific shared spaces) which, in all their ambivalence, represent a form of response to the loneliness produced by contemporary social and economic processes. This ambivalence arises, based on our experience during participant observation, from the fact that each person seems to hope, and at the same time fear, that the relationships formed in the bingo hall will end due to someone's permanent departure.

If this contribution has shed some light on the ambivalences of contemporary life, oscillating between individualism and the construction of social ties, between trust in expert knowledge and superstition, it remains crucial to delve further into how these dynamics most strongly affect particular social groups, which we encountered more frequently at the bingo hall: older women, people from migrant backgrounds, and those with low cultural and social capital. It therefore becomes vital to understand in what ways bingo constitutes a social and recreational practice intertwined with people's life conditions and the processes of structural violence that affect these groups, and whether, and how, it might give rise to various deviant career pathways (Becker, 1963/2017).

What this research could not explore in depth primarily concerns the biographical and social trajectories of the players observed. Future studies might investigate the processes of deviant-career formation (Becker, 1963/2017) more thoroughly, integrating participant observation with tools such as biographical interviews (Bertaux, 1997). At the same time, it would be important to further examine how different playing groups coexist within the hall, and how ethnicity, class, and gender shape both their boundaries and their moments of interaction.

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## Funding and Conflict of Interest Statement

The authors received no funding for the research, authorship, or publication of this article. The authors declare no conflicts of interest related to this work.

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