

BETWEEN ILLUSION AND NECESSITY: A SOCIOLOGICAL LOOK AT ONLINE BETTING IN TUNISIA

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Abstract

This article explores how online betting has become embedded in the everyday life of men in a popular neighborhood of Tunis. Based on eight semi-structured interviews conducted in a café and a nearby internet shop during April and May 2025, the study examines how economic precarity, digital technologies and local social environments shape practices that often oscillate between hope, habit and distraction. The findings reveal the central role of the smartphone, which has transformed occasional betting into a repetitive gesture. Participants see the smartphone not simply as a tool but as a permanent gateway to play, constantly available and constantly prompting action. The interviews also show that the attraction of online betting is not limited to the expectation of profit. For some, betting satisfies emotional needs such as excitement, routine, companionship or the desire to follow events and remain engaged with daily life. The research highlights the presence of a commercial ecosystem that encourages the spread of betting in working class neighborhoods. Overall, the study argues that online betting in Tunisia reflects broader social conditions marked by uncertainty, limited opportunities, digital dependency and a continuing search for hope.

Theoretical Framework

1. Play as an Escape and an Experience

The first way to understand online betting is through the sociology of play. Roger Caillois describes play as a suspension of ordinary reality, a moment that creates its own time and emotions. This idea appears clearly in the interviews. Many participants continued to bet not because they expected profit, but because the act of playing produced excitement, anticipation and emotional stimulation. For some, even when they shifted to free virtual betting platforms, the pleasure of predicting and following events remained intact. Betting therefore functions as an experiential activity that relieves monotony and brings intensity to everyday life, rather than a strictly economic strategy. It offers a controlled form of uncertainty that gives rhythm and meaning to time.

2. The Smartphone as a Social and Behavioural Device

The second axis concerns the central role of the smartphone. Following Michel Foucault's notion of the *dispositif*, the smartphone appears as a device that structures behaviour, shapes possibilities and produces repeated gestures. Interviewees insisted that the smartphone transformed betting from a weekly, match-based activity into a frequent reflex embedded in everyday routines. Tunisian research on digital dependence confirms that constant connectivity and notifications create a fertile ground for compulsive actions. In this context, online betting is inseparable from the technological environment that enables permanent access. The smartphone not only supports the practice but actively participates in its expansion by organising attention and inviting action throughout the day.

3. The Moral Economy of Hope in Conditions of Precarity

A third perspective is the role of hope in environments marked by economic uncertainty. Didier Fassin's concept of the moral economy of hope is useful to describe how individuals rely on improbable events to keep alive the possibility of improvement. Interviewees who mentioned winning 500 dinars remembered the event with precision, even if losses accumulated afterwards. The impact of that single gain is emotional and symbolic rather than mathematical; it sustains a sense of possibility in situations where stable income or upward mobility are limited. Online betting becomes linked to an imagined chance that life might suddenly shift, which explains its persistence even when players are aware of the risks.

4. Masculine Sociability and the Centrality of the Café

Another dimension concerns the social environment of cafés. As described by Abdelwahab Bouhdiba and illuminated through Erving Goffman's work on interaction rituals, cafés in Tunisia serve as informal male social spaces where conversations, routines and identities are shaped. Betting integrates naturally into these settings. Discussions about matches, shared reactions to results and collective observations form a social script that is reproduced daily. In working-class neighbourhoods where formal leisure infrastructures are limited, the café becomes the primary space for sociability. Betting is therefore not only an individual practice but also a shared ritual that reinforces belonging and companionship.

5. Routine, Repetition and the Learning of Behaviour

A further analytic contribution comes from Howard Becker's theory of learned behaviour, which explains how actions initially performed occasionally can become routine through repetition. Several men described betting as a reflex comparable to smoking, an activity performed without deliberate intention. This transformation occurs gradually as the same gestures are repeated in the same places and associated with the same emotional states. Smartphone availability and café sociability reinforce this process, making betting part of everyday habits even when individuals express awareness of past losses or risks.

6. Commercial Structures Supporting Online Betting

Finally, the fieldwork revealed that online betting is supported by commercial networks rather than standing as an isolated individual practice. The owner of the internet shop explained that representatives of betting companies visit regularly, offering commissions, partnerships and equipment improvements. This reflects a deliberate strategy to expand betting in working-class areas. The phenomenon can be understood through the work of Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello on contemporary capitalism, which highlights how economic actors integrate ordinary practices into broader circuits of profit. Online betting thus appears not only as a leisure activity but also as a commercially organised sector actively investing in physical and digital spaces.

Methodology

1. Field Site and Context

The research was conducted in a popular neighborhood of Tunis, where cafés function as central spaces of daily life and informal sociability. The selected café was chosen because online betting is practiced openly there, and conversations about matches, results and betting strategies occur naturally throughout the day. Its location in a working-class area made it a relevant environment for observing how digital practices intersect with social and economic

realities. A nearby internet shop, frequently used by local residents, was also included in the field site because it provided additional insight into the commercial side of online betting.

2. Participants and Sampling

The study is based on eight semi-structured interviews conducted between April and May 2025. All participants were men, reflecting the gendered nature of the café space, which is overwhelmingly male in this type of neighborhood. The interviewees ranged in age from twenty-two to sixty-seven and represented a variety of socio-professional backgrounds, including unemployed young adults, manual workers, employees, informal laborers and one retired man. One additional interview was carried out with the owner of the internet shop located near the café, who provided valuable information about the presence of betting companies and the commercial dynamics surrounding the practice.

3. Data Collection

Interviews were conducted directly in the café or on its terrace, depending on the participants' comfort and willingness to speak in a semi-public space. Each interview lasted approximately twenty minutes. The atmosphere was informal, which helped create a sense of familiarity and reduced the distance between the researcher and the participants. Before conducting the formal interviews, several visits were made to the café to establish rapport, observe the environment and engage in casual conversation with regular customers. This preliminary immersion made it easier for participants to speak openly about practices that can sometimes be sensitive or stigmatized.

The interviews followed a semi-structured guide that allowed participants to narrate their personal experiences with online betting, explain their motivations, describe their routines and reflect on their understanding of risk, addiction and financial expectations. The conversation also included questions about their everyday use of smartphones and their social habits in the café.

4. Analytical Approach

All interviews were transcribed into detailed notes shortly after they were conducted. The material was analyzed using a thematic approach. This method made it possible to isolate recurring motifs such as the influence of smartphones, the appeal of easy money, the pleasure of playing, the role of cafés as spaces of sociability, the emotional needs associated with betting and the commercial environment surrounding online betting. Themes were identified inductively, beginning with the concrete expressions and narratives provided by participants and then regrouped into broader analytical categories.

5. Researcher Position and Access

Access to the field was facilitated by adopting the position of a regular customer rather than an external observer. Spending time in the café prior to conducting interviews helped establish familiarity and reduced potential distrust. This position made participants more comfortable discussing their practices, their habits and their personal interpretations of betting. The researcher's discreet presence also made it possible to observe spontaneous conversations, shared reactions to sports results and the informal rituals through which betting becomes integrated into the daily rhythm of the café.

Results

1. Smartphones Transform Occasional Betting into a Daily Gesture

All interviewees highlighted the decisive role of the smartphone in changing the frequency and nature of their betting practices. Men who had previously placed bets once a week, usually on football matches, explained that the smartphone turned betting into a near-constant possibility. One participant, aged forty-five, said that betting had become “like a cigarette,” a reflexive action triggered each time he picked up his phone. The device made betting easier, faster and more frequent, integrating it into small everyday moments such as waiting in the café, commuting or scrolling before sleep. The shift from occasional to repetitive play emerged as one of the most consistent findings across interviews.

2. The Belief in Easy Money and the Weight of Rare Wins

Several participants described online betting as a possible path to rapid profit. One man recounted a single gain of five hundred dinars, a sum that would normally require nearly twenty days of work for him. Although he acknowledged losing most of the time, this exceptional win remained central in his narrative. It functioned as evidence that a sudden and significant improvement in income was possible. Similar stories appeared among other interviewees, who continued playing not because of frequent success but because of the emotional impact of rare wins. This belief in easy money persisted even among players who expressed awareness of the risks and the high probability of losing.

3. Playing for the Sake of the Game and the Search for Emotional Stimulation

Three younger participants explained that they continue to play on virtual platforms that do not involve real money. One of them had previously spent considerable amounts on betting but eventually realized he was no longer motivated by the expectation of profit. What mattered to him was the feeling of playing, the emotional charge of following results and the sense of involvement. After a friend introduced him to free online betting games, he shifted entirely to these platforms, saying it made him “happier” because the excitement remained while the risk disappeared. These accounts show that betting carries emotional value beyond financial hopes. It provides stimulation, distraction and a sense of engagement in everyday life.

4. The Café as a Setting for Shared Betting Practices

Two friends interviewed together explained that they placed bets primarily when they met at the café. They compared the practice to playing cards, describing it as a form of pleasure tied to sociability rather than addiction. Their interaction suggested that betting functions as a shared ritual, reinforcing bonds of friendship and giving shape to time spent together. Observations in the café also revealed frequent discussions about matches, odds and results among groups of men. In the absence of accessible leisure activities, the café appears as a central site where betting becomes a collective experience embedded in daily social life.

5. Retirees Seeking Routine, Structure and a Sense of Purpose

A retired participant described betting as part of his daily routine. He followed sports results on television and on his smartphone at the same time, and placed bets even on sports he did not particularly enjoy, such as tennis or hockey, when football was not available. He insisted that he did not bet for financial reasons but to “improve the day” and maintain a sense of interest in daily events. For him, betting helped structure time, provided cognitive activity and prevented the emptiness associated with retirement. His account highlights how betting can serve emotional and psychological needs that go beyond the pursuit of profit.

6. Awareness of Addiction in the Community

Some participants acknowledged that addiction is present in their environment. The two friends who considered their own betting harmless mentioned knowing people who had lost significant amounts of money, sold cars or houses, or even divorced because of compulsive betting. Although these stories did not deter them from playing, they revealed a collective awareness of the potential severity of uncontrolled gambling. This recognition coexists with a normalization of moderate betting practices in everyday life.

7. A Commercial Ecosystem Actively Promoting Betting

The owner of the nearby internet shop described regular visits from representatives of betting companies. These representatives offered partnerships, equipment upgrades and commissions in exchange for promoting specific betting platforms. Their presence indicates that online betting is not solely a spontaneous practice emerging from individual interest. It is supported by organized commercial strategies that target working-class neighborhoods and identify cafés and internet shops as key points for expanding their customer base. This ecosystem contributes to the visibility, accessibility and normalization of online betting in the local community.

Analysis and Discussion

1. The Central Role of the Smartphone in Structuring Behaviour

One of the most striking findings of the research is the way the smartphone shapes the rhythm and frequency of online betting. Participants repeatedly described how the device transformed betting from an occasional practice tied to specific football matches into an activity embedded in everyday gestures. The smartphone does not simply facilitate access; it reorganizes time and attention. Notifications, betting applications and the constant availability of online platforms create an environment where the impulse to bet is always present. This supports the idea that betting becomes a behavioural pattern produced by the device itself, especially in a context where digital education is limited. The smartphone appears as an actor that reorganizes conduct, encourages repetition and blurs the boundary between intentional play and habitual reflex.

2. Hope, Uncertainty and the Appeal of Sudden Gains

Economic precarity strongly influences how participants relate to betting. Many men explained that even a single significant win had a lasting psychological effect. A gain of 500 dinars, which represents nearly a month of income for some, becomes emotionally and symbolically powerful. The memory of such an event sustains hope despite repeated losses. This confirms the idea that betting is linked to a moral economy of hope: individuals continue to play not because it is rational but because it preserves the possibility of improvement in a context where stable employment and financial security are difficult to obtain. Betting becomes a symbolic alternative to economic stagnation, suggesting that change might come from outside ordinary life rather than through predictable work.

3. The Social Dimension of Betting and the Importance of the Café

The café plays a fundamental role in the way betting is practiced and experienced. For many participants, betting is inseparable from the social environment in which it occurs. Conversations, shared predictions and reactions to results create a collective experience that reinforces social ties. In neighborhoods where leisure infrastructures are scarce or inaccessible, the café becomes the primary space for relaxation, entertainment and companionship. Betting integrates naturally into this environment and becomes a ritual that maintains social cohesion.

The act of playing thus gains meaning not only through the possibility of financial reward but also through the interactions, performances and routines that unfold in the café.

4. Playing for Pleasure and Emotional Regulation

The interviews showed that betting is frequently used as an emotional outlet. Several participants explained that they no longer play primarily to win but to feel a sense of stimulation or escape. Those who moved to virtual platforms without financial stakes illustrate that the activity has an emotional value independent of economic outcomes. Betting provides excitement, focus and an emotional charge that helps break the monotony of daily life. This is particularly important in environments where boredom, uncertainty and lack of structured leisure opportunities are common. For retirees, betting also appears as a way to maintain cognitive engagement and structure the day, giving rhythm to time that might otherwise feel empty.

5. Routine and the Gradual Normalization of Betting

For some participants, betting has become a reflexive activity described as similar to smoking. Such expressions show how repeated gestures turn into routines that no longer require conscious decision-making. The café environment reinforces this repetition, as the same interactions occur in the same place and under the same emotional conditions. Over time, betting becomes normalized and loses its exceptional character. Even when individuals recognize the risks or are aware of extreme cases of addiction among acquaintances, the practice continues because it has become woven into their habits, their social environment and their daily rhythms.

6. The Influence of Commercial Actors on Local Betting Practices

The testimony of the internet shop owner revealed that betting companies play an active role in promoting and sustaining online betting in working-class neighborhoods. Representatives regularly offer partnerships, commissions and material support such as equipment renewal. This shows that online betting is not an isolated or spontaneous phenomenon but part of a structured commercial strategy. Companies identify cafés and internet shops as strategic points for expanding their customer base. Understanding this commercial ecosystem is essential to interpreting the persistence and growth of betting practices. It situates individual behaviour within a wider economic framework shaped by organized interests and market logic.

7. A Practice at the Intersection of Technology, Economy and Social Life

Overall, the analysis shows that online betting in Tunisia cannot be reduced to addiction or irrational behaviour. It is a complex practice emerging from the intersection of technological availability, economic fragility, emotional needs and social environments. Betting provides stimulation, companionship and a form of symbolic hope. It is supported by digital devices that encourage repetition and by commercial structures that intentionally expand the market. The practice reflects broader characteristics of contemporary Tunisian society, including uncertainty, limited avenues for leisure, and the search for meaning in an unstable environment.

Conclusion

The study of online betting in a popular neighborhood of Tunis reveals a practice that cannot be reduced to the search for money or the presence of addiction. Instead, it emerges as a complex social phenomenon shaped by the interaction of technology, economic vulnerability, emotional needs and the cultural importance of masculine sociability. The fieldwork shows that the smartphone plays a decisive role in transforming betting into a frequent and sometimes

reflexive activity. Constant access, notifications and the ease of use encourage repetition and blur the boundary between intentional play and habitual behaviour.

Economic uncertainty contributes to sustaining the appeal of betting, even when losses accumulate. A single substantial win can leave a lasting emotional mark and feed the belief that sudden improvement is possible. This attachment to improbable gains reflects a broader economy of hope shaped by limited opportunities and precarious work conditions. At the same time, many participants use betting not primarily for profit but for the emotional stimulation it provides. The pleasure of prediction, the excitement of following results and the sensation of being part of an unfolding event give meaning and rhythm to daily life, especially in contexts marked by monotony or lack of leisure alternatives.

The café emerges as a central space in this ecosystem. It serves as a social arena where routines are shared, conversations unfold and betting becomes a collective ritual. The café's role is particularly important in neighbourhoods where formal leisure infrastructures are scarce. For retirees, online betting also offers a way to structure time and maintain a sense of engagement with the world. These findings highlight the extent to which betting practices respond to emotional and social needs rather than simply financial motives.

Finally, the presence of betting company representatives in the area shows that the practice is supported by organized commercial strategies. Betting is not only a personal choice but also part of an economic sector that actively targets working-class communities. This commercial dimension contributes to the normalization and expansion of betting practices.

Taken together, these results suggest that online betting in Tunisia reflects broader transformations in contemporary society. It reveals a population navigating uncertainty, technological change and limited horizons of opportunity. Betting offers excitement, companionship and symbolic hope, but also exposes individuals to risks that are often recognized yet accepted. Understanding this phenomenon requires considering not only individual behaviour but also the social environments, technological devices and economic structures that shape it.

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