



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

The Missing Bridge Players of the Pandemic: Experiences of players who did not make the transition to online bridge

BAMSA Report 2023

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Abstract

This report is part of the *Bridging Covid* study developed by Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA). Through email questionnaires with 27 participants, it investigates how Covid-19 social restrictions and the move to digital platforms impacted those who did not make the transition to digital bridge. Through the *Bridging Covid* research we know a lot about the experiences of players who did make the switch to online bridge during the pandemic. However, little is known about the players who did not. We have described them as the ‘missing players’ as it is their voices and experiences from the time of the pandemic that are missing from the discussion.

Their experiences and inputs into the conversation discuss the game of bridge and how the online game changed it. Further key topics include: the crucial social aspect to the game, the need to focus on other aspects of wellbeing during the pandemic, bridge post-pandemic, and the declining numbers at face-to-face tables at local clubs. As a result, the report presents recommendations for the Scottish Bridge Union (SBU) and other bridge unions as a means of supporting these ‘missing players’ and, overall, the game of bridge post-pandemic.

1. Introduction

As the COVID-19 pandemic made its initial impact in March 2020 we began to see the beginnings of fundamental changes to everyday life. Government restrictions, and a call to ‘social distance’, introduced social limitations as people were instructed to stay at home and keep safe. With only key sectors remaining open to the public, the impact and changes on sectors such as leisure were substantial. Like most, this area found themselves moving what they could online. Gyms held fitness classes over Zoom, ‘live’ events were streamed online, and new online platforms were established in mindsport. With doors to many cultural, leisure, and tourism establishments closing, the Local Government Association (LGA) were quick to highlight the serious negative financial impact Covid-19 would have on this sector, with budgets being put under greater strain coming out of the pandemic (LGA, 2020).

This report, as part of the [Bridging Covid](#) study developed by [Bridge: A Mindsport for All](#) (BAMSA), investigates the impact the move to online bridge had for many players. The demographic of bridge players predominantly falls under older adults, and therefore those who were most impacted by COVID-19. We saw an increase in tech literacy and connectivity for older adults, as the use of phones, tablets, and computers were essential to keep in touch with family and friends (Morrow-Howell et al., 2020). Findings from Snellgrove and Punch (2022) dispute the discourse surrounding older adults and the use of technology, highlighting the willingness and adaptability of older adults to develop new skills to remain connected during the pandemic. Many players moved to online bridge to stay engaged with the game and maintain the social aspect. However, there is a subsection of players who did not make the switch to online playing. It is these players we refer to as ‘missing’. They are a marginalised group and are the missing voices – learning about their experiences may help us to better understand the impact of Covid-19 on the mindsport of bridge and its players.

1.1. Leisure Activities & Covid

Like many sectors during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, the leisure sector had to adapt to the Government restrictions that were put in place regarding social distancing. This meant that theatres, gyms, and social clubs (such as bridge clubs) closed their doors for the foreseeable future. Leisure and the leisure sector are a fundamental part of our society, providing an opportunity for people to escape the daily routines of work and care responsibilities (Marques & Giolo, 2020). Therefore, the closure of leisure clubs and organisations began to have a significant impact on people’s day-to-day lives during the pandemic.

Research from the Netherlands focused on the impact the Covid-19 social restrictions were having on students in the country. Marques & Giolo (2020) found that students reported doing more studying and work compared to their pre-pandemic routines, leaving them with little work/life balance and began exacerbating feelings of uneasiness and meaninglessness in their everyday lives. Leisure activities are often related to feelings of freedom and are more about the person’s will to do something rather than the need to do it (Wise,

2014). With Covid-19 restrictions in place, this feeling of freedom was hindered, leading to increased feelings of stress and anxiety throughout the pandemic. This is further supported by the work of Argan et al. as they state:

The feeling of those staying at home during the outbreak is the melding of work and leisure and the melding of days and hours. Dart (2006) characterises the merging of work and leisure at home as melding. This symbolises a chaos, the distortion of an existing order. (Argan et al., 2023: 151)

In the early days of the pandemic, these negative feelings were largely felt by individuals and this change in routine had a negative impact on the psychology of the individual. The removal of important wellbeing activities (going out, weekends, holidays) changed homelife significantly (Argan et al., 2023).

Using leisure activities as a coping mechanism for stressful events and experiences is common and referred to as 'leisure coping' (Iwasaki & Mannell, 2000). Leisure activities can give a person a sense of self and empowerment – helping to combat those feelings of meaninglessness – and can help provide social support. Leisure coping techniques are the behaviours exhibited through leisure activity involvement and provide coping in specific situations. These leisure coping strategies are therefore used to distance oneself from what is causing the stress, or used to lift a person's mood (Ausman, 2023).

As a result, there was increased demand for leisure activities and an increased demand for the development of new methods of leisure consumption with restrictions in place. This allowed for the emergence of new leisure organisational practices and the further development of potential pre-existing digital leisure ideas (Marques & Giolo, 2020). Similarly, we see this in bridge clubs and bridge organisations' response to the pandemic and social restrictions, through the increased use of online bridge platforms. As Son et al. (2020) discuss in their research, during the time of Covid-19 social restrictions there was the need for leisure activities to help cope with stress and feelings of isolation. Many of the social spaces people used for leisure activities hold significance for a person's wellbeing. When these social spaces are removed, or moved online, the discussion on what impact this has on a person's wellbeing remains (Mansfield, 2020). Research by Krendl and Perry (2021) showed that while wellbeing remained relatively stable, older adults experienced higher levels of depression and loneliness during the pandemic.

1.2. Covid & Social Isolation

Social isolation during the Covid-19 pandemic began to have a serious negative impact on many groups throughout the UK. For example, Alzheimer's UK (2020) have drawn attention to the impact social isolation during Covid has had on the health of older adults. After a survey of 128 care homes, 80% reported deterioration in the health of their residents with dementia due to social isolation and the lack of social

contact. Those with dementia were amongst the worst hit by the virus with it being the most common pre-existing condition for deaths. Alzheimer's UK reported that the increase in deaths of people with dementia was partly caused by increased cognitive impairment due to isolation. Essential care was reduced and visitations from family members could not take place, leaving those with dementia confused and resulted in them losing skills and independence – such as the ability to speak, eat, or drink (Alzheimer's UK, 2020).

However, social isolation in care homes is not a new development due to the pandemic. In 2010, the BBC reported that 40,000 people living in care homes were living in social isolation. The article expresses the detrimental effect social isolation can have on people living with dementia, citing the increased vulnerability these people now face (BBC, 2010). This previous BBC article from 2010 is then followed up by a supporting article in 2013 further showing the negative impact social isolation can have on older adults – even if they do not consider themselves lonely.

Both social isolation and feeling lonely were associated with a higher chance of death. But after adjusting for factors such as underlying health conditions, only social isolation remained important. That risk did not change when researchers added in whether or not someone felt lonely in their isolation. (BBC, 2013)

The article goes on to explain that social connections not only provide benefits such as emotional support and warmth but can also provide advice, reminders on when to take medications, and offer further support for older people in day-to-day life (BBC, 2013).

The potential negative impacts of increased social isolation amongst older adults are further discussed by articles focusing on the social isolation of older adults during Covid-19. The WHO defined loneliness as a significant health concern in 2019. Due to isolation and social distancing measures during the pandemic, social isolation and loneliness has surged amongst various groups in society. Dementia is ranked amongst the top conditions that is most adversely affected by social isolation and loneliness, and therefore people with dementia are amongst the top groups affected by Covid-19. Restrictions on social interactions were at the heart of the Covid-19 response. Therefore, people living with dementia were prone to accelerated progression of their disease.

The article further highlights the positives of social interaction on those living with dementia, 'Social interactions play a crucial role in easing some of dementia's most devastating symptoms', particularly stressing a significant improvement in mood regardless of the type of social activity, this was then improved further when the social activity was outdoors (Curelaru et al., 2021: 951).

General concerns about loneliness and declining health have long been linked (since the 1980s). We often find that older people are more likely to become socially isolated due to frailty, as well as deaths in their family and friendship networks (Fischer & Phillips, 1982). Research carried out in the USA (Klinenberg, 2015) highlighted that American men were more likely to become socially isolated compared to women due

to typically having smaller social networks and less stable connection with children and family over the life course. However, in further research Klinenberg (2016) states that this is not universally the case, as we see women more likely to become socially isolated in countries such as Mexico and Spain. There is increased risk of social isolation for already marginalised groups, such as people who identify as LGBTQIA+ due to the increased likelihood of being estranged from family (Klinenberg, 2016).

Social isolation is also related to geography. For example, neighbourhoods with solid social infrastructure experienced less fatalities due to social isolation compared to neighbourhoods of comparable wealth with poor social infrastructure (Klinenberg, 2016). This is supported by research carried out by Menec et al. (2019), whose research found associations between geographic factors and social isolation. Their findings suggested that socially isolated individuals are, to an extent, clustered into areas with higher proportions of low-income, older adults. Therefore, with Covid-19 social restrictions in place, bridge clubs had to close their doors. Players who would attend, often multiple times a week, were left with the choice to transition to the online game or give up the game for an extended period of time. Those who chose to stay offline were then faced with increased chances of social isolation and the negative impacts this could entail.

1.3. Older Adults, Technology & Covid

At the beginning of the pandemic, Siefert (2020) discussed concern about older adults belonging to a group of the population who is often excluded from digital practices as they may not wish to use new technologies – such as tablets or smartphones. This lack of digital participation, during a time of physical and social distancing, could lead to increased feelings of isolation amongst older adults. A digital gap between younger and older adults remains prevalent. For example, prior to the pandemic 27% of adults in the US, over the age of 65, did not use the internet (Siefert et al., 2021).

However, the use of technology amongst older adults is typically linked with positive outcomes, thus, digital inclusion should continue to be encouraged. Primarily, it is to do with the optimisation of daily activities – such as health management, financial management, shopping, and the organisation of leisure activities. The data shows that the use of technology in regard to these activities saves older adults time, effort, and money. Technology facilitates everyday activities and allows for better use of personal resources to meet personal goals (Nimrod, 2019).

The participation in leisure activities is a strong predictor of wellbeing in older adults in later life (Adams et al., 2011). The use of technology can improve older adults' wellbeing if it is used as a resource for greater engagement in activities that older adults find valuable. The use of technology improved tasks performed in everyday life, such as communication and caring responsibilities. It helps compensate for changes in older peoples' lives such as changes to physical abilities, retirement, and even loss of friends and family members (Nimrod, 2019). As Jordan and Lahiri (2023) explain, considering the digital shift and thinking about who participates in digital leisure, while there may be some restricting economic factors for some, the proportion

of people not using the internet in the UK, has fallen rapidly.

Moreover, research from the time of the pandemic highlighted the benefits of using technology for older adults (Chung et al., 2021). The findings of the research by Chung et al. (2021) show that the use of technology amongst older adults presents a new opportunity for facilitating social engagement – something particularly useful for those who had limited access to social spaces outside their home. It is a means to connect with others, and to remain engaged with leisure activities online. Overall, the research suggested that there was initial anxiety and uncertainty amongst older adults during the pandemic. However, the data suggests that older adults were resilient and successful in reorganising their routines to achieve their personal goals (for example, staying active). Furthermore, the research indicates that due to the challenging circumstances faced by older adults, more of their focus was put into tasks that they deemed most meaningful, primarily focusing on tasks that kept them healthy mentally and physically. Finally, there was an understanding of making compensations and adapting to the situation. This came in the way of using technology to assist carrying out leisure activities that would have previously taken place face-to-face – for example, book clubs, fitness classes, or keeping in touch with family and friends (Chung et al., 2021). As Ausman et al. (2023) state, ‘The pandemic itself has taught many people how to adapt to unfamiliar circumstances, including unpredictable stressors and the need for new coping mechanisms’ (2023, p.203). This emphasises how many people have adapted and invested time into new strategies for engaging in leisure activities.

Overall, the evidence shows that the use of technology for older adults holds many benefits – increased opportunities for engagement in leisure activities being one of them. However, we need to understand further the impact not being engaged with leisure activities online, in this case for players who did not make the transition to online bridge.

1.4. Online Bridge & Covid

Bridge, as a mindsport, is a social but technical game. It requires four players made up of two partnerships (each partnership sits across from each other). A deck of cards is dealt and a round of bidding begins based on the cards held by the players, with each partnership trying to ‘win’ the bidding auction. Once the bidding has taken place, and a partnership has won the ‘contract’ by bidding the highest, a bridge deal is played (Snellgrove & Punch, 2022). With clubs closed during the pandemic, the game of bridge moved online to platforms, such as Bridge Base Online (BBO) and later to a new platform developed during lockdown, RealBridge. Research commissioned by the SBU (2021) reported that those who did make the switch to online bridge during the pandemic experienced benefits such as the opportunity to continue to play bridge when restrictions did not allow clubs to open, the absence of travel, and the ability to play at home.

However, initial findings suggest that some players did not wish to participate in online bridge due to an uninterest in wanting to understand the technology, the lack of social interaction online bridge offered them,

and concerns around cheating in the online game (MacLean et al., 2023). Nonetheless, nationally, bridge clubs have seen a decline in the number of players returning to the bridge table post-pandemic. For example, the English Bridge Union (EBU) reported a 22% drop in membership in 2021 compared to 2019 pre-pandemic (EBU, 2022). With the world making its slow return to pre-pandemic normality, many bridge clubs are determined to get back to the point they were at pre-Covid. However, some bridge clubs have remained closed and are unlikely to reopen, and others struggle with lower face-to-face attendance (BAMSA, 2021).

Some bridge club chairs have suggested a hybrid club as the best possible solution (BAMSA, 2021). The idea of each club having some face-to-face bridge games, as well as online, caters to all players. Those who are reluctant to return to face-to-face have the opportunity to join online but also to re-establish the social connection with the club that may have been lost over the pandemic when bridge clubs were closed. It also gives those players who do not have any interest in playing online bridge the opportunity to return to face-to-face and regain the social aspect of the game. However, this could leave little option for bridge players who do not play online and are not yet comfortable returning to face-to-face clubs post-pandemic. This outcome could explain the drop in participation numbers reported by the EBU (2022).

We know a substantial amount about the experiences of bridge players who moved their bridge playing online during the Covid-19 pandemic. However, there is a lack of in-depth understanding about the players who did not engage with online bridge platforms, and little understanding about their position post-pandemic. To better understand the experiences of these players *the Bridging Covid* project by BAMSA has conducted qualitative research to answer some key questions:

- Q1.** Why did some players choose to not participate in playing bridge online during the pandemic?
- Q2.** In what ways, if any, did their perceptions of online bridge change over time as the pandemic continued?
- Q3.** How has their bridge playing changed as pandemic restrictions eased and bridge clubs returned to face-to-face?

2. Methodology

This project adopts a qualitative approach to address its aims and research questions. It uses thematic analysis (Flick, 2022) of the data to highlight any key trends in the experiences of bridge players who did not play any online bridge during the pandemic. The data is coded by age, nationality, and number of years spent playing bridge. As different countries adopted different Covid-19 responses and restrictions, nationality is an important consideration. In addition, age of the player remains a focus due to the predominantly older adult demographic present in the mindsport and the need to possibly learn new technologies and means of playing bridge.

The project has collected 27 responses to the email questionnaires that were distributed to players who did

not play bridge online during the pandemic. The majority of responses have come from players in the United Kingdom, however some international responses have been collected – primarily from the United States of America. The research gathered responses from players ranging from 30-80 years old – with only three responses from players under the age of 60. The bridge experience of players ranged from 2 and a half years to over 60 years, with many of the participants playing bridge for over 30 years (20 out of 27 respondents).

2.1. Email Questionnaires

This project uses questionnaires distributed via email to bridge players, who did not play online during the pandemic. The benefits of web surveys in qualitative research have been well documented with Wright (2005) highlighting the ability to reach a large number of people, in a short amount of time, at a great geographical difference. Furthermore, as Toepoel (2016) discusses, using email questionnaires as a qualitative method is a great benefit to explorative research as they allow the participant free reign to answer due to the typically open-ended design.

For those players who did not participate in online bridge due to lack of access to a device that would allow online bridge playing, BAMSA conducted telephone interviews to collect the experiences of bridge players who were disconnected to the online world. Furthermore, some email questionnaires had a follow up telephone interview to gain further understanding of those players' experiences.

Participants were recruited through various means online. For example, through Bridge Blogs, SBU membership, and bridge club membership. Further participants have been recruited through snowball sampling techniques, particularly those who did not have access to email. For these participants, telephone interviews were held.

2.2. SBU Interview

To better understand the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on bridge clubs across Scotland, this project conducted an interview with the Scottish Bridge Union (SBU). The virtual interview was used to get fundamental information about the organisational perception of the missing players and further understanding of the communication between bridge organisations and missing players. The SBU interview also discussed actions being taken by bridge organisations to assist players transitions back to face-to-face bridge.

3. Analysis & Findings

The questionnaires were initially analysed with descriptive analysis of each question. Once this was completed, some initial themes had emerged and thematic analysis of these themes could begin. Each question was analysed, and initial codes were developed. Analysis was carried out by paying close attention

to opinions of online bridge, details of experiences during the pandemic, and any changes players may have faced throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. The initial codes were then developed further by bringing some of the similar initial codes together (Flick, 2022). As the questionnaire was distributed to players who did not make the switch to online bridge during the pandemic, the answers provided give an insight into the experiences during the pandemic. There is much discussion surrounding their reasonings for not moving online, their lives during the pandemic with no bridge, and discussions about the future of bridge and bridge clubs as we have moved away from pandemic social restrictions and bridge clubs have reopened.

3.1. Impact of Covid

The questionnaire began by asking participants who did not play online bridge during the Covid-19 pandemic, what happened to their bridge playing. Players were prompted to discuss any changes to their playing, whether that involved trying online bridge platforms or playing face-to-face during the pandemic. Many changes to bridge playing described by players offered a clear contrast to their levels of playing prior to the pandemic. Many respondents stopped altogether, with a few trying online games but ultimately stopping due to not enjoying the online game of bridge. TR explained:

I've realised that I play bridge for the social element (talking to people at the table, having a meal and a drink afterwards and going through the boards). I got none of that from online bridge (it was all BBO at that point). (TR, 60-69 years, Wales)

Missing the social aspect of bridge was the key change for participants TI & AI (70-79 years, Scotland). They discussed that after stopping playing bridge during the pandemic they did not necessarily miss the game of bridge but, “*regretted being unable to meet friends regularly*”. This response shows the importance of the social aspect of the face-to-face game that was not achievable with online platforms of the game. This disconnect between the face-to-face game and the online game is explained by GC (60-69 years, Scotland) also as they state, “*I played once a week online for a time and then stopped as it was not the same as playing face to face*”. This indicates the significant change bridge players experienced when the Covid pandemic hit, and restrictions were put into place.

Participants were given the opportunity to recount how they felt about not playing bridge during the pandemic. They were asked if they missed playing, what they missed about it, and if they didn't miss it what did they believe the reasons for that was. While some missed the challenge of the game of bridge, more participants missed the game due to it being part of their routine pre-pandemic. TR writes:

I missed it when lockdown first happened, as it had been a major part of my routine. I played on average one evening a week, and one weekend in three. The actual bridge playing I didn't miss as much. What I have missed most is the socialising after play, and talking to others about bridge (not just hands, but everything surrounding the game – gossip, laws, rulings etc). I probably didn't miss

the actual bridge as much because I've been playing for so long and have achieved most of what I wanted. Pre-pandemic, I was tending to restrict myself to interesting events/locations, rather than trying to win as much as possible. (TR, 60-69 years, Wales)

This is supported in BB's response as they explained that it was not necessarily missing the game of bridge but missing pre-lockdown restriction life:

At first, I missed my life in general, and bridge was part of that. Later when most everything else came back, bridge was different. My local club closed permanently, tournaments were still being cancelled or not confirmed until times that made travel planning difficult, and had so many Covid rules they didn't sound that appealing or fun anyhow. In Texas my life was completely back to normal, and there were a few times I had my hopes up that bridge was going to return too, but it kept not. And then I missed bridge specifically.

I missed the structure that my weekly bridge games gave to my week, the sense of accomplishment from improving, the overall fun of playing and competing, having tournaments to look forward to, and meeting a much broader range of people than I would without bridge. Aside from my apartment (I worked remotely before covid) and the café/bar across the street from it, the bridge club had been the other place I spent the most time. Losing my bridge club felt like a big loss in my life. (BB, 30-39 years, USA)

Their answer highlights that Covid-19 and the longevity of the lockdown restrictions ultimately changed the game of bridge entirely for some people. It also had a significant financial impact on a lot of bridge clubs.

3.2. Missing Social Element

When asked why the players did not wish to take part in online bridge, the overwhelming response related to the lack of social element to the game. For example, one participant explained they saw "*little social benefits*" (DG, 70-79 years, Scotland) from playing bridge online. This is further explained by TJ as they state,

...bridge playing was more about meeting and interacting with others and we [bridge partner] both found that online bridge to be rather "cold and sterile". (TJ, 70-79 years, Scotland)

TJ highlights that the key factors of enjoyment of the game have been taken away when playing online. This is supported by MG (60-69 years, Wales) who argues that bridge is a social game and for MG to play online meant, "*no table presence, no friendly banter – no pleasure.*" Therefore, as a leisurely hobby, for many playing online changes it to a different game and one that many in our sample have no interest in partaking in. This reminder that the game of bridge is a hobby to many is illustrated in TI & AI's (70-79 years,

Scotland) response stating, *“Bridge is a game, a pastime and not an obsession”*. In their response they go on to emphasise the many other activities and pastimes they engaged in when face-to-face bridge was not an option. Their answer stresses the need to put energy into the leisure activities they valued to keep mentally and physically active.

Players were asked to elaborate on any dislikes they held for online bridge and similar responses from the previous question appeared in the participants’ answers. It becomes clear that the social element of the game is a key reason players enjoy it, with GH (50-59 years, UK) and DB (70-79 years, UK) citing impersonality as a main issue stating, *“It is impersonal and no longer really a social event”*. The response from MO (60-69 years, UK) supports this as they write that they *“miss the company and chat with others”* giving it that ‘cold and sterile’ feel mentioned by TJ previously.

Participants were then asked if they had reconsidered making the switch to the online game as the pandemic extended. For the study sample, the missing social element of the game was also a concern for others leaving many to not reconsider playing online during the pandemic. As LM (70-79 years, Scotland) writes, *“I enjoy the “social” side and was prepared to wait,”*. This illustrates that a main concern for many players was not for the game itself but the social aspect. Of those who did consider returning, their ultimate conclusions remained the same: online bridge did not live up to the experience of face-to-face bridge, as TR points out:

I did think about it, but initially the disadvantages were all still there, and as I said, I wasn’t missing the bridge itself. The introduction of RealBridge would have improved sociability at the virtual table, but the socialising afterwards would still be missing. By that time, I’d resigned myself to not playing bridge until F2F returned. (TR, 60-69, Wales)

Overall, the understanding amongst some players was that the game would not be the same online and they would rather wait to return to the table when face-to-face bridge resumed. As TR states in their response, the introduction of RealBridge allowed some social elements to return to the game – this offered some real practical benefits with playing. However, it was still an uninspiring experience compared to face-to-face bridge.

The importance of the social element is strengthened when asked about returning to face-to-face bridge once the pandemic restrictions had been lifted. Participants were asked to elaborate on why they started playing face-to-face bridge again, and also how often they are now playing – allowing contrast to be drawn between pre and post pandemic face-to-face bridge. From those who have returned to face-to-face games, the majority did so as soon as possible and have continued to play bridge face-to-face at a similar frequency as pre-pandemic – a couple of times a week. LM outlined their experience:

As soon as we were allowed to meet up in each other’s homes we started meeting up for our “kitchen” bridge sessions weekly. Only one of the four of us had played online and we were all keen

to meet up at the first opportunity. One of the Clubs I attend is not affiliated to the SBU and so it was agreed to start as soon as groups of people were allowed to meet up. We meet in a large hall and took all the precautions we could. I currently play regularly 3 times a week, which is quite enough. Sadly, one of the long-established Clubs I played in pre-Covid has disbanded due to lack of support. (LM, 70-79, Scotland)

This account of bridge post-pandemic restrictions again highlights the importance of the social aspect of the game to players. LM's account shows that even with clubs not re-opened they were quick to establish face-to-face bridge back into their routine through 'kitchen' sessions with friends and regain that social element.

3.3. Worries of Cheating

A primary concern for many of the respondents who decided not to make the switch to online bridge was due to the increased chance of people cheating in the game. For example, DG (70-79 years, England) explained that it was not just the lack of social element of the game, but it was *"too easy to cheat online,"* making the online game unappealing. The cheating within the online game discouraged participants from joining online games as the pandemic continued. GH writes:

I was discouraged by the fact that it was still not "proper" bridge – no social element and also, after a while, clearly riddled with cheating. (GH, 50-59 years, UK)

This answer encompasses much of what others were feeling. The distinct lack of social element in online bridge and the fact that *"numerous cases of online cheating came to light"* (CJ, 60-69 years, USA).

3.4. A Focus on Wellbeing

Participants were asked how they used the extra time they had by not playing bridge during the pandemic. Research by Chung et al. (2021) discusses that during the pandemic older adults reorganised their routines, filled their time with activities they found of value and that helped them towards obtaining personal goals – such as maintaining mental and physical health. This is indicated by CJ (60-69 years, USA) who states they spent their spare time *"Pursuing other activities (walking, biking, hiking) to maintain physical and mental fitness"* when not playing bridge. Physical fitness was an aim for many of the participants with two respondents citing playing golf as their main pastime, and five citing walking as a core lockdown activity. Mental stimulus was also a key focus for many participants, with many spending their time reading, completing jigsaw puzzles, and ensuring they kept in touch with family.

However, there were a few respondents where the lockdown restrictions and closure of leisure activities had a damaging effect on their daily routines. When asked what they did with their spare time GH states:

Honestly, doing very little. My television was my entertainment, and I over watched the financial markets and politics. Also, I ate, in particular comfort foods and ice cream, and believe at one point that I gained about 15 pounds. This has since more than come off, as I attend to my health. (GH, 70-79, USA)

This was the reality for many people during the pandemic. Activities that once acted as emotional outlets were no longer available, leading people to less favourable routines (Marques & Giolo, 2020). This is also seen in BB's (30-39 years, USA) response to the question with the short answer of, "Drinking." as their pastime.

Participants also discussed some of the emotions they associated with bridge and the pandemic. While some respondents felt they were largely unaffected by the departure of bridge during the pandemic – for example, "Neutral, no strong emotions" (CJ, 60-69 years, USA). Others experienced some serious negative emotional associations between bridge and the pandemic. As discussed in the literature of this report, social isolation restrictions due to Covid, caused an increase in negative emotions amongst people. People reported feeling increasingly uneasy, lonely, and with feelings of purposelessness (Marques & Giolo, 2020; Argan et al., 2023). These types of feelings are largely displayed in the answers to the questionnaire, for example:

Sadness and frustration. What had been a big part of my week was missing, and that was saddening. As time went on I was very frustrated that my bridge club chose to permanently close and be online only. (BB, 30-39, USA)

These feelings were shared by several other players, as they note negative feelings towards bridge and the pandemic:

Utter depression (MG, 60-69 years, Wales)

Loneliness (GG, 70-79 years, Scotland)

I felt quite negative as I missed playing with people that I knew (MO, 60-69 years, UK)

These responses, once again, illustrate the importance of the social aspect of bridge and the impact the social restrictions of the pandemic had on bridge players.

3.5. Clubs & Covid

Participants were asked about any communication that was held between clubs and players during the time of the pandemic. It was a mixed response from the participants. Some said that they had no communication with clubs whatsoever during Covid lockdowns. Many of the responses explained that they received a lot of

emails from their clubs and bridge unions. However, as many discuss a lot of these emails were encouraging people to join online games and tournaments which these players were not interested in doing. For example, TR writes:

I got a lot of emails saying that such-and-such an event was going to be held online. So I was notified – I wouldn't say encouraged. I ignored these emails. (TR, 60-69, Wales)

This suggests that the communication between clubs and players during the time of the pandemic was not useful to all players, further distancing players from their clubs and the game of bridge. This is seen in the account of BB who explained:

The club that I was a member of I think still sends me emails about all their online games. At various times I emailed that club and some others inquiring about a return to in person games. They all seemed very willing to help me sign up for their online games. There seemed to be an assumption that people who weren't playing online had a tech understanding barrier, and I had several offers to have someone walk me through how to sign up for BBO. My issue is quite the opposite though, I'm not interested in spending more time with my computer. (BB, 30-39, USA)

This account strengthens the understanding that a lot of players who did not wish to play online, did not wish to do so for reasons not relating to technology. As Nimrod (2019) highlights, many people (specifically older adults, in this case) have no issues with technology and actually find it useful in their day-to-day routines. However, in the case of bridge players, many did not want to play bridge online due to not wanting to spend more time on their computer, or because they did not see online bridge as the same game. Thus they put more effort into other activities which they valued during the pandemic.

3.6. Bridge Post-pandemic

A real concern amongst the research participants was the future of bridge and bridge clubs post-pandemic with dwindling numbers returning to the table. With the impact of Covid-19, some participants had resigned themselves to the fact that bridge would likely not be the same post-pandemic. DG (70-79 years, England) explained, “*I missed playing F2F, but I moved on. I doubted bridge club would reopen*”, suggesting acceptance that the pandemic will change the game of bridge. Concern for the mindsport was highlighted in LM's response:

I feel disappointed that so many club members have not yet returned to the club and some state they won't return as online is easier. As the main income stream is from the table money, I fear for the survival of the club. (LM, 70-79, Scotland)

In a response to a previous question, LM's concern for the survival of their local bridge club remains clear,

“Sadly one of the long-established Clubs I played in pre Covid has disbanded due to lack of support.”. This emerged as a key theme as decreasing numbers returning to face-to-face bridge are causing a negative impact on local clubs. A similar account is given by MP (60-69 years, USA) as they returned to face-to-face bridge, albeit more times a week than usual, as they are *“trying to keep the F2F bridge clubs going”*. This suggests that players are aware of the impact Covid has had on clubs. Moreover, MW (60-69 years, USA) writes, *“My most negative emotion is that I fear bridge will decline at an even faster pace than it did before the pandemic.”* This shows concern regarding the long-lasting impact that the pandemic and closure of bridge clubs would have on bridge as a mindsport.

When asked to explain how their bridge activities have changed as a result of the pandemic, many respondents noted that their activities had not changed at all, or *“activities unchanged but with fewer people”* (AB, 70-79 years, Scotland). Several players noted a change because of fewer players returning:

I don't know about permanent change but with the limited return to face-to-face there is a very significant reduction in numbers of players per session. (TJ, 70-79 years, Scotland)

Personally, no change but fear the current lack of support for F2F at our club could be fatal. (LM, 70-79 years, Scotland)

Both TJ and LM draw attention to the negative impact that Covid restrictions have had on bridge clubs.

Overall, there was a consensus amongst the respondents that more could be done to entice players to return to face-to-face games. Some believe that the move to online – while it did not appeal to these players – did have its benefits for others. Therefore, the lack of encouragement from some clubs to return to face-to-face bridge will not help alleviate club concerns regarding their future. DG (70-79 years, England) explained their belief that the game is *“losing its way by going online”* and suggests more do be done by clubs to encourage younger players to join – through schools and universities. This call to encourage more young players to join is expressed by DS (70-79 years, USA) who states, *“We have to attract young people and be in schools as teachers and mentors”* showing the feeling of change for the game of bridge and the hopes of keeping it going by attracting young members to clubs.

Similarly, DG stressed how they believe the switch to online bridge games has impacted the mindsport as a whole:

I think more does need to be done to encourage face to face play but many who have played online will think that some bridge activities take up too much time face to face (driving to a club, the longer club sessions etc) compared with the more dip in and dip out of online bridge. (DG, 70-79 years, Scotland)

The understanding that more encouragement is needed for the return to face-to-face bridge is apparent in many other responses by players. In their response, IS is clear that bridge unions should do more to support clubs post-pandemic:

The SBU should be making concerted efforts to stress that the future of Clubs and the social benefits that accrue to Club play, will wither unless players return to f2f. Playing online results in players ignoring a number of the basic rules of the Playing Regulations and you learn nothing about the background of other players, and you will rarely end having them as friends for life. A national advertising campaign by the SBU – why can't they do what Andrew Robson does and post adverts – yes I know that will cost money – on the BBO and other sites when player log in at start of play? (IS, 70-79, Scotland)

Specifically, there is a call by players for improved direct communication between clubs and players. For example, TJ (70-79 years, Scotland) writes that they “*have been particularly disappointed throughout the pandemic and thereafter with the lack of direct communication with members (email).*” TJ points out that for some players there has been no real encouragement to get them to return to clubs.

4. Discussion

From the analysis of the qualitative data some prevalent issues for bridge players are discussed through their experiences of bridge during the pandemic. This report set out to bring light to the experiences of the ‘missing players’ of bridge during the pandemic, those who did not transition to online bridge during times of Covid social restriction measures and were ultimately disconnected from the game they frequently played face-to-face prior to the pandemic. A key understanding from the data is that these players did not see online bridge as the same game they were playing prior to the pandemic and highlighted some considerable shortcomings of the online game. A concern for many players was the distinct lack of social element in the online game that is present in the face-to-face game. From the data, it is clear that the social element of the game is highly valued by players, and it is not always necessarily the game they enjoy but the opportunity to socialise with fellow players and friends. Valid concerns in relation to cheating in online bridge were present in the data, making the game unappealing for some players. For some of those who had heard or read about the cheating that was present in the online game (MacLean et al., 2023), it was enough to discourage them from trying to play.

However, it was not only the change in the game that saw players uninterested in making the switch to online bridge, but a realisation that their time during Covid lockdowns could be used for other activities that they valued for their physical and mental health. During the Covid-19 pandemic, many aspects of life were shifted to an online equivalent – especially leisure activities. For many of the ‘missing players’ this was not a desirable outcome as it meant spending more time in front of a screen – something a few players were already doing a considerable amount to remain working throughout the pandemic. Regardless of age, people

had to rely on online platforms. However, the increased screen time seen throughout the pandemic led to concerns about the increased use of digital technology on people's physical and mental health, resulting in unhealthy digital habits (Pandya & Lodha, 2021). Moreover, research by Colley et al. (2020) found that engaging in opportunities for outdoor exercise and limiting screen time during periods of social confinement promoted better mental and general health amongst adults.

4.1. Implications for the SBU

The analysis of the qualitative data highlighted some key recommendations for bridge clubs and organisations.

4.1.1. Communication

There is a call from bridge players for more clear and direct communication from clubs and bridge organisations. Multiple players who responded to the questionnaire had not received any type of direct communication from their club or bridge union. Some noted that communication had been shared on club and organisation websites. However, for those who do not wish to spend time online, this is not necessarily readily available to them. Participants who did note that they were contacted by their club or union via email, discussed issues relating to the content of the emails continuing to encourage online bridge, or content that simply did not encourage them to return to face-to-face bridge.

4.1.2. Encouraging Face-to-Face Bridge

Players are aware of the declining numbers at face-to-face bridge clubs and the financial strain that is placed on them. Some participants stressed the understanding that, to many players, continuing with online bridge post-pandemic is convenient and time efficient. However, as thoroughly discussed by participants, to many it is simply not the same game and subtracts some key elements which make the game appealing. By illustrating the benefits of the face-to-face game, such as the social aspect, this could provide a catalyst for an increase in numbers in bridge clubs – therefore, easing financial strain and slowing any decline the game may be facing post-pandemic. In relation to enticing players back to play in clubs, a greater emphasis could be given to social activities to help foster social networking among club members. For example, light refreshments might be provided, such as coffee and cake, or nibbles and wine, in order to create more opportunity for socialising at the club and encourage more to return to the face-to-face club environment.

4.1.3. Increased Support for Bridge Clubs

Similarly, increased support for local bridge clubs – whether that is financial or help advertising face-to-face events – could prove to be significant in helping club doors remain open. Bridge organisations, such as the SBU, have more resources and reach to members which could provide smaller clubs with much needed

publicity and support. Many participants asked for more direct and clear communication from their clubs, and this is something the SBU and other bridge unions can feasibly support with.

4.1.4. Recruitment

Finally, with numbers at bridge clubs decreasing after the pandemic, many players stressed increased focus on recruitment for bridge. This does not only include encouraging current or pre-pandemic players to return to face-to-face games but also creative endeavours to recruit new players. Many suggested that the best course of action would be recruitment through schools and universities where the game of bridge can be taught to younger players, and they can be mentored by experienced players. Therefore, the SBU could champion the formation of bridge clubs at Scottish schools and universities, encouraging new players to pick up the game and improve declining numbers. Online lessons for a range of ages could also offer enhanced links to in-person clubs, with a buddy scheme to enable online learners to transition to face-to-face play in bridge clubs.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this report looked to understand the experiences of bridge players who did not make the transition to online bridge during the Covid-19 pandemic. It used an email questionnaire to ascertain how these players' bridge experiences changed pre to post pandemic as a result of the social restrictions that lockdown put into place. When the Covid-19 pandemic began, life moved online and that was no different for the mindspace of bridge. Online platforms for the game were used more frequently with virtual bridge clubs created as many people tried to reorganise and maintain their everyday routines – which, for many people included hands of bridge. However, there were some players who did not have an interest in moving their games to the online platforms, such as BBO and RealBridge. Many players who took part in this study discussed how, to them, by moving bridge online it was no longer the same game. Many stressed the lacking social aspect, which for most was their main priority when attending bridge clubs. There were discussions of cheating in the online game, resulting in some players being put off trying online platforms. Many players also wished to take a step back from the game and computer screens to focus on other aspects of their wellbeing.

Nonetheless, it was clear to the players that the Covid-19 pandemic has significantly impacted the game of bridge and local clubs. Many players are wishing to return to face-to-face games, but some are unable to do so, due to local clubs closing or significantly decreasing their face-to-face events, particularly for evening games. Whilst some players may no longer be willing to travel in the dark and prefer a face-to-face afternoon game or an online evening game, the decline in evening opportunities for in-person play could end up being detrimental to players of working age. Further research on how to recruit and retain a wider age group of new players would be useful.

This report has provided some implications and recommendations for the SBU and other bridge unions, regarding the post-pandemic return to face-to-face play. These include increased direct communication with players, more encouragement of face-to-face bridge with social events to entice players to return, increased support for bridge clubs, and a greater focus on recruitment. A combination of approaches will not only improve the experiences of the ‘missing players’ but increase the numbers returning to the table – positively impacting the mindsport.

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