



A Sociological Study on Promoting the Mindsport Bridge

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Executive Summary

This research project aimed to investigate why bridge is in decline, and how the sport can increase promotion, and player recruitment and retention. Thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in August and September 2023 as part of a master's thesis. Participants were a combination of bridge players, teachers, and volunteers/employees of National Bridge Organisations (NBOs) from the UK, Europe, Australia, and the USA.

Theories of continuity in older age are used to understand older people's unwillingness to change how they market/promote bridge, and the ways that they want to play bridge. Sociological theories of competition and cooperation are used to analyse why individuals, clubs, and organisations compete for resources and reputation rather than collaborating to promote bridge. The following research questions were used:

RQ1: To what extent does bridge need to promote itself and attract and retain players?

RQ2: What are the challenges of promoting bridge, recruiting, and retaining players?

RQ3: What are some approaches and opportunities to promote bridge and attract and retain players?

Findings

Individuals (such as teachers and players), clubs, and bridge organisations around the world are experiencing the promotion, recruitment, retention, and decline of bridge in diverse ways. For example, the Norwegian Federation's membership remained relatively stable throughout Covid compared to the Dutch Federation, which lost around 20,000 members, and the Australian Federation, which lost around 11% of their registered members. A few Federations, such as the Dutch, are having some success in recruiting new players but they face issues with funding, resources, personnel, and recruiting people under 50. The Icelandic Federation has had success in recruiting younger players and reinvigorating bridge as a popular pastime, which offers some hope for the future of bridge.

Findings show that bridge needs to be 'rebranded'; it is currently disadvantaged by a lack of sports recognition and the low proportion of younger people (45 and under) playing. Interviewees noted that recruiting and retaining younger people was the key to ensuring that bridge survives. However, participants agreed that to do so, bridge needs to be promoted differently and offer more diversity in how the game is played (days/times/game durations).

According to participants, fewer people from younger generations are playing bridge, which was partly caused by cultural changes. These cultural changes include the internet, streaming services, and alternative hobbies that result in fewer people playing cards at home. Some participants said that the Scottish Bridge Union is struggling to develop elite-level youth players. In contrast, Dutch participants thought that their Union had a good number of elite-level youths, although they were struggling for more youths that play at the social level. Therefore, the bridge world must develop ways to make the sport better known, eye-catching, fun, and an appealing pastime to younger generations.

According to the interviewees, the bridge world has a shortage of people with marketing knowledge and experience, the sport often fails to use social and digital marketing to its full potential, and it frequently struggles with funding/resources. A common theme during interviews was that bridge tends to 'preach to the converted' and struggles to engage non-players who are unfamiliar with the game. Therefore, tailored marketing and alternative ways of communicating, playing bridge, and learning could be required to reach a wider audience. There appears to be an awareness (at local, national, and international levels) of weaknesses in marketing and promoting bridge. However, participants reported that there is some unwillingness or hesitation to change promotion, recruitment, and marketing strategies, and how games are offered. It was noted that the group that is more likely to resist change is older people, who may have dedicated much time to the sport and may be in positions of influence (such as on boards).

Many participants regard bridge as having the potential to be an inclusive sport, but the findings suggest that there are some inequalities and a lack of representation. For example, participants spoke of sexist attitudes (such as men's brains are better suited to bridge than women's), and a lack of diversity in clubs, boards, and NBOs at local, national, and international levels. In addition, most participants suggested that bridge has been marketed to certain demographics and that its image as an elitist game may not be a misconception. Negative behaviours in clubs (like bossiness and rudeness) and attitudes within clubs, boards, and NBOs (for example, that bridge should be played to a certain standard or club membership should be invite-only) were claimed to negatively affect bridge's promotion, recruitment, and retention.

Participants say that teaching is important to get new players. However, the data reveal examples of poor teaching, troublesome teacher attitudes, a lack of resources, volunteers, and students, and limited interactive ways to self-teach. Opportunities for bridge promotion involve embracing digital marketing and social media, creating interactive ways for people to

teach themselves, increasing the visibility of bridge, heightening awareness and response to negative behaviour, and making the game more social and fun for those who want that.

Recommendations

Recommendation	Details
Learn to be more tolerant	People have different reasons for playing bridge and different abilities, experiences, and personalities. You will not always agree with people but the culture of intolerance or poor behaviour in some clubs needs to be changed. Clubs/groups need to enforce zero tolerance for 'bad behaviour'. They also need to create welcoming environments that integrate new players.
Invest in marketing (techniques and skills)	Learn about and embrace new ways of marketing. Traditional marketing can still be applied to some target audiences. However, if bridge wants to recruit new (particularly younger) players, then there will need to be more of an emphasis on communicating and marketing via the platforms the target audiences use.
Succession planning	Try to bring new people into boards/organisations to help with difficult areas. Find strategies to advance clubs/organisations to ensure that they survive for many years to come. Consider developing ways to train and organise volunteers.
Focus some attention on retrieval recruiting	Do some research to find out why people stopped attending lessons/games/clubs and try to address those issues. Use a multi-pronged approach to retrieve members (e.g., different types of marketing, offering different types of games, or enabling access to different types of bridge).
Innovation and adaptation	Focus on getting people comfortable with cards/bridge through lessons/clubs/tournaments/teaching/working in new ways. Develop alternative ways of learning, playing, contacting people, and talking about bridge.
Increase sharing and cooperation	Cooperation should occur at all levels (nationally/internationally and between individuals/clubs/NBOs). Develop websites and platforms to easily share resources, guidance, and best practices. For example, the World Bridge Federation (WBF) or European Bridge League (EBL) could have a webpage with best practices, targeted marketing resources, and programmes (with details) from other countries. Consider collaborating with other games/sports/organisations.
Expand social bridge and social environments	Think of ways to make the game more social (e.g., shorter games, include food/drink, bridge parties, family nights).
Rethink some aspects of teaching	When teaching beginners, do not focus on making them good players or teaching them lots. Make the game fun and make them want to come back, then you can introduce more to the ones who want to advance.

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Introduction

Bridge is a stimulating and challenging strategy game, with players making decisions during gameplay based on incomplete information (Punch et al. 2021). Mindsports are competitive, skills-based games that test mental more than physical ability (Dolbysheva 2020). Although the physicality of mindsports has been debated (Punch et al. 2021). Mindsports include activities and games such as chess, bridge, Sudoku, Scrabble, and electronic sports (e-sports). The benefits of playing mindsports include cognitive skills development (de Groot 2014) and improved reading and concentration (Nesson and Nesson 2012). Research has revealed that there are barriers to participating in mindsports, such as access to the Internet and training sites (Mikhaylova 2019). Mindsports lack social and academic recognition, but some researchers are attempting to establish the academic study of mindsports, such as Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA).

Bridge is said to be a very social game (Galbraith et al. 2018) that can improve elements such as confidence and quality of life (Brkljačić et al. 2017a) and empathy and cooperation (Charness 1987). Despite the benefits of bridge, the sport is in decline. In the 1950s, thirty million people were estimated to play bridge in the USA (Smith 1957). Now, the World Bridge Federation (WBF) has around one million members who regularly compete in events. This signifies a considerable decline, although many individuals and clubs are not affiliated with the WBF so it is difficult to estimate the actual change. Researchers suggest that the decline of bridge could be related to the lack of younger people playing the game, possibly because it is often seen as a game for older people (Nesson and Nesson 2012; Scott 1991). To counter the lack of young people playing bridge, some organisations are focusing on attracting younger players (such as the BAMSA Bridging Juniors: Learning, Education, and Development project).

There is a lack of contemporary sociological research into why bridge is in decline, how the decline differs across countries, clubs, NBOs, and other organisations, and what can be done to address it. Therefore, 30 in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted in August and September 2023 as part of this research project. Interviewees were recruited via BAMSA's network. Two interviews were conducted in a bridge club in Scotland, five on Zoom, and twenty on Microsoft Teams. Participants were a mixture of bridge players, teachers, and NBO volunteers/employees from the UK, USA, Australia, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands. Participants were chosen for their knowledge and/or work in marketing and promotion, either within or outside of the bridge world. The three aims of this research were to:

- (i) Identify and analyse the reasons that bridge needs to promote itself and recruit and retain new players.
- (ii) Explore the challenges of promoting bridge.
- (iii) Offer recommendations for bridge promotion and player recruitment and retention.

Literature Review

Section one evaluates empirical studies that highlight the potential benefits of playing bridge to showcase why it should be promoted as a mindsport. Section two briefly discusses sociological theories that could be applied to this study's findings. Lastly, section three provides an overview of promotion and marketing, and how they could be applied to bridge.

Benefits Associated With Mindsports

Healthy ageing is a life-long process that begins in childhood and helps people to develop and maintain cognitive and functional abilities as they age (Michel and Sadana 2017). Healthy ageing is facilitated by many factors including physical activity and keeping socially and mentally active (Age UK and the NHS 2015). Physical activity tends to decrease with age (Kaplan et al. 2001) because of illness and poor mobility (Son and Dionigi 2020). Therefore, mindsports can be a more accessible form of sport than highly physical activities to aid healthy ageing in later life (Dolbysheva 2020) and they can offer additional benefits such as social and cognitive skills development.

Galbraith et al. (2018) found that people played bridge because it was enjoyable, addictive, interesting, offered social interaction and company, and was mentally stimulating. However, there is evidence of a conflict between contract/duplicate players and social players. Social players sometimes view contract players as "serious, rude, nasty, unfriendly, and cutthroat" (Scott and Godbey 1994: 289). Contract or tournament players can think that social games are "hopeless" (ibid: 284). The declining popularity of tournament bridge could potentially be explained by social and duplicate bridge serving contrasting functions. For example, social players may focus on socialising with friends, whereas competitive players may focus on card play and not want to socialise during games. This project considers this divide, examining whether it is still present and whether it affects bridge's ability to promote itself, recruit, and retain players.

Studies have associated playing bridge with improved cognitive function, brain fitness, memory, and problem-solving skills (Clarkson-Smith and Hartley 1990; Gobet and Simon 2000). Empirical studies have suggested that developing skills such as memory, judgement, and critical thinking across the life course could help protect against various forms of dementia in later life (Bespalov et al. 2018; Fabrigoule 2002). With people living longer, the pressure on health services will continue to increase (Age UK and the NHS 2015). Regularly engaging in bridge, for example, can benefit cognitive health and in turn benefit governments by reducing the strain on resources that are spent treating symptoms and conditions related to poor cognitive health.

Researchers report that playing bridge can improve confidence, quality of life, well-being, and alleviate stress (Brkljačić et al. 2017a; McDonnell et al. 2017). Other research has linked bridge to improved communication, empathy, and cooperation (Becchetti et al. 2014; Charness 1987; McDonnell et al. 2017). Loneliness is an issue in the UK that affects quality of life (Young

Minds 2023). A YouGov survey (Ibbetson 2019) showed that of over 2,000 respondents in the UK, 88% of people aged 18–24 and 70% aged 55+ experienced some form of loneliness. Various guidance about people’s mental health and well-being were reviewed (Every Mind Matters; the Loneliness Engagement Fund 2021; Lonely Not Alone; Young Minds 2023). Mindsports were not mentioned or recommended to improve or aid well-being, loneliness, or mental health, which could be an oversight given the empirical evidence of the social benefits of mindsports.

Fong et al. (2021) carried out a study of an Australian bridge club. Older club members particularly valued the social support and assistance that other members offered them and the club gave some “a sense of purpose in life”. Fong et al. (2021) concluded that the bridge club acted as a solid third-place community for members (the first- and second-place communities being home and work, respectively). The researchers interpreted the third-place community as offering participants opportunities for regular and meaningful social interaction and mutual support. Punch et al. (2021) studied elite-level bridge players who referred to their collective identity as offering a shared culture and affiliation to the wider bridge community. These studies suggest that mindsports can aid in building community and connection, so playing bridge could give people an additional sense of community and belonging that aids their well-being.

Relevant Theories

Numerous social theories could be used to scrutinise and explain bridge promotion and its challenges. For this study, the following theories are applied: theories of competition and cooperation; continuity; and adaptation to change. This study will explore competition and cooperation between individuals, clubs, and bridge organisations. That may include which resources they compete over (Bourdieu 1983; Putnam 1995), how competition is constructed and enacted (Werron 2010), when and why cooperation occurs (Simmel 1955), and how competition can be decreased and cooperation increased (Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2017). Many people volunteering or working for clubs, boards, and NBOs are retired or older. Therefore, theories of continuity in later life (Atchley 1989) could be used to understand how some people within the bridge world might (or might not) adapt to change. Theories of organisational adaption (e.g., Chandler 1962) may help to explain why clubs, boards, and NBOs do or do not adapt to change.

Marketing and Promotion

Marketing is dynamic and has many elements including social media marketing, digital marketing, advertising, and branding (Bala and Verma 2018). Promotion involves activities that raise customer awareness of a product or brand and stimulate sales and brand loyalty (Constantinides 2006). Promotion and marketing can effectively influence people’s behaviour. For example, a study found that television and other types of food marketing influenced Australian adolescents’ choices to ask for products they had recently seen advertised (Scully et al. 2011).

Social media marketing is complicated and involves more than just having a presence on social media (Chen et al. 2015). A single social media campaign for all projects and audiences is not suitable. Each project and target audience has distinct characteristics and reasons for engaging with a product (Alves et al. 2016). Digital/social media marketing can be cheaper than traditional marketing but the competency of the people running the campaign is important (Mangold 2009). Research evidencing the effects of social media marketing is difficult to present empirically because the effects are difficult to measure (Grunden and Lagrosen 2014). However, Alpert et al. (2023) found that social media affected young adults' perceptions and attitudes towards electronic cigarettes (e-cigarettes). The researchers reported that regular exposure to e-cigarette-related material on social media normalised e-cigarettes for young adults and increased their appeal, which enticed them to try e-cigarettes. However, many social media campaigns are unsuccessful; skill is needed to run effective ones (Alves et al. 2016).

Social marketing is a framework that brings together multiple disciplines like psychology and sociology to change people's behaviour for the 'common good'. The end goal of social marketing should be to benefit or improve an aspect of society or individuals' lives (MacFadyen et al. 2002). There are many cases of successful social marketing campaigns (and unsuccessful ones such as the USA's Anti-Drug Campaigns in the 1990s). HIV/AIDS prevention campaigns in Sweden showed positive results, such as increasing condom usage between casual partners from 50% to 80% (Wellings 2002). One limitation of social marketing is that it is difficult to measure behaviour change and attribute it to a specific campaign (Smith 2006). In addition, there may be unintended consequences (de Zwart 2015; Merton 1936). For example, an HIV/AIDS initiative in the Philippines aimed to educate people that mosquitos do not carry HIV resulted in decreased empathy for HIV+ individuals (Smith 2006). Therefore, potential consequences of changing people's behaviour surrounding bridge, both intentional and unintentional, must be considered and anticipated (Scott and Marshall 1998).

Conclusion

This literature review established that bridge is a sport that is in decline and that there are some internal conflicts in the bridge world (Scott and Godbey 1994). This study identifies the reasons that people within the bridge community attribute to bridge's decline in popularity and how this decline can be addressed. The benefits of bridge and other mindsports indicate that it is important to promote mindsports and raise awareness of these benefits. Effective promotion of bridge could offer non-players the opportunity to engage with bridge, experience its benefits, and learn a new skill that they can practice over their life course.

Bridge is not considered a sport in many countries because physicality is the basis of many sports definitions (Kobiela 2018). There is a lack of research on the effect that this has on bridge in terms of promoting and recruiting players. Bridge needs to be popularised, especially amongst younger people given its image as an older person's game (Nesson and Nesson 2012; Scott 1991). This study explores to what extent bridge promotion and marketing can help to recruit new players, what will be required to promote and market bridge, and the associated challenges. The analysis culminates in recommendations for next steps in bridge promotion and marketing.

Findings 1: The Need to Promote Bridge

Research Question 1: To what extent does bridge need to promote itself and attract and retain new players?



The Future

There is uncertainty and anxiety around the future of bridge. However, fewer than five participants thought that the future is “bleak” or “dismal”. Half of the participants were optimistic (but worried) and the remaining were concerned.

People have been saying *Bridge is dying* for 40 or 50 years, and we’re still around.
(Eric/EBL Chair)

It will never be what it was in the 1940s but there’s no reason it can’t survive as something to aspire to, as a challenge that people can take up and be rewarded by.
(Morris/Bridge Club Director/USA)

If I had to stop and think “How viable is this in 10-20 years?”, it’s low unless there’s bigger changes.
(Derek/Youth bridge coordinator/Australia)

Bridge is Declining

Participants noted that the Covid pandemic was a key cause of the recent decline in Federation and club membership, with recent research (BAMSA 2021) highlighting the decrease in the number of people returning to clubs post-Covid. The Australian Federation lost around 11% of its registered members and the Dutch Federation lost approximately 20,000 members during Covid. The Danish Federation lost around €1 million in fees from members withdrawing from clubs and associations. Covid aside, most NBOs and clubs are struggling to recruit and retain players, especially people under 50. The Dutch Youth Team has enough members (although they are struggling to recruit youths at lower levels), but there are fewer than six people on Scotland’s Youth Team. However, Covid does not account for the decline pre-Covid or explain why more people are not returning to or taking up bridge now that Covid restrictions have ended. Participants pinpoint the main (external) reason why bridge has declined since the height of its popularity—many people are no longer playing cards at home.

Even though we didn’t lose many members during Covid, we sort of lost them anyway. We had 2 years where they didn’t get to meet in person. Some died,

some got ill, some lost their partner, and some just changed their habits. *(Marianne/Norwegian Bridge Federation)*

The biggest club in Scotland has grown from 250 to 650 members in the last ten years and we have 200 people coming to lessons each term, but this is unusual for clubs in Scotland. *(Alan/Chair of the SBU's Board of Trustees)*

In the 1930s people didn't have TVs so getting together with your neighbours and playing cards was what you did on Friday night... I think the challenges can be overcome; I just don't have the answers. *(Kate/Executive Director of the ACBLEF)*

Player Retention

All participants stated that retention is an issue for bridge.

Only a small percentage of learners will take it up, so you have to go through hundreds to get dozens of them who stay. *(Morris/Bridge Club Director/USA)*

It was suggested that the three main 'problem areas' are retaining people after they learn, retaining people in their 20s–40s, and retaining social players. Almost all study participants have taken breaks from bridge because of life and/or work commitments. They usually took breaks from bridge post-university and many then took bridge back up (or started playing) towards their 50s. Everyone agreed that finding the time for a typical three-hour game or lesson with a set date/time makes it difficult for people to start/continue bridge.

People find it difficult to commit to 10 consecutive Tuesdays for lessons. *(Rosie/Youth bridge teacher/USA)*

People in their 20s–50s have busy lives, with families, careers, and other hobbies. *(Paige/Player, career in marketing and sales/USA)*

I don't leave work reliably enough at 7pm to go to a bridge club at 8, play until 11, and then get up to go to work the next day. *(Esme/Social player, career in marketing/UK)*

Many individuals and NBOs from this study have a desire to transition learners to club/NBO members. Membership is important for the clubs, but participants say alternatives should be offered for people who want to play socially.

I think teaching with the mindset that you're preparing people to play at a club or duplicate level as quickly as possible is pedagogically awful. ... I prefer to teach at their own pace and let them decide how much they want to learn. *(Derek/Youth bridge coordinator/Australia)*

A lot of the things we do for our clubs like giving them programmes calculating bridge scores and masterpoints means that we're making them competitive. We keep the competitive people and tend to lose the others. *(Marianne/Norwegian Bridge Federation)*

Bridge's Images and Demographics of Players

There appears to be agreement between participants that the prevailing images of bridge affect the sport's appeal to the masses. During the interviews, the majority of participants suggested that bridge has marketed itself to certain demographics and that the images may not be misconceptions.

An Older Person's Game



The average age of players strengthens the stereotype that bridge is for older people. Player's ages vary but players are, on average, over 50 (Denmark), in their 60s (Norway), and in their 70s (USA, Scotland, Australia, the Netherlands). Participants say that it does not detract from the game but it can make it difficult to ensure that bridge appeals to younger people.

When you talk to non-players, they think that bridge is for old people. We haven't succeeded in changing this image yet, and it's a problem we need to solve. *(Keith/Danish School Bridge Association)*

A Gambling Game

The image of bridge as a gambling game seems to be most troublesome in Scotland. Governing and Educational bodies in Scotland have seen bridge negatively as a gambling game and Scottish participants said that it has been difficult to convince them otherwise. Bridge can involve gambling (rubber bridge), but this form of the game has declined more than duplicate bridge. A handful of participants play rubber bridge when playing socially with friends, but rubber bridge is no longer typically played in clubs. However, it may be a mistake to dismiss rubber bridge as it may appeal to people who want to "have fun, a drink, and bet a little bit" (Sarah/Teacher/USA) because "bridge doesn't always have to be serious" (Esme/Social player/UK).

An Elitist Game

Participants emphasise that "bridge is an equaliser and no one cares about your background" (Kim/Writer, player, teacher/Europe). However, there seems to be an image that bridge

players are (or have to be) intelligent, educated, and come from wealthier backgrounds, and not much has been done to change this image.

The misapprehension is that it's all for snotty-nosed Tories who've got too much time on their hands. *(Tom/Player/UK)*

I think we can engage a whole new audience and bring that audience up the way we want to bring them up. We don't have to inherit the qualifications of the previous generations and the typical profile of a bridge player. *(Kate/Executive Director of the ACBLEF)*

The EBU's Junior Squad is full of rich, entitled, snobby kids. *(Anonymous)*

I think that there's a dated vision of bridge. I think we can change it and that we have a lot of control over it to make it more universal... I think the more pictures we see of people in casual clothing, not dressed to the nines in a country club environment, will help. *(Kate/Executive Director of the ACBLEF)*

Bridge is Complicated

Participants are aware that bridge is seen as a complicated game. In a way, this is part of bridge's appeal. It takes a while to learn but then it provides a lifetime of enjoyment that can be endlessly challenging. At the top level of the sport, you do need to be mathematic and think strategically (like any top-level sport, much time, hard work, and commitment is dedicated to practising). At social and club levels, bridge does not need to be complex but this notion often persists within the bridge world with teachers and players. As a result, most participants point out that bridge is often over-taught to beginners. See Appendix 1 for best practices of teaching.

Most people don't like teaching beginner bridge and most people don't teach it well. You need to make it fun and they tend to teach it with that very specific uptight focus, duplicate bridge wannabe as opposed to *Hey, I might just wanna play socially and have fun.* *(Sarah/Bridge teacher/USA)*

Many teachers spend eight weeks teaching bidding, or they give too much theory, and it intimidates the learners. *(Marianne/Norwegian Bridge Federation)*

Bridge as a Sport

Bridge is not universally recognised as a sport and bridge's position as a sport has fluctuated. For example, in the 1970s, bridge appeared on the magazine cover of Sports Illustrated. Now, nearly all participants say that bridge struggles for recognition as either a physical sport or mindsport. It is agreed by participants that bridge is a sport, perhaps in a non-traditional way (Kobiela 2018).

It's a sport in the sense that it's extremely competitive. It has all the same ingredients as any other sport where people, teams, and countries are competing against one another. It happens to be cerebral rather than physical. *(Alan/Chair of the SBU's Board of Trustees)*

I think it's a different category, but I think that it's a sport in some ways.
(Rosie/Teacher/USA)

Bridge is a sport that can be played across the life course and most participants think that is a selling point. Denmark's National Seniors team won the World Championship last year, and the Danish Federation's Chair said:

I think it's very good because then you can say that you can play a sport, on a highly competitive level, even though you're not young anymore. *(Liz/Danish Bridge Federation Chair)*

In the Netherlands, bridge is recognised as a sport by the Dutch Olympic Committee. The Dutch Federation receives support from the Olympic Support Fund, around €600,000–700,000 a year, for some types of elite bridge. The top competitive players in the Open and Women's teams are supported by this money, but the Senior and Mixed categories are not recognised as sports by the Dutch Olympic Committee, so they are not. Some participants from various countries feel that a lack of sports funding and recognition is a disadvantage for bridge. In the UK, bridge is not recognised as a sport, and "this financial model dictates all limitations" (Neil/Trustee for the SBU).

It's advantageous for us. We get subsidies, we benefit from the network, we learn from other Federations, we work together with them, and they have best practices that they can share with us. It gives us more access to local and national politics too. *(Johan/Dutch Bridge Federation Chair)*

Summary

The responses to research question one indicated that bridge may be heading towards a crisis in ten to twenty years if nothing is done. Although considered a complex heterogeneous issue, all participants are conscious of the need for bridge to evolve. Participants' biggest concerns are that bridge is declining, the sport needs to be rebranded, and structural issues are making it difficult to learn and play bridge. New people (especially younger people) need to be recruited and retained, with the 'right people' coming along to make changes. Recognition as a sport benefits some forms of elite bridge in the Netherlands but the Dutch Federation is struggling to recruit and retain members in general. In countries where bridge is not recognised as a sport, participants are positive about the potential that sports recognition and funding could have for bridge. The next Chapter explores the key challenges of changing bridge's image and demographics, promoting the sport, and how best to teach and govern bridge.

Findings 2: Barriers to Bridge Promotion



Research Question 2: What are the barriers to promoting bridge and recruiting and retaining players?

Structural Issues

Three structural issues that affect bridge promotion, recruitment and retention were identified: game time and length, partnerships, and inclusivity and representation. Bridge is a partnership mindsport, providing socialisation and community building (Fong et al. 2021; McDonnell et al. 2017). However, findings indicate that the need for a partner can act as a barrier to playing. Participants think that bridge has the potential to be an inclusive sport, but the findings suggest that there are currently inequalities and a lack of representation. Participants say that teaching is important to attract and retain new players. However, the data reveal examples of poor teaching, troublesome teacher attitudes, a lack of resources, volunteers, and students, and limited interactive ways to self-teach.

Game Time and Length

In the UK, Norway, Denmark, and the Netherlands, there are evening and afternoon games, although there are fewer evening games post-Covid. In the USA and Australia, there are few evening games, with bridge becoming a “daytime women’s activity” (Peter/Head of Marketing, Australian Federation). Many participants consider some clubs/organisations to cater to older demographics, although a few participants disagree. During interviews, many discussed how a majority of club members tend to be older, and they may want to avoid driving in the dark or being on public transport at night. Therefore, those members often prefer afternoon games, and with them often making up a majority of club members, games are scheduled to meet demand. Younger people are thought by participants to be more likely than older players to have jobs and young families, so they cannot play in the afternoons, and may not want to spend three hours of their evening away from their families. One NBO and one participant are considering a childcare/creche facility at clubs or tournaments to make bridge more accessible to people with children. Traditional club sessions are often unsuitable for children to play at because the fixed game times interfere with schooling. Some NBOs

have successfully set up after-school youth clubs but there are issues related to lack of interest from children, funding, and volunteers.

Many people have jobs and families to get back to, they don't want to be spending three hours of their night at a bridge club away from their families. *(Alan/Chair of the SBU's Board of Trustees)*

Children can't play in a club from 7–10pm and go to school the next day. But there aren't enough children to create a Youth division of the Federation...So it's difficult for children to make bridge a hobby. *(Liz/Danish Federation Chair)*

Partnership

The partnership aspect differentiates bridge from other mindsports (Punch et al. 2021). Bridge enables the development of partnership skills like empathy, trust, cooperation, and communication (Charness 1987; McDonnell et al. 2017). However, it can be challenging for players to find three other people who can play at the same day/time and level. In addition, learners can quickly outgrow their partners, which can lead to frustration. Some clubs require players to find a substitute if they cannot make a game. When finding a substitute is not required, players could still feel as though they are letting down their partner or teammates if they need to cancel. It could be possible to develop a way to help people find potential bridge partners, perhaps through an online database.

It takes courage and confidence to open up to club members to try and find someone to play with, and face rejection. *(Marianne/Norwegian Federation)*

Young people who stick in with bridge usually need an invested partnership. *(Derek/Youth bridge coordinator/Australia)*

Our system is very inflexible – Tuesday nights from 1900-2300- and if you can't come, you need to find a substitute. And for young people, I think they say, *thanks, but no thanks. I think I will find something else to do.* (Liz/Danish Federation Chair)

Inclusivity and Representation

Gender inequalities and disparities in the bridge world are complex issues (Punch et al. 2023; Rogers et al. 2022). Participants, in general, think that the gender split of players is more equal at grass-roots levels and more male-dominant at elite levels. Participants highlighted the persistent attitude that many people consider men to be better players than women, which supports Punch et al.'s (2023) findings. The Danish Federation has made a women-only event at their annual Bridge Festival and they would like to offer similar events in the future. Rogers et al. (2023) suggested that women-only tournaments could give women the opportunity to compete internationally in an environment with decreased sexism, but those same events can reinforce sexism.



I think that there's quite a lot of sexism. There's still people who think that women don't have the mental faculties to play bridge, and can't think in the right way. *(Esme/Social player /UK)*

I think there's sexism in clubs at times. I think there's still a feeling that men are better bridge players than women. *(Jenna/Education Convenor and Club Support for the SBU)*

I've seen enough to know that sexist and elitist behaviour is alive and well. *(Derek/Youth bridge coordinator/Australia)*

Participants from the UK, Netherlands, Australia, and the USA highlight that a majority of people in clubs, NBOs, and on boards come from similar ethnic backgrounds (white). Many other communities play bridge, and it may be a case that they choose to play with members of their community. At the club and organisational level, there is some awareness of the lack of representation but there is also a lack of proactively recruiting or reaching out to minority demographics. From participants' perspectives, bridge needs to better incorporate its minority demographics to grow the game and meet the needs of all members.

Bridge is a sport that attracts a largely white population in Scotland. *(Neil/Trustee for the SBU)*

It was a real white, Anglo-Saxon, Protestant game in Australia. In our country clubs, it largely still is. *(Peter/Head of Marketing, Australian Bridge Federation)*

Most of the boards here in North America are white, older people, and I keep trying to explain the importance of diversity to them...We need input from the different groups who play because then we're going to grow even more, and we're going to make sure that we're making decisions that work for other demographics as well. *(Paige/Player, career in marketing and sales/USA)*

We have 4.7 million people of non-native Dutch origin in Holland but the number of members from that demographic is very low. I wouldn't know the exact number, but it would certainly be less than a percent. *(Johan/Dutch Bridge Federation Chair)*

Barriers to Recruitment, Retention, and Change

Behaviour

Research has shown that elite-level players can experience many emotions, such as excitement, joy, and anger before, during, and after play (Brkljačić et al. 2017c). This study shows that bridge can bring out the 'best and worst' of people, at recreational, club, and elite levels. Most participants pointed out that the behaviour and attitudes of players in clubs can determine whether a newcomer returns. The first few club experiences for newcomers are important and they must be positive. Participants say that clubs and members are not always intentionally rude. Instead, players can lack awareness of how their behaviour affects others. For example, players may point out the rules or try and be helpful by 'teaching' a newer player the 'right' rules, which can come across as rude, bossy, unfriendly, or intimidating.

A study suggested that there are four types of bridge players (MacLean et al. 2023). The socialiser plays bridge for fun and is motivated by social interactions. The self-improver plays the game seriously for the challenge. The competitor plays for the art of the game, motivated by a desire to compete and win. The mind-gamer plays to understand others. Therefore, players may be consumed by their game and not notice or accommodate newcomers. Several participants mentioned that they have 'strong characters', allowing them to cope with those (rude, unfriendly) behaviours, but many people do not and may stop playing bridge if exposed to such behaviours.

I think the clubs think that they're welcoming but they're not. I don't think they mean badly but they're so consumed with their game and close friendships. I think their problem is that they don't notice newcomers coming into the club. *(Marianne/Norwegian Bridge Federation)*

I'm confident enough in these environments to not be bothered by it. Newcomers might be more intimidated or lack confidence. *(Jenna/Education Convenor and Club Support for the SBU)*

Older people are often deaf, they speak very loudly and yell at each other. When you're 80, you say what you want because you don't care what anybody else thinks. *(Peter/Head of Marketing, Australian Bridge Federation)*

These findings suggest that there needs to be a culture of welcoming and integrating new players and enforcing zero tolerance for poor behaviour. However, a lack of reflexivity may mean that individuals and clubs are not aware of their behaviour and they may not know why people do not return to the club. People may not see others' behaviour as poor or there may not be enforcement of zero tolerance for such behaviour. Therefore, clubs/boards need to develop enforcement strategies (with repercussions).

Everyone in the club has to contribute to the welcoming culture because one or two negative experiences can put people off. *(Keith/Danish School Bridge Association)*

Attitudes

Within this study, there was general agreement that there are certain problematic attitudes (individual and collective) within the bridge world. Examples include that bridge has to be played well, that people should aspire to be good players, and that club bridge should be serious. Of course, these attitudes are not universal but more than half the participants confirmed that they exist in places. Such attitudes have resulted in people needing to play to a certain standard to play in some clubs, which can result in people choosing to play at other clubs or not play at all.

I feel as though there's almost a snobbery in the bridge world that doesn't appreciate that it's okay to not play the most amazing level of bridge. Like, it's absolutely fine for there to be people who are a bit crap, and just do it for a bit of fun. That shouldn't be a problem. *(Esme/Social player, career in marketing)*

One of their objectives is that *You can only play here if you are a strong bridge player*. So I think, in that way, you have to select which associations to join and not to join. *(Liz/Danish Bridge Federation Chair)*

People who were going through lessons weren't automatically encouraged to join the club until they'd reached a certain standard. Now that's not the case, we really encourage them to play and join. *(Alice/Former SBU President)*

Another problem with people's attitudes was cited to be amongst older players/volunteers (involved at the club/organisational levels) and their unwillingness to change. Their lack of adaptation to change results in bridge, at times, being 'stuck in its ways' (e.g. not using new technologies and digital/social media marketing to their full advantage). According to most participants, a lot of clubs are aware that they need to recruit new players. However, the above problematic attitudes may act as barriers to player recruitment and retention. Clubs may want to recruit new players but that does not always translate to a welcoming environment or proactively seeking new players.

I think part of the problem comes down to who the committee is in your club. Unfortunately, a lot of clubs have the attitude that *We've always played like this, we've always invited people to join the club*. So, they don't go out and hold open nights or events for people to come along and try. *(Tom/Player/UK)*

Learning and Teaching

Digital Learning/Teaching Yourself

There are some technologies/ways to learn bridge yourself online but they are limited. Many interviewees said that teachers can be slow to take up technology for lessons. Almost all the teachers from this sample have taught online and in person, and a few of them prefer in-person. They say that in-person teaching makes it easier to build social relationships in the group and to see what people do not understand. However, most participants recognise that many people want to learn online and can be lost as learners if not catered for. Many participants think that people (of all ages) want to learn with some supplementary digital

tools/resources. Lessons can move quickly and if learners cannot access the lessons in their own time, they can fall behind. Therefore, the bridge world needs (i) a good interactive way to self-learn online, and (ii) more digital learning resources for teachers. Online bridge can help to prepare people for clubs and provide a supplement to practice bidding. However, it can be difficult to develop long-term players from online learning.

The ACBL offered all these cheap lessons online and you got more online players, but you don't develop long-term players that way. The only long-term players seem to come from clubs where they make human connections. *(Eve/Bridge Club Director/USA)*

I like teaching face-to-face, it's much better. It works teaching online but it's harder to get the connection with the bigger group. *(Marianne/Norwegian Bridge Federation)*

If people learn the traditional way, 12 weeks and a booklet to take home, when they arrive at a club, they've only played 20-30 boards. If they practice online, they can play hundreds of boards, so they're more prepared when they enter the club. *(Eric/EBL Chair)*

I think online and live are two slightly different games. Online bridge provides a service to people who don't have a club next to them, don't like to drive, are getting older, work so they can't go to the daytime games, so they can play in the evenings... You can practice with your partner on bidding and replay the hands. *(Louise/NBO Chair)*

Some things work better online than in person. I can present some play and defence problems online and they're a little easier to visualise, but I can do the same thing in person to a degree, and between classes, I can give them the ability to practice online. *(Morris/Bridge Club Director/USA)*

If people miss a class, then it almost feels impossible to go back and learn the content when the class has moved on. *(Margot/Teacher/USA)*

Transitioning from lessons

It can be difficult for people to transition from (online and in-person) lessons to clubs and regular play. Clubs and teachers, therefore, need to offer some methods to aid this transition; for example, social games, 'meet the club' nights, and supervised play. Clubs could be encouraged to create a separate space for new members and have a more experienced member help the newcomers each week. The SBU held a successful Summer Academy for online learners with practice sessions to let the students meet each other. However, there was an issue with a lack of 'prolonged willingness' to attend in-person meetings, especially after they finished the set of lessons. An issue for children learning online is that there is a lack of ways to funnel those students onto regular play or move up to elite youth levels. Another point raised was that lessons should not be treated as a 'stepping stone' to clubs. Many participants think that NBOs and clubs have focused their attention on competitive players. This is problematic because "The largest proportion of bridge players will probably always be social players" *(Rosie/Teacher/USA)*.

To me, BridgeWhiz is at the very bottom of the youth funnel. It's online, so it has the least social and the least connective tissue... Then it's like, what are the next steps? How do you take the top 20% of kids and connect them to the next link in the funnel? *(Jordan/NBO Chair)*

Maybe 1 in 20 will join duplicate bridge, and you feel great about that, but I learned a long time ago that it's going to be the unusual person who wants to be that serious about it. *(Eve/Bridge Club Director/USA)*

Membership shouldn't be a driving force in teaching people to play bridge. Of course, we recognise the importance of members for the future of clubs. You've got to remember that you want them to just enjoy the game. *(Alice/Former SBU President)*

Going from lessons to a club has to follow after the fascination with the game. *(Morris/Bridge Club Director/USA)*

The ACBL wants everyone to kind of move into that pipeline of moving from a club player to a sectional player or a regional player. I almost think that it's great to move people, but I think we need to be okay with building a pool that maybe can feed the pipeline. *(Rosie/Teacher/USA)*

People play for all kinds of different reasons and you need to respect whatever their reason is. *(Jess/Teacher/USA)*

Over-teaching

Many beginners think that bridge is complicated and get overwhelmed by everything that they are expected to learn. Teaching methods are diverse but bridge is often taught in a school-like way (formal lessons with books/workbooks over multiple months). Some participants know of people who are keen players but not 'good' teachers. They expect too much of the students and over-teach (by teaching too many rules/conventions too soon rather than playing the cards and gaining confidence). Whether teachers need to be good players is divisive, and some participants think that novice players make better teachers for beginners. Others think that teachers need certain levels of skills and knowledge.

I was a novice player when I started teaching. It was good because I wasn't too sophisticated. It taught me that you have to lower your standards and just say *Here are the basics and if you want to play perfectly, you'll do that someday but here's enough to have fun with it.* *(Eve/Bridge Club Director/USA)*

If you're going to start teaching sensibly beyond the very basics, you need to be a decent player because you need to understand the 'why'. *(Ryan/Teacher/UK)*

A lecture lesson can work for someone who loves bridge, wants to learn more, and is already committed. They might be willing to sit through a lecture and get something from it more than someone who isn't sure. *(Emily/Manager of Marketing and Education for the ACBL)*

Volunteers

Many clubs and NBOs rely on teachers to volunteer. Many of the volunteers in the bridge world are older (given they make up a majority of members and may have more free time). NBOs and clubs are grateful for any volunteers but having older people teach younger people may affect the appeal of the game. Many participants say that it can be difficult for older people to enthuse the learners and convey why the game is so engaging and fun. There is a desire, and perhaps a need, for younger people to teach bridge but it is difficult to get this cohort to teach, in part due to work/family commitments. Participants note that a love for the game is not lacking among bridge players but commitment and motivation can be, which are important for sustaining volunteers (Bang et al. 2009).

If you're a younger person and you see someone your grandparents' age coming to teach you, it's a bit like, well, *That's not very cool*. If they're in their 30s, it makes it a bit more exciting I think. *(Ryan/Teacher/UK)*

Retired players are a very resourceful pool of people... They enjoy playing but they find it hard to express this to the students. *(Keith/Danish School Bridge Association)*

At the end of the day, it's my full-time job. So, I put the effort in to find a way to do what I need to do. *(Ryan/Teacher/UK)*

They have players who might volunteer but if you're not a teacher, you might do more harm than good. *(Margot/Teacher/USA)*

Confidence

Participants say that adults are more hesitant to take risks and make mistakes than children but even children can become nervous as they learn. Adult learners can feel 'stupid' when they are learning, and many participants notice that this can lower their confidence and cause them to stop taking lessons/playing. A challenge that many teachers from this sample face is how to make learners feel as though it is okay to make mistakes. Participants also said that there can be a lack of confidence in volunteers when organising or running bridge events. Some organisations have found success in asking people to help with events rather than making them take responsibility for organising one.

Kids generally have the confidence to try stuff. But I've also seen how quickly kids can become nervous or dependent and want to constantly check *Am I doing that right?* *(Derek/Youth Bridge Coordinator/Australia)*

I get people who were highly successful producers and writers and they're now being put into the situation where they are going to fail and they're going to be humiliated and they have to be willing to take that as a positive, as a challenge to overcome. *(Morris/Bridge Club Director/USA)*

People who are accustomed to suddenly being good at anything they try are going to have a hard time with bridge because they're not going to be good at it for a long time. *(Morris/Bridge Club Director/USA)*

I think the most successful times are when you're telling someone, *Don't worry, you're not leading, we just want you to help out a little bit*. If you're specific about what it is you want them to help with and if it's open-ended, people are less reluctant to sign up. *(Jenna/Education Convenor and Club Support for the SBU)*

Young People and Schools

Most participants say that recruiting and retaining younger people is the key to ensuring that bridge survives. Participants agree that bridge needs to find ways to make the sport better known amongst youths, with less of an 'older person's' image. Some teachers have found that making bridge part of the school curriculum works best because otherwise the children may do other activities instead. However, making lessons compulsory can discourage children and make them feel like a chore. Bridge is part of the curriculum in Norway for 16–19-year-olds and bridge has appeared in some curriculums for periods in other countries. The main issues are getting funding, approval from Educational Boards, school access, and the best school period to teach. The bridge teachers said that different teaching approaches are needed for children versus adults because children have shorter attention spans and learn better from play rather than lectures.

If you're talking to kids, they don't know about the existence of bridge, so they don't have any impression, and they are completely open to whatever we tell them. *(Marianne/Norwegian Bridge Federation)*

Kids can only focus for a few minutes on listening. You need to have them playing most of the time. *(Keith/Danish School Bridge Association)*

I feel as though you almost need a champion in an influential position to help you get into schools. *(Johan/Dutch Bridge Federation Chair)*

It has to be optional. If kids don't want to be there, they're disruptive. *(Ryan/Teacher/UK)*

Children in general during the lessons were flicking cards under the table and weren't paying much attention. I didn't have the time or energy. *(Alice/Former SBU President)*

I think it is most effective if you get them at school in the morning because if you get after-school or evening activities, kids will be quite tired and it is tough to teach kids bridge when they are tired. *(Keith/Danish School Bridge Association)*

Marketing and Skills

Participants agreed that bridge has not found a way to present itself as an eye-catching, fun, accessible, and exciting pastime to the mass market: “Bridge is one of the best-kept secrets” (Eric/EBL Chair). According to the interviewees, there is a lack of people in the bridge world with marketing knowledge and experience; bridge tends to use traditional marketing; bridge lacks the funding/resources for marketing; and older people in clubs/boards/NBOs are at times resistant to new ways of promoting and recruiting players. See the next chapter and Appendix 2 for potential marketing/promotional methods.

Marketing Struggles

There is debate amongst participants about the effect of using ‘the benefits of bridge’ to market the sport and recruit players. Some participants think that the benefits attract people to play and others think that it is a deterrent. Most interviewees think that older people may be more convinced by the ‘brain benefits’ such as slowing cognitive decline and ageing (e.g., Coyle 2003; Gobet and Simon 2000) than younger people. This raises an unanswered question: which ways should bridge be marketed to different demographics? Bridge lacks the funds to pay for marketing and input from marketing experts and staff, so it struggles to identify its markets, understand what they want, and design campaigns to attract them (Armstrong et al. 2009). Promotion and marketing can raise non-player awareness of bridge and stimulate demand for the game (Baines et al. 2017). However, with limited resources and low retention rates, “it isn’t worth spending thousands on marketing” (Jordan/NBO Chair). Bridge could potentially utilise collaborations with popular brands or celebrities, but they would need to be willing to endorse/promote bridge without charging high fees.

Selling people on its benefits typically doesn’t work so well. It’s sort of like a parent trying to convince their kid to do something. I think the intrinsic motivation for youth players will be *If you’re in the top 6, you get a free holiday every year to play in the nationals...* It feels a bit wrong if you’re like *Oh well, I just wanted to do something to improve my spatial awareness and logical consequence thinking.* Like, you can just play because it’s fun. (Derek/Youth Bridge Coordinator/Australia)

People always talk about the benefits of playing and anti-dementia stuff but honestly, no one under 50 cares about that stuff, right? (Esme/Social player, career in marketing/UK)

Older people are keen to keep their brains active, and they think bridge is a good way to do that. (Kate/Executive Director of the ACBLEF)

Word of Mouth

Many participants suggest using existing clubs and players as salespeople/recruiters. Word of mouth could help to combat the lack of funding and resources (Li et al. 2018) and make people feel appreciated and as though they are contributing to the survival of bridge. Several participants mentioned that word of mouth is the easiest way to recruit people to play. This, however, can contribute to the problem of ‘preaching to the converted’. Therefore,

advertising in places where many people go regularly could be a way to get the message out about bridge (Trusov et al. 2009). For a bigger marketing campaign, word of mouth would need to be combined with the likes of print, electronic, and social media marketing (Dwivedi et al. 2015).

People are advertising to the people who already play the game. You need to get posters or the word out in places where people go often, like community centres, libraries, and doctors and dentist surgeries. *(Tom/Player/UK)*

You need to spread stories about bridge to non-bridge players and the big problem is that most people in the bridge community only think of communicating to the bridge players. That doesn't work because you don't need to convince bridge players that bridge is a good game; you need to tell the good stories to non-bridge players and this hasn't been done yet. *(Keith/Danish School Bridge Association)*

You need to support your clubs and teachers on the ground who are your network of recruiters... make them feel appreciated... give them a little money, rewards, or recognition. If you want to build a community of people to support an endeavour, you need to build a network. *(Jordan/NBO Chair)*

Your best advertisement is always your members... give them a part and say *Get a friend to come and play bridge that doesn't play.* *(Margot/Teacher/USA)*

I take the attitude that our 33,000 registered players are our salespeople. *(Peter/Head of Marketing, Australian Bridge Federation)*

Digital/Social Media Marketing

In the modern marketing world, traditional methods need to be combined with digital methods to align with the needs of some consumers (Bala and Verma 2018). For example, using search engine optimisation, which is tailoring a website to naturally appear in a search engine (Mullin 2018), to increase the exposure of bridge content to consumers. The bridge world tends to use traditional marketing rather than digital/social media marketing. Many clubs and NBOs do not have marketing experts working/volunteering for them, and many clubs "don't see marketing as a specialisation" *(Peter/Head of Marketing, Australian Bridge Federation)*.

Simply having a presence on social media is not enough, and clubs/NBOs need to proactively use their social media accounts to market and advertise (Chen et al. 2015). The content needs to be tailored to different platforms; for example, content for mobile phones should be concise (Bala and Verma 2018). Some organisations are learning about social media and trying to help their members (the Dutch Federation has a 'Facebook guide' for its clubs). However, running a social media account or campaign can be close to a full-time job (Rishika et al. 2013). Most participants know that younger people are influenced by social media and influencers (Alves et al. 2016), so there is a need to improve bridge's social media presence.

In the 70s, bridge was a social skill. If you didn't know how to play bridge, you'd see people in the Union playing and you'd go up and say, *Teach me.* *(Eve/Teacher/USA)*

I think social media is something that the majority of our bridge world doesn't understand the importance of today. *(Paige/Player, Career in marketing and sales/USA)*

I think that younger people need to be convinced by influencers. We need heroes...Those influences should be based on academic research and facts. *(Eric/EBL Chair)*

With the demographics we have, their mindset is *Okay, we need to go into the papers, and as long as we get ourselves on television.* *(Johan/Dutch Bridge Federation Chair)*

We're trying to make that transformation at the moment from being a classical marketing organisation to an advanced digital marketer, and understanding who is in our bridge community, and who is interested in what, so you can target them and make sure that relevant offerings meet the right people. *(Johan/Dutch Bridge Federation Chair)*

Summary

Research question two identified four main themes that act as barriers to bridge promotion: inflexibility, negative behaviour and attitudes, problems with teaching/learning, and limited marketing skills/resources. The analysis suggests that there needs to be more flexibility in how bridge is offered, including the days/times of games, the duration of games, and how lessons are delivered and taught. Membership can follow fascination with the game, but people should not only teach to increase membership. Bridge requires promotion and marketing to convey how fun the sport is and how it can meet non-players' needs or demands. There are no easy solutions to bridge's lack of marketing skills, resources, and funding. NBOs can guide and advise but they cannot force people to change. The changes that need to happen must occur at local, national, and international levels across clubs and organisations. The next Chapter will offer some examples of initiatives and ideas that participants have considered or tried and other suggestions to promote bridge and attract and retain players.

Findings 3: Opportunities to Promote Bridge



Research Question 3: What are some approaches and opportunities to promote bridge and attract and retain new players?

Some clubs and NBOs will have more members, resources, and finances than others, so not everyone will be able to make changes. In those cases, they could use advice about changing behaviour and attitudes and low-cost ways to promote bridge and recruit and retain players. See Appendix 2 for further examples.

Visibility

Collaboration/Networking

Around half a dozen participants have considered pairing bridge with physical sports. Some want to introduce people to bridge, and others want to combine the benefits of physical activity and mindsports. Participants are considering working with community sporting teams/athletes to recruit their supporters. The participants know that collaborating with sports will require planning, resources, and the support of clubs/organisations and their members. Given that bridge needs a ‘rebrand’, such initiatives may need to have tactics in place to give people the right impression of bridge.

Some teachers work independently but they could collaborate with clubs to offer a final teaching session in a club, introducing the learners to the club members/environment. The students could then be given a voucher for future beginner sessions. In general, clubs and organisations should encourage friendship and alliances. They could share ideas and tips, and advertise/share others’ events on social media/their websites. Given the lack of marketing skills/resources, cooperating could help the common goal of promoting bridge (Rand and Nowak 2013).

Ambassadors and Incentives

Participants say that to promote bridge, people must find it fun, enticing, social, and not too challenging. Some participants suggest that players could be incentivised to be ambassadors and ‘sell’ bridge (with money or recognition, for example). However, research has shown that material rewards can reduce willingness to cooperate by increasing perceived competition (Brandts et al. 2009; Lacetera et al. 2012). Small-scale ambassadors using word of mouth can effectively reach some people and add a personal touch at a low cost, but this approach might not reach larger audiences (Dubicki 2009).

If you progress quite slowly and give them room to explore and fail and laugh over their own mistakes, they become great ambassadors for bridge.
(Marianne/Norwegian Bridge Federation)

Publicity

Club members could suggest a local cause and the club could run a charity event, and try to get local newspaper/radio coverage (Dubicki 2009). Social media can be utilised to market

and publicise bridge and heighten the visibility of the game and its players (Dwivedi et al. 2015). Perhaps something like Humans of New York/People of Bridge (a photo/video series - see Appendix 2). Outreach would have to be done to identify ways of making and sharing the videos, and how to make them 'viral' online but it could let people see who plays bridge.

If you want to get some advertising for your club, you can run a charity game, and get them to do a write-up in the newspaper... that's better than an ad because they get lost in the newspaper. *(Margot/Teacher/USA)*

Instead of trying to bring people to clubs, bridge could be brought to people. Clubs/NBOs could have coffee mornings (with bridge) in community spaces (like church halls). The SBU is planning a national campaign in March 2024 to raise the visibility of bridge, with pop-up bridge tables being set up in novel locations (like at the beach, train stations, and shopping centres) over Scotland. They will need posters/leaflets with information about taster sessions and lessons so that people can follow up in their local area. Participants raised the issue of it being difficult to make bridge visually appealing when promoting it at hobby fairs and the like. Other stalls may have video games or merchandise to sell, or cartoon characters, which may attract more attention than a bridge table.

These games can have nine-foot inflatable characters. How do you make bridge stand out beside that? *(Kate/Executive Director of the ACBLEF)*

Flexibility and Social Bridge

Clubs/Games

Clubs should try to offer as much flexibility as possible in how and when bridge is played. If clubs can, they should try to offer various days/times for their games (see Appendix 2 for Dutch approaches). Removing the need for membership may also encourage people to play without a commitment to playing regularly. Club members could volunteer to bring along homemade snacks on a rotational basis. This could help members feel part of the club and provide some community benefits (such as Fong et al. 2021 found). NBOs could run a regular youth session at their largest club and medium-sized clubs could offer a monthly after-school session for a couple of hours with pizza. Most participants noted that many people are no longer playing cards at home with their families. Therefore, clubs could host family-friendly events such as monthly family game nights at club/community spaces.

New Events/Clubs

A few participants mentioned that people do what their friends are doing. Therefore, it may be useful to cater to groups of friends by creating somewhere for them to go for a social night. Games clubs or board game cafés where people can play all sorts of games, with food and drinks could work as locations for promoting and playing bridge. Bridge clubs could offer beginner sessions and some informal lessons for groups of friends in these sorts of environments. Café bridge is a popular and social way to play bridge in some European countries. It involves competitive duplicate pairs games set up over different cafes/restaurants/hotels/pubs, and the concept could be taken up in other countries or contexts.

Opportunities to Develop Further

University Bridge

There used to be vibrant bridge cultures in universities and colleges around the world, and some participants/NBOs are trying to revive that culture. The main challenges are personnel, resources, and keeping students playing post-university. The turnover of student populations requires a constant need for new club Presidents and new students to drive the clubs/games. Participants also mention that students tend to be busy and might already attend clubs or societies. Therefore, bridge might need to be promoted in the early stages of semesters.

Reflexivity

Clubs can encourage self-awareness and reflection on how people's behaviour affects others. They can potentially do this by using a card as an indicator that someone is being rude or impatient with others or having posters around the club with messages about tolerance. Less experienced players could also have a way of showing people at the table that they are learning, which could encourage other players to be patient.

Social Marketing

Social marketing can change or maintain how people behave (not how they think), and it does not involve coercion or enforcement (Andreason 2006; Houston and Gassenheimer 1987). Whoever leads and implements social marketing campaigns will have to decide which benefit(s) of bridge they choose to emphasise, and how they make it appeal to the target audience (MacFadyen et al. 2002). When applying social marketing, aspects of generic marketing should be used (like market research and social/digital media marketing) (Stead et al. 2006). Analysis of the findings established that fewer people are playing bridge at home than previous generations, so social marketing could help to get more families playing. Campaigns could also influence younger people to start learning/playing, and even change behaviours within the bridge world (such as rude behaviour). The *Journal of Social Marketing* may be a good resource for people wishing to develop social marketing campaigns for bridge.

Iceland was experiencing a decline in bridge, suffering from an image problem, few new players in the last 15–20 years, and no players under the age of 35. The Icelandic Bridge Federation managed to change the image of bridge, and they now have the most people learning bridge in the Federation's history. However, they face challenges related to a lack of resources and funding and keeping the momentum going. Iceland illustrates what is possible with the right drive, momentum, strong leadership, resources, and innovation. See Imsland (2023) and Appendix 2 for more details.

Summary

There are many opportunities to promote bridge. Clubs/NBOs/organisations need to be willing to adapt and diversify the ways they promote bridge and offer games/lessons. Bridge needs increased visibility, which it could do by bringing bridge to non-players and promotion via social media. People could develop new clubs, integrate bridge with other activities, or add new aspects to existing clubs. University bridge could be a way to get younger people to play bridge at an age when they are often lost by clubs/NBOs, but there are challenges to implementing bridge in universities. Social marketing could be used to influence people's behaviour and encourage them to learn/play bridge and change how people promote bridge.

Discussion

This chapter focuses on the major cross-cutting themes from the findings chapters. These themes are age, visibility/marketing, mixed-ability games, inclusivity, bridge not being a spectator sport, competition/cooperation, and adaptation to change.

Engagement and Bridge

The analysis found that bridge contains some aspects of physicality. For example, some participants find themselves getting more tired after tournaments as they become better players (Scott and Punch 2024). Others mentioned the need to have concentration, stamina, and be well-rested for tournaments (Fine 2014). A few participants thought that bridge lacked enough physicality to be a sport (consistent with exclusivists such as Caspersen et al. 1985; Suits 2007). A few participants used a more holistic definition of sport (Phoenix and Bell 2019; Piggitt 2019; 2020). They thought that bridge satisfied other components of sports (requires skills, can be institutionalised and competitive) (Hsiang 2013). However, it was difficult for participants to categorise bridge (as a sport, mindsport, recreational, social, and competitive) (Russell et al. 2022).

Participants thought that bridge could provide cognitive benefits and skills development such as critical thinking, memory, and mathematics (e.g., Clarkson-Smith and Hartley 1990; Gobet and Simon 2000). Socialising was an important aspect of bridge for both social (Brkljačić et al. 2017b) and competitive (Scott 1991) players. Participants played bridge because it was enjoyable, stimulating, challenging, and addictive (e.g., Becchetti et al. 2014; Galbraith et al. 2018). The collaborative quality of bridge fostered the building and maintenance of relationships between partners and players (McDonnell et al. 2017). Many participants recited stories of strong community relationships and bridge communities being important for older or more vulnerable members (Fong et al. 2021). However, conflicts between social and duplicate bridge were identified (Scott and Godbey 1994), which affected recruitment and retention.

Bridge was said to be for people of all ages, but the average age of players reinforced age stereotypes, which made it difficult to recruit younger people. Many participants think that it is sensible to target the 'most accessible' audience (55+) to at least keep bridge going while they work on solutions for recruiting/retaining younger people. All the NBOs in this project have at times focused on recruiting people over 55, and some still focus on this group (e.g., the Danish and Dutch Federations). All the NBOs have the desire to recruit younger people but many lack the resources to offer youth programmes and the skills/resources to market to this demographic.

Recruiting people 55+ is great for the short term, but it's not necessarily so great for the long term when that bubble isn't here anymore and you haven't done anything with younger people. *(Emily/Manager of Marketing and Education for the ACBL)*

It emerged that most of the bridge world is not communicating and using the platforms that younger people are. For example, Jake (UK) says that some people are using streaming sites/online platforms to communicate and watch bridge. According to Jake, the average age of bridge Twitch streamers is around 18–30, which is much younger than the average age of

players. However, bridge may have missed the ‘Twitch Boom’ (during the first Covid lockdown).

If they’re only playing bridge once a month they’ll fade out. Early on in your bridge career, you need to be doing a lot...so they need to be offered ways to learn that suit them. *(Jake/Streamer, runs a boardgame café/UK)*

Many participants brought up the fact that there is now more of an ‘amalgamation’ of playing abilities/levels at clubs with fewer ability-segregated sessions. One participant described bridge as “failing to move people on” to different ability levels (Tom/Player/UK). At Denmark’s annual Bridge Festival, people sometimes choose to play against better players because they think “I might learn a lot from it” (Liz/Danish Bridge Federation Chair). For beginners who have to play against more experienced players (without choosing to do so), “it can be disheartening to come dead last every time” (Kate/Executive Director of the ACBLEF). Therefore, something may need to be done to better cater for beginners (such as newcomer-only sessions). With all clubs and NBOs seeing a slower-than-expected return to in-person bridge post-Covid, and many clubs lacking enough resources, it is often difficult for clubs to offer ability-segregated sessions (BAMSA 2021).

Participants say that the ‘crux’ of bridge’s problem is its lack of visibility. Most participants mentioned that bridge is not regularly in mainstream media. Many respondents said that bridge is a bit of a ‘closed society’ and many non-players are unfamiliar with bridge. This unfamiliarity combined with a lack of advertising, results in fewer people playing. Getting onto mainstream television was said to be difficult for bridge (given a lack of resources), whereas radio is an inexpensive way to advertise (which the Danish Federation had some success with).

The outside world doesn’t care about bridge. It’s a game that their grandparents played...but they’re onto different things themselves. *(Kate/Executive Director of the ACBLEF)*

Bridge doesn’t have celebrities...no one knows who bridge players are. *(Eric/EBL Chair)*

Marketing is trial and error (Smith 2006), with many participants (individuals and NBOs) learning from experience. For bridge to improve its marketing, it will need to conduct research to identify trends such as who the target audience is, how they are communicating, and why they would want to engage with bridge (Armstrong et al. 2009). A lot of time and money can be spent on marketing, but it does not guarantee success (Mullin 2018). Furthermore, the effects of promotion are temporary, which means the activity needs to be repeated regularly (Dubicki 2009). However, care must be taken not to repeat a marketing activity too often or have too many activities at once because this can confuse the audience (Mullin 2018). Participants were unsure of how to market bridge in a way that would encourage people to start/continue to play bridge over other activities.

People have different things that they decide they’re going to do instead of bridge or maybe they’ve achieved their goal with bridge. *(Louise/NBO Chair)*

The internet is changing marketing techniques, what people do in their spare time, and how they want to engage with bridge (Dwivedi et al. 2015). The important properties of digital marketing are the accessibility, navigation, and speed of digital content (Mangold and Faulds 2009). Digital marketing can be enhanced by word of mouth on social media, increasing the

popularity of sites or content and increasing the visibility of the product (Trusov et al. 2009). The most common social media platform used by participants in this study was Facebook. This was because of participant's familiarity with it and because their membership bases mainly use Facebook. Participants are aware that if they want to recruit younger people, they will need to use other platforms (such as TikTok and Instagram). However, this is difficult because many people (regardless of age) in the bridge world do not know how to use social media advertising (Mangold 2009).

Some people are just setting up the Treasury or secretary side of a club, and it's too much to say *Oh, run a TikTok account as well*, especially when those people don't know how to market on social media. *(Lorraine/Communications role within an NBO)*

Research question 2 identified some areas of bridge that are less inclusive or representative than other areas. Some bridge communities choose to play in the company of those with the same demographic profile, typically relating to geography, religion, ethnic background, and wealth. Membership in some clubs (e.g., golf clubs, the Hurlingham Club, and Cambridge Club) has had prerequisites (expensive to join, need to be nominated by friends for members, long waiting lists) from the outset. Since systematic separation ended in the USA, the separate bridge bodies have discussed a merger, but none have taken place. It is possible that people in any community feel most comfortable socialising in familiar environments and may prefer not to integrate with other communities.

All participants admit that bridge is not a spectator sport and it is not easy for novices or outsiders to watch/understand. Bridge games can have complex scoring systems and it is not immediately obvious who has won. When watching high-level international games, the bidding can be complex and the commentators tend to cater more towards competent players. It could be possible to have different levels of commentators, but it can be difficult to find volunteers and for them to be entertaining and engaging. In addition, participants said that parents can find it hard to engage with bridge if they are not players themselves. Brad (USA) says that poker has more 'watchability' than bridge and that poker has less of a need to be promoted because it is popular in its own right.

Parents want to take an interest in their children's hobbies but it can be hard for them to watch and understand a game. *(Margot/Teacher/USA)*

Poker is sexier than bridge, with its \$10 million first prize... I think that poker's popular in its own right, I don't think anyone's necessarily promoting it. It does that by itself. *(Brad/Poker player/USA)*

This study found that categorisation, politics, and reductionist notions of physical activity affected funding, recognition, promotion, development, and player recruitment (Coakley 2011). The types of bridge players (MacLean et al. 2023) could help to explain why a divide exists between social and duplicate players (Scott and Godbey 1994) in places. Theories of continuity in older age could help to explain why some older people resist changing how they market/promote bridge, and which days, times, and formats they want to play bridge. Theories of competition/cooperation could explore why individuals/organisations compete for capital (Bourdieu 1983; Putnam 1995) instead of cooperating to market and recruit.

Competition and Cooperation

In this study, competition is discussed as competition between individuals, clubs, NBOs, or organisations for economic, social, and cultural capital like resources and reputation (Bourdieu 1983; Putnam 1995). Research has shown that there may be an increased chance of people cooperating when they are told that other people are already cooperating (Alcott 2011; Goldstein et al. 2008). Competition might be removed by adjusting people's goals from the likes of "I want my club to be the most successful" to "I want to work together to ensure that bridge survives for everyone everywhere" (Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2017).

Many people want to be the one to *save bridge*. I know some people who don't help out with other programmes because *That's that person's programme*. Or they see it as *If they're playing at this club, they're not playing at mine*. (Rosie/Teacher/USA)

You can teach beginners bridge and charge \$200/person, then the ACBL comes along and creates its competing product and only charges \$50... anything they do to promote bridge and membership in some ways competes with the local franchises. (Jordan/NBO Chair)

Cooperating in the present can often benefit people in the future (Rand et al. 2013). However, people may choose to defend their capital instead of cooperating (Diekmann and Lindenberg 2015). Defending oneself (resource guarding) is understandable in some contexts. Some organisations and individuals rely on competition to stimulate markets (Gintis 1975) or they rely on bridge as a source of income. Participants reported some idea-sharing and communication between boards, clubs, and NBOs but that it is limited. For example, there have been instances of NBOs not wanting to fund research or work that is done in other countries. In contrast, the Danish Federation is planning on collaborating with a national Partnership Against Loneliness. This gives lonely older people some company and benefits the Federation by getting more people playing bridge.

When I was first appointed Youth Coordinator, I spoke to around a dozen people to ask *What works, what should I avoid?* I got all of their stuff together to try and form some sort of coherent idea of how to look after these guys, and it's been lovely. (Derek/Youth Bridge Coordinator/Australia)

I ran an event for [an NBO] and the local club lent their equipment to me for free because *It'll be good to have people playing bridge...* I was running another event [at another location] and the club quoted me £1,400 to use their equipment. I said *It'll be cheaper for me to hire a van*. The guy looked me in the eye and said, *So, do it*. (Ryan/Teacher/UK)

There appears to be a common goal within the bridge world (and amongst participants): to see bridge survive and have people (especially those under 50) learn and continue to play. Despite this, there seems to be a lack of cooperation at local, national, regional, and international levels. This could be caused by perceived competition, or because competition for capital has been ingrained into bridge culture (Werron 2015). Theories of continuity in older age and organisational adaptation could help to explain why a lack of cooperation amongst older people is occurring despite a sense of a shared goal.

Adaptation to Change

Research has shown that when people retire, they make few changes to their free time and hobbies (Iso-Aholeat et al. 1994; Nimrod and Kleiber 2007). The desire for continuity in activities is influenced by many things. For example, the importance/meaning that individuals assign to the activity (Lawton 1993), activities that comprise daily or 'core' activities (Kelly 1999), or activities that maintain their social and psychological behaviours (Atchley 1989). Many of this study's participants think that there is a "fundamental" problem within bridge. They say that many older people have contributed lots of service to the game, often through volunteering for many years, and they end up in positions of power. However, many of them do not have the right mindset and can be 'barriers to change'. They can be barriers to change in terms of how they market/promote bridge, and an unwillingness to offer bridge at other days, times, or formats. If this chain of command is not challenged, then "bridge risks stagnation and fizzling out" (*Kim/Player, writer, teacher/Europe*).

Many people think "We've been this way for 30 years, let's continue doing it".
(*Neil/Trustee for the SBU*)

It puzzles me when they say that they can't recruit new people and that they've tried the same thing for 20 years, and it's like, obviously, that's not working.
(*Marianne/Norwegian Bridge Federation*)

Cooperation will likely be required to work towards the common goal of promoting bridge (Rand and Nowak 2013). Continuity theory (Atchley 1989; 1999) incorporates the idea of change. However, change as we age is usually in the form of decreasing activity levels or changing one activity for a more accessible or less difficult one (Nimrod and Kleiber 2007). Many participants noted that afternoon bridge games often suit older players more than younger ones, and the increase in afternoon games is based on when/how older players want to play bridge (Nimrod and Kleiber 2007). In addition, older players may be from a generation when bridge was more visible and popular, so there was less need to promote the game. A lack of awareness of this change/the need for promotion could combine with consistency of activities and result in a lack of willingness to adapt to new ways of promoting bridge. However, many older people are 'acutely aware' of the need to change and are trying to do so. Regardless, most participants are concerned with many older players' lack of desire to change, which is to the detriment of bridge promotion.

Organisations can adapt by producing resources and skills by developing their practices (Ahuja and Katila 2004). Adaptation can give a competitive advantage (Helfat and Marin 2015) but organisations need to make decisions effectively (Hannan and Freeman 1984). Changes within organisations are not always adaptive, and not every adaptive decision increases the performance of an organisation (Abatecola 2012). Organisational adaptation can also increase tensions and pressure on other organisations (Durand 2001). Organisations within the bridge world may choose to adapt for survival and legitimacy (Meyer and Rowan 1997). Many organisations from this study are aware of their limitations and the need to evolve to survive, stay relevant to their members, and recruit and retain new players. However, they face issues with limited resources (financial and volunteers), unhelpful attitudes, and unwillingness to change.

If you'd asked me before I started with the SBU I'd have said they were stuck in their ways. But knowing what some of the volunteers are doing and trying to do... the SBU is trying hard. *(Tom/Player/UK)*

I do think ACBL has become much more responsive. I think their intentions were always good but they weren't very helpful. I think the new Executive Director will push them forward. *(Jess/Teacher/USA)*

People are not receptive to change. They like to keep things the same, what they're comfortable with. This is true everywhere, not just bridge. *(Louise/NBO Chair)*

Summary

Participants are keen to get more people of all ages to learn and play bridge. They want people to have the opportunity to access some of bridge's benefits, but they also want people to play because bridge is fun and social. However, there are issues with inclusivity and representation and many barriers to promoting bridge that must be addressed. The analysis found that competition can limit positive outcomes for bridge (Diekman and Lindenberg 2015). Individuals and organisations may always compete to be the ones to "save bridge", so increasing resources may not decrease competition/increase cooperation unless goals are adjusted (Schneiberg and Lounsbury 2017).

There are cases of successful organisational adaption in the bridge world but there is some resistance to change. Tailored recruiting of NBO workers may be one way to recruit forward-thinking people or people with the desired skills. The SBU is taking this approach by writing specific job advertisements and focusing on people's skills rather than their availability or eagerness to volunteer or help (as was done in the past).

Conclusion

Participants all had similar demographics (mostly white, over 50, duplicate players). Non-players, social players, younger people, people in other countries, and anyone who was not interviewed will have different experiences and opinions. This could lead to different or incomplete interpretations of the findings (Fossey et al. 2002). However, the data were collected systematically and added depth to what is known about bridge's decline, promotion, recruitment, and retention.

In all the countries represented in this study, bridge is in decline in different ways. All the countries are struggling to promote bridge and attract and retain new players, particularly those under 45. Parts of the bridge world are aware of their limitations and the need to promote bridge and recruit and retain players but there is a lack of practical guidance that will ensure bridge can 'save itself.' Participants would like to see bridge survive but the findings indicate that if something is not done very soon, bridge is at risk.

Research question one found that bridge needs to be rebranded because its images hinder its appeal to the masses. The same chapter also established that reductionist notions of sports and physical activity (i.e., that sports are 'physical') are concealing the physicality of mindsports and other types of sports (Scott and Punch 2024). Sports organisations/governing bodies often focus on the physicality of sports (Kobiela 2018). Thus, bridge will struggle to gain more acceptance as a sport unless reductionist notions are challenged. The findings suggested that sports recognition could help bridge in various ways. For example, it could give bridge access to funding, networks, and expertise. At the same time, there could be some drawbacks. Some participants noted that bridge appeals to some people who dislike physical sports and sports recognition could potentially deter those individuals from bridge. Therefore, marketing towards this audience may require bridge to be presented as a sport of the mind.

Research question two identified numerous barriers to bridge promotion. One of the main reasons why more people are not playing bridge, according to participants, is because fewer people in younger generations are familiar with it. Many people (both those familiar and unfamiliar with bridge) have misconceptions about the sport. These misconceptions need to be addressed by marketing campaigns, but the findings indicated that some of the stereotypes may be true in ways. Some participants resisted particular stereotypes, whereas others felt cautious about removing those stereotypes completely. For example, a few said that bridge does not need to be complex because you only need to count to 13 and you do not need to be good at maths. Others said that when bridge is challenging, it provides lifelong, never-ending challenges and mental stimulation, which is attractive for some. Participants mostly agreed that bridge should not be taught as though it has to be complicated. Again, separate marketing campaigns will likely be required to promote the different aspects of the game (social/competitive, complex/simple) to different types of potential players (MacLean et al.'s 2023 'four types').

The second research question also highlighted structural issues that bridge must address. There is a lack of flexibility with how bridge is governed and played, and this impacts the ability of children and employed people to play bridge. The need for a partner can be challenging for people and some attempts to address this are being trialled around the world. The unwelcoming behaviour/attitudes of some players/clubs and the attitudes of some teachers/players (e.g., that people should aspire to play well) were found to cause tensions between social and duplicate bridge (Scott and Godbey 1994). Participants are aware that bridge needs to improve its marketing, particularly social media/digital marketing. One of the biggest challenges is how to market bridge more effectively using different platforms and targeting different audiences (Baines et al. 2017). Promoting bridge without negative stereotypes could help to raise awareness of bridge and stimulate engagement (Constantinides 2006). Some NBOs/clubs are pushing to market bridge more and in new ways, but they are constrained by limited resources, knowledge, and willingness to change.

Research question three helped to identify various opportunities for bridge promotion/retention. These opportunities included games clubs/board game cafés, pop-up stalls, collaborating with sports, and running social media campaigns. It should be possible for bridge organisations to address the issues identified in this study. The chances of addressing these issues could be significantly increased if there was more collaboration and less competition within and across bridge organisations. Theories of continuity and change (e.g., Atchley 1989; Nimrod and Kleiber 2007) helped to explain why older people might desire a sense of stability and resist change when playing/promoting bridge. Theories of competition (Bourdieu 1983; Simmel 1952), cooperation (e.g., Diekmann and Lindenberg 2015), and adaptation (e.g., Hannan and Freeman 1984) were applied to individuals and organisations. These highlighted that people in the bridge world compete for cultural capital and resources.

Practice Recommendations

Recommendation	Details
Learn to be more tolerant	People have different reasons for playing bridge, and different abilities, experiences, and personalities. You will not always agree with people but the culture of intolerance or 'bad behaviour' in some clubs needs to be changed.
Invest in marketing (techniques and skills)	Learn about and embrace new ways of marketing. Traditional marketing can still be applied to some target audiences. If bridge wants to recruit new (younger) players, then there will need to be more of an emphasis on communicating using the channels this audience uses.
Start thinking from a succession planning point of view	Try to bring new people into boards/organisations to help with difficult areas. Find strategies to advance your club/organisation to ensure it survives for many years to come. Consider developing ways to train and organise volunteers.

Focus some attention on retrieval recruiting	Do some research to find out why people stopped attending lessons/games/clubs and try to address those issues. Use a multi-pronged approach to retrieve those members (e.g., different types of marketing, offering different types of games, providing access to different types of bridge).
Innovation and adaptation	Focus on getting people comfortable with cards/bridge in lessons/clubs/tournaments by teaching and working in new ways. Develop alternative ways of learning, playing, contacting people, and talking about bridge. The bridge world tends to 'preach to the converted'.
Increase sharing and cooperation	Cooperation should occur at all levels (nationally/internationally and between individuals/clubs/NBOs). Develop websites and platforms to easily share resources, guidance, and best practices. For example, the WBF or EBL could have a webpage with best practices, targeted marketing resources, and programmes (with details) from other countries. Consider collaborating with other games/sports/organisations.
Expand social bridge and social environments	Think of ways to make the game more social (e.g., shorter games, include food/drink, bridge parties, family nights).
Teaching	When teaching beginners, do not focus on making them good players or teaching them a lot. Make the game fun and make them want to come back, then you can introduce more to the ones who want to advance.

Concluding Remarks

It is possible that there could be unintended consequences of promoting bridge and recruiting players (Merton 1936). If bridge were to become more popular rather quickly, then the bridge world would be unprepared for an influx of learners and players. These challenges can be anticipated (de Zwart 2015) and preparation may be required before marketing campaigns are deployed (such as having learning tools and flexible games ready). Bridge struggles with a lack of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1983; Putnam 1995). There are some people with marketing degrees/jobs in the bridge world, but these roles need further investment and development.

Solutions could focus on 'bridging capital'. This could involve increasing trust and networks and sharing capital amongst local, national, and international organisations (Putnam 1995). For example, a global marketing campaign could be designed and deployed, with costs and resources shared across NBOs. This could be more effective than individual NBOs each developing their own costly digital media campaign. Strong leadership and pooling of resources/expertise would be required to coordinate such an effort but given the global concerns around bridge decline, the timing may be right.

Appendix 1: Best Practices of Teaching

These suggestions are gathered from the advice given by participants. They are not designed to prescribe a particular way of teaching. They are intended to give some guidance on 'Best Practices' of teaching from the bridge players and teachers that participated in this study.

Do

- Develop guidelines and 'tips' for new bridge teachers/helpers and provide them free of charge.
- Mentor teachers/helpers to improve their skills and confidence.
- Consider the length of course. How long do people want to spend on one course and how much can you realistically teach in that period?
- Create flexible lesson plans; i.e., lessons that people can come back to in their own time.
- Get people playing quickly. Get them enjoying the game and finding it fun and then you can introduce more theory/rules.
- Consider involving novice teachers/helpers.
- Lower your standards for beginners; don't expect too much of them.
- Make lessons fun and interactive.
- Make resources available for non-members; not everyone will want to become a member of a club/Federation.
- Point out mistakes in kind and subtle ways (advice for teachers, other students, and more experienced players).
- Make clubs and lessons friendly and welcoming environments.
- Create a culture in clubs that welcomes and integrates learners.
- Offer methods of integration (e.g., supervised play, gentle duplicate, 'meet the club' nights).
- Consider using digital or online tools to facilitate learning and development.

Don't

- Expect that everyone is familiar with cards.
- Over-teach the game (e.g., introduce too much too soon).
- Focus on making champion players. Keen new players can take improver lessons. Others will be happy to play at a more rudimentary level.
- Teach everyone in a school or lecture-like way. Some people will want to be taught this way and others won't.
- 'Fling people in at the deep end' when they want to transition to clubs; use methods of integration (see above).

Appendix 2: Potential Marketing/Promotional Methods

Collaboration

One participant spoke about the recent *Barbie* film, and how it did so well and was popular worldwide. Esme (UK) thinks that Barbie's success was partly due to its (over 100) collaborations because "it was everywhere, and everyone was talking about it". Bridge could potentially collaborate with some brands to promote bridge. This study is not able to suggest which brands these could be but based on participants' interviews, collaborating with popular ('young, cool') brands could help to popularise bridge and increase its visibility.

Around five participants are considering (or planning) to collaborate with sports. Liz (Denmark) has spoken with the Danish Physical Sports Federation to suggest the possibility of making a "House of Concentration Sports". These talks are in the early stages and there is no guarantee that anything will come of it, but the dialogue is a good beginning. At the time of the interview, two participants were planning to develop programmes that involve teaching bridge to adults (one to retired athletes and the other using community sporting organisations to recruit people who support local sports clubs). Jess (USA) has considered working with a summer Swim Team to teach children bridge, which they could play in between their turns at swimming. Rosie (USA) has considered trying to pair up with academic decathlons to get students to learn bridge (and compete) during an academic year. However, she notes that children are already busy, so it may be difficult to get people to choose bridge out of the 'endless' options.

Advertising/Marketing

Full-page flyers on boards/walls/bulletin boards can be good to draw people's attention, but people will need smaller flyers to take home. Participants mentioned that these smaller flyers could be handed out at stalls, left in small pouches beside flyers on bulletin boards, and located in public places (e.g., doctors' surgeries, and coffee shops).

There could be opportunities to use samples (i.e., free or discounted merchandise or lessons/membership) to get more people playing bridge and aid recruitment. For example, players could be given rewards or discounts if they bring friends along to learn or play. Non-players could be offered to learn/play/come along at a discounted rate (e.g., flyers with discounts for a particular lesson or club). This technique could also be used to bring back people who stopped learning/playing.

Introducing people to clubs

A common theme brought up during interviews was that people need to be integrated into clubs and made to feel welcome. Many people are learning or playing online at home and their introduction to clubs needs to be a positive experience. Both adults and children can be

introduced to club environments (social/regular/youth clubs). Some participants approach this matter by having social games, supervised play, and drinks nights. When teaching youths, Alice (UK) brought them to the bridge club on one occasion, where they played minibridge and ate food and “they loved it”. Clubs could host open nights for people in the community/area to come along and meet members and try bridge, with most of the focus on socialising, meeting people, and getting familiar with the club environment.

Humans of New York/People of Bridge

Participants mostly agreed that bridge lacks visibility, and that the bridge world does not use social media to its full potential. One participant mentioned that bridge could do a People of Bridge series on the likes of TikTok. There are numerous photo series and photoblogs (in print and social media) that collect photos and stories of everyday people (e.g., Humans of New York and People of New York TikTok videos). The TikTok videos can receive millions of views and have been watched all over the world. Such an approach could be a way of introducing the world to bridge players and showing them the different people who play and the different ways of playing. Of course, there would have to be someone taking these pictures/videos and sharing the stories (people inside the bridge world/photojournalists, for example). Outreach would have to be conducted to identify ways of making and sharing the videos and how to make them ‘viral’ online, but this approach could have the potential to be effective.

Social Clubs and Environments

A few participants suggested that people could form new (social) clubs instead of trying to change existing clubs. These clubs would ideally be run by young or forward-thinking people. The clubs could be unaffiliated with NBOs to keep them focused on social bridge (given that many NBOs, perhaps inadvertently, encourage competitive bridge). If NBOs were to trial this kind of setup, then they would need to be accepting and shift the focus from competitive to social play.

One participant is in the process of ‘socialising’ the bridge club that she helps to run (making it more social and fun). They are considering things such as an under-40s/50s night where they will have drinks and snacks available, like a cocktail hour (with bridge). They will not play a traditional three-hour game. People may be at the club for 3+ hours but bridge play is interspersed with food, drink, and socialising.

Another option may be to create or develop ‘games clubs’ that feature bridge and other games and mindsports. They could charge people a small entry fee (to cover snacks) and then people can move around the room playing different games and socialising. Issues with this endeavour include finding a location, funding, and people to run it.

A Case Study: The Netherlands

The Dutch Federation is trying to stimulate walk-in bridge locations around cities. These are clubs where people can walk in and play for as long as they want without needing to be a member. This approach is working reasonably well and helps to encourage greater flexibility in how bridge is offered. The clubs need to support these ideas and offer this kind of flexibility.

The Dutch Federation has had much success marketing bridge to lonely older people (50+). They approached different municipalities that identified older people. The municipality sent letters out to those people, advertising bridge as a way to tackle loneliness. Fighting loneliness is a priority for the municipalities, says Eric (EBL Chair), so they are happy to promote bridge to help tackle loneliness in older adults. The Federation approaches the municipalities every couple of years to send out advertisements. This campaign has been running for around 15 years now and has secured over 15,000 new members. People come along to their local library or community centre for free. They start with minibridge, where some of them stay and some advance. The Federation is happy to have people staying with minibridge because they are still playing and socialising at a level that they enjoy. Some people go on to form a club where they feel secure and socialise two or three times a week. For example, a group of over 100 people formed their own informal club, and they are happy to play minibridge or relaxed normal bridge in an environment that suits them.

Around 15 years ago, the Federation trialled a programme (Flexi Bridge), where people could come to the club between 7 and 9.30pm and leave between 9 and 11pm. Eric (EBL Chair) thinks that gave people the flexibility to attend the club when it suited them and to play as much (or as little) bridge as they wanted. They offered the same flexibility in the afternoon which was also successful. Johan and Eric say that many clubs are not used to flexibility and that it takes some willingness and adaptation to change.

About 40 years ago in the Netherlands, they had a programme on television during prime-time hours, and Johan thinks that this inspired a lot of people to learn and play. The Federation increased its membership from 30,000 to 100,000 in 5 years or so. They have tried to do the same thing a few times since but subsequent attempts were not as successful as the first at recruiting players.

A Case Study: Iceland

See Imsland (2023) for a presentation from the managing director of the Icelandic Federation.

Iceland has grown the number of youths and adults learning and playing bridge and has managed to improve the image of bridge in Iceland. The Federation had nearly 1,000 learners going through their school last year, and they have the highest number of people playing in the last 20 years. The Federation Director's attitude to change the image of bridge was that you have to believe in the product and rebrand. Traditionally, the Federation used radio and print marketing but they started using social media. They focused on showing images of young

people when they advertise and get media coverage. The Federation also sponsored a television programme that was one of the most popular shows on the channel. They hope to get their second programme onto the biggest channel in Iceland.

A consequence of the advertising campaign is that old players are returning to the game because they think that it is fun and they are missing out now that in Iceland it is considered cool to play bridge. The Federation has added weekly beginners' tournaments (with teachers to help), and they have additional classes for their under 14s who show the most promise. They use minibridge to introduce under 14s to playing and make it fun. The Federation got bridge accepted as a subject with credits in secondary grammar schools, and they supply books, assistant teachers, and equipment. In some cases, there is not enough interest for a class in individual schools, so the Federation teaches pupils from different schools. All Federation bridge programmes are free for those under 20, which probably encourages young people to play. They have motivated young teachers and experienced (older) teachers. However, they face challenges including keeping the momentum going, needing more space to teach, and limited money and resources.

University Bridge

Many participants spoke about introducing bridge to university students and campuses to encourage students (and faculty members) to learn but they identified issues such as limited resources. One participant has successfully run a university bridge club in the USA since around 2019. The participant enjoys teaching university students because it is informal, social, and fun. She and her bridge partner (who helps run the club) decided to start by getting the students playing straight away. They get the students to play a hand or two of Whist before introducing simple bidding.

One participant from the ACBL discussed three scenarios for college programmes. In Scenario 1, a professor at a university starts a bridge class that fulfils part of an honour's credit. A subset of students enjoy bridge and start a student bridge club. The university continues to offer the class every year or two so they have new students coming through that can feed into their club. In Scenario 2, a charismatic student who already plays bridge recruits friends and teaches them. The trouble with this approach is when the student does not form a structured organisation with a succession plan. When the student graduates, the club will discontinue. In Scenario 3, a student who already plays bridge recruits fellow students (similar to Scenario 2) and forms a structured club. The structured club (including President and Treasurer) has a plan to continue after the original student(s) leave.

The above examples illustrate some of the possibilities for promoting bridge and recruiting and retaining players. There are many cases of successfully getting more people (of all ages) learning and playing bridge. A more coordinated and cooperative approach to bridge promotion and recruitment/retention across nations, regions, and organisations could enhance the success of such initiatives and help the future of bridge.

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