



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

A Sociological Study on Promoting the Mindsport Bridge

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BAMSA Summary Report 2024

It is difficult to estimate how many people around the world play bridge socially and/or competitively. However, figures suggest that numbers have declined considerably since the height of bridge's popularity in the 1950s, when thirty million people were estimated to play bridge in the USA alone (Smith 1957). Now, the World Bridge Federation (WBF) reports having around one million registered members who regularly compete in events.

This project investigated sociological factors surrounding why bridge is in decline and needs to promote itself more. Potential opportunities and associated challenges with promoting bridge and player recruitment and retention were examined from a sociological perspective. Thirty in-depth, semi-structured interviews were conducted with bridge players, teachers, and National Bridge Organisation (NBO) employees/volunteers from the UK, USA, Europe, and Australia.

Findings

Around the world, individuals (such as teachers and players), clubs, NBOs, and other bridge organisations are experiencing promotion, recruitment, retention, and the decline of bridge in diverse ways. For example, some participants said that the Scottish Bridge Union is struggling to attract elite-level youth players, whereas Dutch participants thought that their Union has a good number of elite-level youth players. During interviews, it was discussed how the number of people who are learning and playing bridge has declined more for under 50s than over 50s in many countries.

Findings show that bridge needs to be 'rebranded', it is disadvantaged by a lack of recognition as a sport, and there is a lack of younger people (45 and under) playing. Recruiting and retaining younger people was said to be 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).

Participants acknowledged that bridge has an 'image problem' and that the sport struggles to present itself as an eye-catching, fun, accessible, and exciting pastime to the mass market. According to participants, fewer people from younger generations are playing bridge, which is in part caused by cultural changes. These cultural changes include the internet, streaming services, and alternative hobbies that result in fewer people playing cards at home. Therefore, the bridge world must develop ways to make the sport better known and more appealing to younger generations who are less familiar with the game.

According to the interviewees, the bridge world lacks people with marketing knowledge and experience, the sport often fails to use social and digital marketing to its full potential, and bridge struggles with funding/resources for marketing and promotion. A common theme during interviews was that bridge tends to 'preach to the converted' and struggles to engage non-players who do not know anyone who plays. Therefore, tailored marketing and alternative ways of communicating, playing bridge, and learning could be required to reach a wider audience and recruit and retain more players. There appears to be an awareness (at local, national, and international levels) of bridge's weaknesses in marketing and promotion. However, participants reported that there is some unwillingness or reluctance to change promotion, recruitment, marketing strategies, and how games are offered. The group that was considered more likely to resist change was older people, who may have dedicated much time to the sport and are often in positions of influence (such as boards).

Many participants regarded bridge as having the potential to be an inclusive sport, but the findings suggest that there are currently some inequalities and a lack of representation. For example, some players hold sexist attitudes (such as that men's brains are better suited to bridge than women's) and there is a lack of diversity in clubs, boards, and NBOs at local, national, and international levels. Most participants suggested that bridge has marketed itself to certain demographics and that the negative images of bridge as an elitist older person's game may not be misconceptions. Negative behaviours in clubs (like bossiness and rudeness) and attitudes within clubs, boards, and NBOs (e.g., that bridge should be played to a certain standard or club membership should be invite-only) were said to adversely affect bridge's promotion, recruitment, and retention.

Participants say that teaching is important to obtain new players. However, the data reveal examples of poor teaching; troublesome teacher attitudes; and a lack of resources, volunteers, students, and interactive ways to self-teach. Opportunities for bridge promotion involve embracing digital marketing and social media, developing 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 players who strongly value those aspects of bridge.

Discussion

Overall, the findings indicate that if something is not done very soon, the future of bridge is at risk. Parts of the bridge world are acutely aware of their limitations and the need to promote bridge and recruit and retain players but there is a lack of practical guidance that can be followed to help bridge 'save itself.' Bridge struggles with a lack of economic, social, and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1983; Putnam 1995). This is mainly a lack of funding and resources and insufficient knowledge and skills to market bridge in effective ways to different audiences. There are some people with marketing degrees/jobs in the bridge world, but these roles need further investment and development.

Solutions to promote bridge could focus on 'combining capital'. This could involve increasing trust and networks and sharing capital (i.e., resources and expertise) at local, national, and international levels (Putnam 1995). For example, a global marketing campaign could be designed and deployed, with costs and resources shared across NBOs. This could potentially be more effective than individual NBOs each developing their own costly digital media campaign. Strong leadership and a 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 to investigate this possibility.

Practice Recommendations

Recommendation	Details
Learn to be more tolerant	People have different reasons for playing bridge and different abilities, experiences, and personalities. The culture of intolerance or poor behaviour in some clubs needs to change. Clubs/groups need to enforce zero tolerance for poor 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 (younger) players, then there will need to be more of an emphasis on communicating and marketing via the platforms that this audience use.
Succession planning	Try to bring new people into boards/organisations to bring new perspectives on issues. Think about how a club/organisation can be promoted to ensure that 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. Then, a multi-pronged approach can be used to retrieve those members (e.g., different types of marketing, offering different types of games, or providing access to different types of bridge).
Innovation and adaptation	Focus on getting people comfortable with cards/bridge in lessons/clubs/tournaments by teaching/playing 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 a lot. Instead, focus on making the game fun so that they want to keep playing.

References

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