



Bridge: A MindSport For All

Connects People, Challenges Minds

Bridge: Technology and Covid

Snellgrove, M. and Punch, S. (2024) [Situating bridge: Understanding older adults' digital leisure practices during the COVID-19 pandemic](#). *Journal of Leisure Research*.

Summary

The arrival of the Coronavirus pandemic saw life across the world change dramatically, with many countries imposing national lockdowns. While the majority of people were sequestered indoors, digital spaces for work, socialising and leisure became part of the 'new normal.' Within bridge, this meant the closing down of all bridge clubs and an attendant move to online bridge playing.

Between April and November 2020, bridge players were invited to submit diary entries detailing how COVID-19 had changed their bridge playing habits. 298 diary entries from 19 different countries and 133 participants were collected. Drawing on this diary data, this paper explores the important role digital bridge played for many in sustaining and maintaining social connections.

Findings

The paper discusses technology and its role in leisure practices from an academic viewpoint. With the arrival of the pandemic and a host of national lockdowns and stay-at-home orders, digital leisure became a space for many to connect. This included bridge. Prior to lockdown, BBO (Bridge Base Online) was the main online bridge platform. During the pandemic, a new platform emerged called RealBridge which included video and audio. It transformed digital play to something closer to club bridge, where players could interact and socialise online.

The majority of the submitted diary entries were one-offs, but a few participants submitted repeat accounts. Some of the diary entries were very short and others were extensive. The paper contains many quotes from the diaries, both from bridge players and from organisers of bridge clubs. It covers four key themes: digital volunteer facilitators, maintaining social connections through digital bridge, the practical benefits, and the digital constraints and challenges.

- **Social Connections through Digital Bridge:** During the first lockdowns, many bridge clubs devoted considerable time and energy to moving their club online. As well as enjoying the social benefits of connecting and playing, participants had a geographical benefit of being able to play with a wider range of players, including those overseas. What the accounts show is the central importance of bridge in people's lives before and during the pandemic.
- **Playing Digital Bridge:** Many clubs encouraged their members to play online and many were key in teaching digital literacy skills. The digitisation of the game brought new challenges. The process often demanded a huge amount of time and energy from a range of dedicated teachers and organisers. Some players were reluctant to move online, but the longer the pandemic continued, more people moved online as a way to connect with others.

People became used to the roles and rhythms of digital bridge and built it into their locked-down lives. Many over-70s have described online bridge as a 'lifesaver' during the pandemic, whilst others are playing and teaching more bridge than ever before. However, for some it did not compensate for the loss of meeting people and the feelings of loneliness and isolation experienced by many during the pandemic.

- **The Lonely Pandemic:** For many participants, the pandemic and the lockdowns exacerbated any existing issues with health, depression and loneliness. Though many people took to online bridge and some explained why they did not like it, there was also concern expressed about those players who were not participating in digital bridge.
- **The Missing Players:** Clubs and organisations estimate that 40-60% of existing players participated in digital bridge, but as the pandemic progressed those figures were likely to be higher, around 70%. This means that 30% of players lost a key leisure activity. There were some polarised views, either loving or hating playing online from the outset, whilst others initially disliked digital bridge but grew to like it. Some respondents indicated that they did not want to get to grips with the technology, some felt their skills or wifi were not sufficient, some considered the digital game to just not be the same without the in-person social and human aspects, and some were put off by cheating cases. However, there is still much that we do not know about this group who are possibly the most marginalised and excluded.
- **Cheating:** During the move to digital bridge in 2020, a series of cheating scandals emerged, involving either self-kibitzing or collusion. There were estimates of as many as 10% of deviant online players at the start of lockdown, falling to 2-5% as awareness was raised and preventative methods introduced. Whilst cheating was mentioned in the diaries for this study, it was not a major focus and is discussed in a separate book chapter.
- **Transferable skills:** For some, online bridge encouraged the development of motor skills (e.g. the use of keyboard and mouse). It gave rise to the development of new computer skills, and enabled some players with mobility issues to re-engage with the game. For many participants, playing digital bridge during the pandemic was a crucial mechanism to combat loneliness and isolation in a time of high-health risk for many.

Further Research

As a result of the pandemic, digital bridge has led to changes in the provision and participation of the mindsport. The ways that access, delivery and engagement will continue in the post-pandemic era is worthy of future research. Digital bridge has opened up more inclusive spaces and greater access for some, yet also marginalised others. It would be interesting to explore how this will shape future teaching, recruitment and retention of new players. There is uncertainty as to how bridge clubs and organisations will cater to the different needs of face-to-face and digital bridge players in a cost-effective manner in a post-pandemic world. Bridge has been transformed by technological changes during the pandemic, and further research is needed to explore the future hybrid of digital and face-to-face bridge. Further research is also needed about the disengagement of bridge players during lockdown (i.e. the missing players) and whether they are likely to return to in-person bridge clubs

BAMSA Project Lead: Professor Samantha Punch

Email: bamsa@stir.ac.uk



**UNIVERSITY of
STIRLING**

