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Bridging Stigma: Marketing the Mindsport Bridge to the Next Generation of Players

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ABSTRACT

The image of the card game bridge is associated with an older generation of players. This study develops ideal types of bridge players as a way of challenging the mindsport's stigmatized image to promote and increase its global reach. In a two-part emergent design, part one involved five workshops with the bridge community and part two involved three focus groups with non-bridge players. Among the bridge community, there was a consensus for the socializer, self-improver, and competitor ideal types, but not for the mind-gamer type. Although the ideal types were evident in non-bridge players' experiences of sport, they might not be enough in themselves to persuade them to play bridge. To conclude, identity-based marketing can be used to rebrand bridge as a mindsport and mind-game to overcome its negative stigmatized image.

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Bridge; leisure; mindsport; stigma

> NO ONE IS LEFT from the Glen Valley, Pennsylvania, Bridge Club who can tell us precisely when or why the group broke up, even though its forty-odd members were still playing regularly as recently as 1990, just as they had done for more than half a century.
>
> Putnam (2000, p. 15)

There has been a gradual decline in the popularity of the card game bridge, as Putnam's quote suggests. Bridge is not alone, though, as similar declines have been noticed in other leisure activities such as lawn bowls (Heath & Freestone, 2023). According to Stebbins (2017), leisure activities which have a "marginal status" are seen as frivolous or unimportant (p. 100). Other mainstream games, like boardgames, have "strategically twisted" or innovated (e.g. in game play) to remain popular (Antunes, 2023). The problem that remains for bridge is how a game once revered by many can be rebranded to attract the next generation of players. Without doing so, there is a risk that bridge will fail to innovate and share the same fate as other traditional card games.

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Bridge used to be more of an intergenerational leisure activity which older and younger people played together, including families. Research on intergenerational transfer has shown that parents' interest in sport encourages their children's participation in sport (Downward et al., 2014; Hayoz et al., 2019; Wheeler, 2012). However, parents tend not to teach their children cards anymore, resulting in a lack of intergenerational transfer. Children may be exposed to bridge via their grandparents, which could lead to them having more knowledge than their parents, reversing intergenerational transfer. Yet now the contemporary sporting context is digitized, young people can choose between more activities, with video games (Kowert, 2020) and e-sports becoming increasingly popular (Andrews & Ritzer, 2018; Riatti & Thiel, 2022). Intergenerational transfer is evident from older to younger generations for table-top role-playing games and video games (Buyukozturk & Shay, 2024), but has been limited and less effective for bridge. With the generation gap increasing, bridge has become perceived as an unexciting pastime as it is assumed to be mainly for older people in retirement (Hen-Herbst et al., 2023; McCutcheon & Punch, forthcoming).

A key challenge facing the European Bridge League is a recognition that if bridge had a "more prominent and less problematic profile/image" this would help attract funding and also bring more players into the game (Snellgrove & Punch, 2020, p. 5). There are several examples of when the "face" (Goffman, 1967/1982) of sport and leisure has been threatened. In leisure tourism, urban decline and decay became a marketing strategy for resurrecting Detroit as "America's Great Come Back City" (Tegtmeyer, 2016). In sport, elite curling rebranded itself from an "old man's game" of smokers and drinkers to a young fitness culture of elite athletes through popular representation in the media (Allain, 2020). While video games were once seen as harmful, recent research acknowledges their potential well-being benefits (Kowert, 2020). These examples point to a broader sociological question that underpins this article: how can identity-based marketing help reframe stigmatized leisure activities like bridge?

This article develops ideal types of bridge players as a way of challenging the mindsport's stigmatized image in order to promote and increase its global reach. To do so, we turn to the sociology of Erving Goffman, who, according to Back (2015), has a "brilliant ear and eye for the seemingly unimportant" (p. 833). If managing stigma is about how people show their identity (Goffman, 1986), then rebranding using relatable identity archetypes (like ideal types) can help change these performances for new audiences. The article begins by looking at the stigmatization of the mindsport bridge. We then present the methods, followed by the results of poetic representations of ideal types of bridge players and non-bridge players' responses to these types. Finally, we discuss the ideal types in relation to existing literature and present them as a new marketing approach for bridge, as well as having implications for rebranding other stigmatized forms of leisure.

Stigmatization of the mindsport bridge

Stigma is an ancient Greek word for marking bodies to expose something unusual or bad about the moral status of the signifier. In more recent times, this marking has become replaced with a "stigma symbol" in which we are drawn to an attribute of an

individual that is "deeply discrediting" (Goffman, 1986). Such symbols are constructed in social interactions which become stereotyped into either "normal" or "stigmatized" behavior. While the stigmatized are part of the normal, they are also different from it. According to Goffman (1986), stigma can be either *discredited*, where "differentness is known," or *discreditable*, where "it is neither known about by those present nor immediately perceivable" (p. 4).

When describing bridge as a stigmatized form of leisure, we refer to a combination of different types of stigmas. First and foremost, there is an age-related stigma. Agism was coined by Robert Butler in 1969 as the systematic process of stereotyping and discrimination because of someone's chronological age (Butler, 1975; cited in Genoe & Whyte, 2015). The image of bridge is still associated with an older generation of players despite becoming increasingly professionalized over the past three decades (Russell et al., 2022). Research has shown that young people are more reluctant to participate in sports they perceive as boring and tend to have more negative feelings and are less likely to associate with older people (Berger, 2017; Toms & Fleming, 1995). As Scambler (2009) argues, such stigmatizing behavior can result in "exclusion, rejection, blame or devaluation" (p. 441). In the context of bridge, this stigma might deter younger players from taking up what is perceived as a dull or boring game, assumed to be outdated and only for older people (Punch & Snellgrove, 2021).

There are also class-based and cultural associations, where bridge is sometimes perceived as elitist, old-fashioned, or out of step with more contemporary leisure activities (McCutcheon & Punch, forthcoming). Gender stigma is also present, with women bridge players often stereotyped as "weaker" or less skilled according to interviews with bridge players and the second author's experiences of playing in bridge tournaments (Punch and Rogers, 2022; Punch et al., 2023). These assumptions may result in younger people feeling reluctant to engage with bridge. This article offers one possible solution to age-based stigma by exploring how identity-based marketing could help reframe bridge for a new generation of players.

Methods

The study Bridging Insights had a two-part emergent research design. Part 1 focused on developing a marketing strategy of "ideal type" bridge players. This informed the questions in part 2, for testing the marketing strategy with non-bridge players. Ethics approval for the study was granted by the University of Stirling's General University Ethics Panel (1852).

Ideal types of bridge players

Ideal types offer "concepts and propositions—the components of the ideal type—that can guide discovery-oriented inquiry" (Stebbins, 2015, p. 96). In this study, the four ideal types—self-improver, competitor, socializer, and mind-gamer—were developed collaboratively by members of the marketing and research team, providing a new framework for understanding and rebranding stigmatized leisure activities, particularly bridge. The types are not empirically derived categories but rather were fictionally constructed based on the team's insider knowledge and

experience within the bridge community, as well as on previous research (Galbraith et al., 2018; Punch et al., 2022).

Ideal types are well established in public health (Farrimond, 2017; Yule and Tinson, 2017) and sports management (Guillianotti, 2002). The ideal types are consistent with what Goffman (1986) calls "personal identity" (i.e. bridge identities), as they are "the unique combination of life history items that come to be attached to the individual with the help of those pegs for his [/her] identity" (p. 57). Each type was fleshed out using illustrative examples from the team's lived experience. The competitor type is for the art of the game, which is a serious yet extrinsic endeavor. Author 2 plays bridge as an escape from work. She loves the thrill of winning and the desire to win keeps her sharp and focused when at the bridge table. The pain of losing motivates her to improve and do better next time. Author 2 does not like playing if there is nothing at stake. The socializer type participates for the fun of the game that is extrinsically social. When Author 4 is not at work, she wants to relax and have fun, without structure, competition, or judgment. Author 4 plays bridge with friends and a glass of wine; the social encounter is her motivation to play. The self-improver type plays bridge for the challenge of the mind-game, which is both serious and internally driven. Author 5 loves a good challenge, where part of the fun is setting targets, measuring progress, and pushing herself to the next level. She strives to outperform her previous best and that is why she plays bridge. The mind-gamer type Author 6 is fascinated by people and loves to figure out what makes them tick. At the bridge table he watches the people, the rhythm of the game, and the ways players approach bidding or playing. For him, bridge is just another way of understanding human beings. While ideal types give clear targets for messaging, they can also risk reinforcing group stereotypes that stigma depends on, a point this study strives to address by gathering data from both bridge and non-bridge playing communities.

Data collection and analysis

For part 1, all registered attendees were recruited at the *Bridge: A MindSport for All* (BAMSA) Conference (see https://bridgemindsport.org/). Only individuals who were registered for the conference were eligible to take part in the workshops. Registration for the workshops was made available via the project website and posters at the university. The sample of participants included a diverse range of people from an international context, including bridge-playing academics, amateur and professional bridge players, as well as policymakers involved in the bridge community. Participants were informed about the workshops through email correspondence in the run-up to the conference, which included a participant information sheet and completed a consent checklist.

Members of the research and marketing team conducted the workshops in July 2021. Session 4B, "Marketing Bridge," was attended by 278 attendees (academics, administrators, and bridge players) from 62 countries across the world. Attendees were randomly allocated into one of five groups on Microsoft Teams. Each group focused on one ideal type of bridge player, and questions were devised in a similar format for the purpose of comparison between groups. The first question acted as an icebreaker

about their response to the type, followed by a series of questions developed by our marketing partner, SHM. Questions were structured around each ideal type of bridge player (self-improver, competitor, socializer, mind-gamer). Participants were encouraged to discuss how these types fit in with (or not) their own lived experiences of bridge. Finally, a scenario was posed to the group that encouraged experimentation and creativity for how bridge could be developed for promoting the game to this particular type of player.

Members of the research team (Authors 1 and 3) developed poetic representations of ideal types of bridge players in the form of short stories (Faulkner, 2019) based on the workshop discussions. According to Lupton (2021, p. 7), poetic representations entail pulling out "evocative phrases" and considering how they could be combined to generate a narrative poetic representation tracing a story arc. The poetic transcription was informed by a grounded theory approach whereby code categories and themes were inductively developed from recurring language that was extracted out of the data (Leavy, 2020, p. 91). While poetic representation can be more subjective than conventional thematic analysis, it allowed us to retain participants' language. To improve transparency, the coding process began with Author 1 and 3 independently reading through the transcripts and identifiying key words or sentences and putting them into a separate Word document. Keywords and phrases were then grouped together to create the arc of each story based on each ideal type of bridge player. Although the original wording from the phrases extracted from the stories was retained, members of the research team did make some slight edits, including sometimes changing punctuation and tense to make the phrases better fit together in the poetic format. Authors 1 and 3 then met to discuss and compare their stories to ensure consistency. While there were differences in the ordering of ideas, both used similar keywords and phrases. The poetic representations were reviewed in discussion with another team member (Author 2).

For inclusion in part 2, we invited non-bridge players aged between 18–35 years old who had no experience in playing bridge or had not engaged with the game for at least 10 years; however, exceptions were made for those who had played other similar card games such as whist. Invitation to the focus groups was advertised via the project website and Twitter account, the team's existing networks at the University of Stirling, sport- and leisure-related journals, governing bodies of sport, and local authorities. The three focus groups were attended by eight participants (three males and five females) aged between 18 and 35 years. The groups were facilitated by the marketing team (Author 4) and observed by members of the research team (Authors 1 and 3). A key difference between the questions in part 1 and 2 was that participants in part 2 were encouraged to discuss how the ideal types fit in with (or not) their own lived experiences of sport. The analysis follows Goffman's "documentary method of interpretation," which involves "the mutual, back-and-forth hermeneutic determination between a given set of particulars and an underlying homologous pattern" (Watson, 1999, p. 150). We applied this interpretive approach by comparing participants' reflections on their sport identities with the poetic ideal types, iteratively moving between the specific language participants used and the broader motivational patterns they described. This enabled us to assess which ideal types resonated most, or least, with the non-bridge players.

Results

We present poetic representations for each of the ideal types: socializer, competitor, self-improver, and mind-gamer. Each story draws on keywords and phrases related to player identities, developed from the workshops that took place at the BAMSA Conference with members of the bridge community.

Socializer's story

New players
Incentivize and publicize
"Make sure they feel really special"

Not a frightening experience
We don't play for competition
Must reduce competition
Longer games intimidate
Bridge needs more than competitive players to survive

In the comfort of one's home
In the spirit of fun
A common interest
Less serious and shorter games
Handicaps for a level playing field
To give a fighting chance
With breaks in play
Chitchat and food
Making new friends, partnerships, and communities

Informal leagues, teaching online, bridge parties
Learn to be tolerant
Care for others
Mentored by experienced players
Clubs must be warmly welcoming

Encourage players to be social
"As much a social event as it is a bridge lesson"
Socializers should motivate socializers

Bridge is a social game

Competitor's story

Earn points
Compete against top international players across the world
Bridge ranking

Now a serious player
"Hooked for life"

Have fun when you're winning
All games are competitive
No fun if it's not competitive
Are you brave enough to enter?

Win at all costs

Achieving results is exhausting
With conventions that are overwhelming for new players
But make sure you don't come last
Feeling humiliated and demoralized
Discouraged and not coming back
Wired for competition?

Start with the foundations
Need new systems
Bridge buddies
Players must stay for bridge to survive
Have different competition formats in schools
Need like-minded competitors from other sports
Excitement of competing in bridge

A competitive mindsport

Self-improver's story

Partnership is key
Thrives on challenges
A problem solver
Set aside practice time

Not solely interested in winning
Don't need to be a "good" player

Sometimes gets frustrated
Too much of a commitment
Break-up with partner
Need to up the game
Partner with a better player

Break down image and stereotype barriers
Inflexible teaching programs
Great players might not be great teachers
"We shoot ourselves in the foot"

Make bridge appealing
A game for young and middle-aged people
Market from successes in poker, chess, and cricket
Open to new ideas

Let players find their own path
Need investment like videogaming
Teach using social media and apps
Add color, life, and change terminology
Reinvention of bridge to attract new players

"You never stop learning"

Mind-gamer's story

An experienced player
Interested in people
Thinking about interaction
Watching rather than playing

More than socializing

Psychology of the game
Reading the opposition
A tactician
Assessing different styles of play

More than self-improvement

"Killer instinct"
A sinister undertone
Pulling a stroke
Drawing them into a trap
Breaking them down psychologically
Beating the person mentally
Lobbying for support from influential people
For their own benefit

More than a competitor

Promote constructive aspects of the game
Assessing different styles of play
New ideas and strategies
A deeper knowledge
"You can never be a total expert"

Every player is playing a mind-game of some sort

Non-bridge players' perceptions of bridge

Through Goffman's documentary method, three overarching themes were developed of how participants talked about bridge in relation to other leisure and sport contexts: bridging sport, bridging identities, and bridging stigma. Bridging sport considers how bridge compares to mainstream sports. Bridging identities explores how the ideal types fit in with (or not) non-bridge players' sporting experiences. Bridging stigma looks toward the future of bridge.

Bridging sport: A "step too far"?

Bridge was considered an intellectual activity that requires high levels of concentration in a relaxing space around a table, but there was some "ambivalence" (Goffman 1986) towards it, when compared to sports more generally. For example, one participant said "[sport is] instrumental[ly] rationalized and rule bound … [by] governing bodies, [whereas] bridge might be better considered a game or form of leisure" (FG1). Another said calling bridge a sport a "step too far" (FG2). Bridge was among a category of games like chess or darts, also not considered sports because they have limited physicality. Alternatively, "mind-game" (FG3) was suggested because bridge was perceived to "take a lot of mental energy" (FG2), and "makes you feel like you're getting smarter" (FG3). Others "don't see why it [bridge] couldn't be both [a game and a sport]. Football is a game and a sport. So, for me, it would depend on the purpose of the people coming together. Are they coming to play or compete?" (FG2). Having a purpose means that bridge is not simply defined as either a sport or game; but rather, "it can be either of those things depending on the person who chooses to do it" (FG1). Games were associated with fun and excitement, particularly of their youth, where people learn by interacting with one another. This is consistent with Goffman's (1961; cited in Lemert & Branaman, 1997, p. 138) view of "fun in games": "as far as gaming encounters and other focused gatherings are concerned, the most serious thing to consider is the fun in them." Intergenerational bridge playing could form part of a social inclusion agenda to "socialize with different generations", especially for older people who might "start slowing down … when they stop doing stuff like these things" (FG1).

Bridging identities: "I've never really been a card player"

Participants recognized their non-bridge identity. As one interviewee explained, "I've never really been a card player" (FG1). The extent to which participants considered themselves as a potential card player or not reflects how they positioned themselves in relation to the ideal types for thinking about playing bridge. Participants also differentiated between ideal types. For example, the socializer has "time for chatting" (FG2); the self-improver strives "to gain from experience" (FG1); the competitor "is in to win it … I don't like to just play games for the sake of playing them. … I'm not just playing for the fun of it" (FG2); and the mind-gamer is about "observ[ing] your opponent" to find out "what goes on in people's minds" (FG3). Some moved from one type to another type: "I would say when I was younger, I would have started out as a competitor, but as I've got older, I would realize I'm a socializer" (FG1).

Non-bridge players might be persuaded to play bridge if playing the game is consistent with their own sporting ideal type. This suggests that the ideal types of the stigmatized (bridge) are somewhat compatible with, or cut across, the mainstream (non-bridge). Indeed, Goffman (1986) suggests that "every individual participates in both roles, at least in some connections and in some phases of life" (p. 138). For example, one socializer said the atmosphere would have to be more social by having snacks and beer with friends who were also interested in playing. Another socializer would be persuaded if bridge was advertised as anti-competitive, "come along, there's literally no pressure, this is like an introductory beginner-level thing" (FG2). Some would be persuaded to play "a bridge night at a café or somewhere that would be willing to give up the venue for an hour or however long you need" (FG2), or in a university or in a bridge society (FG3).

Competition in bridge clubs was intimidating for one participant who said, "I'd feel like I would not want to come along because I'd feel I'd be annoying them" (FG2). These are signs of embarrassment (Heath, 1988) which might deter non-bridge players from taking up the game. With that said, it seems important to be "taught first … [by] some[one] with experience for me to want to play" (FG1). Another would find it beneficial to "hook up with someone who's already … a good bridge player, but they're not going to take it too seriously, … understanding you are a first-time bridge player" (FG2). Consequently, greater flexibility in rules was suggested: Chang[ing] the rules … Football changes every year. I mean there's always improvements made and maybe it's for the better. Maybe it's for the worse, but maybe initially to get people playing. (FG1)

There seems to also be a lack of knowledge about the game that hinders bridge's appeal to non-bridge players. For example, one participant said "currently, I just don't know enough about it. It's like one other activity among others that I don't really know much about" (FG2). This limited familiarity of bridge and card games in general is becoming more prevalent as fewer families play cards together compared with several decades ago (Parlett, 1990).

Bridging stigma: "Outdated taste"

The image of bridge was discredited by non-bridge players. Participants reaffirmed the stigmatized image of bridge as a game that "takes place in an old people's home" (FG2). Another said bridge was a "dying art" (FG1) of past generations, and one other encapsulated this by saying, "for me, bridge has like a little bit of outdated taste" (FG3). This perception contributed to feelings of exclusion; as one participant said, "I probably wouldn't venture in one of these [bridge] places" (FG1). To counter the stigmatized image of bridge, having a presence on online platforms, such as Instagram and Facebook, was seen as important for encouraging younger players to play bridge:

> A lot of influencers get sent stuff and then that becomes popular. … So maybe if they were playing bridge on their Instagram story, the people would be more so, "Oh, I should look into that" and then look it up and it might be something they are interested in. I think it would have an impact. (FG2)

According to Goffman (1986), it is when normal and stigmatized come together that stigma can be directly confronted, as "the more allied the individual is with

normal, the more he will see himself in non-stigmatic terms" (p. 107). This was apparent when one participant said:

> There's nothing in my mind right now that is like, "I'm not ever playing bridge" [or] "no, I could never play it." No, I'd play, but at the same time I'm not going to change my schedule to attend a bridge game. (FG2)

When discussing the prospect of taking up bridge, one would prefer to learn by doing with "an insider who already plays and brings me in" (FG3). Others mentioned using YouTube on their iPad or videos and documentaries rather than books or "having a lecture [as that] would feel artificial" (FG2). Yet, one did suggest having at least "guidelines" so that they would know "they made a move" (FG3). Some would be encouraged to learn online by themselves first, and then once they had got to grips with it, they would play the card game in person.

Learning can also be specific to ideal types of players. For example, a self-improver would "need more of the history of it or culture and then I'd be more interested in playing" (FG2), whereas a competitor "you probably are going to skip all the kind of history and background" (FG1). Teaching was also seen to take place in small groups of players:

> It would be better to get started straight into it even if it was just smaller groups being talked at, but I feel … the size turns it into more of a conversation, and you can then ask questions and then it breaks the ice a bit more. (FG2)

Despite the urgency of getting straight into it, bridge has the added difficulty that to participate even minimally requires significant training and knowledge, as the activity centers on knowing which cards have been played and which are therefore yet to be played (Stebbins, 2015, p. 144). Goffman (1981, p. 143) himself captures the "interaction-order" of bridge playing, "where some moves are made with cards and some with voiced avowals which have been transformed into ideal performatives by the rules of the game." Learning the rules and all the possibilities for bidding is not compatible with a younger generation's desire for instant gratification.

The marketing of other leisure activities offers a useful comparison for promoting the appeal and reach of bridge. For example, one participant gave the example of chess in *The Queen's Gambit* and believed that a similar short film on bridge might be impactful for new players: "if I saw it in a story or the series I was watching had it in, it would definitely get me interested in watching it" (FG2). While doing something similar for bridge might "expose more people to the game," there is a risk that they "don't really engage with the traditions and the rituals and the history of the game" (FG1). Not all participants were persuaded by pop culture: "I play chess but it's not because of *The Queen's Gambit* … it's because I knew how to play since I was like seven" (FG2). Another comparison was made to poker, where the "main orientation of most poker players now is to make money. It's [in] a lot of the Hollywood films I've seen" (FG1).

Discussion

This study challenges the negative stigmatized image of bridge as a dull and boring game for older players (Hen-Herbst et al., 2023; Punch & Snellgrove, 2021) by showing

what might matter to different types of players, as well as possible ways to engage new younger players who fit the different types. Marketing in different ways will be important given that the ideal types represent different identities of bridge players.

The socializer was particularly widely recognized due to the social and collaborative aspects of play and can be likened to what Putnam (2000, p. 94) calls "schmoozers," whose engagement is less organized and purposeful and more spontaneous and flexible (e.g., playing bridge with friends at dinner parties or cafes). The competitor and self-improver also resonated with many players. For instance, the competitor's "challenge mindset" and desire to play at the highest possible level was recognized in a constant striving to win. This can go too far, of course, and a winning at all costs mentality has even led to the downfall of some esteemed international bridge players who have been caught cheating (Maclean et al., 2023). Competitors are driven by the desire to win, which can be exhilarating, exciting, and enjoyable yet often exhausting. Punch et al. (2022) also found that the challenge of problem solving and the ever-evolving nature of bridge gave players a particular thrill when competing in high-level events. Negative connotations described by competitors in our study included feelings of being overwhelmed, humiliated, and demoralized. These feelings can lead to withdrawal from sport (McMahon et al., 2019).

When it came to the self-improver, the social aspect of play was also considered integral given the need for collaboration with playing partners (Cohen-Gewerc & Stebbins, 2013). Self-improvement was not measured by being a "good" player in and of itself, but rather on betterment through challenge and continual learning and development. However, an excessive commitment to improve may lead to feelings of frustration and the breakdown of playing partnerships (Punch, 2021).

The current bridge players in our sample did not as strongly associate with the mind-gamer type as with the other types. This is to be expected, as some types will have undesirable attributes that are incongruous with that stereotype. As Goffman (1986) suggests, individuals may avoid identifying with groups they perceive as stigmatized, which can lead them to distance themselves from certain roles. They tended to associate mind-gamer with psychological aspects of bridge such as tactics and game plans, which is consistent with Hyde's (1999) "trickster," who creates an "invention of traps" (p. 19), and perhaps more experienced players who watch and read opponents. "Gamer" also had some negative connotations, as it was associated with a darker and more sinister side that exploits the weaknesses of inexperienced players, and this may partially explain why people did not identify as much with this type as the others. Further research is needed to understand how the mind-gamer type might be pushing new players away.

The ideal types also resonated with non-bridge players and, in fact, all four types resonated roughly equally; there were not the same negative connotations for the mind-gamer that existed amongst current bridge players. The competitor type was, as expected, associated with winning or doing well relative to one's level and not for the sake of taking part (i.e., the fun of it). However, competition was also associated with feelings of anxiety and stress, which suggests a need for a balance between the competitor and socializer types. Self-improvement went beyond playing to learning the history and culture of a sport, which emphasizes the importance of how bridge is marketed to non-bridge players. Finally, the mind-gamer was associated with observing

to understand the strategies that players use when playing bridge. The strategic ploys which players use at the bridge table (Punch & Snellgrove, 2021) could be applied to entice other mind-gamers to try bridge.

Some of the non-bridge players also talked about enjoying both serious and social play at different times and in different places (Punch et al., 2022). For example, one performed as a competitor when they were younger but is now more of a socializer, whereas another transitioned from a socializer to a self-improver. This highlights the fluidity of ideal types and suggests that they are not fixed categories but useful tools for understanding shifting motivations and contexts. Marketing messages should thus reflect these shifting ideal types, with messaging that taps into moods or contexts. Furthermore, a fluidity of ideal types could be drawn upon directly to avoid a player dropping out because of the emotional strain of competitive bridge tournaments. For the self-improver or competitor, an emphasis on incorporating some social fun games could help to counteract the pressure of achieving progress or performing well. Bridge clubs could encourage players to embrace occasional less serious and more casual games in line with the socializer.

Drawing on lessons from chess and poker, we can see the power of popular media in transforming the image of a game. For example, *The Queen's Gambit* led to a resurgence in interest in chess by highlighting the intellectual thrill and emotional intensity of competitive play. Similarly, televised poker leveraged suspense and personality to create viewer engagement (McGowan, 2010). During the poker boom (2003–2010), the game grew due to the increase in people playing online and the number of competitors in professional tournaments. This led to a growth of spectators watching on television, which was extensively aided by innovations such as card cameras giving the viewer at home much greater access to player perspectives and strategy (Talberg, 2019). Bridge could learn from both chess and poker by developing content that dramatizes strategic moments in high-level games or explores the personal journeys of diverse bridge players. Short-form video content designed for platforms like TikTok, Instagram, or YouTube could highlight the excitement, strategy, and social dynamics of the game.

Although the ideal types were evident in non-bridge players' experiences of sport, knowing that their type could fit in with the bridge community would not be enough in and of itself to persuade them to play bridge. This reflects a common barrier where Goffman (1986) notes individuals may "refrain from developing an attachment to the community in the first place" (p. 129). Consequently, a variety of strategies will need to be used to raise awareness of an interest in bridge in the non-bridge community beyond just showing people that they can play bridge the way they do other sports.

There was also some uncertainty of how exactly bridge should be categorized. Bridge was primarily perceived as a form of leisure which for some (particularly the competitor) might undermine its credibility as a mindsport, "a game primarily based on intellectual rather than physical skill" (Punch et al., 2021, p. 805). There was agreement surrounding the "mind" as a central element of playing bridge; however, the comparison to other sports was contentious due to its lack of physicality (Kobiela, 2018; Scott & Punch, 2024). This study has shown that terminology will depend on the ideal type of bridge player. For example, mind-game might be more conducive to the socializer and mind-gamer types, whereas mindsport might be more conducive to the competitor and self-improver types.

Limitations of study

A limitation of the study was the small number of participants in the focus groups. We recognize that this limits the strength of claims about youth perceptions of bridge. However, the difficulty in recruitment reflects the wider challenge faced by the bridge community in attracting new younger players. A second limitation of this study is not having a fuller synthesis of how gender, class, and age stigmas interact, and doing so would offer further refinements of how bridge can be marketed to different groups. Future studies could use an intersectional approach to see how age, class, and gender stigmas work together to affect certain groups.

Theoretical implications

To our knowledge, this is one of the first studies to use Goffman's work to examine stigmatized forms of leisure. When leisure becomes discredited, as in the case of bridge, there is a risk that it may become obsolete unless there is a new generation of players to take the game forward. In this case, stigma not only concerns the identity of bridge players but the identity of the game itself. Whilst Goffman offers ways for managing stigma at an individual level, such as through impression management, this could be limited for bridge due to its discredited identity as an older person's game. Rather, bridge requires a more transformative form of identity change through the marketing of ideal types that reframe how the game and its players are imagined. Thus, discredited stigma can be fought not just through individual efforts, but also by groups changing how they see themselves in the market.

Practical implications

Based on our findings, we set out the following strategies for marketing the mindsport bridge to the next generation of players:

- ***Education and Intergenerational Learning*** (for self-improvers)
  Promote bridge's intellectual and social benefits through education and intergenerational programs to build pride and motivation, especially by showcasing the skills and life lessons of older players. This could include a mentoring scheme where a more experienced older player is partnered with a younger, less experienced player. This could also facilitate school or university bridge players' transition into club bridge, which can be an alienating process. It is important that efforts to grow bridge do not unintentionally exclude or marginalize older players, but instead celebrate their skills, experience, and the value they add to the bridge community (de Guzman et al., 2021).
- ***Hybrid and Flexible Formats*** (for competitors)
  Combine online play with in-person meetups to reflect modern leisure habits, especially for younger generations. Casual online sessions connected to local social events, clubs, or pop-ups offer flexible engagement. Bridge clubs partnering with community centers or universities can run low-cost themed nights or beginner tournaments. Bridge clubs charge table money for each session and these

club funds could be used to pay for new initiatives or an additional small contribution could be charged to each participant for a new themed session.

- ***Inclusive Club Cultures*** (for socializers)
  Balance the social and competitive sides of bridge by ensuring new or casual players feel welcomed alongside more serious competitors. Experimenting with new formats, such as modified rules or role-playing ideal types during play, can reduce barriers and increase enjoyment.
- ***Media and Digital Engagement*** (for mind-gamers)
  Although bridge has not yet had a cultural moment like chess did with *The Queen's Gambit*, there is an opportunity to create media content that highlights the intellectual challenge and social enjoyment of bridge, making it more appealing to younger players. In the focus groups, several participants suggested that partnerships with social media influencers or content creators could help make bridge more visible and relatable to younger audiences. Such collaborations could highlight both the intellectual challenge and the social enjoyment of the game in formats already familiar to online communities. Whilst this suggestion is more costly, bridge organizations could collaborate and pool financial resources to fund such initiatives (see also McCutcheon & Punch, forthcoming). Gamified apps, online tutorials, and social leaderboards tailored to the different ideal types provide accessible, low-pressure ways for newcomers to start playing.

Conclusion

This article has focused on age-related stigma and identity-based marketing. It speaks to wider concerns about the decline of certain leisure activities, particularly those perceived as traditional or outdated. Both bridge players and non-bridge players recognized the game's negative image and the stereotypes surrounding who plays it. This suggests that bridge is a "discredited" (Goffman, 1986) form of leisure, as its differentness is known. The marketing strategies identified in this study have the potential to rebrand the image of bridge as a vibrant, intellectually engaging activity that fits within contemporary, hybrid leisure cultures without pushing older players away. The ultimate goal is to expand the reach of bridge to a new generation of players. Other stigmatized forms of leisure can also leverage identity-based marketing to expand participation. Should future studies look at whether rebranding a "discredited" leisure activity accidentally creates new, exclusive groups based on the identities promoted?

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