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Promoting traditional leisure: barriers and enablers for the mindsport bridge

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ABSTRACT

Mindsports are intellectual, competitive games, like the traditional leisure pursuits of chess and the card game bridge. This study examines barriers and enablers for promoting engagement in bridge using a layered framework spanning individual, institutional, and cultural levels. We draw on 30 semi-structured interviews with bridge players, teachers, and National Bridge Organisation staff across the UK, USA, Australia, Denmark, The Netherlands, and Norway. Findings highlight challenges unique to mindsports, including limited public and sport recognition, declining participation among younger players, marginalisation as a cultural artefact, and perceptions of exclusivity. This signals the need to reframe bridge's habitus – the social and cultural practices, values, and dispositions that shape how players engage with the game. Bridge organisations' resistance to change and limited organisational capacity, including marketing resources, further constrain adaptation and inclusivity. The interconnection of bridge's exclusive habitus and institutional inertia hinders opportunities for change. Effective promotion requires interventions that simultaneously address individual motivations, club practices, and broader cultural messaging, including image rebranding. By illustrating tensions arising from bridge's position between leisure and sport, the paper contributes to the emerging field of Mindsport Studies, offering a multi-dimensional approach that supports sustainable, inclusive engagement across socially and culturally distinctive activities.

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Introduction

Mindsports are competitive, skills-based games that test intellect more than physical skills (Dolbysheva, 2020), although the physicality of mindsports is debated (Kobiela, 2018; Scott & Punch, 2024). Scrabble, card games like bridge and poker, and boardgames like backgammon, Go, and chess are examples of mindsports. Bridge is a trick-taking card game, uniquely played in partnership against another pair of opponents. As a form of serious leisure (Stebbins, 2020), bridge can be played competitively in bridge clubs and

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tournaments (duplicate bridge). ‘Kitchen bridge’ is a social and casual leisure activity (Stebbins, 2020) that is played in more relaxed environments. Bridge tournaments can be played in local bridge clubs, nationally and internationally, with the opportunity to play bridge professionally (McIntosh et al., 2024). Players can be employed full-time or part-time by partnering with a sponsor or playing on their team (Russell et al., 2022). However, professional bridge is gendered and unevenly distributed, geographically (Punch, 2021).

The bridge community operates as a distinct subculture, with its own set of symbols, norms, behaviours, language and values that differentiate it from more mainstream, individualistic leisure activities and digital pastimes (Hebdige, 1979). In the 1950s, thirty million people were estimated to play bridge in the USA alone (Smith, 1957). Now, the World Bridge Federation (WBF) reports that it 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 decline of bridge’s popularity could be related to the lack of younger people playing the game, possibly because it is often seen as a boring and old-fashioned game for older people (Maclean et al., 2026; Nesson & Nesson, 2012; Scott, 1991). To counter the shortage of younger players, there is some research focusing on attracting youth (e.g. Milosheva & Punch, 2025; Toomey et al., 2023; the BAMSA Learning, Education and Development project).

Despite the decline of bridge being documented (e.g. Scott, 1991), there is a lack of contemporary sociological research into the phenomena. This paper explores the enablers and barriers regarding participation and the promotion of bridge. Thirty semi-structured interviews were conducted with bridge teachers, players, and National Bridge Organisation (NBO) employees/volunteers from the UK, USA, Australia, Denmark, The Netherlands, and Norway. The following research questions are considered in this paper:

- (1) To what extent does bridge need to promote itself and attract, and retain players?
- (2) What are the challenges of promoting bridge, recruiting and retaining players?
- (3) What are some approaches and opportunities that could enable bridge to promote itself, attract and retain players?

Literature Review

The Mindsport Bridge

Bridge players make decisions during gameplay based on incomplete information, making it a stimulating and tough strategy game (Punch et al., 2021). Thirteen cards are dealt to each player (their ‘hands’), followed by ‘bidding’, then ‘playing’ (Scott, 1991). During the bidding phase, players non-verbally describe the strength and formation of their hands to their partner. The final bid signifies how many ‘tricks’ the partnership has agreed to make during play. A trick involves all four players playing one card, and the person with the highest card wins. The aim is to win the number of tricks that were bid, or more (see beginner videos: <https://bridgemindsport.org/school-and-youth-bridge/>).

Scholars have categorised bridge players into four types – ‘occasional’, ‘regular social’, ‘regular duplicate’ and ‘tournament’ players (Scott & Godbey, 1994) and self-improvers,

competitors, socialisers and mind-gamers (Maclean et al., 2026). No group is homogeneous, but tournament players are usually considered to be the most serious and dedicated. There is evidence of a conflict between duplicate and social players, with the latter group often viewing duplicate players as ‘rude, nasty, unfriendly and cutthroat’ (Scott & Godbey, 1994, p. 289), while tournament players can think that social games are ‘hopeless’ (ibid: 284).

The decline of bridge is unfortunate, given the variety of benefits empirically associated with it. Players vouch for how social bridge is and emphasise the strong community element (Brkljačić, Lučić, et al., 2017; Fong et al., 2021; McDonnell et al., 2017). Some people play bridge because it is enjoyable, compelling, mentally stimulating (Punch et al., 2022), and can potentially slow the onset of dementia (Derby et al., 2017). It can also improve confidence and quality of life (Brkljačić et al., 2017), empathy and cooperation (Charness, 1987) and problem-solving and planning skills (Unterrainer et al., 2006). However, people with disabilities may encounter barriers to participating in mindsports (Mikhaylova, 2019).

Much of the research on mindsports focuses on chess and poker. However, empirical research on bridge is expanding, with it being studied as a meaningful activity (Ashworth et al., 2016) and a strategic mindsport (Ginsberg, 2001). Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA) is an academic project based at the University of Stirling, conducting sociological research on bridge. BAMSA researchers have conducted studies on gender inequalities and sexism (Punch et al., 2023; Rogers et al., 2022), motivations (Punch et al., 2022), emotions (Punch & Russell, 2022) and the formation of self and identity within the bridge world (Punch et al., 2021).

Mindsport Promotion

Mindsport promotion involves collaboration among international associations of mindsport masters, marketing specialists, educators, policymakers, sponsors, players and commercial developers (Hsiang, 2013). Well-resourced and expertly executed marketing and communication strategies are vital for addressing barriers related to awareness of activities (Sport Australia, 2020). Wen (2024) examined factors that contribute to membership growth at Chess.com, identifying enthusiastic stakeholders, social media marketing, competitive events and game enhancements as key drivers. In contrast, issues like cheating, technical difficulties and limited career options hindered growth.

As Spotswood (2023) argues, marketing efforts must be inclusive, particularly in imagery, representation and messaging, to challenge exclusionary narratives and encourage engagement from under-represented groups. However, deficiencies in marketing skills, planning capacity and communication systems act as barriers to reaching new participant segments (Jenkin et al., 2021). Social media and digital marketing have the potential to enhance public awareness of mindsports (Bala & Verma, 2018) and there is a growing recognition of the necessity to promote activities, lessons and events. Some national mindsport organisations, such as the British Go Association and the English, Australian, German and Danish Bridge Unions have started to provide marketing resources on their websites, including guidance on advertising on platforms like Facebook and templates for promotional materials. However, many clubs and national

bodies lack the capacity to offer such resources, and some of the materials are not regularly updated, making navigation difficult.

Effective social media marketing encompasses more than maintaining an online presence (Chen et al., 2015), and a single campaign cannot effectively address all projects and audiences (Alves et al., 2016). Therefore, each mindsport must adopt tailored approaches to target their diverse audiences effectively. Maclean et al. (2026) suggest that identity-based marketing could effectively rebrand bridge as an engaging social and intellectual activity that appeals to contemporary leisure cultures and challenges the stigmatised image(s) of bridge. This underscores the need for marketing strategies grounded in audience segmentation, inclusive representation and accessible messaging to reshape perceptions of bridge as welcoming, social and mentally stimulating.

Existing literature on leisure participation distinguishes between different types of barriers, including structural or practical (e.g. cost, timing, transport) and psychological or attitudinal (e.g. confidence, perceived relevance) (Crawford et al., 1991; UK Government, 2025). Enablers that facilitate leisure engagement include accessible and affordable provision, accurate information and strong social support (Malkowski et al., 2025). Psychological enablers, including confidence, belonging and positive self-perception, are equally important, especially regarding disability and inclusion (Jaarsma et al., 2014).

There is limited contemporary research examining the opportunities and constraints associated with mindsport promotion. In this paper on bridge, we conceptualise these barriers and enablers across three interrelated layers: individual, institutional and cultural. This framework illustrates how traditions, organisational routines and habitus – the shared habits, assumptions and ways of doing things, formed through people's upbringing and social experiences (Bourdieu, 1977) – interact dynamically to shape patterns of engagement. Cultural capital refers to non-economic assets such as education, language proficiency and cultural knowledge, which facilitate social mobility within stratified societies (Bourdieu, 1990). In bridge terms, cultural capital includes the skills, knowledge and confidence people gain from their surroundings, especially from family and community, which help them feel comfortable playing the game. Bourdieu's concepts of cultural capital and habitus offer a means to examine how mindsport, as a form of leisure, may be structured by class-based inequalities, with cultural capital often favouring those with prior exposure to the game.

The paper also considers how certain factors may function simultaneously as barriers and potential enablers, exploring the conditions under which particular barriers might be reconfigured as enabling forces. These insights extend existing models of leisure participation and offer a practical framework for promoting engagement in mindsports more broadly, thereby contributing both theoretically and practically to sport and leisure scholarship.

Method

Sample

This sociological study is part of the research of BAMSA (<https://bridgemindsport.org>). BAMSA's international network was used to identify and recruit participants who had

Table 1. Participant details.

Name	Role and Country	Age Range	Sex
Sarah	Bridge teacher, USA	50–59	Female
Margot	Bridge teacher, USA	60–69	Female
Jess	Bridge teacher, USA	50–59	Female
James	Trustee for the American Contract Bridge League Educational Foundation, USA	50–59	Male
Steph	Manager of Marketing and Education for the American Contract Bridge League, USA	60–69	Female
Morris	Bridge player/director of a bridge club, USA	60–69	Male
Paige	Career in marketing and sales/bridge player, USA	50–59	Female
Sophie	Executive Director of the American Contract Bridge League Educational Foundation, USA	60–69	Female
Rosie	Youth bridge teacher, USA	30–39	Female
Eve	Bridge player/director of a bridge club, USA	60–69	Female
Neil	Trustee for the Scottish Bridge Union, UK	70–79	Male
Alan	Chair of the Scottish Bridge Union's Board of Trustees, UK	70–79	Male
Alice	Ex-President of the Scottish Bridge Union, UK	70–79	Female
Jenna	Education Convenor and Club Support for the Scottish Bridge Union, UK	60–69	Female
Tom	Bridge player, UK	60–69	Male
Ryan	Bridge teacher, UK	40–49	Male
Esme	Social bridge player/works within business and marketing, UK	30–39	Female
Marianne	Works for the Norwegian Bridge Federation	50–59	Female
Johan	Chair of the Dutch Bridge Federation, The Netherlands	60–69	Male
Eric	Chair of the European Bridge League, The Netherlands	60–69	Male
Liz	CEO of the Danish Bridge Federation	50–59	Female
Keith	Works for the Danish School Bridge Association	60–69	Male
Derek	Youth bridge coordinator, Australia	30–39	Male
Peter	Head of Marketing, Australian Bridge Federation	60–69	Male
Jake	Bridge streamer/runs a board game café, UK	30–39	Male
Brad	Was on the American Contract Bridge League's Tournament Committee/poker player, USA	50–59	Male
Jordan	Chair of a National Bridge Organisation	40–49	Male
Kim	Bridge player/teacher/writer, Europe	50–59	Female
Lorraine	Communications role within a National Bridge Organisation/non-bridge player	40–49	Female
Louise	Chair of a National Bridge Organisation	50–59	Female

professional marketing knowledge, taught bridge, or worked/volunteered for a National Bridge Organisation (NBO)/bridge club and engaged in promotion or advertising [see Table 1]. The sample of 15 men and 15 women was mostly older, White, duplicate bridge players, which could have concealed other insights into the phenomenon (Fossey et al., 2002). Despite the homogeneity of the sample, the participants have been (directly or indirectly) involved in the marketing/promotion of bridge for many years and have good connections with their NBO. They were very experienced in the past and current landscape of the bridge world, qualifying them to identify challenges and point to potential practical solutions and enablers.

Data Collection

Five of the interviews were conducted in-person, and the others via online videoconferencing (Microsoft Teams and Zoom), lasting on average 70 minutes. The in-depth nature of the interviews allowed an extensive understanding of the research problem, based on participants lived experiences (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Ethical approval was obtained from Stirling University's *General University Ethics Panel* [GUEP Approval: 1479510389], and the researchers adhered to the British Sociological Association's *Statement of Ethical Practice* (2017).

Data Analysis

The research team benefited from an insider-outsider dynamic (Merton, 1972), which BAMSA has previously found effective (Punch & Snellgrove, 2021). Punch, an international bridge player, added context and depth to the analysis, while McCutcheon's unfamiliarity with the mindsport encouraged critical reflection. Reflexive Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006) was used to analyse the data. Coding was inductive, with ten themes and thirty sub-themes crafted from the transcripts. Codes were generated and compared, allowing larger descriptive themes to be developed (Elliot, 2018).

To avoid the downsides of familiarity, McCutcheon, the outsider researcher, conducted the initial analysis of codes. Dialogue with Punch, who has lived experience and situated knowledge of the bridge world, enabled further interpretation of the emerging codes and themes. The findings for research question one were divided into three themes: the future, stereotypes, and bridge as a sport. The findings for research question two reflected four themes: structural problems, behaviour and attitudes, learning and teaching, and marketing troubles. Three themes were developed for research question three: transition management, social bridge, and volunteers.

Findings

We present our findings in two sections – barriers and enablers – examined across three interrelated layers: individual, institutional, and cultural (see Figure 1). These layers are mutually constitutive, each shaping and being shaped by the others. Some themes span multiple layers within a single section. For example, 'age' appears as an institutional-level barrier (e.g. resistance to change) and as a cultural-level barrier (e.g. stereotypes framing it as an older person's game). Other themes operate as both barriers and enablers, and in some cases may shift from one to the other depending on context.

Barriers to Bridge Promotion

Individual Barriers

At the individual level, people have a variety of motivations for engaging with bridge. Our findings, however, find that certain motivations are catered for more than others within club cultures, lessons and game formats. For most of the serious duplicate players in our sample, bridge was not merely entertainment, but a dedicated pursuit that fostered identity, community and social bonds. In contrast, Esme, an exclusively social player, liked to play with friends over a glass of wine, to relax and have fun, without structure, judgement or the pressure of competition, which she associated with bridge clubs.

You get people that just want to come along [to the club] and play and I cannae play against them. I've nae idea wit they've got in their hand and I get nae enjoyment out of it whatsoever. But they do and there has to be a place for them . . . I want to advance; I want to get as good as I can get. (*Tom, UK*)

The partnership aspect of the game, built on cooperation, communication and trust, was especially valued by duplicate players, which they said differentiated bridge from other competitive games. However, the ability to find consistent partners at compatible times

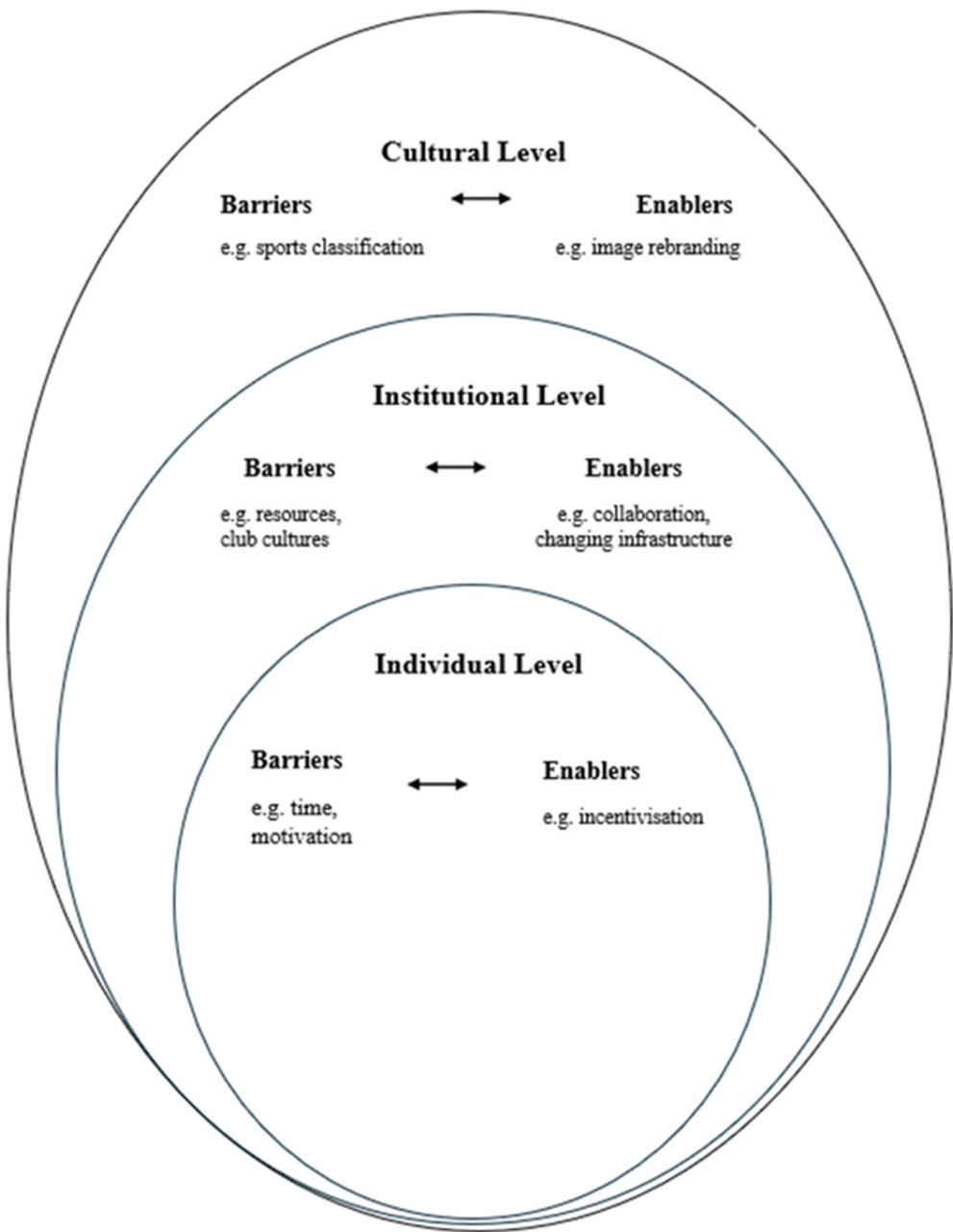


Figure 1. Barriers and Enablers for Promoting Bridge.

and skill levels was cited as a challenge. A few participants suggested creating an online database to help players connect with potential partners, though they acknowledged this would require significant resources, collaboration and expertise.

Bridge, in its serious leisure form, involves long sessions (ranging from three-hour club games to multi-day tournaments) that demand sustained attention. For many

duplicate-playing participants, this structured commitment and intellectual investment was a key aspect of their ongoing involvement in the game. In contrast, social player Esme felt it was a barrier because of her busy work and life schedules. Several other participants took breaks from playing, usually after finishing university, and did not return to the game until nearer retirement because work and life commitments impacted their ability and desire to play bridge.

Many people under 50 have work and family commitments, so they can't always come to 3-hour games or commit to the same time or day every week . . . It's the same for some learners too, who can't always commit to showing up every week. (*Jess, USA*)

Some clubs and NBOs are attempting to cater to different player motivations. The Dutch Federation is trying to stimulate walk-in locations around cities, to encourage greater flexibility in how bridge is offered. These are clubs where people drop in to play for as long as they want, without needing to be a member. Support from clubs is essential for the initiative to be successful.

Institutional Barriers

Our analysis highlighted several institutional-level barriers to promoting bridge. Even though bridge can 'be an equaliser because people from all walks of life play together' (*Kim, Europe*), membership in some clubs (e.g. golf clubs, Cambridge Club), from the outset, have had prerequisites – expensive to join, need to be nominated for membership, waiting lists. Participants also admitted that many clubs and NBOs remain predominantly homogenous, with limited efforts to engage minority demographics. According to Bourdieu (1990), habitus evolves through experience, shaped by social positioning, and influences what individuals view as accessible or worthwhile. Our research indicates that bridge will likely continue to feel alien or appear exclusionary for people from working-class or marginalised backgrounds because it is less embedded in their social environments.

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, USA*)

Our study further supports research that suggests bridge's habitus often reinforces gendered stereotypes and inequalities (Punch et al., 2023). Many interviewees thought that bridge has a relatively equal gender split at grassroots level but is male-dominated at elite-level. Some participants recalled specific neurosexist attitudes at individual, club and elite levels: 'men are naturally better players' (*Jenna, UK*) and 'women don't have the mental faculties to play bridge and can't think in the right way' (*Sophie, USA*). The Danish Bridge Federation CEO, Liz, told us that the Federation introduced women-only events to counteract sexism, but this can potentially risk reinforcing gendered stereotypes.

Participants insisted that another problematic aspect of club culture is that some experienced players can appear rude when they correct rules or 'teach' new players. Interviewees emphasised that, for newcomers, the first few club experiences are crucial

and they must be positive, but the (often unintentionally rude) actions of experienced players can hinder this. It was commonly mentioned that you come across ‘big personalities’ in the bridge world and that bridge can bring out both the ‘best and worst’ of people at all levels of play. Participants thought this underscores the need for a welcoming culture, with a ‘zero tolerance’ approach to poor behaviour. However, challenges included (i) a lack of reflexivity from clubs and individuals about why newcomers do not return, and (ii) people not recognising certain behaviour as problematic.

The clubs think 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, Norway*)

I’m confident enough in these environments to not be bothered by it. Newcomers might be more intimidated or lack confidence. (*Jenna, UK*)

A number of participants expressed frustration over the slow pace of change in how bridge is marketed, especially considering that, ‘bridge is one of the best-kept secrets’ (*Eric, The Netherlands*). Most interviewees thought that the bridge world is locked into outdated marketing models, including traditional marketing methods such as word-of-mouth and printed materials, rather than embracing digital and social media marketing.

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, Norway*)

One of the main reasons participants thought that bridge marketing remains stagnant is because, institutionally, the bridge world lacks the resources and knowledge to use different methods and platforms, including Instagram, Facebook and X. Some participants thought that social media marketing could be successful in attracting younger people. Others highlighted that managing a NBO or club’s social media presence can be a full-time job, and the effectiveness of such campaigns depends heavily on the skills and experience of those running them.

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*)

Participants expressed frustration that many within bridge institutions ‘don’t see marketing as a specialisation’ (*Peter, Australia*). This was perceived to limit organisations’ capacity to identify target markets, understand audience needs and design effective recruitment campaigns. However, Jordan, Chair of a National Bridge Organisation, said that with limited resources and low retention rates, ‘it isn’t worth spending thousands on marketing’. Participants described how organisations tend to recruit marketing officers predominantly from within the bridge community, despite the professional skills not always being available. While some suggested that recruiting non-players could help address skills gaps, they acknowledged that non-players may struggle to navigate and interpret the norms and structures of the bridge world.

According to interviewees, the player base is typically over 50, and long-serving members frequently occupy influential positions within the community. Although this continuity can provide stability and practical knowledge built up over time, several participants characterised some senior figures as ‘barriers to change’, citing entrenched

practices and resistant attitudes. If such hierarchies remain unchallenged, one participant warned that ‘bridge risks stagnation and fizzling out’ (*Kim, Europe*). Our findings suggest that, for many older players, bridge is not simply a leisure activity but a central component of social identity, developed and sustained over decades (see also Fong et al., 2021). This may help to explain their reluctance to endorse organisational change (Atchley, 1989), particularly where such change is perceived to threaten established norms, relationships or status.

People are not receptive to change. They like to keep things the same, what they’re comfortable with. (*Louise*)

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. (*Alan, UK*)

Participants observed that teaching methods are often traditional and formal in nature, commonly structured around extended courses and textbook-based learning. These sessions are frequently delivered by retired volunteers who bring considerable playing experience, but not always pedagogical expertise or familiarity with how younger generations prefer to learn.

If you’re a younger person and you see someone your grandparents’ age coming to teach you, it’s a bit like . . . *That’s not very cool*. (*Keith, Denmark*)

In addition, views about how bridge ‘should’ be played – held by some individuals and embedded more broadly within bridge culture – were described as alienating for certain learners and beginners. Many (duplicate playing) participants perceived bridge’s complexity as part of its appeal, whilst also recognising this could be off-putting for certain types of players. They confirmed that at the top level of the sport, mathematical and strategic thinking is required (like other elite-level sport, much time, hard work and commitment is dedicated to practising) but at social and club levels, bridge does not need to be complex. However, this notion often persists in teaching and institutional environments. Consequently, bridge is often over-taught to beginners, reinforcing its subcultural identity and image as a complicated game.

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 uptight focus, duplicate bridge wannabe as opposed to *Hey, I might just wanna play socially and have fun*. (*Sarah, USA*)

Cultural Barriers

Participants identified a distinct set of barriers related to broader cultural definitions and assumptions that shape both how bridge is perceived and how it is promoted. These include sport classification systems (i.e. what counts as a ‘sport’), and views were divided amongst participants.

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, UK*)

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

Sport recognition is not the norm for bridge (see Kobiela, 2018; Scott & Punch, 2024). We found that such recognition can have several advantages, and that a lack of recognition can have several disadvantages. In the UK, bridge is not a sport, and 'this financial model dictates all limitations' (*Neil, UK*). In contrast, Johan, Dutch Federation Chair, told us that because bridge is a member of the Dutch Olympic Committee, they receive around €600,000–700,000 a year from the Olympic Support Fund, for some types of elite bridge. Johan told us about some of the benefits:

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, The Netherlands*)

Participants consistently described bridge as a game that can be played across the lifecourse. In practice, however, the current player base tends to be older: typically, over 50 in Denmark, in their 60s in Norway, and in their 70s in the USA, Scotland, Australia and The Netherlands. While participants were clear that this demographic profile does not diminish the quality or value of the game, they acknowledged that it could hinder efforts to attract younger players. Participants suggested that, in mainstream culture, bridge is frequently associated with older age, and this perception can discourage those who do not see themselves reflected in the existing player base. Participants were unsure of how to attract younger players, with some suggesting promotion of the cognitive and social benefits.

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, Denmark*)

Selling people, especially kids, on bridge's benefits typically doesn't work so well. It's 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 six, you get a free holiday every year to play in the nationals* or *You can just play because it's fun*. (*Derek, Australia*)

The age-based stereotype intersects with a further perception of elitism. Participants referred to a common assumption that bridge players are, or must be, highly intelligent, well educated, and from relatively affluent backgrounds. They suggested that limited efforts have been made to challenge this image, allowing it to persist, reinforcing the idea of bridge as an exclusive pursuit rather than an accessible one.

The misapprehension is that it's all for snotty-nosed Tory's [a political conservative] who've got too much time on their hands. (*Tom, UK*)

I think we can engage a whole new audience and bring them up the way we want. We don't have to inherit the qualifications of the previous generations and the typical profile of a bridge player. (*Sophie, USA*)

One of the most frequently identified barriers to participation, particularly among younger people, was attributed to broader cultural shifts in leisure practices. Many

interviewees described being introduced to bridge – or similar card games such as whist – at a young age through family members or social networks. Early exposure led to greater familiarity and confidence, suggesting that engagement with bridge has historically been transmitted across generations as a form of cultural capital (Bourdieu, 1983). Several participants argued that this intergenerational pathway is weakening, as families now play cards together less often. Consequently, younger people have fewer informal opportunities to encounter bridge. This growing unfamiliarity interacts with perceptions of bridge as a ‘closed society’ and its limited public visibility, reducing the likelihood that newcomers, particularly younger people, encounter or consider the game.

In the 1930s, people didn’t have TVs, so getting together with your neighbours and playing cards was what you did . . . But nowadays kids play on their tablets and prefer video games. It’s so hard to make bridge appeal to them. (*Margot, USA*)

Collaborating with social media influencers was suggested as one potential strategy to enhance visibility and reach new audiences. However, limited resources and a lack of digital marketing expertise were acknowledged as significant constraints on such efforts.

I think that younger people need to be convinced by influencers. We need heroes . . . Bridge doesn’t have celebrities; no one knows who bridge players are. (*Keith, Denmark*)

Enablers for Promoting Bridge

Individual Enablers

Promoting individual engagement in bridge requires a nuanced understanding of the diversity of motivations and other factors that facilitate participation. Access to resources such as online tutorials, instructional guides and local classes play a pivotal role in simplifying the learning process. However, participants emphasised that not all players aspire to master the game or compete in tournaments; many are drawn to bridge for its social aspects or leisure qualities.

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, 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 but you’ve got to remember that you want them to just enjoy the game. (*Alice, UK*)

Many participants recounted stories of introducing friends or family members to bridge, with some suggesting informal outreach could be encouraged more systematically. This might include offering financial incentives or public recognition to players who refer newcomers to lessons or clubs.

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, Norway*)

I take the attitude that our 33,000 registered players are our salespeople. (*Peter, Australia*)

However, others expressed concerns that introducing material rewards might undermine the cooperative ethos of the bridge community by fostering competition between members. Others questioned whether such strategies would meaningfully broaden participation, suggesting efforts would probably only reach those already connected to a bridge player, thus reinforcing bridge's 'echo chamber'.

Institutional enablers

Despite a culture of hesitancy to change how bridge is played and marketed, some positive stories emerged from the interviews:

If you'd asked me before I started with the SBU [Scottish Bridge Union], 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. (*SBU Trustee, Scotland*)

I do think the ACBL [American Contract Bridge League] has become much more responsive. Their intentions were always good but they weren't very helpful. I think the new Executive Director will push them forward. (*Jess, USA*)

Institutional-level enablers were seen as central to building a stronger foundation for promoting bridge, particularly through collaboration, inclusivity and community engagement. Participants described how, in a digital culture, bridge has begun to adapt while retaining its intellectual and social core.

We're trying to make that transformation at the moment from being a classical marketing organisation to an advanced digital marketer – 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, The Netherlands*)

The growth of online platforms has increased accessibility, for example, by enabling play during the Covid-19 pandemic (see Snellgrove & Punch, 2024). We found that digital bridge also allowed participants to practise and play when ill health, ageing, or other circumstances impacted their ability to play in-person. This suggests a shift in how cultural capital is distributed in the digital age, highlighting the resilience of the bridge community in the face of external pressures (Bourdieu, 1983).

Participants emphasised the importance of engaging both social and competitive players across age groups, including through youth initiatives that encourage cross-generational participation. Social networks were seen as an underused asset in widening engagement, but doing so would require deliberate efforts to reposition bridge as a socially accepted and visible leisure activity. While some NBOs have introduced after-school clubs, funding constraints and high turnover limit their impact.

Children can't play in a club from 7–10 pm 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, Denmark*)

Interviewees highlighted the value of connecting traditional clubs with more informal, community-based spaces. Events like café bridge or coffee mornings in local venues were seen as accessible entry points, especially with support from experienced players.

Participants stressed that not all learners aspire to club competition, and lessons should not automatically be framed as pathways into formal play. Additionally, a perceived tendency for organisations to compete rather than collaborate was seen to impede progress. Stronger partnerships between clubs and NBOs could enhance resource sharing and expand reach. However, participants noted that institutional inertia, low political priority and limited public visibility continue to constrain funding opportunities and broader support.

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, USA)

Cultural Enablers

Cultural-level enablers are central to widening engagement, particularly by increasing awareness and improving accessibility. Participants highlighted the potential of social and digital media marketing to enhance visibility and reach more diverse audiences. Several suggested repositioning bridge as a lively and sociable activity rather than a niche pastime, to broaden its appeal. Tournaments, festivals and other public events were viewed as key opportunities to showcase the game and create a sense of shared celebration.

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. (Kate, USA)

Greater collaboration between schools, local authorities, clubs and NBOs was viewed as a way to potentially strengthen resources and coordinate outreach. However, participants noted practical barriers, including administrative requirements, safeguarding checks and pressure on the school curriculum. Those with experience of teaching children emphasised that participation should be optional; otherwise, disengaged pupils could disrupt sessions. For children who are willing to learn, teaching approaches were seen to require adaptation, with a stronger emphasis on active play, as ‘kids can only focus for a few minutes at a time’ (Keith, Denmark).

I feel as though you almost need a champion in an influential position to help you get into schools. (Johan, The Netherlands)

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, UK)

Discussion

This study explored the decline and unequal participation in bridge by showing how individual experiences and organisational practices are closely connected. Drawing on Bourdieu (1990), it highlights how habitus and cultural capital interact with institutional inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1984) to form a self-reinforcing system. Essentially, the expectations and preferences of existing players shape how bridge is organised, and these structures then make it harder for others to join.

Our findings show that participating in bridge is strongly influenced by habitus and cultural capital, which are often unevenly distributed. Those with prior exposure, often through family or early social environments, are at an advantage. As Bourdieu (1990) suggests, cultural capital is often passed down across generations, shaping not only skills but also confidence and a sense of belonging. However, this pathway appears to be weakening, as fewer families now engage in bridge or other card games at home. This shift reduces informal learning opportunities and makes entry more dependent on formal teaching environments, which we found can feel intimidating or inaccessible to newcomers.

Some types of bridge can also reflect Stebbins (2001) concept of ‘serious leisure’, where participation involves skills development, commitment and identity formation (Punch et al., 2021). While this fosters a strong and loyal community, it can also create barriers for entry. To participate fully, in serious bridge, individuals must acquire not only technical skills but also an understanding of the game’s rituals, norms, and etiquette – key elements of habitus (Bourdieu, 1990). These cultural expectations often operate implicitly, meaning that newcomers may feel excluded without fully understanding why. The effort required to acquire both technical and social competence can reinforce intrapersonal constraints (Crawford et al., 1991), particularly for those lacking confidence or prior exposure.

Perceptions of who bridge is ‘for’ further shape participation. Some individuals assume they need particular cognitive skills or personality traits to take part, which can deter involvement (Crawford et al., 1991). In addition, while many older players valued bridge for its mental stimulation and cognitive benefits, framing it primarily around cognitive maintenance, as a way to ‘keep the mind sharp’, may unintentionally alienate younger audiences and reinforce negative age-related stereotypes (Phoenix & Orr, 2014). A broader framing, emphasising enjoyment, social connection, storytelling and building community, could make the activity more appealing across age groups and align with more positive views of ageing (Biggs, 2005). The age-based stigma (see also Maclean et al., 2026) alongside bridge’s limited recognition as a sport and negative assumptions associated with card-playing contribute to a cognitive legitimacy barrier that is specific to bridge as a mindsport.

These individual-level factors are closely linked to organisational practices. The deeply ingrained, exclusive habitus of individual players directly feeds into and solidifies the institutional inertia of the organisations. The preferences of established players, such as favouring long, face-to-face sessions, valuing traditional formats and traditional hierarchies, often become embedded in club routines and governance. When leadership is dominated by long-standing members, these preferences shape recruitment strategies, teaching methods and tournament formats. As a result, institutional inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1984) is reinforced, making change both practically difficult and culturally sensitive.

This dynamic creates a recursive loop: individual dispositions shape collective expectations; which become institutionalised, and those structures then reproduce the same dispositions (habitus) through everyday practices and informal gatekeeping. Over time, this loop stabilises the system but also limits adaptability. At an institutional level, this creates a tension between stability and adaptability. Long-standing formats provide

familiarity and continuity, particularly valued by older players (Atchley, 1989), but may also constrain efforts to diversify participation and game formats (Tushman & Romanelli, 1985). Resistance to change is evident in reliance on traditional recruitment methods, limited use of digital platforms, and the persistence of hierarchical structures. Resource limitations and reliance on volunteers impacts the capacity for innovation and experimentation. At the same time, the lack of younger role models reinforces perceptions of exclusivity and generational imbalance.

Importantly, the same characteristics that act as barriers can also be reframed as strengths. The depth, tradition and intellectual challenge of bridge may appeal to individuals seeking meaningful and sustained engagement. Similarly, its structured nature and opportunities for mastery can attract those who are motivated by learning and progression. This suggests that perceived barriers, such as complexity or formality, can be repositioned as distinctive features, particularly when communication or advertising is tailored to different player groups (Maclean et al., 2026).

Theoretical contribution

This study's theoretical contribution sheds a new light on the relationship between habitus, cultural capital and institutional inertia. Rather than viewing individual dispositions and organisational structures separately, we demonstrate how they are connected through an ongoing recursive process. Cultural capital, including knowledge, skills and familiarity with norms, shapes both participation and expectations of legitimacy within bridge (Bourdieu, 1990). These shared expectations become embedded in organisational routines and governance, aligning with institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) and institutional inertia (Hannan & Freeman, 1984). Continuity theory (Atchley, 1989) and serious leisure (Stebbins, 2001) further explain why these patterns persist over time, as people invest in activities that support and maintain their identity, competence and social status.

By integrating these perspectives, this study extends leisure constraint models (e.g. Crawford et al., 1991; Jackson et al., 1993). It highlights the importance of cultural and symbolic mechanisms, such as cognitive legitimacy, ritualised norms and social signalling, as central to participation. Exclusion emerges not from single barriers but from the interaction between embodied dispositions and institutional expectations. This layered perspective offers a more comprehensive framework for understanding participation in mindsports and similar activities.

Practical implications

Increasing participation in bridge requires coordinated changes across individual, cultural and institutional levels. At a cultural level, bridge should be reframed as an inclusive and socially engaging activity rather than one associated primarily with older age or niche expertise. Emphasising connection, enjoyment, and community could broaden its appeal (Phoenix & Orr, 2014). Strengthening its recognition as both a casual and competitive mindsport and sport may also enhance its legitimacy and attract more diverse participants.

At an institutional level, adaptation is needed to better support newcomers. The findings indicate the importance of coordinated multi-level strategies. Efforts focused solely on individual motivation, raising awareness or advertising the cognitive benefits of bridge are unlikely to succeed without corresponding changes in institutional structures and club environments. While not all organisations have the same capacity for reform, collaboration within the bridge community can help pool resources and share effective practices.

Practical steps may include:

- Developing flexible teaching pathways that cater for different levels of commitment and learning preferences.
- Expanding mentorship schemes to build confidence and facilitate transitions from lessons to clubs.
- Increasing the visibility of diverse and younger role models to challenge perceptions of exclusivity.
- Supporting hybrid and digitally enabled formats that widen access without undermining valued traditions.
- Training and supporting volunteers to help modernise the game, particularly in outreach and teaching.
- Encouraging collaborative partnerships between clubs or organisations to share resources, ideas and costs.
- Using a youth-centred participatory approach when designing interactive teaching materials and promotional content for younger audiences.

Limitations & future research

This study has several limitations. It focuses on specific contexts and includes insights from a fairly homogenous sample. Further research could adopt comparative approaches to examine whether similar, or different, dynamics exist across different regions, organisational structures, cultural settings and activities, such as chess and poker. A longitudinal study would be valuable in assessing how changes in organisational practices influence participation over time. In addition, more attention should be given to the experiences of underrepresented groups, including younger players, those without prior exposure and those from various racial, ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds to better understand how inclusion can be meaningfully achieved.

Conclusion

This paper contributes to Mindsports Studies by illustrating that participation in bridge is shaped by the interaction between individual dispositions, organisational practices and wider cultural meanings. It has argued that the entrenched, exclusive habitus of individual players reinforces the institutional inertia of bridge organisations. The research shows that inclusion and participation are not simply matters of personal choice but are produced through the (mis)alignment of these interconnected levels. To enhance inclusivity, bridge must continue to reposition itself as a contemporary mindsport – a shift increasingly recognised

by national and international organisations. Image rebranding, embracing digital tools and community-driven approaches will help shift the habitus of the bridge world, expanding the game's appeal while preserving its traditional identity.

Bridge continues to offer intellectual challenge, social connection, and opportunities for long-term engagement. However, these same features can also signal exclusivity, particularly to those without prior exposure or confidence in navigating its norms. Addressing this requires a systemic approach. Interventions that focus on only one dimension, such as promoting cognitive benefits or adjusting club practices, are unlikely to produce sustained change without broader alignment.

A key implication is that the future of bridge lies in adapting, rather than abandoning, its traditions. This includes widening access to cultural capital, rethinking how the game is presented and evolving the habitus of bridge to better reflect contemporary expectations and lifestyles. Efforts to increase participation must therefore be coordinated across cultural messaging, organisational practices and individual experiences. By adopting a layered perspective, this study extends existing leisure constraint models (Crawford et al., 1991; Jackson et al., 1993) to incorporate cultural and symbolic dimensions, such as rituals, stigma and cognitive legitimacy.

These factors are particularly important in understanding participation in mindsports. Other mindsports, such as chess or poker, may face similar challenges where deeply embedded traditions and expectations shape who feels able to participate. As such, this study contributes to a broader understanding of how historically rooted leisure practices can both sustain commitment and limit inclusivity. Ultimately, sustaining and growing participation in mindsports depends on recognising the interdependence of the barriers and enablers identified in this paper. With thoughtful and coordinated adaptation, the traditions that define bridge can support a more inclusive, accessible and welcoming mindgame for future generations.

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Originality Statement

This paper offers a novel examination of the barriers and enablers for promoting mindsports to increase recruitment and player retention. Unlike previous leisure research, which primarily focuses on time, cost and access constraints, this study identifies barriers unique to mindsports, including cognitive legitimacy and symbolic/classificatory constraints, as well as enablers such as social support, community identity and flexible institutional practices. By applying a layered framework, spanning individual, institutional and cultural levels, the research demonstrates how traditions, habitus and organisational routines interact dynamically to influence engagement. It shows how the ingrained, exclusive habitus of individual players feeds into and solidifies the institutional inertia of the organisations. The study also highlights opportunities to reframe bridge as an inclusive and socially engaging activity without undermining its heritage or intellectual challenge. These insights extend existing leisure models and provide a practical roadmap for promoting participation in mindsports more broadly, offering both theoretical and applied contributions to sport and leisure scholarship.

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