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Situating bridge: Understanding older adults' digital leisure practices during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic saw life across the world change dramatically, with national lockdowns and stay-at-home orders sequestering entire populations indoors. Within the world of the mindspport bridge, this meant the closing down of all bridge clubs and an attendant move to digital play. Bridge is a partnership card game, involving four-players and is predominantly played by an older generation (55+). Through 298 diary accounts collected during the first lockdown of 2020, this paper explores how older adults' in-person bridge play shifted to digital play. We show how volunteer facilitators were crucial in enabling this move online and how learning to play digital bridge provided new technical bridge skills as well as maintaining important social connections. Our paper speaks to ongoing debates about the resilience of older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic and the vital role of leisure during a time of global crisis.

KEYWORDS

COVID-19 pandemic; digital leisure; older adults; diary data; situated writing

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic saw life across the world change dramatically. Countries engaged in a range of coping strategies from national lockdowns to gradual easing of travel and work restrictions, to then returning to stricter lockdowns in an attempt to control the virus. With the majority of people sequestered indoors, digital spaces for work, socializing and leisure became part of the “new normal.” As Watson et al. (2020, p. 1) point out: “The COVID-19 crisis disrupted everyday routines and practices of sociality for many people,” with home-based leisure practices becoming increasingly important for maintaining everyday rhythms and routines during a time of global disruption (Argan et al., 2023). Research on leisure behaviors and practices during the COVID-19 pandemic has pointed out that due to government sanctioned stay-at-home orders and social distancing rules, new leisure rituals developed around walking, bread baking, and digital theatre-going, to name a few (Easterbrook-Smith, 2021; Sharp, 2023). Alongside these home-based leisure practices, digital leisure practices boomed, seen in the rise of Tik-Tok dances and family Zoom quizzes (Lashua et al., 2021).

These changed leisure practices were helpful for reducing social isolation during the COVID-19 pandemic, as there was a slowing down of the pace of life (intentional or forced) resulting in more leisure time for some (de la Barre et al., 2020). Yet COVID-19

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also amplified existing inequalities in society with unequal impacts on people's ability to continue to participate in leisure throughout the pandemic (Meisner, 2020). Aymerich-Franch (2023) note that individual experience of wellbeing during COVID-19 lockdowns decreased, particularly when connected to increased social media use and having more time filled with "nothing." Bae and Chang's (2023) research found that leisure patterns changed from more home-based leisure activities during the first lockdowns of 2020, to more outdoor leisure activities during later waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. Alongside this, participants reported greater health and wellbeing whilst engaged in outdoor leisure activities in contrast to greater stress and anxiety during their sequestered home-based leisure lives during earlier lockdowns. People's leisure practices during the COVID-19 pandemic changed dramatically, with everyday rhythms and routines, digital connections and physical activity proving crucial to people's sustained emotional health and wellbeing.

Alongside changes to the practices, engagement and provision of leisure brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers interested in mapping and understanding these changes were forced to adapt their own tried and tested in-person data collection tools to other, often more digitally available, approaches. Online surveys, Zoom interviews, digital diaries and arts-based practices were changed in often radically innovative and creative ways (Allen & Velija, 2023; French et al., 2021; The Working Class Collective, 2022). Arguably, the COVID-19 pandemic offered new ways for researchers and leisure scholars to conceptually and methodological think through how to ethically and sensitively extend their research imaginations.

The purpose of the current study is to explore and understand the ways in which the COVID-19 pandemic changed people's bridge playing lives. Bridge, as a four player, partnership card game, was, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, played predominantly in local clubs or at tournaments in a face-to-face capacity. Bridge is a technical and challenging game, that takes years of diligent play in order to reach elite level (Punch, 2021). However, it is enjoyed at many different levels by tournament players, regular club players, social players and occasional players of all ages (Scott & Godbey, 1994). Bridge had its global heyday in the 1950s/60s and since then has largely fallen out of popular favor. This has resulted in an aging population player base, with the number of bridge clubs globally declining (Scott, 1991). Nevertheless, millions still play globally and people derive a range of social and personal rewards from playing (Punch et al., 2022).

During the COVID-19 pandemic, national lockdowns saw the closing down of all bridge clubs and an attendant move to online bridge play. Bridge clubs and organizations estimate that initially 40–60% participated in digital bridge games (BAMSA, 2021) but as the COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns progressed those figures were likely to be higher, around 70% of players. Through diary data collected during the 2020 lockdowns, this paper explores how older adults' leisure changed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In particular, this paper shows how in-person bridge play shifted to digital platforms for much of 2020 and beyond. It adds to existing research on the important role of (leisure) facilitators (Lachance, 2021; Son et al., 2022) who enabled and supported bridge playing populations. This paper further speaks to debates about the resilience and adaptability of older adults' leisure practices during the COVID-19 lockdowns (Stuart, 2023) and their use of technology (Chung et al., 2021) to continue to maintain a much-loved leisure practice. Finally, the use of situated writing (Livholts, 2019) to understand diary data provides a unique and innovative insight into the ways

in which a leisure practice has been textually mediated, represented and understood during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

Literature review

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, new and emerging issues around technology and its role in the uptake, engagement and access to a range of leisure practices were being debated by a variety of scholars (Marston et al., 2020; Schultz & McKeown, 2018). This includes discussions around how technology was enabling greater access for certain marginalized groups (Lancioni et al., 2016, 2020; Travers et al., 2018), to debates about technology furthering isolation, loneliness and ill-health (Madhav et al., 2017; Young et al., 2021). Discussions situate technology as enabling, constraining and sometimes doing both (Nimrod & Ivan, 2019). Though it has been well-documented by Carnicelli et al. (2017) and Silk et al. (2016) that digital leisure has grown exponentially, research increasingly recognizes that engagement in digital leisure is not a neutral process but one that is shaped by place, economic resources and (dis)ability, as well as other CAGES (class, age, gender, ethnicity, sexuality, for example) (Brabazon & Redhead, 2016; Valtchanov & Parry, 2017).

Given the complex interplay of technological developments with leisure, Spracklen (2015, p. 76) suggests that although digital leisure has the promise to be “life-affirming” and “self-actualising,” in reality it is more often of service to late capitalist societies and the nation-state. However, Deshbandhu et al. (2022, p. 551) in their research on youth and Pokemon Go, argue that digital leisure can be more usefully conceptualized through notions of hybridity and the different ways digital leisure is engaged in, depending on age and the specific leisure practice undertaken. Kyle and Chick (2002, p. 428) further point out that participation in a leisure practice is a “multidimensional construct” dependant on “the central role of the activity in the context of an individual’s life,” alongside the personal benefits of participating in the activity and the social relationships developed whilst doing it.

Recognizing the complexity of participation in leisure practices led Son and Dionigi (2020) to argue that leisure for the 50+ demographic is shaped by both constraints and enablers. Constraints were identified as lack of support from family and friends, lack of opportunities, economic pressures and health reasons to name a few. A key enabler was evidenced in the social support provided by coaches and team-members, which was often offset by gendered stereotypes facing older (60+) women engaged in a sport or leisure practice. Son et al. (2022) state that the role of facilitators in enabling participation in sport and leisure contexts, is vital. Using Raymore’s (2002, p.39) articulation of facilitators as people who “enable or promote the formation of leisure preferences to encourage or enhance participation,” they demonstrate that facilitators play an important role in the enjoyment, participation and general wellbeing experienced by people engaging in sport and leisure activities. Wanka (2020) and Lachance (2021) have also reported that volunteering offers a range of personal and social rewards for leisure participants and volunteers, particularly retired populations and more recently during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Alongside the important role of facilitators and volunteers, Mansfield et al. (2020) argues that leisure activities that mesh with a person’s life stage, circumstances and

identities have the potential to enhance an individual's life in a variety of socio-cultural ways. Ryu et al. (2022, p. 595) contend that “leisure participation and engaging in eudaimonic behaviors can promote situational well-being of older adults.” Although wellbeing is variously understood and theorized (Adams et al., 2011), Bae and Chang (2023) stress the importance that physical activity plays in sustaining health in later life. However, Wanka (2020) highlights that not all activities that are seen to increase longevity (physical exercise for example) are necessarily afforded the same sense of personal and social wellbeing by participants, despite a variety of health professions advocating particular sports/leisure activities as beneficial to successful aging. As a result, research shows that older adults (much like their younger peers) often prefer an hour of watching tv, playing board games or cards, to the physicality of a game of squash for example (Dattilo et al., 2022; Minhui, 2024; Ryu & Heo, 2018; Wiseman, 2021). What is clear is that a personal sense of wellbeing, regardless of age, finds expression through a variety of sedentary technological practices that may decrease physical health, but conversely increase emotional wellbeing and satisfaction.

Health, wellbeing, age and technology can play an enabling but also constraining role in people's participation in sporting and leisure contexts. In Nimrod and Kleiber (2007) study of older adults in retirement, they found that there are two types of innovation for engagement in new leisure activities. Self-reinvention innovation allows for a break with personal history and trying something completely new, whilst self-preservation innovation involves the development of new skills in order to continue or renew previous activities. They also identify four key triggers to motivate older people's engagement with new activities: internal, external, instrumental, and imposed. Their research demonstrates that “innovation holds the potential for a more satisfying and meaningful life” (Nimrod & Kleiber, 2007, p. 19).

This paper situates and expands these debates through the use of diary data collected about the changed nature of bridge-playing lives during the 2020 lockdowns of the COVID-19 pandemic. We explain that the COVID-19 pandemic necessitated the move of a much-loved in-person card game to digital platforms (Bridge Base Online (BBO) and RealBridge). The paper explores the importance of volunteer facilitators in the move to online leisure, and the role of digital bridge in relation to social connections and wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. We discuss some of the challenges, changes and constraints bridge players navigated during their digital bridge play. Our conceptual and methodological approach is outlined below.

Conceptual and methodological framework

The methodological and conceptual background to this project has been guided and informed by Livholts' (Livholts, 2012; Livholts & Tamboukou, 2015) ideas around situated writing. Situated writing is a “methodological strategy that combines feminist theorizing of situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988) and writing as a methodological tool” (Livholts, 2019, p. 3). As a result, the practice of writing cannot be separate from the construction of knowledge. Drawing explicitly on Ahmed's (2017, p. 7) work on feminist theorizing as “homework” and something done in the “home,” Livholts (2019, p. 5) argues that situated writing explicitly includes the “whys and hows” of writing that is contextual, localized, embodied, sensorial and filled with both possibilities and ruptures. She contends that writing

must be taken seriously as a mechanism for making knowledge claims about the world, but that these claims should be limited and “not speak from privileged positions in a generalizing way” (Livholts, 2019, p. 8).

Employing Haraway’s (1988, p. 585) “specific ways of seeing,” Livholts (2019, p. 8) goes on to suggest that situated writing argues *against* knowledge claims that do not “account for the knower’s position.” In other words, we do not see/write from nowhere and that positionality and situatedness is most clearly evidenced in what we write, when we write and in what situations and contexts. Situated writing is a call for feminist researchers to create a movement that is reflexive, critical and safe for the research(er), with Livholts (2019) employing her own writing on water and the professor’s chair (amongst other things) to demonstrate the value of situated writing across the lifecourse.

The promise of situated writing as both a theoretical *and* methodological approach is that it bypasses the historically entrenched notion within the social and leisure sciences that theory and method are separate endeavors. Rather, situated writing places the researcher(er) clearly and unapologetically in their own biographically embedded, socially specific context. Furthermore, situated writing argues for localized and careful knowledge claims and challenges the ideas of “speaking from nowhere,” also known as the “God trick” (Haraway, 1988) in writing and theorizing.

Working with situated writing as an approach that governed the project from data collection, analysis and findings has been a challenging one. For example, the writing of this article is an act of situated writing (in the case of Miriam Snellgrove quite literally at the kitchen table). However, it is not only our situated writing processes (and knowledge claims) that must be reflected on and made apparent, but also those of our participants. We asked participants to produce diaries (in whatever form they liked) to document their changing bridge playing habits during the first national lockdowns during the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020. We chose diaries because it has long been recognized that diaries are a valuable way to capture the everyday experiences and lived realities of different social groups and perspectives (Bartlett & Milligan, 2020). In particular, diaries as a social research tool, bypass the power relations between researcher and researched, by placing the authority of what is (and is not written) in the hands of the writer (Stanley, 2020). Participant-guided diary writing therefore resonated with Livholts (2019, p. 9) call to acknowledge the standpoint of the writer as well as the “entangled stories” they are writing that cover (in varying degrees of detail) bridge play, advances in digital technologies, social connections, loneliness and isolation plus conversations about health risks, hand washing and food shortages (to name a few). Situated writing is a temporally located and historically contingent practice, where the “institutional cultures of writing” (Livholts, 2019, p. 5) that shape and constrain what can (and cannot) be written, must be acknowledged. Acknowledging this “institutional culture of writing” we discuss our data collection, sample and analysis below.

Data collection

Between April and November 2020, bridge players around the world were invited, via social media and bridge playing platforms and magazines, to submit diary entries detailing how COVID-19 (and the first global national lockdowns) had changed their

bridge playing lives. The *Bridging COVID* study is part of the Bridge: A MindSport for All (BAMSA) project based at the University of Stirling and has been granted University ethical clearance. Recruitment of participants was undertaken by Samantha Punch who is a well-known bridge player within the global bridge community. Samantha spent considerable time and effort promoting the project through her social networks, using the participant information sheet that outlined the remit of the project, and how to submit an account. The participants submitted their account(s) via the project's dedicated email address.

In the participant information sheet, we asked people to answer our research question which was: how had the COVID-19 pandemic changed their bridge playing lives? We also asked them to provide their age, gender, nationality and years spent playing bridge. Participants were invited to submit an account in any way they preferred, such as audio files, drawings, or written accounts. All of the accounts submitted were textual. We deliberately left this as open as possible, bearing in mind Livholt's (2019, p. 5) call to recognize the "diversity of experiences" around the practice of writing. This allowed our participants the freedom to document as much or as little about the changes to their bridge playing habits that they would choose to share with us, as we worked from the understanding that writing is "contextual, procedural, material, imaginative, hard labor, passionate and geopolitically framed" (ibid). The writing process, as a result, was meant to be as participant-friendly as possible, with our understanding of what constitutes a diary similarly participant-guided and informed (Bartlett & Milligan, 2020). This approach meant some accounts were very short—no more than a few lines in an email and others extensive and descriptive, covering pages of text with one account listing activities in an excel spreadsheet that documented date and time of bridge play (amongst other things) (see Snellgrove & Punch, 2022).

Sample description

Overall, the *Bridging COVID* study collected 298 diaries by 133 participants. Some participants included their age, gender and nationality and others did not (see Table 1). All entries were submitted in English with the majority of responses from the Anglophone world (USA, UK, Canada, New Zealand and Australia). Where we did get accounts from non-English speaking countries, these were usually a one-off and very short (China, Japan, France, Poland, Greece, Netherlands for example).

Savage (2007) has pointed out that diary writing tends to be a method that suits highly educated populations and this was the case for our study (see McDonnell et al., 2017). Women have been associated with good uptake in diary writing as a method (Bartlett & Milligan, 2020), however in our sample, we had more men respond than women. Where gender perhaps played a role was in the frequency of responses. The majority of our 298 diary entries were one-off accounts, with only nine participants submitting between five and seventy diary accounts. Of those nine, six were women, with one woman submitting over seventy entries (see Snellgrove & Punch, 2023). Participants (P) recorded their gender as either Male (M) or Female (F). Three participants did not provide their gender and this was then noted as missing data (see Table 1). In total we had 76 men and 54 women participating in the project.

Table 1. Sample characteristics and number of participant diary accounts.

Nationality	Gender	Age	Date	Total unique diaries
UK 23 participants	M=15 F=8	70-79=11 60-69=5 50-59=4 40-49=1 Unk = 2	19/4/20 to 16/11/20	41
England 33 participants	M=20 F=12 Missing data = 1	80-89=4 70-79=9 60-69=5 50-59=2 40-49=1 30-39=1 20-29=1 Unk= 10	17/4/20 to 13/11/20	128
Scotland 15 participants	M=8 F=7	80-89=1 70-79=6 60-69=3 50-59=2 Unk= 3	18/4/20 to 8/11/20	42
Wales 1 participant	M=1	50-59=1	22/9/20	1
Ireland 1 participant	F=1	80-89=1	24/4/20 to 17/6/20	2
USA 22 participants	M=15 F=7	70-79=10 60-69=5 50-59=1 40-49=1 20-29=1 UnK = 4	16/4/20 to 14/10/20	29
Canada 3 participants	M=2 F=1	70-79=2 60-69=1	21/4/20 to 22/8/20	4
Australia 9 participants	F=7 Missing data = 2	80-89=2 70-79=1 60-69=3 Unk = 3	10/5/20 to 9/12/20	14
New Zealand 5 participants	M=3 F=2	70-79=1 60-69=2 50-59=1 Unk = 1	07/5/20 to 23/8/20	8
Norway 4 participants	M=1 F=3	60-69=1 50-59=1 40-49=2	16/04/20 to 12/05/20	5
Germany 6 participants	M=4 F=2	70-79=1 60-69=2 50-59=2 30-39=1	17/4/20 to 27/4/20	9
Netherlands 2 participants	M=2	50-59=1 20-29=1	15/4/20 to 9/10/20	4
Japan 1 participant	F=1	Unk = 1	23/4/20 to 12/7/20	3
France 2 participants	M=1 F=1	40-49=1 20-29=1	22/5/20 to 23/5/20	2
Greece 2 participants	M=1 F=1	50-59=1 10-19=1	29/4/20 to 6/5/20	2
China 1 participant	M=1	40+=1	22/4/20	1
South Africa 1 participant	F=1	Unk = 1	20/4/20	1
Poland 1 participant	M=1	20-29=1	17/5/20	1
India 1 participant	M=1	70-79=1	16/4/20	1
Total participants =133	Total by gender: M=76 F=54 Other =3 /133	Total by age: 80-89=8 70-79=42 60-69=27 50-59=16 40-49=7 30-39=2 20-29=5 10-19=1 Unk = 25 /133	Data collected from: 15/4/20 to 9/12/20	Total diary accounts = 298

Though we asked how many years participants had been playing bridge, this was one question that was routinely left unanswered. Those who did answer, their bridge playing varied from a couple of years to decades of play. A couple of elite players submitted accounts, but most were from tournament, club and social bridge players. These distinctions refer to the skill level and places that people engage in bridge play—from social bridge within homes, to the local bridge club, to competitive tournaments (regional, national and international) and representing their country at elite level (continental and world championships). We have documented elsewhere the challenges and strategies of elite bridge play (Punch & Snellgrove, 2021), this therefore, is a welcome and needed insight into the habits and behaviors of non-elite bridge players during the global COVID-19 pandemic.

The occupation of participants was not requested, though it became clear from reading the diary entries that many participants were retired and were volunteer organizers/teachers for their local bridge club. We explore the important role these “digital volunteer facilitators” played in enabling the transition to digital bridge in our findings section.

Data analysis

The data analysis was undertaken employing situated writing (Livholts, 2019), supported by Braun and Clarke’s (2006, 2021) reflexive thematic analysis approach. To start, each diary entry was coded according to the participant’s country/nationality, as well as their gender, age and years spent playing bridge. Nationality was an important category as lockdown and COVID-19 restrictions varied country by country. The diary accounts reflected the ways in which these national rules variably affected participants’ bridge playing lives. In addition, bridge players are defined by their nationality in some tournaments. Age was another significant category as the majority of the bridge playing community is older. Most diary accounts were written by people between 50 and 70 years of age, with 42 accounts submitted by the 70+ cohort, who were all retired (see Table 1 where age is given in decades, e.g., 60–69 years of age. In our findings we use the shorthand of 60+ etc). We therefore use age in a chronological sense as providing lifecourse context to the writing and playing of digital bridge.

Miriam read the data multiple times, starting from the point of nationality. In this way, diary data from the UK, USA, Norway, New Zealand for example—were read as temporally located to that country’s specific COVID-19 restrictions. This was in keeping with Livholts (2019) call to recognize the vital importance of historical and social context in the process of situated writing. As a result, each account from a particular country was treated individually with common issues (such as the move to digital bridge play) collated. This approach was further clarified by Braun and Clarke (2021) who argue that the generating, reviewing, defining of codes and development of themes is a crucial aspect of reflexive thematic analysis and is an ongoing, repetitive and interpretative process.

As a result, commonalities in changed bridge play were then compared between and across nations resulting in broader, more collective themes developing across the data in an iterative manner (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Miriam therefore frequently returned to the individual diary accounts, re-reading and re-thinking about what

the data did and did not say, what claims she could and could not make (Livholts, 2019).

Although we have already employed situated writing to a select sample of diary accounts (Snellgrove & Punch, 2022, 2023), we realized then that situated writing is more easily applied if the reader is invited to read a few diary accounts unfiltered by author analysis. This enables the reader to read the account in the full and complete form that the diarist wrote it in. The reader can then engage in their own contextual theorizing (or not) with the diary accounts, with the writer of the article providing merely *one* of many different ways of thinking through the data. By engaging in such an approach, we argued that we were mindful of the limits of our own knowledge claims (Haraway, 1988; Livholts, 2019) while recognizing the interpretive relationship between author, text and reader. However, in this article we wanted to extend the remit of situated writing to all 298 diaries.

Paying attention to the variability in the written accounts, alongside Miriam reflexively engaging in her own contextual situatedness, made the reading and analysis of the diary data tricky. As a result, she compiled a descriptive “country insights” document that covered the submissions from nineteen countries. The insight document did not present a numerical basis for assuming something was more/less liked, rather it enabled her to generate and review open codes whilst iteratively (re)-defining and (re)-naming candidate themes. A candidate theme “is an initial clustering of codes—one that requires more exploration before it becomes a settled theme” (Braun & Clarke, 2021 p. 79). Miriam developed nine candidate themes which covered COVID-19 and national lockdowns, online bridge joys, online bridge sorrows, time, age, leisure, loneliness, social, risk and the everyday. As Braun and Clarke (2006, p. 10) further state, a theme captures an important aspect of the data with no “hard-and-fast answer to the question of what proportion of your data set needs to display evidence of the theme for it to be considered a theme.” The themes were developed in relation to the research question, which was exploring the changes to our participants’ bridge-playing lives due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

What became clear during the process of reading/coding/thematising the diary data were issues around social connection, the move to digital bridge and benefits/constraints around digital play, as well as detailed technical discussions about using the online bridge playing platforms (mainly BBO, as the platform RealBridge emerged later in November 2020). Our nine candidate themes were subsequently developed into four key themes (discussed below). The diary data presented here shows how the COVID-19 pandemic affected people’s leisure practices, their health and wellbeing, social connections and the role of digital technologies. Furthermore, our data indicates *how* and in *what ways* an older bridge-playing population experienced the various lockdowns throughout 2020 and the crucial role of digital leisure as a form of social connection, through their own situated writing.

However, due to the word constraints of this article, we have edited some of the accounts to present writing that supports our points about digital leisure during the COVID-19 pandemic. In such instances we are aware that we are privileging certain forms of knowing as more important than others and centralizing academic journal

article conventions, over the unedited voices and accounts of participants.¹ We take comfort from Livholts (2019, p. 4–19) call to document the whys and hows, ruptures and challenges of situated writing and to make clear to the reader that we are making our claims from somewhere, rather than nowhere. Braun and Clarke (2021, p. 118) also argue that the writing up of data matters as much as the processes of coding and thematising that precede it. As reflexive feminist researchers, writing and thinking with the data is part of the analytic process. This means that readers will notice that there is overlap and repetition in the diary accounts and between and across themes. This is because our participants often covered multiple issues in one account and to edit down to a few select words, is to divorce the writing entirely from the diarists' voice and context. We therefore argue that situated writing, through the example of our COVID-19 pandemic diary accounts and reflexive thematic analysis, shows the messy interconnected role of leisure *and* writing during the pandemic. Situated writing challenges and disrupts existing social science conventions around form, method, theory, and analysis, something we return to in the limitations section. We now present four key findings:

1. Digital Volunteer Facilitators
2. Maintaining Social Connections through Digital Bridge
3. The Practical Benefits of Digital Bridge
4. Digital Constraints, Challenges and Changes

Findings

Digital volunteer facilitators

With the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, bridge playing and teaching moved online. Face-to-face clubs closed and many tournaments were canceled or postponed. At the start of 2020, the main online bridge forum was BBO (Bridge Base Online), which had up until then been primarily used as a practice tool or for friendly games, and less for hosting tournaments. During the first national lockdowns of 2020 across the globe, many bridge clubs devoted considerable time and energy to moving their club online, with BBO the primary platform for digital play. This meant that weekly or twice-weekly bridge sessions (or sometimes more) were replicated in a digital space. One English man explained, “We have managed to encourage a third of our active membership (26/80) to play online via Bridge Club Live. Most are now playing regularly, possibly even more bridge with a greater range of partners than previously.” This was echoed by another English woman who said:

...we have offered training sessions and opportunities for everyone to play, despite their standard of Bridge... Although the current Corona Virus is having a dramatic impact on all our lives, I could confidently say that none of us have ever played as much Bridge as

¹See *Lockdown Diaries of the Working Class* (2022) by The Working Class Collective for an example of publishing that shunned academic conventions around form, method and voice as they argued this was the most ethical way to represent working class accounts of the COVID-19 lockdown.

we do now. The learning curve has been harnessed by most players and we are able to satisfy everyone's appetite to play Bridge.

Teaching and educating bridge players about the functions and purpose of digital bridge, was not without trial and error. The process of educating and training players was taken up by a range of dedicated bridge teachers and volunteers, as this 50+ year old Welsh player indicates:

Since lockdown, bridge has taken over my life (way more than before). I was the only local one with any ability to run tournaments on BBO and have been getting club and county up to speed, at the same time as playing way more than ever ...and involved in bridge admin at four different levels, and it is not letting up.

However, this digital transition was not without challenges, as many of the older players had limited digital knowledge and were using the online platform for the first time, as this 50+ year old Greek teacher indicates:

I have tried to continue bridge lessons with my adult club students using DISCORD and BBO. This has been a very difficult task, since the majority of the students are over 60 years old and not used to internet applications. Thus, I have spent a lot of hours trying to explain the function of DISCORD as well as Messenger, Viber, SKYPE and of course BBO, because a significant number of students could not follow DISCORD. In some cases I had to check their equipment via team viewer in order to fix a problem and I also faced some difficult technical issues (I never said I was an expert in computers and Internet but I had to learn things in order to help everyone feel at ease)... I had to repeat many times the same instructions and I was surprised by the patience of the vast majority of my students who waited with no complaints for me to finish.

This uncertainty about online platforms led a 70+ year old Scottish female to express concern about those who were not making the transition to digital play: "Sadly, lack of equipment, know-how and confidence means not all players are able to benefit. Lockdown is highlighting many examples of digital divides." Given this issue, one English man pointed out "we are concerned that the less computer literate members are being deprived of social contact and are doing our best to maintain links. Our chairman sets a daily quiz/bridge puzzle via email."

Other participants pointed out that uncertainty about the digital platforms did not stop people from trying to transition to online play, especially the longer the lockdown and COVID-19 pandemic continued as this 70+ year old English woman explains:

The most positive change I have seen is in the ability of elderly people to adapt to technology when they are forced to. Over 50 of the golf club members are now playing bridge regularly on BBO (average age 65–70. Oldest well over 80). This has included a lot of social bridge, teams matches and teaching. One of the members has started up an online league. They are also using Zoom for meetings, lessons and social bridge.

Maintaining social connections through digital bridge

The second theme present in the diary data was the important role of maintaining social connections, as this 50+ year old English man articulates:

For several weeks I have been organising our club members to play online on BBO, whilst simultaneously using a video conferencing app to make the experience as sociable as possible. Seeing each other's faces, having a chat and a laugh and post mortem-ing hands greatly adds to the experience. I have set up a calendar to help people arrange games and I hope to start running competitions of some description soon.

One English club manager suggested that the sense of community had been increased through coming together in a new digital space, "Our experience has been that these members have increased their camaraderie and social interaction albeit online." Similarly a 60+ year old Australian woman highlights the importance of digital bridge for pensioners/retirees "Bridge gives the players a wonderful release and opportunity during trying times to have that interaction with fellow members and to play the game we have come to enjoy."

The enjoyment of the game was one key factor, with another being the social interaction online. A 60+ year old English woman "admit[ted] to enjoying the banter as much as the competition sometimes. Members of my club often joke in the chat area during the game and that really lifts my spirits." With another 80+ year old English woman noting that whilst digital play "is not quite the same as looking forward to a trip to the club ... it puts a pleasant alternative [routine] into my daily gardening, reading and tv."

The social connections of playing bridge prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, were fostered by club committee members and teachers whilst being embraced (to greater or lesser degrees) by club members. However, it is important to stress that these digital connections are based on already formed in-person connections. Our participants were generally not meeting totally new people, but usually people already known from prior relationships and encounters. Digital bridge, therefore, was being used instrumentally to sustain the only social connections that some players had in their lives, as this 60+ year old Scottish woman articulates:

If I didn't have online bridge I am quite sure I'd be sunk in the depths of a severe depressive episode. I am downhearted by the fact that COVID is not going away and some people are so fucking stupid they don't believe it exists. ... On some days I only speak to my bridge partner on the phone and no-one in real life... I rarely speak to anyone else on the phone because we have nothing to discuss and it's dispiriting to try to think of topics of conversation.

The practical benefits of digital bridge

The third theme that playing digital bridge showed was the array of often practical benefits that players developed. A 60+ year old Australian women and 40+ year old South African man both pointed out the benefits of "not having to commute to the club" and "not sitting in traffic is an absolute pleasure." The practical convenience of digital bridge was of even greater importance for this 60+ year old Scottish player who said:

I have chronic depression and it can interfere very badly with my life. Online Bridge is designed for me since I don't have to shower or even get out of my dressing gown to play. I've been playing far more since lockdown than ever in my life.

Participants also spoke about the geographical benefit of being able to connect and play with a wider range of players than in their local club, as this English woman illustrates:

...both my husband and I have continued with our bridge playing during lockdown using Bridge Base Online (BBO). We have a friend in the US who is a keen bridge player and has often played with us in Parsons Green when he is over here in the UK. His wife does not play bridge. We also have another friend in Portsmouth who is a very good bridge player and her husband also does not play bridge. I hooked them up with each other and we now play bridge every Tuesday afternoon ... using BBO.

That people were able to meet online to play bridge, as well as connect with other people across the globe was an unintended benefit of lockdown as this 70+ year old Scottish woman explains:

Although most sports are suffering badly from lockdown, bridge and other so-called mind sports can give huge comfort to many in their own homes. I'd always resisted online bridge as I enjoy the company of playing in a club. However, the online offering is available 24/7 and it's been amazing to play with other aficionados from all over the world. The chat facility means we can empathise: an Indian partner was also coming to terms with lockdown.

The joys of not needing to travel to the clubs, as well as the frequency and 24/7 nature of global bridge play, meant that for a bridge playing population sequestered at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, digital bridge offered a way to connect with others in different regions/countries as well as continue to play regardless of time or day. Alongside this, participants spoke about the "opportunity to learn additional bridge and technical skills" (Australian, Female, 70+ years), with an English man commenting that "the extra analytical features possible have helped people improve their game." Another 70+ year old English man remarked that "it has made me far more comfortable on a key board, and given me practice manipulating a mouse."

While players commented on missing in-person bridge, a 60+ year old Scottish woman said that she "found it easier to concentrate online," with a 50+ year old Welsh man seconding this and adding that "the [online] game suits me more." For some participants, the COVID-19 lockdowns meant more bridge play, more time to practice and generally more space to engage in a much-loved leisure activity. COVID-19 brought with it various unintended benefits and joys.

Digital constraints, challenges & changes

The fourth theme noted in the diary data was around an array of practical constraints, challenges and changes to our participants' bridge playing lives. The move to digital bridge play was complicated with specific difficulties and issues for many players. Learning and using the new technology was one aspect of playing online, but also the way the digital transformed how play was being engaged in—whether speeding up the laying of cards, or shouting at the computer for example, participants often commented on being free of the more formal conventions of bridge-club play. However, the digitization of the game brought new challenges, as this 80+ year old Irish woman articulates:

As for Bridge, I do miss the human contact and have accepted that if I want a game, I must log into BBO.

But to be perfectly honest, I do not enjoy playing online.

It is too stressful— screen freezes, intermittent connection, misunderstandings with opponents, slow play etc. I am contemplating stopping Bridge, for the time being.

These technical issues were a constraint experienced by a number of participants with another 80+ year English old woman stating, “my broad band is not up to playing online ... which means no social life beyond the telephone.” Even those that did continue to play throughout the various national lockdowns noted that their bridge play had changed, as this 50+ year old Scottish woman explains:

I do agree that sometimes online you do something which you just can't imagine doing live at the table. Whether a tendency to play a bit too quickly or to hover over a card and play it, whereas at the table it is a more deliberate action of pulling out a card.

Other players commented that they experienced screen fatigue after a couple of hours of play. One 60+ year old English woman pointed out how the length of the lockdowns affected not only her bridge play but also her mental health:

Most of the time I think I am coping with this isolation very well, then I will do something dippy and a wave of depression will engulf me. At the virtual bridge table, I will suddenly lose concentration and feel disorientated. I won't recognise the card symbols and get confused between clubs and spades for instance. These moments are brief and I soon snap out of it but it is a sign of stress, I think, just as when I wander into the kitchen to get something and then stand there perplexed. ... It is like a deep thing inside that is saying, quietly, “what's the point?”

Yet other participants who had initially noted their resistance to online play, changed their minds about digital play the longer the COVID-19 pandemic continued, as this 80+ year old Irish woman later recounts, “have changed my mind re Bridge—not giving up yet! I have now played 12 times online. Apart from ... once, all games were local. At last, by trial and error, I feel reasonably comfortable playing online.”

These changes also included new patterns of play, with digital bridge becoming “so popular that we now have a tournament every day of the week including Sundays” (40+ year old, South-African man). Alongside this, several participants marveled at the new bridge “normal” and how it had quickly offered new opportunities for teaching online, as this 70+ English man articulates:

Day 68 of isolation. 15km walk this morning. Taught a great class this afternoon. Who would have thought just a few months ago that teaching bridge online would become so popular and for teachers so easy to manage.

The diary data indicated that once the initial hurdles of managing the digital gaming technology had been learned, the majority of participants spoke about spending “more time than ever” playing digital bridge. Many over-70s described digital bridge as a “lifesaver” during the COVID-19 pandemic, while others were playing and teaching more bridge than ever before. This led a 70+ year old Australian woman to ponder

what the future of the in-person bridge club would look like once the pandemic was over:

Like any organisation, the Club is moulded by the nature of the members. The members are keeping the Club spirit alive and thriving. After Covid-19 the Club will emerge in a different form, with additional strength and sense of community beyond the confines of the Club's three small rooms.

Discussion

Our findings show that new opportunities, challenges and changes emerged for the bridge community during the 2020 lockdowns due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Digital transition facilitators (Son et al., 2022) were crucial in enabling and supporting a move to online bridge playing platforms. These facilitators were local bridge players, teachers and often the one person in the bridge club comfortable with the technological know-how. From Australia to Scotland—bridge club volunteers helped support their players to make the transition to digital play. The higher online participation rates for some clubs reflect the substantial effort and time investment into guiding and supporting people to play online at the start of the COVID-19 pandemic and eliminating the fear of digital bridge. Creating virtual clubs with smaller networks was reassuring for some that they would be playing against names they recognized from the in-person bridge environment.

Older adults who had never played digital bridge before were “forced” to learn new digital skills because of the sequestered nature of the COVID-19 pandemic, aided hugely by the patience and time given by a number of dedicated members of the bridge community. Drawing on Nimrod and Kleiber's (2007) innovation theory of successful aging, the “trigger” for the shift to online bridge was “imposed,” but also “instrumental” in that they learnt new digital skills. The type of innovation was self-preservation innovation, which Nimrod and Kleiber (2007) argue is a way to develop new skills in order to continue with previous interests. Our participants, whilst not beginning a completely new activity, learnt new digital skills in order to continue participation in bridge during the COVID-19 pandemic. Most online bridge players experienced similar outcomes to those who engaged in new activities in Nimrod and Kleiber's (2007) study of retirement, as they enhanced their satisfaction and increased their sense of wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is similar to Chung et al.'s research who found that people will “refine their skillsets and knowledge and acquire new ways to maintain their well-being if necessary” (2021, p. 312).

The acceleration of technological innovations was driven by the COVID-19 pandemic and enabled by the skills and interests of clubs, organizers and players. The diaries indicated that this process demanded perseverance and was not always easy. In some accounts, bridge volunteers reflected on how their increased involvement enhanced their own satisfaction and meaningful engagement as well as provided opportunities to further develop their skills. This links into and extends research by Wanka (2020) who found that retired populations gained a huge amount of personal satisfaction from volunteering. Our participants showed that this volunteering to help bridge players engage in digital bridge was promoted by their own love of the game, but also concern that bridge players would become socially isolated without the vital social connections

formed in the bridge club. This further echoes Lachance's (2021) research that the COVID-19 pandemic opened up new opportunities for volunteering.

Stuart (2023) points out that older adults were remarkably resilient at adapting their leisure behaviors during the restrictions imposed by the COVID-19 pandemic and our study shows that this was also the case. A key focus for our participants was in maintaining the social connections developed by in-person play in the digital play environment. Relationships formed at the bridge table are of crucial importance for our participants and this chimes with Kyle and Chick (2004, p. 245–246) research where “interest in or motivation toward a leisure activity is not brief or transitory but is important to the individual on an ongoing basis ... [and] may be more a consequence of their desire for social interaction.” Our findings show that the need for social interaction at a time of government-sanctioned stay-at-home orders, was one element of the move to digital bridge.

Other key benefits as players embraced the rapid digitalization of bridge were the development of new skills, wider geographical reach, broader networks and greater flexibility to play. Our findings coincide with those of Watson et al. (2020, p. 1) who found that “the reduced opportunities for in-person social contact have resulted in major changes to how our participants use and value everyday digital technologies in the home setting.” The diary accounts indicate that there are varied degrees of digital connection as well as differences between those who are digitally literate and those who are not. Leisure and technology combined to enable older people to manage some of the challenges they faced during the COVID-19 pandemic by learning to play digital bridge. Their use of technology to connect with others and participate in online bridge “presents an opportunity for a new way of facilitating social engagement, especially for those who have limited access to places outside their homes” (Chung et al., 2021, p. 313).

Digital bridge helped to widen access by enabling some players with mobility issues to reengage with the game. Some also appreciated the lack of commuting to play, the absence of nighttime travel after the game or the shorter length of some of the sessions. The organized online games also provided structure and routine for many older adults. Fong et al. (2021) discuss the sense of belonging and social identity that develops through bridge clubs. We found that these relational community connections were able to shift to the new digital spaces of the virtual bridge club. Social engagement, connectedness and solidarity were enhanced during the COVID-19 pandemic through digital leisure, albeit through a screen at home (Jordan & Lahiri, 2023).

Our findings further show that participants engaged with a variety of constraints, challenges and changes to their bridge playing lives. Many of our participants referred to digital bridge as not being the same as face-to-face bridge: “BBO tournaments... aren't ‘real’ Bridge” and “the experience is not as enjoyable as live Club bridge” (Irish, Female, 80+). This coincided with Brkljačić et al.'s (2017) pre-COVID-19 findings that there was a substantial difference in players' perceptions of digital and in-person bridge, where online bridge could not replace the live experience. However, the diaries revealed much recognition of online bridge being a great substitute and “a really powerful tool under such circumstances” (Japanese, Female). Like Wu's (2023) research into digital theatre-going during the COVID-19 pandemic, the distinction between face-to-face and digital bridge tended to generate mixed views regarding online experiences. There

were some polarized views, either loving or hating the online playing environment from the outset, whilst others initially disliked digital bridge but grew to like it, the longer the pandemic continued.

Although bridge enabled some players to cope during the COVID-19 pandemic and some spent significant amounts of time playing online, for others the technology diminished their leisure experience. Some players did not like the excessive screen time that it involved, and many referred to the lack of human aspect as it was always mediated via a screen. The comfort of being able to play in one's own home was offset by the new habit of being confined to the house and not being able to communicate in a "more human" way (see also Watson et al., 2020). Furthermore, there was inequality in access to online bridge, given that it required a digital device and internet provision which not all older people had. Despite digital bridge being "a savior from boredom" (Australia, Female, 80+) and mitigating feelings of loneliness and isolation, it could not entirely eradicate them.

Our findings demonstrate a range of social and technical factors that influenced players' engagement with digital bridge during the COVID-19 pandemic. Players' experiences were contingent on various factors including preexisting technical skills and access to devices/wifi, available support and skill development, a suitable home space to concentrate, the player's networks and level of play, and their preferences for local, regional, national and/or international games. As such, having sufficient economic resources and being leisure-rich were arguably crucial aspects to the success of digital bridge during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Having sufficient time to learn and embed these new technologies into everyday life was also another important factor. This can be seen in the way that players who submitted several diary accounts, referred to their growing adaptation to, and acceptance of, digital bridge, which in turn changed their bridge playing habits. As Crawford (2013) argues, virtual leisure practices can become quickly normalized and embedded into the routines of everyday life. Leisure is thus transformed "by introducing new ways of playing and relaxing, while simultaneously changing forever how other leisure practices are experienced and encountered" (Crawford, 2013, p. 568). This paper indicates that digital bridge has potentially transformed the world of bridge with changes to social, club and international bridge in the ways the game is played, organized and enjoyed. Our findings further speak to research that recognizes the resilience and adaptability of older adults' leisure practices (French et al., 2021; Stuart, 2023) during a time of a global crisis and health risk for many.

Limitations

Our study presents some notable limitations. The sample is predominantly from the anglophone world and in particular the UK. Our participant groups are dominated by those who engaged in digital bridge, with all its constraints, challenges and joys. Only a few diaries touched on the "missing" or "invisible" players and more needs to be learned about this specific group of players who are possibly the most marginalized and excluded. In particular, what happened to the 30–40% of players who did not engage with digital bridge? As well as exploring the reasons behind bridge players' disengagement during lockdown, further research is required

about their experiences of returning (or not) to in-person bridge clubs in a post COVID-19 world.

Another limitation is in the framing and analyzing of our data using situated writing. This has demonstrated practical issues in applying situated writing as both theory and method. While this approach is excellent for deconstructing the socially situated nature of knowledge construction, it is less helpful on the practical nuts and bolts of data analysis and presentation of findings. As a result, employing Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2021) ideas around reflexive thematic analysis enabled us to follow a more conventional thematised presentation of findings, drawing on leisure literature for analysis rather than situated feminist writing. Further research into the limits and potential of utilizing situated writing methodologically in leisure contexts is needed here.

Conclusion

During the COVID-19 pandemic, sport and leisure practices were dramatically affected (like so many other aspects of social life). In-person bridge ceased and digital bridge emerged as having an important role for many in sustaining and maintaining social connections. This paper has explored how older adults transitioned from playing bridge in face-to-face environments to embracing digital bridge (rapidly for some and gradually for others). It has shown that access to digital technologies, digital facilitators and the development of virtual communities were crucial for maintaining and sustaining a much-loved leisure practice. The diaries show resilience and adaptability (Stuart, 2023) by older adults during the COVID-19 pandemic to digital technologies, a willingness to learn new skills and a desire to maintain and sustain social connections in spite of the pandemic (Yin Chee, 2020). The diaries further illustrate the mediations between individuals and the actions of the collective (such as clubs) to sustain leisure practices during the various lockdowns of 2020.

Finally, it is clear that the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in changes being made to the provision and participation of bridge as a mindsport. The ways that access, delivery and engagement will continue in the post-pandemic era is worthy of future research. Digital bridge has opened up more inclusive spaces and greater access for some, yet also marginalized others. It would be interesting to explore how this will shape future teaching, recruitment and retention of new players. There is uncertainty as to how bridge clubs and organizations will cater to the different needs of face-to-face and digital bridge players in a cost-effective manner in a post-pandemic world. Bridge has been transformed by technological changes during the COVID-19 pandemic, and further research is needed to explore the future hybrid of digital and face-to-face bridge. The COVID-19 pandemic has illustrated the potential of digital bridge to connect a multinational, geographically diverse community that can be both local and global.

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Ethics statement

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