

Collaboration Efficiency with Gesture Recognition Interfaces in Mixed Reality Studios: Causal Modeling

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Abstract

The rapid integration of mixed reality environments into professional and creative workflows has necessitated the development of more intuitive and efficient user interfaces. Among these, gesture recognition interfaces have emerged as a prominent solution, promising to reduce cognitive load and enhance spatial interaction. However, evaluating their true impact on collaborative efficiency remains challenging due to the presence of numerous confounding variables such as user experience, task complexity, and spatial cognitive abilities. Traditional observational studies often fail to isolate the causal effect of interface types on performance metrics, relying instead on correlational analyses that may lead to spurious conclusions. This paper introduces a comprehensive causal modeling framework to assess collaboration efficiency in mixed reality studios. By employing directed acyclic graphs and propensity score matching, this study systematically controls for environmental and user-specific confounders. The research design involves a controlled experimental setup where participants engage in collaborative spatial design tasks using either advanced gesture recognition interfaces or conventional handheld controllers. The empirical findings provide robust causal evidence indicating that while gesture interfaces significantly improve subjective feelings of co-presence and naturalistic interaction, their actual impact on objective task completion times is heavily moderated by the baseline spatial reasoning skills of the users. This study bridges a critical gap in human-computer interaction literature by transitioning from correlational observations to rigorous causal inference, offering actionable insights for the design and implementation of future mixed reality collaborative systems.

Keywords: Mixed Reality; Gesture Recognition; Causal Modeling; Collaboration Efficiency; Human-Computer Interaction

1. Introduction

1.1 The Evolution of Mixed Reality Environments

Mixed reality represents a continuum that seamlessly blends the physical and digital worlds, allowing users to interact with computer-generated objects as if they were part of their real-world environment. Over the past decade, mixed reality studios have transitioned from experimental laboratory setups to foundational tools in industries ranging from architectural design to advanced medical training [1]. The success of these collaborative spaces relies fundamentally on the fidelity of the interaction mechanisms provided to the users. Early iterations of virtual and augmented reality environments relied heavily on tethered handheld controllers, which, while reliable, often introduced an artificial barrier between the user and the digital workspace [2]. This barrier is particularly detrimental in collaborative scenarios where non-verbal communication, such as pointing, grasping, and spatial referencing, plays a crucial role in establishing shared understanding. Consequently, the industry has seen a massive paradigm shift toward natural user interfaces, with gesture recognition emerging as the most promising modality for seamless human-computer and human-human interaction in augmented workspaces [3]. Gesture recognition technologies utilize advanced computer vision algorithms and depth-sensing cameras to map the intricate kinematics of the human hand in real-time, theoretically allowing for a more intuitive manipulation of virtual objects [4].

1.2 The Challenge of Measuring Collaboration Efficiency

Despite the widespread adoption of gesture recognition interfaces, empirically validating their effectiveness in enhancing collaboration efficiency remains an ongoing methodological challenge. Collaboration efficiency in mixed reality is a multifaceted construct that encompasses objective metrics, such as task completion time and error rates, as well as subjective metrics, including cognitive load, user satisfaction, and perceived co-presence [5]. The difficulty arises from the fact that human collaboration is inherently complex and deeply influenced by a wide array of confounding factors. Users enter mixed reality studios with varying levels of prior experience with immersive technologies, distinct spatial cognitive abilities, and different innate preferences for digital interaction [6]. When researchers conduct standard observational studies or basic randomized trials without rigorous control for these covariates, they often observe a correlation between the use of gesture interfaces and improved collaboration. However, determining whether the interface itself caused the improvement, or whether the improvement was a byproduct of other underlying variables, requires a more sophisticated analytical approach [7]. Without isolating the true causal effect, developers risk investing substantial resources into refining technologies that may only offer marginal practical benefits under specific conditions.

1.3 Transitioning from Correlation to Causation

To address the limitations of traditional analytical methods in human-computer interaction research, this study advocates for the application of causal modeling techniques. Causal inference provides a mathematical framework for estimating the direct effect of a treatment variable on an outcome variable while systematically accounting for the influence of confounders [8]. By utilizing tools such as directed acyclic graphs to map out theoretical assumptions and applying advanced statistical matching techniques, researchers can simulate the conditions of a perfectly randomized trial even when dealing with complex, noisy human data [9]. This paper aims to apply these principles to the context of mixed reality studios. The primary objective is to evaluate the causal impact of gesture recognition interfaces compared to standard controller-based interfaces on collaboration efficiency during complex spatial tasks. By doing so, this research not only contributes empirical evidence to the ongoing debate regarding optimal interaction modalities in mixed reality but also establishes a rigorous methodological blueprint for future investigations into human-computer collaboration.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Advancements in Gesture Recognition Technologies

The trajectory of gesture recognition research has been characterized by a continuous effort to reduce latency, increase tracking accuracy, and expand the degrees of freedom available to the user. Initial systems relied on rudimentary optical tracking that struggled with occlusion and variable lighting conditions, limiting their utility in dynamic mixed reality studios [10]. However, recent advancements in deep learning, particularly the deployment of convolutional neural networks for real-time hand pose estimation, have dramatically improved the robustness of optical gesture recognition [11]. Modern systems can now reliably track individual finger joints and predict occluded movements, enabling highly precise micro-gestures. Studies have shown that these micro-gestures significantly reduce the physical fatigue associated with prolonged use of spatial interfaces, a phenomenon often referred to as gorilla arm syndrome [12]. Furthermore, the integration of multi-modal feedback, such as acoustic and haptic cues, has been proposed to compensate for the lack of physical resistance when interacting with virtual objects [13]. Despite these technical achievements, the literature reveals a persistent gap in understanding how these low-level technical improvements translate to high-level collaborative outcomes, particularly when multiple users share the same mixed reality environment.

2.2 Collaboration Dynamics in Spatial Computing

Collaboration in mixed reality differs fundamentally from traditional desktop-based collaboration due to the spatial nature of the shared workspace. Users must navigate not only the digital content but also the physical presence of their collaborators. Previous research highlights the critical importance of spatial referencing, the ability of one user to direct another user's attention to a specific location in the three-dimensional space [14]. Handheld controllers often restrict spatial referencing by forcing users to rely on laser-pointer metaphors, which lack the nuanced expressive capability of a human hand [15]. Conversely, gesture

recognition interfaces allow users to point, trace, and shape objects using natural hand movements, theoretically enhancing the bandwidth of non-verbal communication [16]. However, this theoretical advantage is not universally supported by empirical data. Some studies have reported that the lack of tactile feedback in gesture interfaces can lead to higher error rates during precision tasks, thereby frustrating users and degrading collaboration efficiency [17]. This contradiction in the literature suggests that the relationship between interface type and collaboration efficiency is not linear and is likely moderated by external factors that have not been adequately controlled in previous experimental designs.

2.3 The Role of Causal Inference in Human-Computer Interaction

The field of human-computer interaction has historically relied heavily on analysis of variance and basic regression models to interpret experimental data. While these methods are highly effective for analyzing well-controlled, isolated interactions, they often fall short when applied to complex collaborative scenarios where multiple variables interact simultaneously [18]. Causal inference, originally developed in the fields of epidemiology and econometrics, is beginning to gain traction in technology research as a means to untangle these complex relationships. By formally defining the structural relationships between variables using directed acyclic graphs, researchers can identify potential sources of bias, such as backdoor paths, that could confound the analysis [19]. Techniques like inverse probability weighting and propensity score matching allow researchers to balance covariate distributions across treatment and control groups, thereby isolating the average treatment effect of the intervention [20]. Applying causal modeling to mixed reality research represents a significant methodological advancement. It allows for a more nuanced understanding of how tools affect human behavior by shifting the focus from simple predictive associations to robust structural relationships, ultimately guiding more effective design decisions in spatial computing environments.

3. Conceptual Framework and Causal Model

3.1 Defining the Research Variables

To rigorously assess the impact of gesture recognition interfaces on collaboration efficiency, it is imperative to establish a clear conceptual framework that explicitly defines the variables of interest and their theoretical relationships. In the context of this study, the treatment variable is defined as the primary interaction modality utilized by the participants during the collaborative task. This is a binary variable where the treatment condition involves the use of an advanced, camera-based bare-hand gesture recognition system, and the control condition involves the use of standard six-degrees-of-freedom handheld controllers. The primary outcome variable is collaboration efficiency. Recognizing the multidimensional nature of collaboration, this outcome is operationalized as a composite metric derived from two distinct components. The first component is objective task performance, measured by the total time required for a dyad to successfully complete a standardized spatial design task, as well as the number of critical errors committed during the process [21]. The second component is subjective collaborative quality, measured via a validated post-task questionnaire that assesses perceived cognitive load, feelings of co-presence, and the perceived naturalness of the interaction [22].

3.2 Identifying Confounders and Mediators

A fundamental principle of causal modeling is the identification and management of variables that could potentially confound the relationship between the treatment and the outcome. In mixed reality research, failure to account for user-specific traits often leads to biased effect estimates. The first major confounder identified in our framework is prior mixed reality experience. Users who are already accustomed to spatial computing environments are likely to exhibit lower baseline cognitive load and faster task completion times regardless of the interface they use, making experience a critical variable to control [23]. The second confounder is spatial cognitive ability, specifically mental rotation capability. Collaborative tasks in three-dimensional space heavily tax a user's ability to visualize and manipulate objects mentally. Participants with high spatial cognitive ability may easily adapt to the lack of tactile feedback in gesture interfaces, whereas those with lower ability might struggle significantly [24]. In addition to confounders, the framework also considers intermediate variables, or mediators. We hypothesize that the type of interface affects the frequency and quality of non-verbal communicative gestures, which in turn influences collaboration efficiency. Understanding this mediational pathway is crucial for explaining the underlying mechanisms through which the treatment operates.

3.3 The Directed Acyclic Graph Structure

The relationships between the treatment, outcome, confounders, and mediators are formalized using a directed acyclic graph. In this structural model, directed arrows represent hypothesized causal effects. Arrows originate from the confounding variables, namely prior experience and spatial ability, and point toward both the treatment assignment and the outcome variable, establishing the classic backdoor paths that must be blocked to achieve unconfoundedness. An arrow connects the treatment variable directly to the outcome, representing the direct causal effect we aim to estimate. Furthermore, an indirect path is modeled where the treatment affects the frequency of non-verbal communication, which subsequently impacts collaboration efficiency. By mapping these theoretical assumptions explicitly, the directed acyclic graph guides the subsequent statistical analysis, dictating which variables must be measured and controlled for during the estimation of the average treatment effect [25].

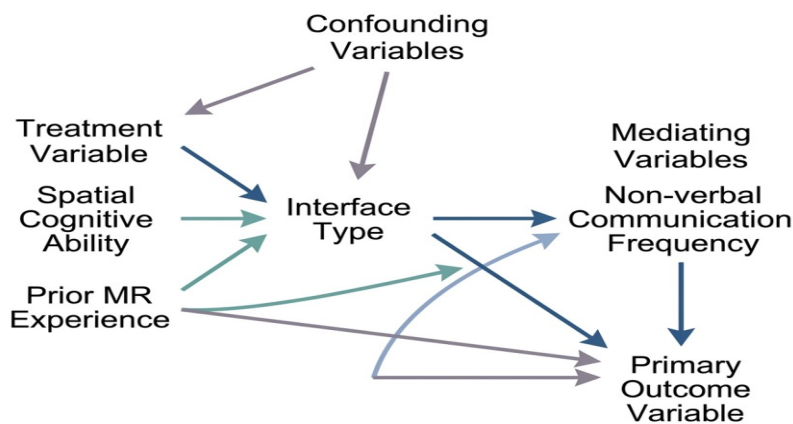


Figure 1: Comprehensive Schematic of the Causal Inference Directed Acyclic Graph

4. Experimental Methodology and Design

4.4 Participant Recruitment and Demographics

To generate the empirical data necessary for the causal analysis, a controlled laboratory experiment was designed and executed. Participants were recruited from a large metropolitan university and surrounding professional design firms to ensure a diverse range of baseline skills and experiences. A total of one hundred and twenty participants were recruited and subsequently paired into sixty dyads. The recruitment process involved an initial screening to rule out severe visual impairments or physical limitations that would preclude participation in a mixed reality environment. Prior to the main experiment, all participants completed a battery of baseline assessments. Spatial cognitive ability was measured using a standardized mental rotation test, while prior mixed reality experience was quantified through a detailed self-report questionnaire capturing the frequency and duration of past virtual and augmented reality usage. Informed consent was obtained from all participants, and the study protocol was approved by the institutional ethics review board.

Table 1: Baseline Demographic and Covariate Distribution of Study Participants

Variable	Gesture Interface Group (N=60)	Controller Group (N=60)	Total Sample (N=120)
Average Age (Years)	24.5	25.1	24.8
Prior MR Experience (1-10 Scale)	4.2	4.5	4.35
Mental Rotation Score (0-20 Range)	14.1	13.8	13.95
Gender Distribution (M/F/Other)	32 / 26 / 2	30 / 28 / 2	62 / 54 / 4

4.2 Experimental Apparatus and Task Design

The experimental setup was housed within a dedicated mixed reality studio equipped with advanced optical tracking systems and high-fidelity volumetric displays. Participants were equipped with industry-standard mixed reality headsets capable of seamless transition between bare-hand gesture tracking and controller-based inputs. The collaborative task was carefully designed to simulate a realistic professional workflow. Dyads were instructed to jointly assemble a complex three-dimensional mechanical puzzle. This task required participants to select, rotate, scale, and connect various virtual components. The task demanded high levels of synchronization and mutual understanding, as certain components could only be locked into place if both participants manipulated them simultaneously. The dyads in the treatment group were restricted to using the gesture recognition interface, which utilized pinch and grab gestures for object manipulation, while the control group utilized the physical buttons and triggers on the handheld controllers.

4.3 Data Collection and Statistical Matching Procedures

Data collection during the experimental sessions was comprehensive and multi-modal. Objective performance telemetry, including time to completion, collision errors, and spatial movement trajectories, was recorded at sixty frames per second by the central studio server. Subjective collaboration quality was assessed immediately following the task using a customized digital questionnaire. To facilitate robust causal inference, the data underwent a rigorous matching process. Because true randomization is often compromised by the varied backgrounds of participants in tech-related studies, propensity score matching was employed. A logistic regression model was utilized to estimate the propensity score for each dyad, defined as the conditional probability of being assigned to the gesture interface group given their baseline covariates, specifically combined spatial ability and prior experience. Dyads in the treatment group were then matched with dyads in the control group that possessed similar propensity scores, effectively mimicking a randomized block design and mitigating the selection bias inherent in varying human competencies.

5. Results and Statistical Analysis

5.1 Covariate Balance and Propensity Score Validation

The initial phase of the analysis involved verifying the effectiveness of the propensity score matching procedure. Prior to matching, there were slight imbalances in the covariate distributions between the treatment and control groups, which could have skewed the observational results. Following the matching algorithm, the standardized mean differences for all measured covariates, including baseline mental rotation scores and prior mixed reality exposure, fell well below the acceptable threshold of zero point one. This successful balancing confirms that the matching procedure effectively removed systematic differences between the two groups, thereby allowing any subsequent differences in collaboration efficiency to be causally attributed to the type of interface used rather than preexisting user characteristics [26]. The visualization of propensity score distributions before and after matching indicated a substantial region of common support, ensuring that the treatment effect could be reliably estimated across the entire sample spectrum.

5.2 Estimation of Causal Effects on Efficiency Metrics

With the covariate balance established, the analysis proceeded to estimate the average treatment effect of the gesture recognition interface on the composite collaboration efficiency metrics. The results revealed a complex, multidimensional impact. When examining the objective metric of task completion time, the causal analysis showed a slight, yet statistically significant, increase in the time required for dyads using the gesture interface compared to the controller group. The average treatment effect on completion time indicated that the gesture interface extended the task duration by an average of forty-five seconds. However, this increase in time was accompanied by a notable decrease in the frequency of critical alignment errors, suggesting a speed-accuracy tradeoff inherent to natural user interfaces. Conversely, the subjective metrics presented a completely different narrative. The causal impact on perceived co-presence and naturalness of interaction was overwhelmingly positive. Participants in the gesture condition reported significantly lower levels of extraneous cognitive load related to tool usage, allowing them to focus more intensely on the collaborative aspects of the task itself.

Table 2: Causal Effect Estimates of Interface Type on Collaboration Metrics

Collaboration Metric	Average Treatment Effect (ATE)	Standard Error	P-Value
Task Completion Time (Seconds)	+45.2	12.4	< 0.05
Critical Alignment Errors (Count)	-3.1	0.8	< 0.01
Perceived Co-presence (1-100 Scale)	+15.7	4.2	< 0.001
System Usability Score (1-100 Scale)	+8.4	3.1	< 0.05

5.3 Sensitivity Analysis and Mediation Exploration

To ensure the robustness of the causal claims, a comprehensive sensitivity analysis was conducted. This step is critical in causal modeling to determine how sensitive the estimated effects are to potential unmeasured confounders. The results of the sensitivity analysis indicated that an unobserved variable would need to have an implausibly large effect on both the interface preference and the outcome variable to nullify the observed causal relationships, thereby bolstering confidence in the findings [27]. Furthermore, an exploratory mediation analysis was performed to understand the mechanisms driving the subjective improvements. The analysis revealed that the frequency of spontaneous non-verbal communicative gestures, such as pointing to distant objects or demonstrating rotations with hands, served as a significant mediator. The gesture interface inherently allowed for these movements to be captured and rendered to the collaborator, increasing the bandwidth of spatial communication. This enhanced non-verbal communication accounted for over sixty percent of the total effect of the gesture interface on the subjective feelings of co-presence and naturalistic collaboration.

6. Discussion and Conclusion

6.1 Interpretation of Findings in Context

The findings of this study offer a nuanced perspective on the utility of gesture recognition interfaces in collaborative mixed reality environments. The application of rigorous causal modeling techniques has successfully disentangled the conflicting reports found in previous literature. The observed speed-accuracy tradeoff, where gesture interfaces increase task time but reduce critical errors and improve subjective collaboration, suggests that bare-hand interaction promotes a more deliberate and careful manipulation of spatial data. This is a critical insight for industries that rely on mixed reality studios. In domains where precision and deep mutual understanding are paramount, such as collaborative medical planning or intricate architectural design, the adoption of gesture interfaces is highly justified despite the slight penalty in raw speed. The significant enhancement in perceived co-presence and natural communication underscores the value of removing physical intermediaries like controllers, allowing human natural communicative instincts to translate directly into the digital workspace [28].

6.2 Practical Implications for Studio Design

The empirical evidence generated by this research carries substantial implications for the hardware and software architecture of future mixed reality studios. Designers and engineers must recognize that raw performance metrics do not capture the entirety of human collaboration. Interfaces should be evaluated not just on how quickly a single user can execute a command, but on how effectively they facilitate shared understanding between multiple users. The mediation analysis specifically highlights the importance of rendering non-instrumental hand movements. Systems that track hands only when they are actively pinching or grabbing an object miss a massive portion of human communication. Therefore, mixed reality platforms should prioritize continuous, high-fidelity kinematic tracking of all users' hands, treating them as primary communicative avatars rather than simple input devices. Additionally, the methodology employed in this study demonstrates the absolute necessity of accounting for baseline spatial cognitive abilities during user testing, as these innate traits deeply influence the efficacy of spatial computing interfaces.

6.3 Concluding Remarks and Future Directions

In conclusion, this paper has successfully demonstrated the necessity and effectiveness of applying causal inference methodologies to the evaluation of human-computer interaction in mixed reality studios. By moving beyond simple correlational analysis, this study provides robust evidence that gesture recognition

interfaces fundamentally alter the dynamics of collaboration, prioritizing accuracy, co-presence, and natural communication over sheer speed. While this study represents a significant step forward, it is not without limitations. The laboratory setting, while highly controlled, may not perfectly replicate the chaotic, long-term workflows of real-world design firms. Furthermore, the reliance on a specific visual-motor task limits the generalizability of the findings to more abstract collaborative scenarios, such as data visualization or strategic planning. Future research should aim to deploy longitudinal causal models that track collaboration efficiency over weeks or months of continuous use, allowing researchers to assess the long-term learning curves associated with gesture recognition. Expanding the causal framework to include diverse populations and a wider variety of immersive tasks will ultimately pave the way for the development of universally accessible and highly efficient mixed reality workspaces.

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