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The Role of Social Psychology in Human-Computer Interaction in Teaching Systems

Shambhavee Saroj

Air Force Golden Jubilee Institute

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Abstract

Teaching systems—from intelligent tutoring systems (ITS) and learning management systems (LMS) to MOOCs and collaborative learning platforms—are social spaces mediated by interfaces. Between 2012 and 2021, findings across social psychology and HCI converged on four recurring levers of learner behavior: **social presence**, **motivation and need support**, **social structuring (norms, identity, comparison)**, and **affect/trust**. This integrative paper synthesizes meta-analyses and high-quality empirical studies to (a) map how social-psychological constructs shape learner engagement and performance in computer-mediated instruction, (b) translate them into design principles for teaching systems, and (c) compare how these constructs play out across ITS, MOOCs, LMS discussion forums, and computer-supported collaborative learning (CSCL). We conclude with a research agenda prioritizing socially adaptive interfaces, ethical learning analytics, and robust evaluation in real-world deployments.

1. Introduction

Human–Computer Interaction (HCI) in education is rarely "human versus machine"; it is **human–human-via-machine**. Learners perceive instructors, peers, and even interfaces as social actors; they adapt to norms, feel belonging or isolation, and respond to motivational cues embedded in design. Over 2012–2021, research clarified which social features reliably lift learning outcomes, which merely increase "activity," and which can backfire. This paper organizes the landscape into four lenses:

1. **Social Presence** (perceiving real people behind the interface).
2. **Motivation & Need Support** (Self-Determination Theory; autonomy, competence, relatedness).
3. **Social Structuring** (norms, identity, comparison, collaboration networks).
4. **Affect & Trust** (emotion, fatigue, privacy/ethics).

We integrate evidence to produce actionable HCI guidance for teaching systems and a cross-system comparative analysis.

Table 1. Scope & guiding questions

Lens	**Research questions (2012–2021)**	**Teaching systems where most salient**
Social presence	Which cues (video/voice/agents/immediacy) drive satisfaction/achievement?	MOOCs, LMS, video-based courses

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Lens	Research questions (2012–2021)	Teaching systems where most salient
Motivation (SDT)	Which interface choices support autonomy, competence, relatedness?	All; especially self-paced
Social structuring	How do norms/identity/comparison and network structures shape behavior?	MOOCs, CSCL, forums
Affect & trust	What emotional/ethical constraints bound design?	Synchronous video, analytics-heavy platforms

2. Theoretical background: social psychology meets educational HCI

2.1 Social presence & instructor immediacy

Meta-analytic synthesis across online courses shows **social presence** correlates positively with satisfaction and perceived learning; instructor immediacy behaviors (warm tone, timely responses, visible instructor) matter even in asynchronous settings. Instructors' visible cues and clear facilitation strengthen perceived presence and learning outcomes.

Table 2. Presence cues & expected effects

Cue	Mechanism	Expected effect
Instructor video/voice	Humanizes, reduces ambiguity	↑ Satisfaction, ↑ persistence
Prompt replies/immediacy	Signals availability	↑ Social presence, ↑ engagement
Avatars/agents (with restraint)	Parasocial support	Small ↑ in motivation/transfer

2.2 Motivational foundations (Self-Determination Theory)

Self-Determination Theory (SDT) posits that **autonomy**, **competence**, and **relatedness** drive quality motivation. Meta-analytic work within education shows teacher autonomy support and competence scaffolding are reliable predictors of self-determined motivation; autonomy support links to need satisfaction and then to more adaptive motivation types. For online HCI, this translates into meaningful choice architectures, transparent progress/feedback, and structured peer contact.

Table 3. SDT → HCI mapping

SDT need	HCI pattern	Example UI element
Autonomy	Choice with rationale; non-coercive nudges	Multiple task paths; optional extensions
Competence	Mastery progress + process-level feedback	Progress bars, formative hints
Relatedness	Visible peer/instructor connections	Peer groups; quick-reply affordances

2.3 Social structuring: norms, identity & comparison

Digital classrooms are normative environments. Light-touch **social norm** messages and **comparison** cues (e.g., progress relative to class median) can nudge effort—yet intensive leaderboards risk discouraging novices. Orchestrating collaboration via **social network analysis (SNA)** can identify isolates, rebalance groups, and improve outcomes.

Table 4. Social structuring levers

Lever	Opportunity	Pitfall
Descriptive norms	Normalize productive behaviors	Boomerang effects for high performers
Social comparison	Calibrates effort	Threatens self-efficacy if misused
SNA-guided grouping	Balances participation	Over-engineering if too frequent

2.4 Affect, fatigue, and trust

Synchronous video classes surfaced **nonverbal overload** ("Zoom fatigue"), cautioning designers to minimize constant self-view, encourage audio-only breaks, and reduce grid stress. Meanwhile, **learning analytics** raised privacy/ethics concerns—especially for social data—requiring transparency and consent.

Table 5. Affective & ethical constraints

Issue	Risk	HCI response
Video fatigue	Cognitive/affective strain	Toggle self-view; vary modes
Emotional misreads	Blunt sentiment models	Human-in-the-loop review
Analytics privacy	Consent/opacity risks	Clear dashboards & opt-outs

3. Evidence from teaching systems

3.1 Intelligent Tutoring Systems (ITS)

What works. Two meta-analyses found ITS produce **moderate gains** over traditional instruction and other computer-based methods when they provide step-wise scaffolding, mastery learning, and targeted feedback. Affective-aware adaptations can further enhance engagement when calibrated.

Pedagogical agents. Beyond ITS logic, **agent form** matters: a 2018 meta-analysis shows that **agent gesturing** (not just presence) aids learning, suggesting designers privilege *functional* social cues over decorative anthropomorphism.

Table 6. ITS & agents: what the evidence supports

Feature	Social-psych mechanism	Evidence trend
Stepwise hints	Competence support	↑ Learning vs. business-as-usual
Mastery pacing	Autonomy & efficacy	↑ Transfer/performance
Agent gesturing	Social presence + attention	Small-to-moderate gains

Feature	Social-psych mechanism	Evidence trend
"Cute" agents alone	Mere exposure	Unreliable benefits

3.2 MOOCs & large-scale online courses

MOOCs struggle with persistence; social design can help. **Instructor presence**, **peer contact**, and **structured chat/orchestration** are associated with better satisfaction and lower attrition. Network-aware orchestration (e.g., rolling chat; proactive pairing) alleviates coordination problems and fosters consistent engagement.

Table 7. MOOC social design patterns

Pattern	Rationale	Implementation note
Weekly instructor video	Presence & goals framing	Keep short; transcripted
Rolling small-group chats	Relatedness; turn-taking	Avoid brittle 1:1 matching
Norm nudges	Social proof	Use conservative baselines

3.3 LMS discussions & CSCL environments

In **CSCL**, the structure of interaction networks predicts outcomes. Interventions guided by **SNA dashboards**—identifying centrality, reciprocity, and fragmentation—have improved collaboration quality and group performance in field deployments.

Table 8. CSCL orchestration via SNA

Metric	Interpretation	Action
Degree/reciprocity	Participation balance	Re-seed prompts; rotate roles
Betweenness	Gatekeepers/bottlenecks	Add cross-links; mentor support
Modularity	Factionalism	Merge/split groups strategically

3.4 Gamified teaching systems

A 2020 meta-analysis reports **small-to-moderate** positive effects of **gamification** on motivation and learning, contingent on alignment with pedagogical goals; points/badges are less effective without **competence-oriented feedback** and **meaningful challenges**.

Table 9. Gamification: social-psych design checklist

Element	SDT mapping	Good practice
Progression & levels	Competence	Calibrate challenge; show mastery
Teams/co-op quests	Relatedness	Encourage interdependence
Choice of quests	Autonomy	Offer meaningful pathways

4. Comparative analysis across teaching systems

Table 10. How social-psych levers vary by system

Lever	ITS	MOOCs	LMS forums	CSCL
Social presence	Agent/instructor proxies; limited peer	Instructor videos; peer scale	Text-heavy; facilitation key	High peer-to-peer
Motivation (SDT)	Strong competence scaffolds	Autonomy high; competence varies	Autonomy moderate	Relatedness & autonomy via roles
Norms & comparison	Mastery norms; gentle progress comps	Norm nudges useful; avoid harsh leaderboards	Local norms per course	SNA-informed norms & roles
Affect & trust	Affective tutoring promising if transparent	Video fatigue risks	Civility policies & moderation	Privacy for social data critical

Key contrasts. ITS excel at **competence support**; CSCL maximizes **relatedness** but needs orchestration; MOOCs need **presence & norms** to offset scale; LMS forums benefit most from **immediacy** and **clear facilitation**.

5. Design principles: turning social psychology into HCI patterns

5.1 Presence by design

- **Make instructors visible** (short weekly videos, photo+bio, rapid feedback windows).
- **Use agents functionally** (gestures & signaling rather than novelty). Evidence ties gesturing to attention and learning.

Table 11. Presence components & widgets

Component	Widget	Note
Instructor “trail”	Recent replies, office-hour card	Sets expectations
Peer visibility	“Who’s here now”, study-buddy opt-in	Consent first
Agent cueing	Pointing/highlight	Use for germane attention only

5.2 Motivation-aware choice architecture (SDT)

- **Autonomy:** offer *real* choices (sequence, modality) with brief rationales.
- **Competence:** progress meters tied to **criteria-based** feedback; mastery unlocks.
- **Relatedness:** stable micro-cohorts; fast, low-friction messaging. Meta-analytic models confirm that teacher behaviors supporting needs predict better motivation.

Table 12. SDT anti-patterns to avoid

Anti-pattern	Harmed need	Safer alternative
Forced pacing without rationale	Autonomy	"Default path + alternatives"
Points without feedback	Competence	Process-level feedback
Broadcast-only comms	Relatedness	Small cohort channels

5.3 Social structuring & orchestration

- **Norms:** state descriptive norms carefully; spotlight *improvable* behaviors (e.g., "Most students post a draft by Wednesday").
- **Comparison:** show **absolute** progress before **relative**; allow opt-out.
- **SNA-assisted facilitation:** dashboards to catch isolates, rotate roles, and rebalance groups.

Table 13. Orchestration playbook

Signal	Threshold	Action
Low reciprocity	<0.2 replies/post	Seed prompts; assign responders
High centralization	Top 10% >50% edges	Introduce hubs; rotate discussants
High modularity	Q communities > 0.4	Cross-group critique tasks

5.4 Affect, fatigue & ethics

- **Video ergonomics:** limit always-on grids; default self-view off; audio cycles. Empirical/theoretical work on "Zoom fatigue" supports such mitigations.
- **Analytics transparency:** show what you track, why, and how it helps; provide opt-outs and overrides for social data. Ethical analyses of learning analytics emphasize consent and purpose limitation.

6. Methodological notes (for this synthesis)

This paper is an integrative review emphasizing **peer-reviewed meta-analyses and systematic studies (2012–2021)**. We privilege sources with clear operationalizations, robust samples, or experimental/field designs, and translate findings into interface patterns.

Table 14. Inclusion emphasis

Priority	Rationale
Meta-analyses/systematic reviews	Stable, generalizable effects
Field experiments / naturalistic data	Ecological validity
Transparent measures & outcomes	Reproducibility

7. Limitations & open questions

- **Causality vs. correlation.** Many presence and SDT findings are correlational; need more randomized trials at platform scale.
- **Equity & identity.** Social features can differentially affect learners by prior attainment or identity; 2012–2021 work only partially addresses bias.
- **Agent design granularity.** Evidence favors *gesturing and signaling* over mere anthropomorphism; we need finer tests across cultures and ages.
- **Privacy trade-offs.** Social analytics help orchestration but increase privacy risk; clear consent patterns are essential.

Table 15. Research agenda

Theme	Next steps
Socially adaptive UIs	Context-aware presence & norms
Causal evaluation	RCTs/A-B tests of social features
Equity-aware design	Differential impact audits
Ethics-by-design	Standard consent/controls patterns

8. Conclusion

From 2012–2021, social psychology provided reliable **design levers** for HCI in teaching systems: build *authentic presence*, support *autonomy/competence/relatedness*, structure *social context* wisely (norms, comparison, collaboration), and guard *affect and trust*. The comparative analysis suggests **no single platform dominates**: ITS anchor competence; CSCL realizes relatedness; MOOCs demand presence and norms; LMS forums rely on facilitation and immediacy. The strongest gains emerge when social-psych insights are translated into **specific interface patterns** and **ethically instrumented** with transparent analytics.

Table 16. Practitioner summary

Action	Why
Make instructors visibly present weekly	Boosts social presence & satisfaction
Offer meaningful choices + rationale	Supports autonomy
Tie feedback to criteria & mastery	Builds competence
Orchestrate groups with light-touch SNA	Improves collaboration balance
Reduce video strain; be transparent about analytics	Protects affect & trust

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