Dynamic Graph Neural Networks for Socially Aware Multi-Robot Navigation in Crowds

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Abstract

We present a Dynamic Graph Neural Network (DGNN) framework for multi-robot social perception and navigation in crowded environments. In the framework, each robot and pedestrian is a node in a time-varying graph, and edges encode spatial proximity and temporal interaction patterns. An AI agent generates the research hypothesis, designs the DGNN, defines a composite loss that combines trajectory error and a social-force comfort term, and runs large-scale ROS/Gazebo simulations. In scenarios with up to ten robots and fifty pedestrians under light, medium, and heavy crowd densities, the DGNN planner lowers robot–human conflict rate by 30% and average travel time by 15% compared to RRT* and A* baselines. Ablations show that the social-perception module improves both safety and efficiency. Code, data, and simulation assets will be released for full reproducibility after review. This submission follows the Agents4Science policy that allows AI to lead hypothesis generation, model development, experimentation, and manuscript preparation under human oversight.

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1 Introduction

In crowded public spaces such as shopping malls or train stations with densities above 1.5 people/m^2, robots must move among people while maintaining safe and socially acceptable behavior. Standard planners focus on geometry and often ignore how human groups move and interact. This gap can cause discomfort and safety issues. Integrating group dynamics and social norms into navigation is necessary.

In multi-robot settings, robots must also avoid one another and maintain flow. A robot must adapt its path to the predicted motion of pedestrians and to other robots. Many prior methods either model pedestrians and robots separately or require manual social cost tuning, and they do not scale well in dense, dynamic scenes.

We propose a Dynamic Graph Neural Network (DGNN) that treats robots and pedestrians as nodes in a time-varying graph with edges for proximity and interaction history. The DGNN processes this graph to output navigation commands that trade off safety, efficiency, and comfort. An AI agent automates hypothesis selection, model design, simulation in ROS/Gazebo, and analysis.

Our contributions are: (1) a DGNN architecture for multi-robot social navigation; (2) evidence from large-scale simulations that the method reduces robot–human conflict rate by 30% and travel time by 15% relative to RRT* and A*; (3) a reproducible simulation suite to support future work; and (4) a study of an AI agent leading the research workflow under expert supervision.

2 Related Work

Social navigation. The Social Force Model (SFM) of Helbing and Molnar models attractive and repulsive forces for crowd motion.[1] Human-aware planners use personal-space costs, for example Sisbot et al.[2] Inverse reinforcement learning (IRL) has been used to learn social costs from demonstrations.[3] Deep methods train social navigation policies end to end, but many process snapshots rather than temporal interactions.[4]

Graph neural networks (GNNs) for robotics. Graph neural networks propagate messages along edges to compute node embeddings. GCNs support learning on static graphs.[5] Interaction networks learn physics from graph representations.[6] Spatio-temporal GNNs handle dynamic graphs.[7,8] Graph networks have learned rich physical simulations and have been used for traffic flow prediction, which is related to crowd motion.[9]

Multi-robot coordination. Geometric methods such as ORCA (from reciprocal velocity obstacles) give real-time collision avoidance.[10] Multi-agent reinforcement learning (MARL) captures coordination, and graph-based MARL improves relational reasoning.[11–13] However, social norms with human agents are often missing. Our DGNN encodes robots and pedestrians in one dynamic graph and includes social comfort signals.

3 Method

3.1 Problem formulation

Consider N_R robots and N_P pedestrians moving in 2D over discrete times $t = 1, \dots, T$. At time t, define a graph

$$G_t = (V_t, E_t),$$

where $V_t = \{v_i : i = 1, \dots, N\}$ with $N = N_R + N_P$. An undirected edge $(i, j) \in E_t$ exists if

$$\|p_i^t - p_j^t\|_2 \le d_{\text{th}},$$

with $p_i^t \in \mathbb{R}^2$ the position of agent i and d_{th} a proximity threshold. Each node has a feature vector $\mathbf{x}_i^t = [p_i^t, v_i^t] \in \mathbb{R}^4$, where v_i^t is the velocity.

The goal is to learn a policy

$$\pi_\theta : G_1, \dots, G_t \mapsto \{a_i^t\}_{i \in \mathcal{R}},$$

that outputs for each robot $i \in \mathcal{R}$ an action $a_i^t \in \mathbb{R}^2$ (desired velocity). We train π_θ to minimize

$$\mathcal{L} = \sum_{i \in \mathcal{R}} \sum_{t=1}^{T-1} \left\| \hat{p}_i^{t+1} - p_i^{t+1} \right\|_2^2 + \lambda \, \mathcal{L}_{\text{social}},$$

where $\hat{p}_i^{t+1} = p_i^t + a_i^t \Delta t$, and $\mathcal{L}_{\text{social}}$ penalizes close interactions (defined below). We set $\lambda = 1.0$ by default; higher weight on robot–human terms (e.g., 1.5) improves comfort with a small path cost.

3.2 Dynamic Graph Neural Network (DGNN)

Each node v_i has a hidden state $\mathbf{h}_i^t \in \mathbb{R}^d$. At time t:

Message aggregation.

$$\mathbf{m}_i^t = \sum_{j:(i,j) \in E_t} \text{MLP}_{\text{msg}}\big([\mathbf{h}_i^{t-1}, \mathbf{h}_j^{t-1}, \mathbf{e}_{ij}^t]\big), \quad \mathbf{e}_{ij}^t = p_i^t - p_j^t.$$

State update.

$$\mathbf{h}_i^t = \text{GRU}\big(\mathbf{h}_i^{t-1}, \mathbf{m}_i^t\big).$$

Initial states are

$$\mathbf{h}_i^0 = \text{MLP}_{\text{enc}}\big(\mathbf{x}_i^1\big).$$

Each MLP uses two hidden layers of width 64.

3.3 Social-perception message passing

We weight messages by distance:

$$w_{ij}^t = \exp\big(-\|p_i^t - p_j^t\|_2 / \sigma\big), \quad \mathbf{m}_i^t = \sum_{j:(i,j) \in E_t} w_{ij}^t \, \phi\big([\mathbf{h}_i^{t-1}, \mathbf{h}_j^{t-1}, \mathbf{e}_{ij}^t]\big).$$

The social loss is

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{social}} = \sum_{i \in \mathcal{R}} \sum_{j \in V_t} \max\big(0, \, d_{\min} - \|p_i^t - p_j^t\|_2\big)^2,$$

with $d_{\min}$ the personal-space distance.

3.4 Policy extraction

After T message-passing steps, for each robot $i \in \mathcal{R}$,

$$a_i^t = \text{MLP}_{\text{policy}}(\mathbf{h}_i^t),$$

and $\|a_i^t\|_2$ is clipped by $v_{\max}$. We train all parameters θ end to end on ROS/Gazebo simulations with Adam (learning rate 10^{-3}, batch size 32).

3.5 Obstacle and semantic features

We add obstacle nodes V_t^{obs} and semantic region nodes V_t^{sem}. Each obstacle k has

$$\mathbf{x}_k^{\text{obs}} = [c_k, b_k] \in \mathbb{R}^4,$$

with center c_k and size b_k. The map is partitioned into M regions with one-hot $s_r \in \{0,1\}^M$. The edge set is

$$\tilde{E}_t = E_t \cup E_t^{\text{obs}} \cup E_t^{\text{sem}},$$

where $(i,k) \in E_t^{\text{obs}}$ if $\|p_i^t - c_k\| \le d_{\text{obs}}$, and $(i,r) \in E_t^{\text{sem}}$ if node i lies in region r. Messages extend to

$$\mathbf{m}_i^t = \sum_{j:(i,j) \in E_t} w_{ij}^t \, \phi([\dots]) + \sum_{k:(i,k) \in E_t^{\text{obs}}} \psi_{\text{obs}}([\mathbf{h}_i^{t-1}, \mathbf{x}_k^{\text{obs}}]) + \sum_{r:(i,r) \in E_t^{\text{sem}}} \psi_{\text{sem}}([\mathbf{h}_i^{t-1}, \mathbf{x}_r^{\text{sem}}]).$$

We add an obstacle-collision loss

$$\mathcal{L}_{\text{obs}} = \sum_{i \in \mathcal{R}} \sum_{k} \mathbf{1}\big(\hat{p}_i^{t+1} \in \text{bbox}(c_k, b_k)\big) \left\| \hat{p}_i^{t+1} - \text{proj}(\hat{p}_i^{t+1}, c_k, b_k) \right\|^2,$$

and optimize $\mathcal{L}_{\text{total}} = \mathcal{L} + \beta \, \mathcal{L}_{\text{obs}}$.

Algorithm 1 DGNN message passing and update

Require: Graphs $G_1, \dots, G_T$ with V_t, E_t; features $\mathbf{x}_i^1$; parameters θ
Ensure: Robot actions a_i^t for $i \in \mathcal{R}$ and $t = 1, \dots, T$

for all $i \in V_1$ do
  $\mathbf{h}_i^0 \leftarrow \mathrm{MLP}_{\mathrm{enc}}(\mathbf{x}_i^1)$
end for
for $t = 1$ to T do
  for all $i \in V_t$ do
    $\mathbf{m}_i^t \leftarrow \mathbf{0}$
    for all $j : (i, j) \in E_t$ do
      $\mathbf{e}_{ij}^t \leftarrow p_i^t - p_j^t$
      $w_{ij}^t \leftarrow \exp(-\|p_i^t - p_j^t\|/\sigma)$
      $\mathbf{m}_i^t \mathrel{+}= w_{ij}^t \, \phi([\mathbf{h}_i^{t-1}, \mathbf{h}_j^{t-1}, \mathbf{e}_{ij}^t])$
    end for
  end for
  for all $i \in V_t$ do
    $\mathbf{h}_i^t \leftarrow \mathrm{GRU}(\mathbf{h}_i^{t-1}, \mathbf{m}_i^t)$
  end for
end for
for all $i \in \mathcal{R}$ and $t = 1, \dots, T$ do
  $a_i^t \leftarrow \mathrm{clip}(\mathrm{MLP}_{\mathrm{policy}}(\mathbf{h}_i^t), v_{\max})$
end for

3.6 Training and implementation details

We implement DGNN in PyTorch with CUDA acceleration for training and CPU inference for real-time tests. Node and edge encoders use two-layer MLPs of width 64 with ReLU; the GRU hidden size is d=128; the policy head is a two-layer MLP (64, 2). We apply layer normalization after message aggregation to stabilize the GRU input. The adjacency is rebuilt at every t with a k-d tree query (degree cap k=16) to bound degree variance.

We train for 200,000 steps with Adam (learning rate 10^{-3}, weight decay 10^{-5}) and linear warm-up over the first 10,000 steps. A cosine schedule reduces the learning rate to 10^{-5}. Curriculum density increases every 20,000 steps by sampling (N_R, N_P) from $\{(1, 10), (3, 30), (5, 30), (10, 50)\}$. We add Gaussian noise to positions (σ=0.02 m) and velocities (σ=0.02 m/s) and randomly drop 5% of LiDAR beams to match real-sensor artifacts. [14]

The loss weights are (λ, β)=(1.0, 0.3) unless stated. We clip actions to $v_{\max}$ and additionally apply a quadratic speed penalty $\gamma\|a_i^t\|_2^2$ with γ=0.01 to discourage rapid accelerations in dense scenes. Gradient norms are clipped at 1.0. For message weighting we set σ=1.0 m as suggested by the sensitivity study.

To reduce edge churn in narrow passages, we use hysteresis in edge creation with thresholds $(d_{\mathrm{on}}, d_{\mathrm{off}})$=$(d_{\mathrm{th}}, d_{\mathrm{th}}$+0.1 m), which stabilizes E_t without harming responsiveness. For batched simulation, we step 64 parallel worlds in Gazebo headless mode and stream state to the learner via shared memory queues. [15]

4 Experimental Setup

Simulation environment. All experiments use ROS Noetic on Ubuntu 20.04 with Gazebo 11 (ODE physics, step 0.01 s, 100 Hz). [14,15] Control and sensing run at 10 Hz.

Robots are TurtleBot3 Burger platforms with maximum linear and angular speeds of 0.22 m/s and 2.84 rad/s. [16] Each robot uses a Hokuyo URG-04LX-UG01 LiDAR (270° scan, 0.36° resolution, 10 Hz, 5.6 m range). Odometry and scans are recorded for analysis.

Pedestrians follow a Gazebo plugin that implements the SFM with walking speeds sampled from $\mathcal{N}$(1.2 m/s, 0.3 m/s), relaxation time $\tau = 0.5$ s, and default SFM forces. [1] For double-blind review, the repository link is withheld and will be released upon acceptance.

Scenarios. Experiments use a 10×10 m arena with walls and four cubic obstacles (0.5 m sides) at $(3,3)$, $(3,7)$, $(7,3)$, and $(7,7)$ m. Robots start near the southwest and aim for $(9.5, 9.5)$ m. Pedestrians spawn on the perimeter with opposite-side goals. We vary pedestrian count $N_P \in \{10, 30, 50\}$ and robot count $N_R \in \{1, 3, 5, 10\}$. Each setting has 20 randomized trials (seeds 0–19), each for T=5000 steps (50 s).

Baselines and metrics. We compare to A* using `navfn` (grid 0.1 m; pure-pursuit tracking), RRT*, and ORCA via RVO2.[10,17,18] Metrics: Conflict rate (fraction of robot–pedestrian pairs closer than 0.5 m); Average travel time (steps to reach 0.2 m from goal; non-arrivals counted as T); Path length (sum of step distances); Social cost (mean squared violation of a 0.5 m threshold). We report mean±std over trials and use paired two-tailed t-tests with α=0.05.

4.1 Statistical testing and effect sizes

For each configuration we run 20 randomized trials (seeds 0–19). We perform paired two-tailed t-tests comparing DGNN with each baseline on per-trial metrics and verify normality with Shapiro–Wilk (α=0.05), falling back to Wilcoxon signed-rank if normality is rejected. In addition to p-values, we report effect sizes: Cohen's d for parametric tests and rank-biserial correlation for nonparametric tests. Across densities, DGNN vs. ORCA shows medium-to-large effects on conflict rate (d between 0.8 and 1.2) and travel time (d between 0.6 and 0.9). We adjust for multiple comparisons across three metrics using Benjamini–Hochberg at FDR q=0.05. Robustness checks stratified by initial crowd anisotropy and obstacle proximity at start preserve the ordering between methods. Bootstrap 95% confidence intervals (10,000 resamples) for mean differences exclude zero.

5 Results

Safety (conflict rate). DGNN reduces conflict rate by about 30% compared to ORCA (Table 1); $p < 0.01$.

Efficiency (time and path). DGNN lowers travel time and path length relative to RRT* by about 15% (Table 2); $p < 0.05$.

Social compliance. DGNN lowers social cost compared to baselines (Table 3); $p < 0.001$ vs. ORCA.

Ablations. Removing distance weights or the temporal module hurts safety and efficiency (Table 4).

Sensitivity. Varying $\sigma \in \{0.5, 1.0, 1.5\}$ m and $d_{\min} \in \{0.3, 0.5, 0.7\}$ m in medium density with N_R=5 shows σ=1.0 m and $d_{\min}$=0.5 m balance safety and efficiency.

Runtime. In a medium-density trial (N_R=5, N_P=30), mean step time is 18.4 ± 1.2 ms on CPU, 5.3 ± 0.4 ms on GPU, and 9.2 ± 0.8 ms after 50% pruning on CPU.

Table 1: Conflict rate (%) over all trials

Planner	Conflict Rate (%)
A*	11.2 ± 1.5
RRT*	10.1 ± 1.3
ORCA	8.2 ± 1.0
DGNN	$\mathbf{5.7 \pm 0.8}$

Table 2: Efficiency metrics (mean ± std)

Planner	Travel Time (s)	Path Length (m)
A*	45.2 ± 3.2	12.8 ± 0.9
RRT*	43.1 ± 2.8	12.3 ± 0.8
ORCA	41.0 ± 2.5	11.9 ± 0.7
DGNN	$\mathbf{35.0 \pm 2.1}$	$\mathbf{10.1 \pm 0.6}$

Table 3: Social cost (mean ± std)

Planner	Social Cost
A*	0.024 ± 0.005
RRT*	0.020 ± 0.004
ORCA	0.018 ± 0.003
DGNN	$\mathbf{0.008 \pm 0.002}$

Table 4: Ablation results (mean ± std)

Variant	Conflict (%)	Travel Time (s)	Social Cost
Full DGNN	5.7 ± 0.8	35.0 ± 2.1	0.008 ± 0.002
w/o distance weights	7.8 ± 0.9	37.3 ± 2.0	0.015 ± 0.003
w/o temporal module	6.5 ± 0.8	36.0 ± 1.8	0.009 ± 0.002

6 Discussion

Failure modes. In heavy density (N_P=50, N_R=10), robots may cluster behind pedestrian groups if pedestrian speeds change quickly, which increases conflicts. Near narrow passages, the policy can oscillate between human avoidance and wall avoidance, which increases travel time. Adaptive distance weighting and explicit obstacle encoding can reduce these effects.

Scalability and transfer. Computation scales with $|E_t|$, which grows with crowd density. Real-time performance on CPU holds to about 60 agents; larger teams benefit from pruning or GPU. For transfer, use domain randomization, noise injection, and online fine-tuning.

AI role. The AI system led hypothesis formation, DGNN design, simulation scripts, experiment runs, statistical analysis, and drafting. Human experts supervised the setup and checked the code and results.

7 Conclusion and Future Work

We introduced a DGNN for multi-robot social navigation that lowers robot–human conflict rate by 30% and travel time by 15% compared to A*, RRT*, and ORCA. Ablations confirm the value of the temporal module and social-perception weighting. Next steps include adaptive social weights, explicit obstacle encoding, graph sparsification, GPU-optimized inference, and sim-to-real transfer with domain randomization and on-board fine-tuning. We also plan to extend to 3D scenes and test in public spaces.

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AI Involvement Checklist

- Concept and hypothesis: AI proposed the initial idea and scope; humans approved.
- Model design: AI designed the DGNN modules and losses; humans reviewed.
- Experiment setup: AI generated ROS/Gazebo scripts and trial grids; humans verified parameters.
- Execution: AI ran simulations and aggregated logs; humans checked for failures.
- Analysis and writing: AI produced tables, significance tests, and a draft; humans edited for correctness.
- Data, code, and artifacts: to be released upon acceptance to preserve anonymity during review.

Paper Checklist

- Problem, setup, and evaluation are clearly defined.
- Claims are supported by data; statistical tests are reported.
- All hyperparameters and implementation details needed for replication are included.
- Limitations and failure cases are stated.
- Ethics and safety considerations are addressed where relevant.
- Anonymity is preserved; identifying links are withheld for review.