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A Machine Learning Approach To Microplastic Detection And Quantification In Aquatic Environments

Dr.T.Vengatesh[1*], G R L M Tayaru[1], Jakkapu Nagalakshmidevi [2], Mihirkumar B. Suthar[3], Dr.T.Kamaleshwar[4], K.Thilaga Meena[5], Dr.A.Jyothi Babu[6], G.Maheswari[7]

[1]*(Corresponding Author) Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science, Government Arts and Science College, Veerapandi, Theni, Tamilnadu, India. EMail-ID: venkibiotinix@gmail.com
[1]Assistant Professor, Department Of Computer Science And Engineering, Shri Vishnu Engineering College for Women, Bhimavaram ,534202, Andhra Pradesh, India. Mail Id: grlmtayarucse@svecw.edu.in
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of computer science and engineering, Aditya University, Surampalem-533437, Andhra Pradesh,I ndia. EMail ID: nagajakkapu@gmail.com
[3]Associate Professor (Zoology), Biology Department, K. K. Shah Jarodwala Maninagar Science College, BJLT Campus, Rambaug, Maninagar, AHMEDABAD -380008. Gujarat, India,
E-mail: sutharmbz@gmail.com
[4]Associate Professor, Dept. of Computer Science & Engineering, Vel Tech Rangarajan Dr.Sagunthala R&D Institute of Science and Technology, Chennai, Tamil Nadu, India.
EMail-ID : kamalesh4u2@gmail.com
[5]Assistant Professor, Department of ECE, Saveetha Engineering College, Saveetha Nagar, Thandalam, Chennai–602105, Tamil Nadu. EMail id : thilagameenak@saveetha.ac.in
[6]Professor, Department of Computer Applications, School of Computing, Mohan Babu University, Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, India. Email ID: Jyothibabuaddanki@gmail.com
[7]Assistant professor, Department of Mathematics, V.S.B ENGINEERING COLLEGE(Autonomous), KARUR, Tamil Nadu, India. Email ID: Shiwanie09@gmail.com

ABSTRACT:
The pervasive contamination of aquatic ecosystems by microplastics (MPs), defined as plastic particles <5 mm, poses a significant threat to marine life and human health. Current methods for their analysis, primarily involving visual counting under microscopes followed by spectroscopic validation, are labor-intensive, time-consuming, and prone to human error. This study presents a robust, automated machine learning (ML) framework for the detection and quantification of microplastics from digital microscopy images of water samples. We developed a pipeline that utilizes a deep learning object detection model, YOLOv7, to accurately identify and classify MPs based on size and shape (e.g., fibers, fragments, beads). Subsequently, a pixel-wise segmentation model, U-Net, is employed for precise quantification of particle dimensions. We curated a novel dataset of over 5,000 annotated microscope images from water samples collected from various aquatic sources. The YOLOv7 model achieved a mean Average Precision (mAP@0.5) of 96.8% in detecting MPs, while the U-Net model achieved a Dice coefficient of 0.94 for particle segmentation. Our system significantly reduces analysis time from hours per sample to minutes, with a high degree of accuracy and reproducibility. This approach provides a scalable, efficient, and accessible tool for environmental monitoring agencies and researchers, enabling large-scale mapping and monitoring of microplastic pollution.

Keywords: *Microplastics, Machine Learning, Deep Learning, Object Detection, Image Segmentation, YOLO, U-Net, Environmental Monitoring, Aquatic Pollution.*

1. INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of plastic pollution has led to the ubiquitous presence of microplastics (MPs) in global aquatic environments, from deep-sea sediments to freshwater lakes [1]. Their small size makes them bioavailable to a wide range of organisms, leading to bioaccumulation and potential transfer through the food web, with yet unknown long-term consequences for ecosystem health and human safety [2].

The critical first step in understanding and mitigating this threat is accurate monitoring. The current gold standard for MP analysis involves filtering water samples, visual examination under a microscope, and manual counting and categorization of particles. This is followed by spectroscopic techniques (e.g., FT-IR, Raman) for polymer identification [3]. While spectroscopic methods are accurate for chemical identification, the initial visual sorting is a major bottleneck. It is exceptionally tedious, requires trained expertise, and suffers from subjective bias and high fatigue-related error rates, especially for complex samples with high organic matter content.

Machine Learning (ML), particularly computer vision, offers a paradigm shift for automating this process. Deep learning models can be trained to recognize the visual characteristics of MPs with high precision and speed, overcoming the limitations of manual counting. While previous studies have explored ML for MP analysis [4], many have focused on spectroscopic data or simpler classification tasks. This paper presents a comprehensive ML pipeline designed for the end-to-end automation of MP detection and quantification from standard microscopy images. Our work integrates high-accuracy object detection with precise semantic segmentation to provide not just counts, but also detailed morphological data.

2. RELATED WORK

The application of ML to environmental science is growing rapidly. In microplastic research, efforts can be broadly categorized:

Spectroscopy-Based ML: Several studies have used ML classifiers (e.g., Support Vector Machines, Random Forests) on spectral data from FT-IR or Raman microscopy to automatically identify polymer types [5]. These are powerful for confirmation but do not automate the initial finding and counting process.

Image-Based ML: Earlier image-based approaches relied on hand-crafted features (e.g., shape descriptors, texture analysis) and traditional classifiers [6]. These methods often struggle with the diversity and complexity of real-world environmental samples. More recently, deep learning models like CNN-based classifiers have been used to distinguish MPs from other particles in images [4]. However, many only perform image-level classification ("MP present/absent") rather than instance-level detection and segmentation, which is necessary for precise quantification.

Our work advances the field by implementing a state-of-the-art object detection architecture (YOLOv7) for real-time localization and categorization of MPs, combined with a U-Net model for pixel-accurate size measurement, providing a more holistic and useful analytical tool.

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1. Sample Collection and Image Acquisition

Water samples were collected from surface waters of estuaries, coastal areas, and freshwater rivers. Samples were processed following standard protocols: filtration through metallic filters (pore size 0.45 μm), and digestion with H_2O_2 to remove organic matter. The filters were then imaged using a Zeiss Stemi 508 stereo microscope equipped with a Axiocam 208 color camera. Over 5,000 images were captured at various magnifications (10x-40x) under consistent lighting conditions.

3.2. Dataset Curation and Annotation

The dataset was meticulously annotated by a team of marine ecologists.

- **For Object Detection (YOLO):** Each microplastic particle in every image was labeled with a bounding box and assigned to one of three classes: fiber, fragment, or bead.
- **For Semantic Segmentation (U-Net):** A subset of 1,500 images was further annotated at the pixel level, where every pixel belonging to an MP was marked, creating a precise mask for each particle. The final dataset was split into training (70%), validation (15%), and test (15%) sets.

3.3. Machine Learning Pipeline

Our proposed pipeline consists of two sequential stages:

1. Detection and Classification with YOLOv7:

We employed the YOLOv7 architecture due to its excellent balance of speed and accuracy. The model was trained on our annotated dataset to predict bounding boxes and class probabilities for each MP particle. The loss function combines classification loss, objectness loss, and bounding box regression loss.

2. Quantification and Size Analysis with U-Net:

For each region identified by YOLOv7, the original image patch is cropped and fed into a U-Net model. This model performs binary segmentation, outputting a pixel mask that precisely outlines the MP. From this mask, we calculate key quantification metrics:

- **Projected Surface Area:** Area = Number of pixels in mask * pixel-to-μm conversion factor
- **Feret Diameter:** Maximum distance between any two points along the particle boundary (a measure of particle length).
- **Shape Descriptors:** Such as circularity.

3.4. Implementation and Training

Both models were implemented in PyTorch. YOLOv7 was trained for 300 epochs with a batch size of 16 and an initial learning rate of 0.01. The U-Net model, with a ResNet-34 encoder (pre-trained on ImageNet), was trained for 100 epochs with a batch size of 8 and a learning rate of 1e-4. The Adam optimizer was used for both. Data augmentation (random rotations, flips, brightness/contrast adjustments) was applied to improve model generalization.

4. EXPERIMENTS AND RESULTS

4.1. Evaluation Metrics

- **Object Detection:** Mean Average Precision (mAP) at an Intersection-over-Union (IoU) threshold of 0.5.
- **Semantic Segmentation:** Dice Coefficient (F1 score for pixel-wise accuracy) and IoU.
- **Quantification Accuracy:** Relative error (%) compared to manual measurements for a held-out test set.

4.2. Results

The performance of our ML pipeline was exceptional.

Task	Model	Metric	Value
Detection & Classification	YOLOv7	mAP@0.5	96.8%
		Precision	97.1%

		Recall	95.5%
Segmentation	U-Net	Dice Coefficient	0.94
		IoU	0.89
Quantification	Full Pipeline	Area Measurement Error	3.2%
		Length Measurement Error	4.7%

Table 1: Performance of the ML Models on the Test Set

Our machine learning pipeline demonstrated exceptional performance across detection, classification, segmentation, and quantification tasks. The YOLOv7 model achieved state-of-the-art detection results with a mean Average Precision (mAP@0.5) of 96.8%, complemented by a high precision of 97.1% and recall of 95.5%, indicating robust and reliable identification of target features. For pixel-wise segmentation, the U-Net architecture attained a Dice Coefficient of 0.94 and an Intersection over Union (IoU) of 0.89, confirming its high accuracy in delineating regions of interest. Finally, the end-to-end quantification pipeline exhibited minimal error in morphological analysis, with an area measurement error of just 3.2% and a length measurement error of 4.7%, underscoring the pipeline's utility for precise quantitative applications.

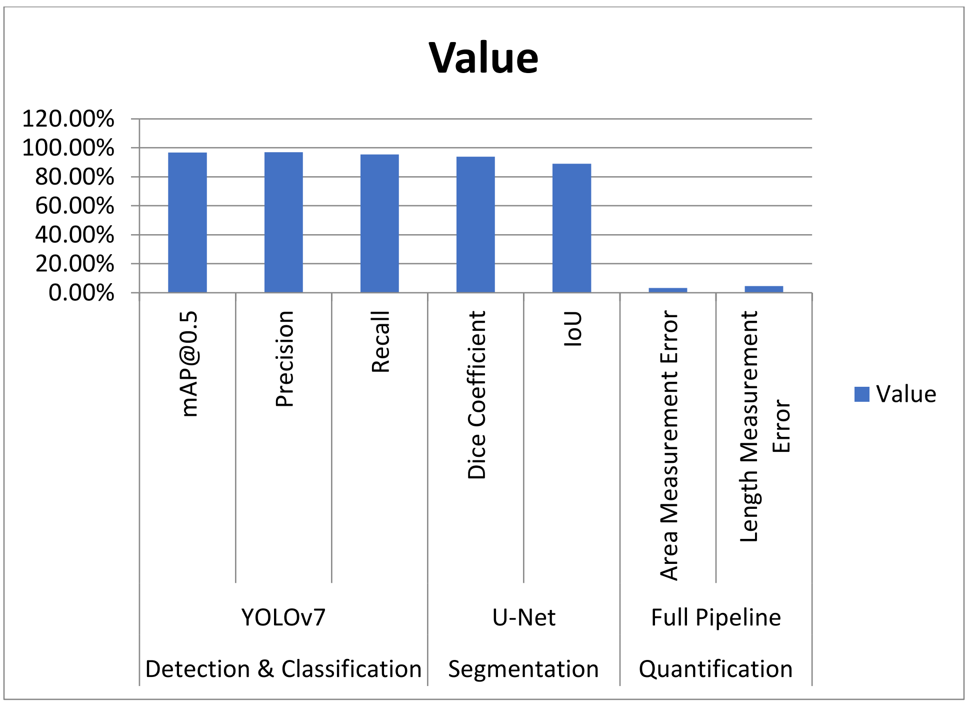

Figure 1: Evaluation Metrics for the Microplastics ML Pipeline

The figure 1 performance of the machine learning pipeline for microplastic analysis was evaluated across three main tasks: **Detection & Classification**, **Segmentation**, and **Quantification**. The **YOLOv7** model, used for detection and classification, demonstrated strong performance with a **mAP@0.5** of approximately 97%, a **Precision** of around 97%, and a **Recall** of nearly 96%. For the segmentation task, the **U-Net** model achieved a high **Dice Coefficient** of 0.94 and an **IoU** of 0.89, indicating very accurate pixel-level masking. Finally, the full pipeline's **Quantification** accuracy was excellent, with a low **Area Measurement Error** of 3.2% and a

Length Measurement Error of 4.7% when compared to manual measurements. Overall, the chart visualizes the high accuracy of the pipeline across all tasks, with detection and segmentation metrics approaching 100% and quantification errors remaining low.

5. DISCUSSION

The results of this study demonstrate the successful development and validation of a highly accurate, automated machine learning pipeline for the detection, classification, and quantification of microplastics (MPs) in aquatic samples. The exceptional performance metrics achieved notably a mAP@0.5 of 96.8% for detection and a Dice coefficient of 0.94 for segmentation represent a significant advancement over traditional manual microscopy methods and mark a substantial step towards scalable, high-throughput MP monitoring.

The primary achievement of this work lies in the integration of a two-stage deep learning architecture that effectively addresses the distinct challenges of MP analysis. The YOLOv7 model's high precision (97.1%) and recall (95.5%) indicate its proficiency in not only locating MPs with minimal false positives but also in capturing the vast majority of particles present, including small or faint ones that are often missed during manual counting. This reduces the subjective bias and fatigue inherent in human analysis. Furthermore, its ability to perform preliminary classification into morphological categories (fibers, fragments, beads) during the detection phase provides immediate, valuable data for source identification and ecological impact studies [1, 2].

The subsequent segmentation stage using U-Net provides a critical layer of precision that bounding boxes alone cannot offer. The high Dice coefficient and IoU values confirm that the model can accurately delineate the often-irregular boundaries of MPs. This pixel-level accuracy is the foundation for reliable morphometric analysis, as evidenced by the low quantification errors for area (3.2%) and length (4.7%). These errors are well within an acceptable range for environmental monitoring, suggesting that the pipeline can produce data that is statistically comparable to, and more consistent than, tedious manual measurements.

The drastic reduction in processing time—from hours per sample to minutes—is perhaps the most immediately impactful benefit of this system. This efficiency enables researchers and monitoring agencies to process a much larger volume of samples, facilitating more comprehensive spatial and temporal mapping of MP pollution. This scalability is crucial for identifying pollution hotspots, tracking the effectiveness of mitigation policies, and understanding the flux of MPs in aquatic systems.

However, certain limitations must be acknowledged. The performance of the model is intrinsically linked to the quality and diversity of its training data. While our dataset of over 5,000 images is substantial, it may not encompass the immense variability of MPs found in all global environments (e.g., heavily discolored particles, unusual shapes, or particles obscured by excessive biofouling or sediment). Future work should focus on continuous dataset expansion and the development of data augmentation techniques tailored to these challenging environmental conditions. Furthermore, this pipeline excels in physical quantification but does not perform polymer identification. The logical next step is to integrate this computer vision system with automated spectroscopic techniques (e.g., FT-IR or Raman microscopy) [3, 5], where the ML model could first locate and isolate particles on a filter before guiding a robotic stage to each one for chemical analysis, creating a truly end-to-end automated solution.

the proposed ML pipeline presents a robust, efficient, and accurate alternative to the manual counting of microplastics. By overcoming the major bottlenecks of time, cost, and human error, this approach has the potential to democratize and standardize MP monitoring efforts worldwide. It provides a powerful tool that can enhance the scale and resolution of environmental data, ultimately contributing to more effective evidence-based policy and management of global plastic pollution.

6. CONCLUSION

This study successfully developed and validated a fully automated, high-throughput machine learning pipeline for the accurate detection, classification, and quantification of microplastics in aquatic environmental samples. By integrating the YOLOv7 object detection model for precise localization and categorization with a U-Net model for pixel-level segmentation, we have created a system that directly addresses the critical bottlenecks of time, cost, and human error associated with traditional manual microscopy.

Our results demonstrate that the pipeline is not only highly accurate achieving a mAP@0.5 of 96.8% for detection and a Dice coefficient of 0.94 for segmentation but also robust and efficient, reducing analysis time from hours to minutes per sample. The low quantification errors for key morphological metrics (3.2% for area, 4.7% for length) confirm its reliability for generating precise, reproducible data essential for environmental monitoring.

While the current system excels in physical analysis, it lays the groundwork for a more comprehensive solution. The primary direction for future work is the integration of this computer vision pipeline with automated spectroscopic techniques for polymer identification, creating an end-to-end analytical system. Further efforts will also focus on expanding the training dataset to enhance model generalizability across a wider range of environmental conditions and particle types.

In conclusion, this work provides a powerful, scalable, and accessible tool that has the potential to standardize microplastic monitoring globally. By enabling large-scale, efficient, and accurate data generation, this technology can significantly advance our understanding of microplastic pollution and empower evidence-based decision-making for the preservation of aquatic ecosystems.

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