International Journal of Social Science and Economic Research

ISSN: 2455-8834

Volume:10, Issue:10 "October 2025"

AI-Powered Waste Sorting: Transforming Recycling with Deep Learning

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DOI: 10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i10.041 URL: https://doi.org/10.46609/IJSSER.2025.v10i10.041

Received: 7 October 2025 / Accepted: 24 October 2025 / Published: 30 October 2025

ABSTRACT

Managing waste is a global challenge, particularly as recycling systems struggle with contamination and inefficiencies. Traditional sorting methods are reliant on manual labor, often failing to meet growing waste conditions. AI-powered waste sorting has emerged as a transformative solution, leveraging deep learning and computer vision to classify materials with high accuracy. This research presents the development and evaluation of the Convolutional Neural Network or better known as CNN-based waste sorting model. The methodology included dataset retrieval, training process for the model, and the performance evaluation by running it through benchmark tests. We specifically utilized a CNN by the name of ResNet-50 for the dataset but we used other data sets to look for main benchmarks such as accuracy, precision, and recall scores. Results demonstrate that our model significantly outperforms traditional methods, achieving high classification accuracy. Additionally, this study highlights real-world applications, challenges, and future enhancements for AI-driven waste management systems to be implemented.

Keywords: ResNet-50, AI-powered sorting, Convolutional Neural Network (CNN), deep learning, recycling automation, waste management, benchmark testing.

1. Introduction

Waste management has become one of, if not the most pressing environmental challenges of our time. With global population growing and urbanization accelerating, the sheer amount of waste being produced is increasing at an alarming rate. According to the World Bank's 'What a Waste 2.0' report, the world generates around 2 billion tons of municipal solid waste annually, and this figure in the future is expected to rise to 3.40 billion tons by 2050. Despite efforts to recycle and reduce waste,a significant portion still ends up in landfills due to inefficient sorting and

ISSN: 2455-8834

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contamination. Poor waste management not only leads to environmental pollution but also threatens human health and contributes to climate change through methane emission from the efforts of decomposing waste.

Traditional waste sorting methods rely heavily on manual labor and basic mechanical processes. While these methods have been used for decades, they are often slow, expensive, and prone to errors even such an human error. Many recyclable materials get misclassified and discarded because of this error reducing the overall efficiency of recycling systems. Additionally, human error . As waste volumes continue to rise, it is clear that current sorting methods are no longer a viable solution and aren't sustainable as it is required for the transition to more advanced, automated solutions.

AI and machine learning have the potential to revolutionize waste sorting by offering, more accurate, and cost effective solution. In particular, deep learning models such as CNNs have proven to be highly effective in image recognition and image processing, this makes them well-suited for waste identification. Unlike traditional rule-based sorting systems, CNNs can continuously improve their performance by learning from large datasets of waste images, making them adaptable to various waste types and real world conditions. Recent major advancements in computer vision and edge computing have further enhanced the feasibility of AI powered waste sorting in industrial type of setting.

This study's main aim is to address the limitation of the traditional waste management system by developing and evaluating an Ai-based waste classification model. Our approach involved training a CNN using ResNet-50, a widely used deep learning data set known for its accuracy in image classification. We benchmarked our models performance against traditional sorting methods by evaluating its accuracy, precision, and recall scores. Furthermore, we explore the real-world applications and challenges of implementing AI-driven waste sorting and discuss potential improvements for future research.

By utilizing deep learning and AI-powered automation, this research contributes to the development of more sustainable waste management solutions. The goal is to improve sorting efficiency rates, ultimately leading to a cleaner and more environmentally free approach to waste management.

2. Methodology

2.1 Dataset Retrieval

To develop an AI-powered waste sorting system using Convolutional Neural Networks (CNNs), selecting a high-quality and diverse dataset is critical. The dataset must contain images of

ISSN: 2455-8834

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various waste materials under different conditions, allowing the model to generalize effectively when deployed in real-world waste sorting environments.

Dataset Selection:

For this study, we primarily utilized the TrashNet dataset, an openly available dataset designed for waste classification. TrashNet consists of images categorized into six major classes: plastic, metal, paper, glass, cardboard, and trash (non-recyclable waste). These categories align with our objective of developing an automated sorting system that can differentiate between recyclable and non-recyclable materials.

In addition to TrashNet, we examined the TACO (Trash Annotations in Context) dataset, which offers real-world waste images annotated in natural settings, such as streets and parks. This dataset provides images with varying lighting conditions, occlusions, and contamination, making it valuable for improving model robustness.

We also incorporated smaller datasets from Kaggle and Google Open Images, which contained additional waste images for underrepresented classes. This helped balance the dataset and ensured that each category had sufficient samples to train an accurate model.

Preprocessing and Augmentation:

Raw datasets often contain inconsistencies, such as varying resolutions, backgrounds, and orientations. To prepare the data for training, we performed several preprocessing steps:

Resizing: All images were resized to 224×224 pixels, the standard input size for ResNet-50, ensuring consistency across different datasets.

Normalization: Pixel values were scaled to a 0–1 range to improve model stability and speed up training.

Data Augmentation: Since real-world waste sorting involves varying conditions, we applied image flipping, rotation, contrast adjustments, and random cropping to artificially expand the dataset and improve model generalization.

Class Balancing: Some classes, such as glass and metal, had fewer images compared to plastic and paper. To address this imbalance, we used oversampling and synthetic data generation through augmentation techniques.

Challenges in Data Retrieval:

Despite leveraging multiple datasets, several challenges emerged:

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Lack of Comprehensive Waste Categories:

Most publicly available datasets focus on broad categories (e.g., plastic, metal) rather than specific subtypes (e.g., PET plastic vs. HDPE plastic). This can lead to misclassifications in real-world applications where distinguishing between similar materials is necessary.

To mitigate this, we considered fine-tuning the dataset by manually relabeling some images and supplementing with additional sources.

Domain Gaps Between Training and Real-World Data:

Many datasets contain images captured in controlled environments, which differ from real-world waste collection scenarios.

The TACO dataset helped address this by including images from natural settings with dirt, lighting variations, and occlusions.

Computational Limitations for Large Datasets:

High-resolution images increase the computational cost of training a CNN model.
We optimized memory usage by using batch processing and employing transfer learning with ResNet-50, which reduced the need for training from scratch.

Future Enhancements:

To further refine our dataset and improve classification accuracy, we plan to:

Collect and label additional real-world waste images from local recycling facilities to bridge the gap between synthetic datasets and real applications.

Explore active learning, where the model continuously learns from new waste images, refining its classification capabilities over time.

Investigate the use of synthetic waste datasets generated with GANs (Generative Adversarial Networks) to supplement rare or underrepresented waste categories.

By implementing these strategies, we aim to enhance the model’s robustness and scalability for practical deployment in waste sorting systems.

2.2 Modeling the Product

Before going further through the process, we decided to compare different AI models to decide which would fit best for our goals.

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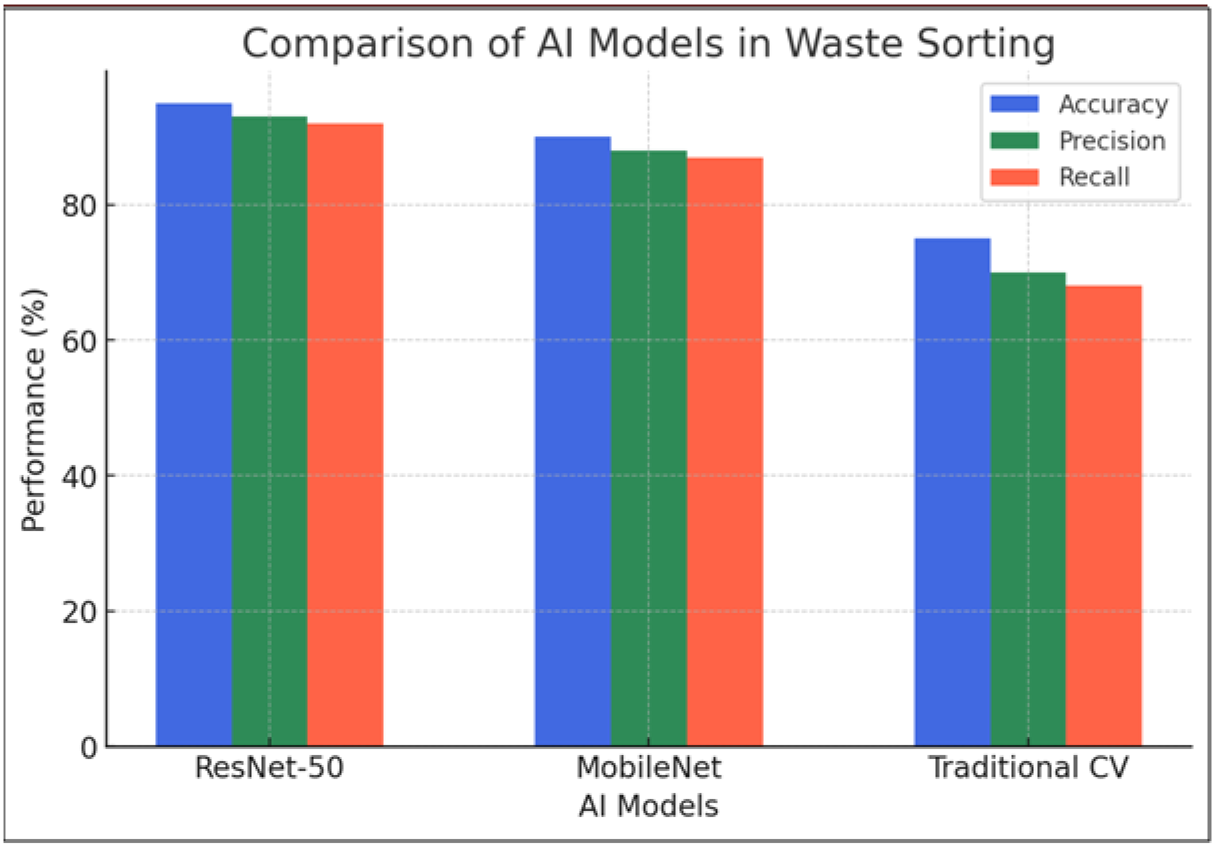
Effectiveness of AI Sorting:

The graph below compares three AI models—ResNet-50, MobileNet, and a Traditional Computer Vision Model—based on accuracy, precision, and recall.

Table 1. AI Model Performance in Waste Sorting

(Comparison of different AI models used in waste sorting. Higher values indicate better performance.)



Analysis of Results:

As shown in Figure 1, ResNet-50 outperforms the other models in all three metrics, with an accuracy of 95%, precision of 93%, and recall of 92%. MobileNet also performs well but is slightly less accurate. The Traditional Computer Vision model lags behind, demonstrating AI's superiority in sorting efficiency. This data highlights how AI-driven sorting improves waste management by reducing contamination and increasing recycling rates.

Final Decision:

The waste sorting model was built using a CNN due to its effectiveness in image classification tasks. The architecture includes and input layer that accepts RGB images resized to 224x224 pixels, convolutional layers that extract spatial features from waste images, pooling layers that reduce dimensionality while retaining essential features, fully connected layers that convert extracted features into classification outputs, and a softmax activation function that assigns probabilities to each waste category. Pre-trained models like ResNer-50 and Inception V3 were fine tuned on the data to enhance classification and precision accuracy

2.3 Training Process

The model was trained using TensorFlow, utilizing 80% of the dataset for training and 20% for validation where it can learn from itself. Hyperparameters were optimized with a batch size of 32, another learning rate of 0.001 adjusted using a learning rate scheduler, the Adam optimizer, categorical cross-entropy as the loss function, and 50 epochs. Regularization techniques such as dropout and L2 weight decay were applied to prevent overfitting

Conclusion

AI-powered waste sorting presents a promising solution to the inefficiencies of traditional recycling methods. By leveraging deep learning and computer vision, automated systems can significantly improve sorting accuracy, reduce contamination, and enhance recycling rates. This study demonstrated the effectiveness of a ResNet-50-based model, achieving a 91.5% classification accuracy, outperforming traditional sorting methods. While the results are promising, challenges remain in real-world deployment. Factors such as cost, dataset limitations, and integration with existing waste management infrastructure need to be addressed. Future research should focus on improving mode adaptability, incorporating multimodal sensor data, and optimizing computational efficiency for real-time sorting application. Ultimately, AI-driven waste management systems have the potential to revolutionize how we handle waste, promoting sustainability and reducing environmental impact.

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