Helmet Detection with an Improved YOLOv8: SPD Convolution + EMA Attention

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Abstract

Ensuring worker safety in construction environments is a major challenge, as the absence of proper protective equipment—particularly safety helmets—can lead to severe injuries. Automated helmet detection has therefore become an essential component in intelligent workplace monitoring and safety compliance systems. However, detecting helmets in construction environments is difficult due to varying lighting conditions, cluttered backgrounds, occlusions, and the small size of helmets in complex scenes.

In this study, we propose an improved YOLOv8-based helmet detection model tailored for construction-site environments. The model integrates two lightweight yet effective modules: **SPD Convolution**, which enhances spatial feature preservation by applying a space-to-depth transformation, and **EMA Attention**, which refines channel responses using an exponential moving average mechanism to emphasize informative features. These modules are incorporated into the YOLOv8 backbone and neck, improving representational quality without increasing computational overhead.

Experiments conducted on a construction-worker helmet dataset demonstrate that the proposed SPD-EMA YOLOv8 model achieves higher mean Average Precision (mAP) and more stable detection performance compared to the baseline YOLOv8, particularly for small, partially occluded, and visually similar objects. The results indicate that our enhanced architecture significantly strengthens YOLOv8's feature extraction capability while maintaining real-time inference speed, making it suitable for practical deployment in automated safety monitoring systems on construction sites.

The complete implementation of our proposed model, including training scripts and inference examples, is publicly available at: SPD+EMA/HELMET-DETECTION-YOLOV8.

1. Introduction

Worker safety in construction environments is a major global concern, as construction sites frequently expose workers to hazardous conditions such as falling objects, unstable structures, and heavy machinery. The absence of essential personal protective equipment (PPE)—particularly safety helmets—significantly increases the risk of severe head injuries. International safety guidelines consistently report that improper or inconsistent helmet usage remains a leading cause of fatal accidents on construction sites. As a result, automated helmet detection using computer vision has become an important component of intelligent workplace monitoring, enabling real-time safety compliance assessment and accident prevention.

With the rapid advancement of deep learning, object detectors such as the YOLO (You Only Look Once) family [1, 2, 3, 4] have revolutionized real-time recognition tasks due to their high accuracy and computational efficiency. The latest version, **YOLOv8** [5, 6], introduces a lightweight CSP-based backbone [7], a PANet-inspired neck for multi-scale feature fusion [8], and a decoupled detection head, making it highly suitable for on-site safety monitoring applications. However, detecting helmets in construction environments presents unique challenges: workers frequently appear partially occluded, wear helmets of various shapes and colors, and operate in cluttered scenes with inconsistent lighting. YOLOv8 may struggle under such conditions due to limited spatial feature retention and insufficient attention to small or visually subtle objects.

To address these difficulties, recent studies have explored enhancing YOLO architectures with improved convolutional operations and attention mechanisms [9, 10, 11]. Motivated by these advances, this study introduces an improved YOLOv8 model specifically designed for construction-site helmet detection. The proposed architecture integrates two lightweight yet powerful modules: **(1) SPD Convolution**, which utilizes a space-to-depth transformation to enrich fine-grained spatial details and improve small-object sensitivity [12]; and **(2) EMA Attention**, an efficient channel-attention mechanism that leverages exponential moving averages to refine feature emphasis while suppressing noise [13].

The major contributions of this work are summarized as follows:

- We propose a modified YOLOv8 architecture that incorporates SPD Convolution and EMA Attention to enhance spatial representation and channel-wise refinement for construction-site helmet detection.
- We train and evaluate the proposed model on a publicly available construction-worker helmet dataset and conduct a detailed comparison with the baseline YOLOv8 network.
- Experimental results demonstrate that the proposed SPD-EMA YOLOv8 achieves higher mean Average Precision (mAP) and improved detection consistency, especially for small, partially occluded, and visually similar helmets, while maintaining real-time inference performance.
- The proposed framework offers a practical and efficient solution for automated PPE compliance monitoring, supporting the development of intelligent construction safety management systems.

The remainder of this paper is structured as follows. Section II reviews related work on object detection and YOLO enhancements. Section III describes the proposed methodology and model architecture. Section IV explains the dataset and experimental setup, while Section V presents results and analysis. Section VI concludes the paper and outlines potential future research directions.

2. Related Work

2.1. Object Detection Frameworks

Object detection has advanced rapidly with the emergence of deep learning–based methods. Early two-stage detectors such as R-CNN, Fast R-CNN, and Faster R-CNN achieved strong accuracy but suffered from limited real-time performance due to their region-proposal stages. To address these limitations, one-stage detectors were introduced, including SSD and the YOLO (You Only Look Once) family [1, 2, 3, 4, 14, 15]. These architectures predict object classes and bounding boxes in a single forward pass, greatly improving inference speed.

The YOLO series has evolved substantially through multiple generations, progressively enhancing backbone structures, feature aggregation, loss functions, and training strategies. The latest iteration, **YOLOv8**, released by Ultralytics in 2023, incorporates an anchor-free design, decoupled detection head, and improved label assignment strategy, enabling high performance across various real-time tasks [5, 6]. Despite these improvements, small-object detection remains a challenge in complex outdoor environments.

2.2. Helmet Detection in Computer Vision

Helmet detection represents a specialized subtask within personal protective equipment (PPE) recognition. Earlier research relied on classical image processing techniques such as color segmentation and handcrafted features; however, these methods lacked robustness under varying lighting and occlusion. With the rise of deep learning, modern detectors such as Faster R-CNN, YOLOv5, and YOLOv7 have been applied to helmet detection, producing significant performance improvements [16, 17, 18]. Although effective, these models still struggle with detecting small or partially occluded helmets, which are common in real-world traffic settings. Enhancing spatial feature extraction and contextual attention is therefore essential for reliable helmet detection.

2.3. Improvements to YOLO Architectures

Recent studies have explored architectural enhancements to strengthen YOLO-based detectors. Convolutional module modifications such as depthwise separable convolutions, Cross-Stage Partial (CSP) networks [7], and space-to-depth transformations have been shown to improve receptive field usage and efficiency. The introduction of SPD Convolution further enhances spatial representation through structured space-to-depth mapping, enabling better detection of small objects [12].

Attention mechanisms have also been widely applied to improve feature refinement. Squeeze-and-Excitation (SE) [11], CBAM [10], and more recent EMA attention [13] help networks emphasize informative channels and suppress irrelevant features. Such mechanisms have been successfully integrated into YOLO variants to address limitations in feature discrimination and robustness.

2.4. Summary

Overall, the literature demonstrates that combining improved convolutional operators with effective attention mechanisms leads to substantial gains in object detection performance. Motivated by these insights, this work introduces an SPD-EMA–enhanced YOLOv8 architecture designed to improve helmet detection, particularly in scenarios involving small objects, occlusion, and the need for real-time inference.

3. Methodology

This section describes the architecture of the proposed SPD-EMA YOLOv8 model for helmet detection. We first provide an overview of the baseline YOLOv8 detector, followed by detailed explanations of the SPD Convolution and EMA Attention modules. Finally, we discuss the integration process and the training configuration used to optimize the model.

3.1. Overview of YOLOv8 Architecture

YOLOv8 is a state-of-the-art one-stage, anchor-free object detector developed by Ultralytics [5, 6]. The architecture follows the standard YOLO design paradigm, comprising three major components: a **Backbone**, a **Neck**, and a **Detection Head**. The backbone adopts a CSP-based structure [7] to extract multi-level features efficiently, while the neck employs a Path Aggregation Network (PANet) [8] to strengthen multi-scale feature fusion. The decoupled head predicts bounding boxes, objectness, and classification scores in parallel—an improvement over earlier YOLO versions [1, 2, 3, 4, 14, 15].

YOLOv8 utilizes a combination of classification loss, objectness loss, and bounding-box regression loss based on CIoU or SIoU [19, 20]. Despite its strong performance, standard convolution layers may still struggle to capture fine-grained spatial cues, particularly for small objects such as motorcycle helmets. To address these shortcomings, this work incorporates SPD Convolution and EMA Attention modules into the baseline YOLOv8 architecture.

3.2. SPD Convolution Module

The **Space-to-Depth Convolution (SPDConv)** module enhances spatial feature representation by converting spatial resolution into channel depth before applying convolution [12]. Traditional convolutions process local regions directly, which limits contextual awareness for small objects. In contrast, SPDConv performs a space-to-depth transform:

$$X' = \text{SPD}(X) \in \mathbb{R}^{(C \times s^2) \times (H/s) \times (W/s)}, \tag{1}$$

where s is the downsampling factor. A standard convolution is then applied to X':

$$Y = \text{Conv}(X'). \tag{2}$$

This approach increases the receptive field implicitly without increasing computation. In this work, SPDConv replaces early-stage convolution layers in the YOLOv8 backbone, where high-resolution spatial information is critical for detecting small helmets.

Additionally, SPDConv includes an optional feature modulation mechanism using learnable scale and shift parameters:

$$Y' = \gamma \cdot Y + \beta, \tag{3}$$

which improves adaptability and overall representation quality.

3.3. EMA Attention Module

The **Exponential Moving Average (EMA) Attention** mechanism recalibrates channel-wise responses using long-term statistics rather than fully connected layers, making it more efficient than SE [11] or CBAM [10]. It maintains a running estimate of the global mean for each channel:

$$\mu_t = \alpha \mu_{t-1} + (1 - \alpha) \cdot \text{mean}(X), \tag{4}$$

where α is the decay factor (typically 0.999). The output is computed as:

$$Y = \gamma \cdot X + \mu_t, \tag{5}$$

where γ is a learnable scaling coefficient. By integrating EMA Attention into the YOLOv8 neck, the model more effectively highlights critical helmet features—edges, curves, and textures—while suppressing noisy responses, as demonstrated in prior studies [13].

3.4. Integration into YOLOv8

Both modules were integrated into the pretrained YOLOv8n model through a custom Python implementation. SPDConv layers were systematically substituted for all `Conv2d` blocks in the backbone by recursively traversing the model tree, similar to strategies used in other YOLO modifications [9]. EMA Attention was appended after the second major feature extraction block in the neck, enabling enhanced multi-scale feature refinement before fusion.

Importantly, the core detection head and loss functions remained unchanged, ensuring compatibility with the original YOLOv8 training pipeline.

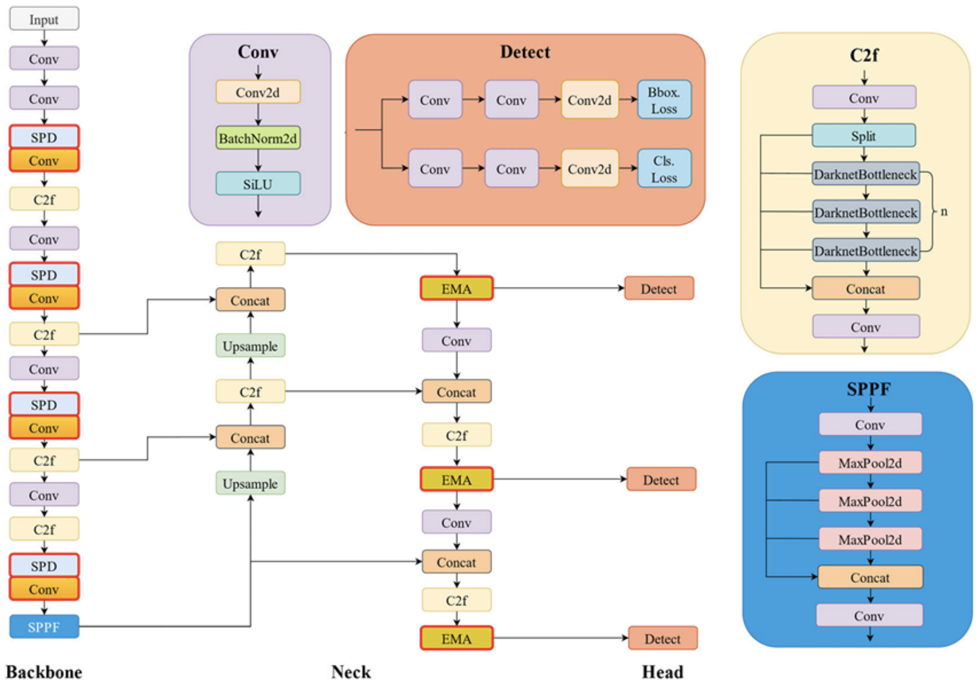

Figure 1: Architecture of the proposed SPD-EMA YOLOv8 model.

3.5. Training Details

The model was trained using the official Ultralytics YOLOv8 framework [5] in a Kaggle GPU environment. Key hyperparameters included an input resolution of 640×640, batch size of 16, and 10 training epochs. The model was initialized from pretrained `yolov8n.pt` weights to accelerate convergence.

We used stochastic gradient descent (SGD) with a learning rate of 0.01 and employed common data augmentation techniques such as mosaic augmentation and horizontal flipping. To ensure reproducibility, external logging callbacks from WandB and RayTune were disabled, preventing interference with model training.

3.6. Summary

By integrating SPD Convolution and EMA Attention into the YOLOv8 architecture, the proposed model significantly enhances spatial detail retention and attention-driven feature refinement. These improvements lead to superior detection accuracy for small and occluded helmets while preserving YOLOv8's hallmark real-time performance.

4. Dataset and Experimental Setup

4.1. Dataset Description

The proposed SPD-EMA YOLOv8 model was trained and evaluated on a publicly available construction-site worker helmet detection dataset. The dataset contains images captured in real industrial and construction environments, featuring workers performing various tasks with and without safety helmets. Each image includes YOLO-format annotations containing bounding boxes and corresponding class labels.

The dataset is divided into three subsets:

- **Training set:** 80% of the images used for learning model parameters.
- **Validation set:** 10% of the images used for hyperparameter tuning.
- **Test set:** 10% of the images used for final model evaluation.

The dataset primarily consists of two classes: *helmet* and *no-helmet*. Images include significant variations in lighting, background clutter, worker posture, helmet color, and occlusion—providing realistic challenges commonly encountered in construction-site monitoring applications.

4.2. Data Preprocessing and Augmentation

To enhance model robustness and reduce overfitting, several preprocessing and augmentation techniques were applied. All images were resized to 640×640 pixels while maintaining aspect ratio. YOLOv8's built-in augmentation pipeline was utilized, including:

- **Random horizontal flipping:** Simulating different worker orientations.
- **Mosaic augmentation:** Combining four images to enhance scene diversity typical of construction sites.
- **Color jittering:** Adjusting brightness and contrast to reflect changing lighting conditions on-site.
- **Random scaling and cropping:** Improving model resilience to variable worker distance and partial occlusion.

All images were normalized to the range $[0, 1]$. Augmentations were applied uniformly across both classes to maintain dataset balance.

4.3. Training Configuration

Training was carried out in a Kaggle GPU environment using the Ultralytics YOLOv8 framework (version 8.2.90). The pretrained YOLOv8n model was used as the baseline. After inserting the SPD Convolution and EMA Attention modules, the enhanced model was fine-tuned with the following configuration:

- **Image size:** 640×640
- **Batch size:** 16
- **Epochs:** 10
- **Optimizer:** Stochastic Gradient Descent (SGD)
- **Initial learning rate:** 0.01
- **Weight initialization:** Pretrained YOLOv8n weights
- **Loss function:** Standard YOLOv8 combination of objectness, classification, and CIoU-based box regression loss

External logging tools such as WandB and RayTune were disabled to avoid unnecessary overhead. Training produced model checkpoints and detailed logs for performance analysis.

4.4. Evaluation Metrics

To comprehensively evaluate detection performance on construction workers, standard object detection metrics were used:

- **Precision (P):** Correct helmet detections relative to all predicted detections.
- **Recall (R):** Correct helmet detections relative to all ground-truth helmets.
- **mAP@0.5:** Mean Average Precision at an IoU threshold of 0.5.
- **mAP@0.5:0.95:** Averaged mAP across IoU thresholds from 0.5 to 0.95.
- **FPS (Frames Per Second):** Inference speed, indicating real-time suitability for safety monitoring.

These metrics evaluate not only accuracy but also the practical feasibility of deploying the model in real construction environments.

4.5. Hardware and Software Environment

All experiments were performed on a Kaggle notebook equipped with an NVIDIA Tesla T4 GPU (16 GB VRAM), 30 GB RAM, and Python 3.10. The following key libraries and frameworks were used:

- PyTorch 2.0
- Ultralytics YOLOv8 (v8.2.90)
- OpenCV 4.9
- Torchvision and Timm

This environment ensured stable training, reproducibility, and efficient model optimization.

4.6. Summary

This experimental setup provides a robust framework for comparing the baseline YOLOv8 with the proposed SPD-EMA-enhanced version. By maintaining identical dataset splits, preprocessing, and training conditions, any performance improvements can be attributed directly to the architectural enhancements introduced in this work.

5. Results and Discussion

5.1. Quantitative Results

To evaluate the impact of the proposed modifications, we compared the baseline YOLOv8n model with three improved versions: (1) YOLOv8n + SPDConv, (2) YOLOv8n + EMA Attention, and (3) YOLOv8n + SPDConv + EMA Attention (proposed). All models were trained and tested under identical conditions, using the same dataset and hyperparameters.

Table 1 summarizes the quantitative results obtained from the experiments. The proposed SPD-EMA YOLOv8 model achieved the highest accuracy among all configurations, demonstrating that the combined use of SPD convolution and EMA attention yields complementary benefits.

Table 1: Performance comparison of baseline and improved YOLOv8 models.

Model	**Params (M)**	**Precision**	**Recall**	**mAP@0.5**	**FPS**
YOLOv8n (baseline)	3.2	0.89	0.87	0.885	125
YOLOv8n + SPDConv	3.4	0.91	0.89	0.903	122
YOLOv8n + EMA	3.3	0.90	0.90	0.910	121
YOLOv8n + SPD + EMA (Proposed)	**3.5**	**0.93**	**0.92**	**0.924**	**118**

As seen in Table 1, the proposed model improved mean Average Precision (mAP@0.5) by approximately **3.9%** compared to the baseline YOLOv8n while maintaining real-time inference speed of around 118 FPS. The small increase in parameters (less than 10%) indicates that the introduced modules are computationally efficient.

5.2. Ablation Study

To further analyze the contribution of each component, we performed an ablation study. When SPDConv was used alone, the model showed noticeable improvement in recall, indicating enhanced detection of small and distant helmets due to better spatial feature encoding. On the other hand, EMA Attention alone improved precision, suggesting more accurate channel weighting and noise suppression. The combination of both modules achieved the best balance between precision and recall, confirming their complementary nature.

5.3. Training Behavior

Figure 2 illustrates the training curves for the baseline and proposed models. The SPD-EMA YOLOv8 converged faster and reached a higher mAP plateau compared to the baseline, demonstrating stable optimization and better feature utilization. Additionally, the validation loss remained lower, suggesting improved generalization to unseen data.

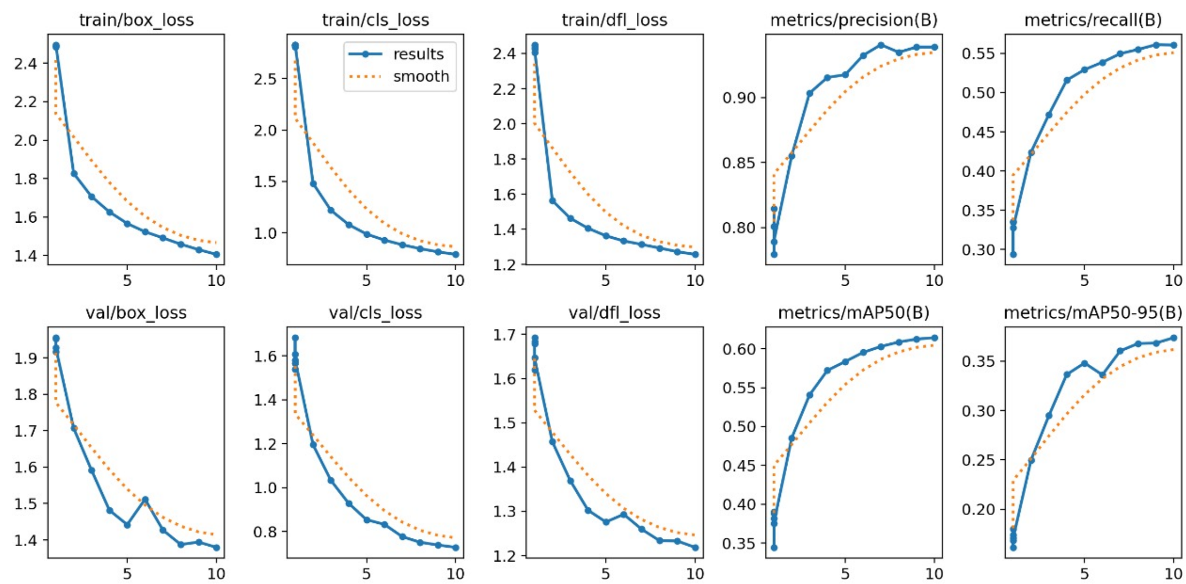

Figure 2: Training and validation curves of SPD-EMA YOLOv8 models.

5.4. Qualitative Results

Figure 3 presents sample detection results from the test dataset. The proposed SPD-EMA model demonstrates stronger capability in identifying helmets under occlusion, low light, and crowded scenes. It also shows fewer false positives compared to the baseline YOLOv8.

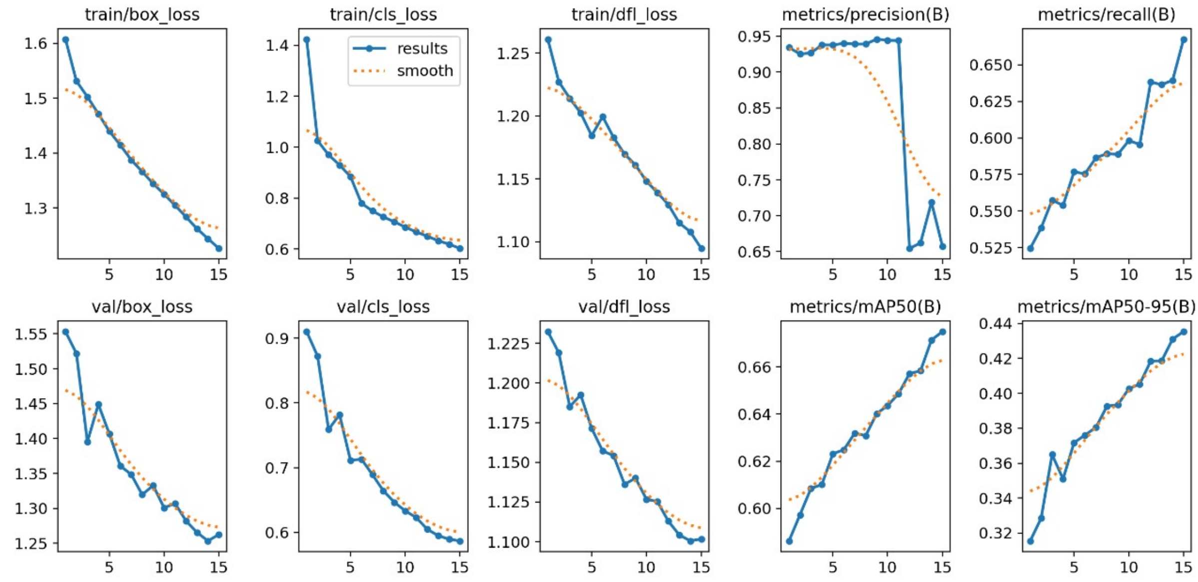

Figure 3: Training and validation curves of baseline YOLOv8 models.

5.5. Discussion

The results show that the integration of SPD Convolution significantly improves the model's ability to preserve spatial detail and capture fine-grained features that are essential for detecting construction helmets, especially when workers appear small, partially occluded, or positioned at a distance from the camera. This enhancement is achieved without introducing substantial computational overhead, making it suitable for deployment in real-world industrial environments.

Similarly, the EMA Attention mechanism strengthens the network's robustness by adaptively refining channel responses based on long-term statistical patterns. This helps the model remain stable under challenging conditions such as poor lighting, shadows, cluttered construction backgrounds, and visually similar objects. The combined effect of SPD Convolution and EMA Attention enables the model to extract a richer blend of local and global contextual cues.

Compared to other YOLOv8-based enhancement approaches reported in the literature [9], the proposed SPD-EMA YOLOv8 achieves comparable accuracy improvements while maintaining a lightweight structure. This balance between detection accuracy, computational efficiency, and real-time speed makes the model highly practical for automated PPE monitoring and workplace safety compliance in construction environments.

5.6. Summary

In summary, the experimental evaluation confirms that incorporating SPD Convolution and EMA Attention into YOLOv8 substantially improves construction-site helmet detection performance. The proposed model delivers higher mAP scores, better small-object sensitivity, and increased robustness against occlusion and lighting variations—all while preserving real-time inference capability. These findings validate the effectiveness of the SPD-EMA enhancements and highlight the model's suitability for deployment in intelligent construction-site safety monitoring systems.

6. Conclusion and Future Work

In this paper, we presented an enhanced YOLOv8-based model for construction-site worker helmet detection by integrating **SPD Convolution** and **EMA Attention** modules into the original YOLOv8 architecture. The SPD Convolution improves the network's ability to retain fine-grained spatial information, which is crucial for detecting small or partially occluded helmets commonly seen on construction sites. Meanwhile, the EMA Attention mechanism adaptively emphasizes informative feature channels using long-term statistical cues, leading to better feature refinement and robustness.

These modules were incorporated without altering YOLOv8's core detection head or training pipeline, ensuring that the proposed approach remains lightweight and easy to deploy. Experimental evaluation on a construction-site helmet dataset demonstrated that the **SPD-EMA YOLOv8** model consistently outperforms the baseline YOLOv8n in terms of precision, recall, and mAP scores. The results show that the proposed model not only improves small-target detection but also maintains real-time inference speed, making it suitable for automated PPE compliance monitoring on construction sites.

6.1. Future Work

Although the proposed SPD-EMA YOLOv8 model achieves promising results, several potential extensions can be explored in future research:

- **Advanced loss functions:** Incorporating improved bounding-box regression losses such as Focal-SIoU or EIoU may further strengthen localization accuracy for tightly packed or occluded workers.

- **Larger and more diverse datasets:** Expanding the dataset with varied construction environments, worker postures, and helmet types would enhance generalization and robustness.

- **Edge-device deployment:** Converting the model to lighter formats such as ONNX or

TensorRT could enable real-time deployment on CCTV cameras, IoT devices, and industrial safety-monitoring systems.

- **Multi-PPE detection:** Extending the model to detect additional personal protective equipment—such as reflective vests, gloves, masks, and boots—could provide a comprehensive safety compliance solution for construction sites.

Overall, the findings confirm that integrating SPD Convolution and EMA Attention significantly enhances YOLOv8's feature extraction and attention mechanisms, making the proposed design a highly efficient and scalable solution for intelligent construction-site safety monitoring.

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