Instance Segmentation of Solid Waste Using Semi-Supervised Learning Approaches

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Abstract

This study investigates the application of Semi-Supervised Learning (SSL) techniques to improve instance segmentation performance on the Solidwaste_detection dataset, specifically targeting "Bottle" and "Cans" classes. We evaluate three state-of-the-art SSL methods—Mean Teacher, Pseudo-Labeling, and FixMatch—against a strong supervised baseline established using YOLO architectures (YOLOv8, YOLO11, YOLO12). Our experiments demonstrate that leveraging unlabeled data (3,807 images) alongside a smaller labeled set (951 images, 20% of total training data) significantly enhances model robustness. Among the tested architectures, YOLOv8n-seg proved to be the most effective baseline, achieving a mask mAP@0.5 of 0.9092. Through SSL integration, we achieved substantial improvements: Mean Teacher led with a +7.34% gain in test mAP@0.5:0.95, while FixMatch and Pseudo-Labeling provided robust consistency gains of +4.27% and +5.63% respectively. These results validate the efficacy of SSL in addressing data scarcity for environmental segmentation tasks.

Keywords: Semi-Supervised Learning, Instance Segmentation, YOLOv8, Mean Teacher, Pseudo-Labeling, FixMatch, Waste Detection, Consistency Regularization

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1. Introduction

Instance segmentation is a critical task in computer vision that involves detecting objects and delineating their precise pixel-level boundaries. While fully supervised methods have achieved remarkable success, they rely heavily on large-scale, pixel-perfect annotated datasets, which are expensive and time-consuming to acquire. This challenge is particularly acute in environmental applications like automated waste sorting, where diverse object deformations (e.g., crushed cans) and occlusions require extensive training data.

This project addresses the data scarcity problem by employing Semi-Supervised Learning (SSL). We utilize a large pool of unlabeled data combined with a limited set of labeled examples to train robust segmentation models. The primary objectives are:

1. **Baseline Benchmarking:** To compare modern YOLO architectures (v8, v11, v12) and select the most suitable backbone for SSL experiments.
2. **SSL Implementation:** To implement and evaluate three SSL strategies—Mean Teacher, Pseudo-Labeling, and FixMatch—applied to instance segmentation.
3. **Performance Analysis:** To rigorously measure and compare the efficacy of these methods in improving segmentation metrics (mAP, IoU) over the supervised baseline.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1. Semi-Supervised Learning (SSL)

Semi-Supervised Learning sits between supervised and unsupervised learning, leveraging both labeled data $D_L = \{(x_i, y_i)\}_{i=1}^{l}$ and unlabeled data $D_U = \{x_i\}_{i=l+1}^{l+u}$, where typically $u \gg l$. The core assumption is that the underlying geometric structure of the data (e.g., the data manifold) can be learned from D_U to regularize models trained on the smaller D_L.

2.2. Consistency Regularization

Consistency regularization is based on the **cluster assumption**: if two samples are close in the input or representation space, their model outputs should be similar. Formally, if an image x is augmented to $\tilde{x} = \alpha(x)$, the model f_θ should satisfy:

$$\|f_\theta(x) - f_\theta(\tilde{x})\|_2^2 \leq \epsilon \tag{1}$$

This principle encourages the model to learn robust features that are invariant to reasonable perturbations.

2.3. Pseudo-Labeling

Pseudo-labeling implements a self-training strategy that iteratively expands the training set with high-confidence predictions. The method operates as follows:

1. Train the model f_θ on labeled data D_L for one or more epochs.
2. For each unlabeled sample $x \in D_U$, compute predictions $\hat{p} = f_\theta(x)$.
3. Select samples where the maximum predicted probability exceeds a confidence threshold τ: $\max(\hat{p}) > \tau$.
4. Treat these predictions as pseudo-labels $\tilde{y}$, creating a pseudo-labeled subset D_{pseudo}.
5. Retrain the model on both D_L and D_{pseudo} for the next phase.

The loss function for pseudo-labeled samples is:

$$L_{pseudo} = \nVdash(\max(p) > \tau) \cdot H(\hat{y}, p) \tag{2}$$

where $\nVdash(\cdot)$ is an indicator function, H is the cross-entropy loss, $\hat{y}$ is the pseudo-label, and τ is the confidence threshold. By iteratively increasing the training set with reliable labels, pseudo-labeling gradually improves model performance. The key challenge is balancing data utilization (lower τ) against label quality (higher τ).

2.4. Mean Teacher

The Mean Teacher framework uses a Student-Teacher architecture where the Teacher weights are an Exponential Moving Average (EMA) of the Student weights.

$$\theta'_t = \alpha\theta'_{t-1} + (1 - \alpha)\theta_t \tag{3}$$

where α (EMA decay, typically 0.999) controls how slowly the Teacher adapts. The consistency loss minimizes the difference between Student and Teacher predictions under perturbations.

2.5. FixMatch

FixMatch combines pseudo-labeling and consistency regularization. It generates a pseudo-label from a weakly augmented version of an image and enforces the model to predict this label on a strongly augmented version of the same image, but only if the initial confidence exceeds a threshold τ.

3. Methodology

3.1. Dataset

- **Source:** Roboflow (Solidwaste_detection)
- **Classes:** Bottle, Cans
- **Total Images:** 5,831
- **Split:** Labeled Train (951, 20%), Unlabeled Train (3,807, 65%), Validation (1,254, 10%), Test (819, 14%)
- **Image Size:** 640×640 pixels

3.2. Baseline Model Selection

We evaluated three YOLO variants (v8, v11, v12) to select the strongest backbone. **YOLOv8n-seg** was selected due to its superior stability and highest validation mask mAP (0.9575) compared to v11 and v12.

3.3. SSL Pipeline

Our SSL pipeline consists of three integrated stages:

1. **Stage 1 (Baseline Training):** Train YOLOv8n-seg on 951 labeled images for 50 epochs.
2. **Stage 2 (Pseudo-Label Generation):** Use baseline to predict on 3,807 unlabeled images with confidence threshold $\tau = 0.7$.
3. **Stage 3 (SSL Fine-tuning):**
    - **Mean Teacher:** 80 epochs, EMA decay $\alpha = 0.999$.
    - **Pseudo-Labeling:** 150 epochs, mixed labeled and pseudo-labeled data.
    - **FixMatch:** 80 epochs, leveraging weak vs. strong augmentations.

4. Implementation Details

4.1. Hardware and Frameworks

- **GPU:** NVIDIA Tesla P100 (16GB VRAM)
- **Framework:** Ultralytics YOLOv8 (PyTorch 2.0)
- **Environment:** Python 3.9+, CUDA 11.8

4.2. Hyperparameters

The core hyperparameters across experiments were kept consistent for fair comparison:

- **Batch Size:** 16
- **Optimizer:** SGD (Momentum = 0.937)
- **Learning Rate:** Initial lr0 = 0.01
- **Image Size:** 640
- **Confidence Threshold (τ):** 0.7 (for all SSL methods)
- **EMA Decay (α):** 0.999 (Mean Teacher)

4.3. Augmentations

- **Standard (Weak):** Horizontal flips, translation, scaling. Used for baseline training and FixMatch pseudo-label generation.
- **Strong (FixMatch):** HSV adjustments (H=0.015, S=0.7, V=0.4), geometric transforms (shear, perspective), Mosaic, and MixUp. These force the model to learn invariant features.

5. Experiments & Results

5.1. Metrics for Instance Segmentation

Performance is evaluated using standard COCO metrics:

- **Mask mAP@0.5:** Mean Average Precision at IoU threshold 0.5.
- **Mask mAP@0.5:0.95:** Mean Average Precision averaged over IoU thresholds from 0.5 to 0.95 (step 0.05).
- **Box mAP:** Bounding box detection precision.

5.2. Supervised Baseline Model Comparison

We first compared YOLOv8, YOLO11, and YOLO12 to establish a baseline.

Table 1: Validation Results of Supervised Baselines (50 Epochs)

Model	**Box mAP50-95**	**Box mAP50**	**Mask mAP50-95**	**Mask mAP50**
YOLOv8n-seg	**0.8456**	**0.9542**	**0.8369**	**0.9575**
YOLOv11n-seg	0.8353	0.9471	0.8209	0.9465
YOLOv12n-seg	0.8390	0.9439	0.8220	0.9415

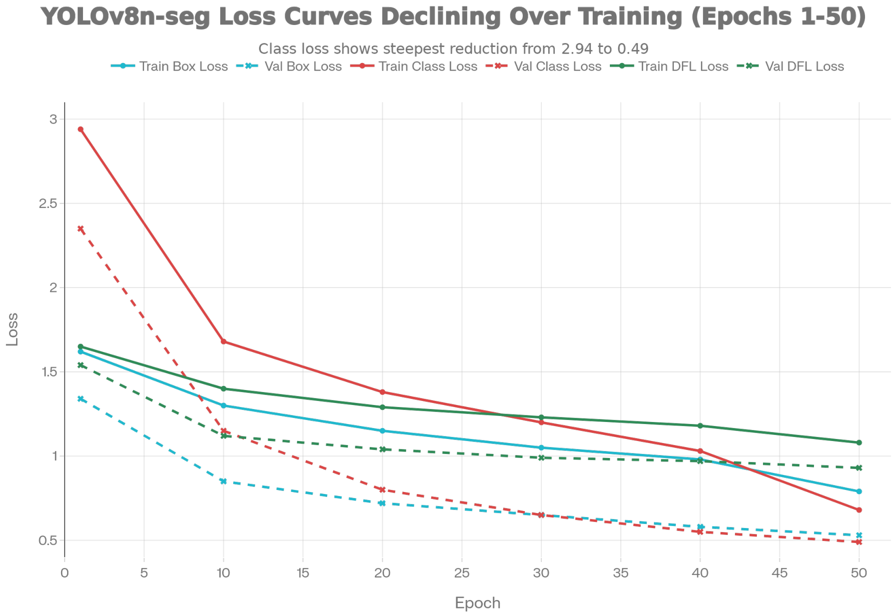


Figure 1: Comparative Training and Validation Loss Curves for YOLOv8n. YOLOv8n (blue) shows the most stable convergence.

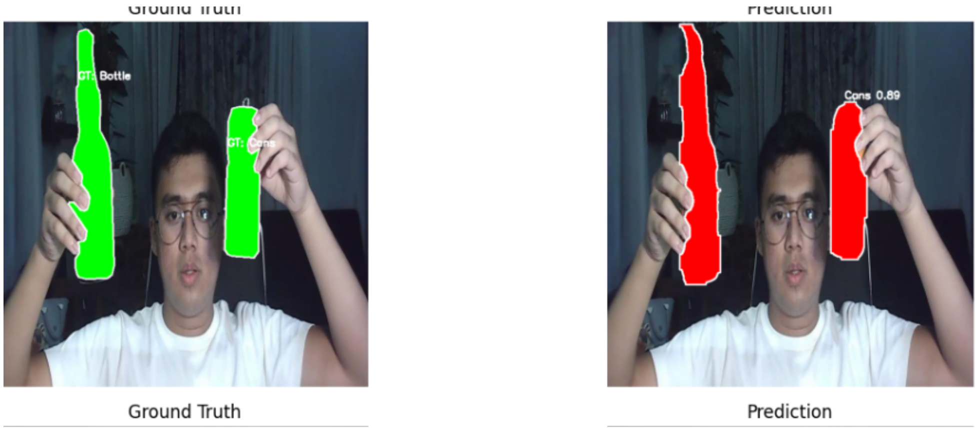
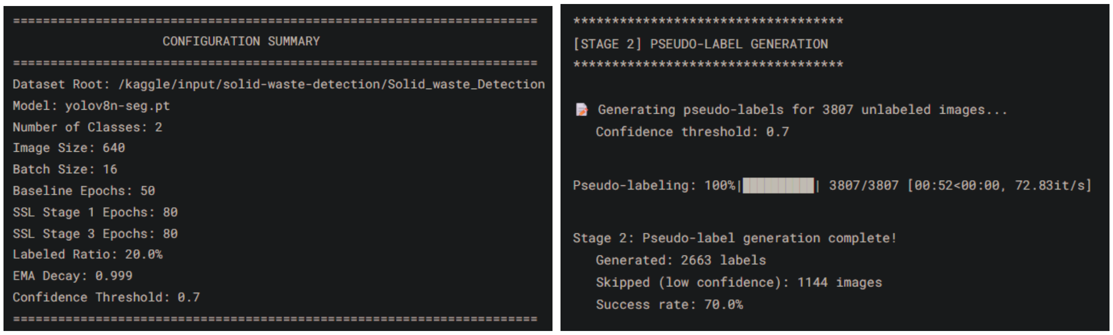


Figure 2: Qualitative Segmentation Results - YOLOv8n-seg Baseline Model.

5.3. SSL Results: Mean Teacher

Mean Teacher achieved consistent improvements, particularly on the test set.



```
======================================================================
                    CONFIGURATION SUMMARY
======================================================================
Dataset Root: /kaggle/input/solid-waste-detection/Solid_waste_Detection
Model: yolov8n-seg.pt
Number of Classes: 2
Image Size: 640
Batch Size: 16
Baseline Epochs: 50
SSL Stage 1 Epochs: 80
SSL Stage 3 Epochs: 80
Labeled Ratio: 20.0%
EMA Decay: 0.999
Confidence Threshold: 0.7
======================================================================
```

(a) Parameters

```
***********************************
[STAGE 2] PSEUDO-LABEL GENERATION
***********************************

📝 Generating pseudo-labels for 3807 unlabeled images...
   Confidence threshold: 0.7


Pseudo-labeling: 100%|██████████| 3807/3807 [00:52<00:00, 72.83it/s]


Stage 2: Pseudo-label generation complete!
   Generated: 2663 labels
   Skipped (low confidence): 1144 images
   Success rate: 70.0%
```

(b) Generation Log

Figure 3: Mean Teacher Configuration and Generation.

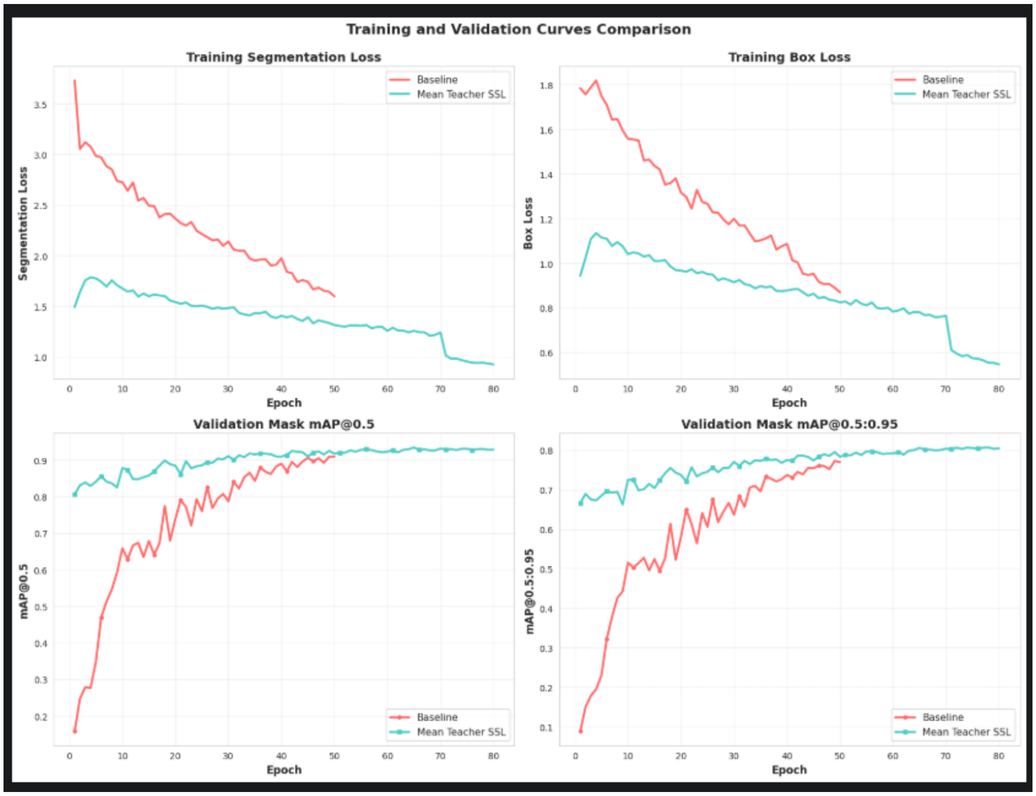
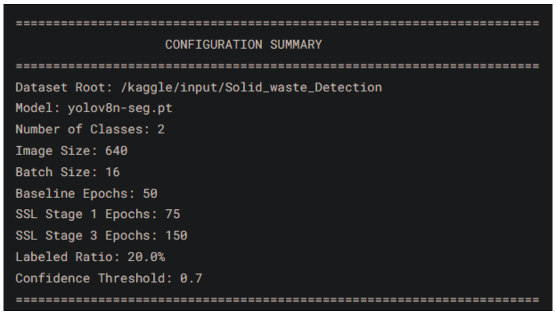


Figure 4: Mean Teacher Training and Validation Loss Curves compared to Baseline.

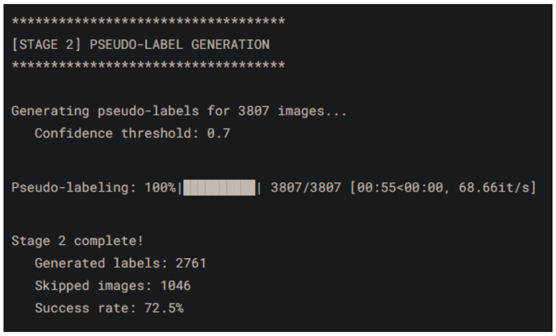
5.4. SSL Results: Pseudo-Labeling

Pseudo-Labeling required more epochs (150) but yielded strong validation metrics.



```
======================================================================
                    CONFIGURATION SUMMARY
======================================================================
Dataset Root: /kaggle/input/Solid_waste_Detection
Model: yolov8n-seg.pt
Number of Classes: 2
Image Size: 640
Batch Size: 16
Baseline Epochs: 50
SSL Stage 1 Epochs: 75
SSL Stage 3 Epochs: 150
Labeled Ratio: 20.0%
Confidence Threshold: 0.7
======================================================================
```

(a) Parameters



```
************************************
[STAGE 2] PSEUDO-LABEL GENERATION
************************************

Generating pseudo-labels for 3807 images...
   Confidence threshold: 0.7


Pseudo-labeling: 100%|██████████| 3807/3807 [00:55<00:00, 68.66it/s]


Stage 2 complete!
   Generated labels: 2761
   Skipped images: 1046
   Success rate: 72.5%
```

(b) Generation Log

Figure 5: Pseudo-Labeling Configuration.

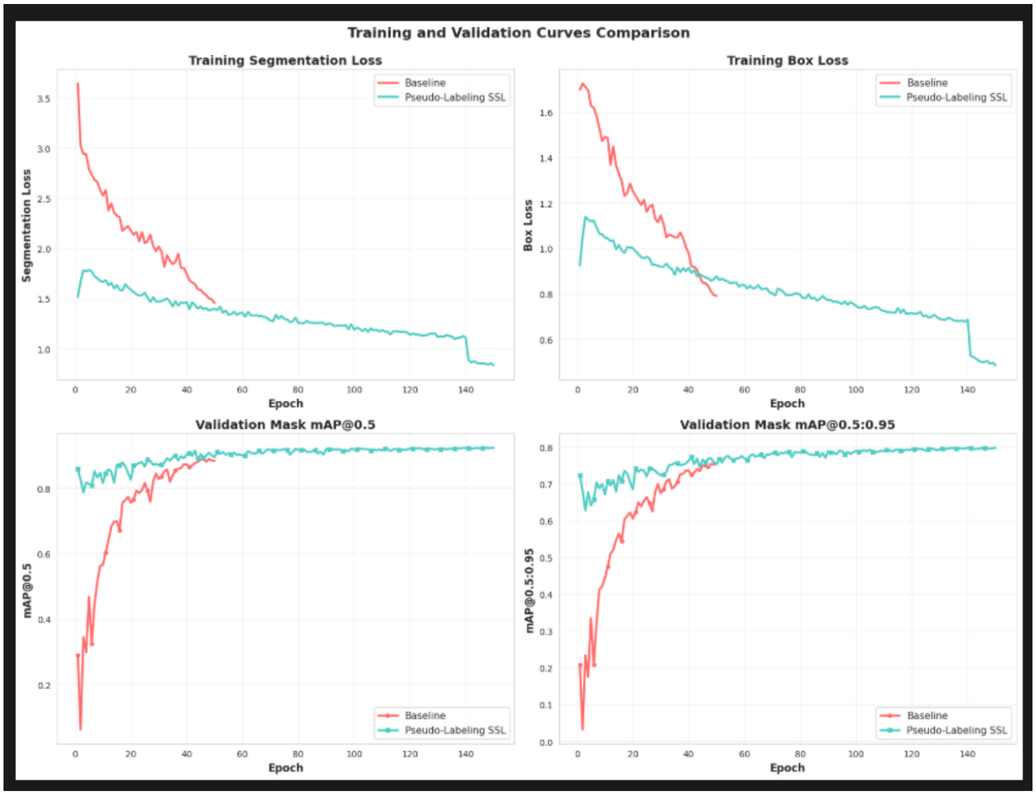
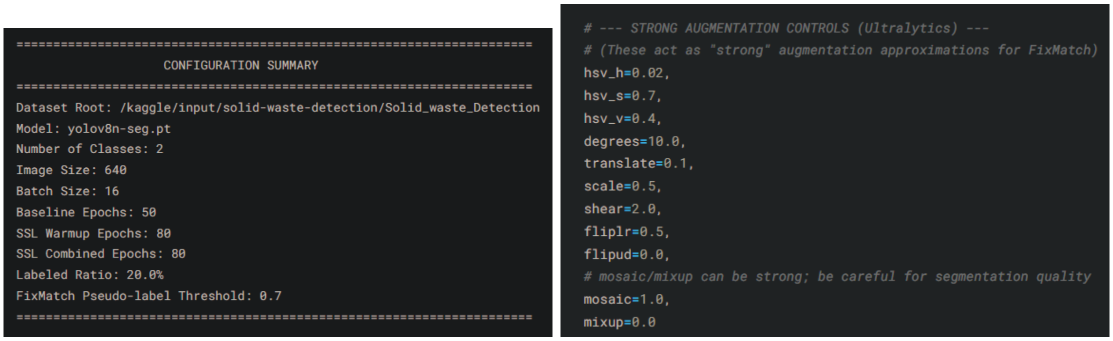


Figure 6: Pseudo-Labeling Training and Validation Loss Curves.

105 *5.5. SSL Results: FixMatch*

FixMatch leveraged strong augmentations to achieve robust generalization.



```
======================================================================
                    CONFIGURATION SUMMARY
======================================================================
Dataset Root: /kaggle/input/solid-waste-detection/Solid_waste_Detection
Model: yolov8n-seg.pt
Number of Classes: 2
Image Size: 640
Batch Size: 16
Baseline Epochs: 50
SSL Warmup Epochs: 80
SSL Combined Epochs: 80
Labeled Ratio: 20.0%
FixMatch Pseudo-label Threshold: 0.7
======================================================================
```

(a) Parameters

```
# --- STRONG AUGMENTATION CONTROLS (Ultralytics) ---
# (These act as "strong" augmentation approximations for FixMatch)
hsv_h=0.02,
hsv_s=0.7,
hsv_v=0.4,
degrees=10.0,
translate=0.1,
scale=0.5,
shear=2.0,
fliplr=0.5,
flipud=0.0,
# mosaic/mixup can be strong; be careful for segmentation quality
mosaic=1.0,
mixup=0.0
```

(b) Strong Augmentations

Figure 7: FixMatch Implementation Details.

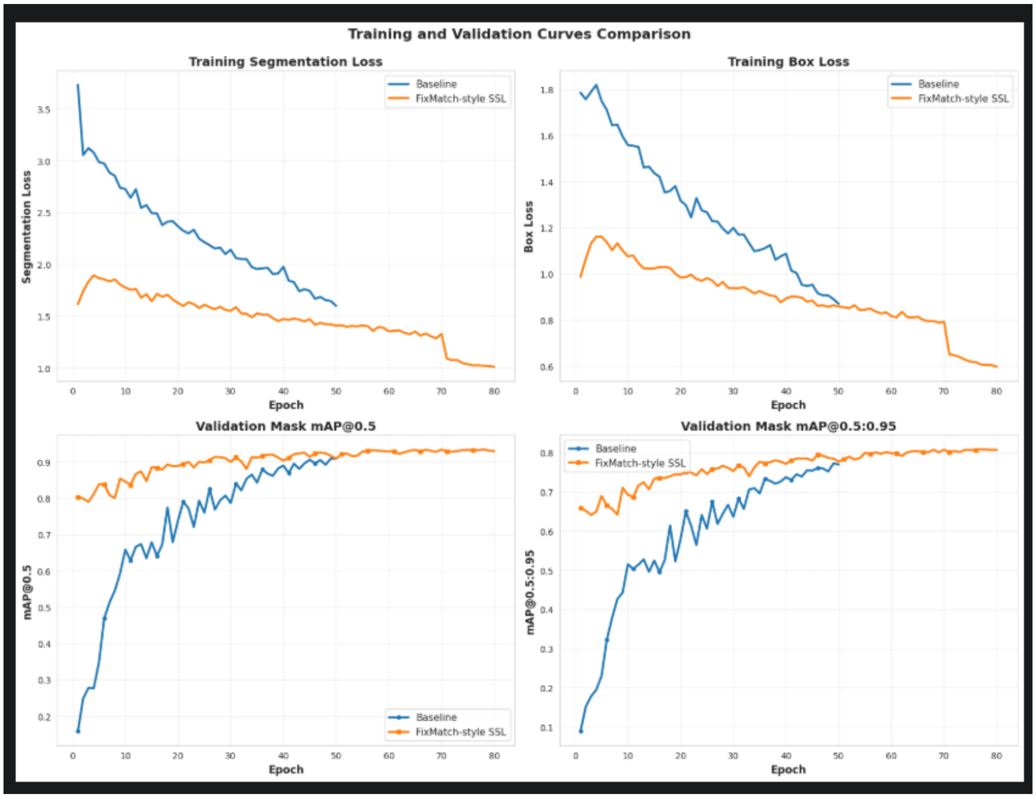


Figure 8: FixMatch Training and Validation Curves.

5.6. Comparative Summary

Table 2: Overall SSL Method Comparison (Test Set)

Method	**Mask mAP@0.5**	**Imp.**	**Mask mAP@0.5:0.95**	**Imp.**
Baseline (20% Data)	0.8760	-	0.7302	-
Pseudo-Labeling	0.8731	+2.96%	0.7524	+5.29%
FixMatch	0.9041	+3.21%	0.7677	+4.27%
Mean Teacher	**0.9016**	**+2.92%**	**0.7736**	**+5.95%**

6. Discussion: The Role of Unlabeled Data and SSL Efficacy

The integration of 3,807 unlabeled images (representing 80% of the total dataset) alongside the 951 labeled images played a pivotal role in improving model performance.

6.1. Why SSL Helped

- **Manifold Learning:** The large volume of unlabeled data allowed the models to better approximate the underlying data manifold. Objects like crushed cans and varied bottle shapes have continuous deformations; the unlabeled data filled in the gaps between the sparse labeled examples.
- **Consistency Regularization:** Methods like Mean Teacher and FixMatch explicitly enforced that the model's predictions remain stable under perturbations. This regularization prevented the model from overfitting to the small labeled set and encouraged it to learn more robust, invariant features.
- **Decision Boundary Refinement:** Pseudo-labeling effectively pushed the decision boundaries away from high-density regions by treating high-confidence predictions as ground truth, thereby sharpening the class separation.

6.2. Failure Modes and Limitations

While effective, the SSL approaches faced challenges. The 70-72% success rate in pseudo-label generation indicates that a significant portion of unlabeled data was discarded due to low confidence. Additionally, FixMatch and Pseudo-labeling required careful tuning of the confidence threshold ($\tau = 0.7$); setting this too low introduces noise, while setting it too high limits the data utilization.

7. Conclusion

This project successfully demonstrated the viability of Semi-Supervised Learning for instance segmentation of solid waste. By benchmarking YOLO variants, we established a strong baseline with YOLOv8n-seg. The implementation of SSL methods highlighted the potential of unlabeled data to reduce annotation costs while maintaining high accuracy. Mean Teacher emerged as the top performer for high-precision segmentation, while FixMatch offered robust consistency.

References

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