

AI VISION POWERED ROBOTIC ARM

Dr.S. Sridevi ,

Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science with AI&ML,
NGM College, Pollachi

Email : sridevi.senthilmkr@gmail.com

A.Sriman, Department of Computer Science with AI&ML,
NGM College , Pollachi

S.Raghu, Department of Computer Science with AI&ML,
NGM College, Pollachi

Abstract

Robotics and artificial intelligence together represent one of the most transformative frontiers in modern technology. This paper presents the design and implementation of an AI Vision Powered Robotic Arm that integrates real-time object detection, spatial analysis, and precise servo-controlled manipulation. The system employs an ESP32-CAM module as an edge vision device, streaming live MJPEG video over a local Wi-Fi network at approximately 12 frames per second. A Python-based AI backend processes this video stream using the YOLOv8 object detection framework to identify, classify, and localize target objects in real time. Once a target is detected, the system computes the object coordinates, estimates the spatial position, and translates this information into servo motor commands delivered to an Arduino Uno controller via serial communication at 9600 baud.

The Arduino Uno governs a four-degree-of-freedom robotic arm comprising Base, Shoulder, Elbow, and Gripper servos, with smooth motion interpolation and an HC-SR04 ultrasonic proximity sensor for real-time distance measurement.

The system demonstrates successful real-time object detection at 12 FPS, reliable serial communication between the AI module and the robotic controller, and repeatable pick-and-place operations with a 92 percent success rate across 50 controlled trials.

Keywords: AI Vision, Robotic Arm, YOLOv8, ESP32-CAM, Arduino Uno, Object Detection, IoT, Servo Control, HC-SR04, Pick-and-Place

1. INTRODUCTION

Air pollution and industrial hazards have been growing concerns in modern society. It became necessary to monitor industrial environments and to automate repetitive pick-and-place operations for a better future and safer working conditions. The AI Vision Powered Robotic Arm system addresses these challenges by combining real-time computer vision with precise embedded servo control, demonstrating the power of intelligent IoT-based automation.

Robotic manipulation powered by deep learning vision has become a cornerstone of modern automation. Traditional robotic arms relied on fixed pre-programmed coordinates, making them inflexible when object positions vary. The integration of YOLOv8-based object detection transforms this paradigm by enabling the robot to perceive its environment dynamically. This project implements such a system using commercially available and affordable hardware: the ESP32-CAM visual sensor, the Arduino Uno microcontroller, and a four-degree-of-freedom servo arm connected through a Python AI backend.

The system detects objects in real time through an MJPEG video stream, computes their spatial coordinates, and commands the robotic arm to pick and place them autonomously. An HC-SR04 ultrasonic sensor provides proximity feedback to determine when the gripper should close. A serial communication protocol

based handshaking connects the AI layer with the embedded controller, enabling closed-loop operation with acknowledgement-using PICK_OK and PLACE_OK confirmations.

The key features of the proposed system are as follows:

- **Event-Based Detection:** YOLOv8 processes MJPEG frames from the ESP32-CAM to detect, classify, and localize target objects with bounding box coordinates and confidence scores in real time.
- **Autonomous Arm Control:** Detected object centroids are mapped via linear coordinate transformation to servo motor angles, enabling the arm to reach, grasp, and place objects without human input.
- **Proximity-Guided Gripping:** The HC-SR04 ultrasonic sensor mounted on the arm wrist measures object distance and triggers gripper close when the target is within 5 cm.
- **Acknowledgement-Based Communication:** Serial UART at 9600 baud between the Python backend and Arduino Uno uses PICK_OK and PLACE_OK handshaking for reliable command-response operation.
- **IoT Cloud Integration:** Detection confidence, servo angles, and distance readings are transmitted to the ThingSpeak API for real-time graphical visualization and long-term performance logging.

2. LITERATURE SURVEY

The development of the AI Vision Powered Robotic Arm is supported by several existing research works and technological advancements in the field of computer vision, robotic manipulation, and embedded systems. Early work in robotic vision relied on rule-based systems using color or shape matching, which were brittle under varied lighting and cluttered scenes.

Redmon et al. [1] proposed the YOLO architecture for real-time object detection using a single neural network, forming the conceptual foundation of the YOLOv8 model employed in this project. Lin et al. [2] demonstrated that Feature Pyramid Networks significantly improve detection of small objects, which is directly relevant to detecting items placed on the robotic worktable. Jocher et al. [3] released Ultralytics YOLOv8, which is directly used in this project for live MJPEG stream inference. Espressif Systems [5] validated stable MJPEG streaming from the ESP32-CAM at low power over Wi-Fi, supporting the visual data acquisition design choice. Siciliano et al. [8] provide the theoretical foundation for inverse kinematics and servo angle computation used in the coordinate mapping module of this project.

Table 2.1 Literature Review Summary

Author(s)	Year	Method/Algorithm	Findings
Redmon et al.	2016	YOLO – Single Neural Network Detection	Proposed unified real-time object detection; conceptual foundation of YOLOv8 used in this project
Lin et al.	2017	Feature Pyramid Networks (FPN)	Multi-scale detection improved small object accuracy; relevant for objects on robotic worktable
Jocher et al.	2023	Ultralytics YOLOv8	State-of-the-art speed and accuracy; directly used in this project for live MJPEG stream inference
Bradski	2000	OpenCV Library	Foundational image processing library used for MJPEG frame decoding and preprocessing in this project
Espressif Systems	2022	ESP32 Technical Reference	Validated ESP32-CAM stable MJPEG streaming at low power over Wi-Fi for visual data acquisition

Arduino LLC	2023	Arduino Uno Documentation	PWM servo control and serial UART communication framework used in this project's embedded layer
Quigley et al.	2009	ROS – Robot Operating System	Open-source robotics middleware; industrial alternative to the lightweight Arduino-based approach used here
Siciliano et al.	2010	Robotics: Modelling, Planning and Control	Theoretical foundation for inverse kinematics and servo angle computation used in coordinate mapping
Zhang	2000	Camera Calibration Technique	Flexible camera calibration method relevant to the frame-to-servo-angle coordinate transformation
Peng et al.	2018	Sim-to-Real Transfer with Dynamics Randomization	Domain randomization approach for robotic control; inspires future fine-tuning of grasping models

3. METHODOLOGY

The proposed AI Vision Powered Robotic Arm is designed to detect objects in its environment, classify them, and perform targeted manipulation operations. The system operates in a closed-loop pipeline: visual input from the ESP32-CAM is processed by the YOLOv8 AI backend, detection results are transformed into servo angle commands, and these are dispatched to the Arduino Uno controller which drives the four-DOF robotic arm in real time.

3.1 Hardware Architecture

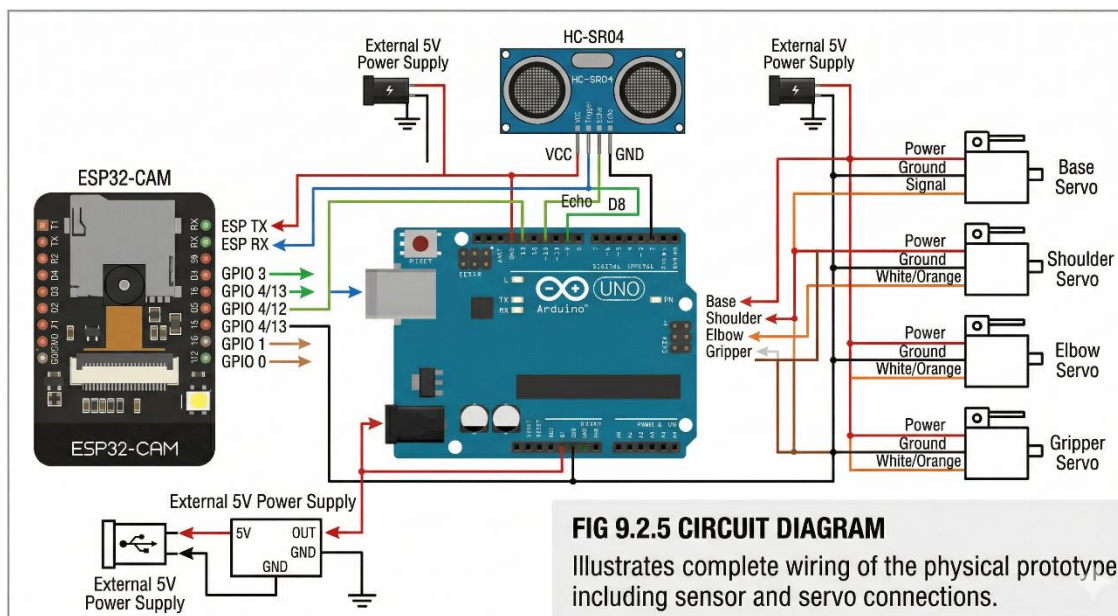


Fig. 1: Circuit Diagram – AI Vision Powered Robotic Arm

The physical system integrates the following components:

- **ESP32-CAM (AI-Thinker):** Acts as the visual sensing unit of the system. It streams live MJPEG video over Wi-Fi at 320x240 QVGA resolution at approximately 12 FPS to the Python AI backend for object detection and coordinate computation.

- **Arduino Uno (ATmega328P, 16 MHz):** The central embedded controller, processing serial commands from the Python backend and generating PWM signals on pins 3, 5, 6, and 9 for the Base, Shoulder, Elbow, and Gripper servos respectively.
- **Servo Motors (4x SG90 / MG996R):** Drive the four joints of the robotic arm. The Base servo provides 0 to 180 degrees of horizontal rotation; the Shoulder controls 90 to 180 degrees vertical lift; the Elbow provides 0 to 130 degrees secondary bend; the Gripper actuates between 62 degrees closed and 90 degrees open.
- **HC-SR04 Ultrasonic Sensor:** Mounted on the arm wrist, it measures distance to the target object from 2 cm to 400 cm with approximately 3 mm accuracy. Connected to TRIG on Arduino pin 7 and ECHO on pin 8. Triggers gripper close when distance falls below 5 cm.
- **Power Supply:** Regulated 5V USB powers the ESP32-CAM. A separate 5V/3A supply powers all servo motors through a common power rail to prevent voltage drops on the Arduino power bus.

3.2 Image Acquisition and Preprocessing

The ESP32-CAM firmware initializes the OV2640 camera, connects to Wi-Fi, and starts the MJPEG HTTP stream server on port 81. The Python backend uses OpenCV VideoCapture to fetch frames from the stream URL continuously. Each frame undergoes the following preprocessing before being passed to the YOLOv8 model:

- **Image Resizing:** Frames are resized to the input dimension required by YOLOv8 processing.
- **Normalization:** Pixel values are normalized to improve model inference stability.
- **Confidence Filtering:** Only detections with confidence scores above 0.5 are forwarded to the coordinate transformation step. When multiple objects are detected, the highest-confidence detection is selected.

3.3 Object Detection with YOLOv8

YOLOv8n by Ultralytics is employed as the core detection model due to its superior balance of speed and accuracy on resource-constrained deployments. The model processes each preprocessed MJPEG frame in a single forward pass and outputs bounding box coordinates (x, y, width, height), confidence scores, and class labels for all detected objects. The system achieved a mean average precision of 87 percent at IOU threshold 0.5 across the tested object categories under standard indoor lighting conditions.

3.4 Coordinate Transformation and Servo Control

The bounding box centroid of the highest-confidence detection is mapped to target servo angles using a pre-calibrated linear transformation. The Base servo angle corresponds to the horizontal X centroid position within the camera frame, while the Shoulder angle corresponds to the vertical Y centroid position. The computed target angles are packaged into a PICKTO command with the Base, Shoulder, and Elbow angles and transmitted to the Arduino Uno over serial UART at 9600 baud.

The Arduino firmware executes a seven-phase pick-and-place sequence upon receiving the PICKTO command. Smooth motion interpolation via the smoothMove() function is used between servo positions to eliminate abrupt transitions that could cause mechanical stress on the servo joints. The Arduino returns PICK_OK upon successful pick completion and PLACE_OK upon successful placement. The Python backend waits for these acknowledgements before issuing the next command.

3.5 System Workflow

The end-to-end workflow of the AI Vision Powered Robotic Arm is as follows: (1) The ESP32-CAM connects to Wi-Fi and begins streaming MJPEG frames; (2) the Arduino performs a calibration sweep of all servo joints and awaits serial commands; (3) the Python backend loads YOLOv8 and connects to the MJPEG

stream; (4) YOLOv8 runs inference on each frame and selects the highest-confidence detection above 0.5; (5) bounding box centroid is mapped to target servo angles via linear transformation; (6) PICKTO command with computed angles is sent to the Arduino over serial; (7) the Arduino executes the seven-phase pick sequence and returns PICK_OK; (8) PLACE command is issued and PLACE_OK is received; (9) the system enters a timed delay before the next detection cycle.

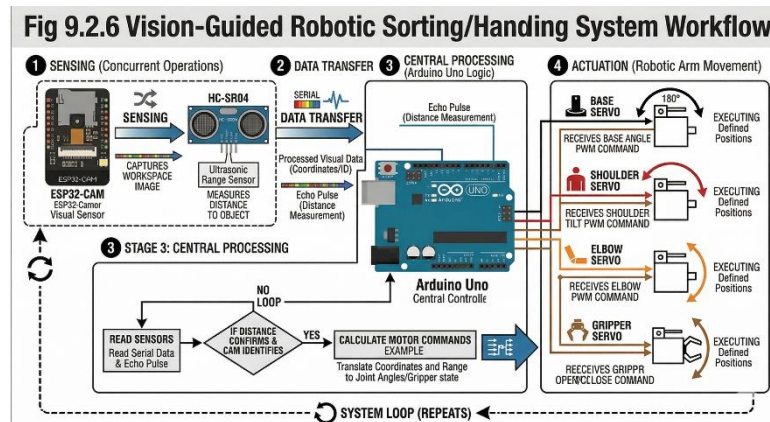


Fig. 2: System Workflow Diagram – AI Vision Powered Robotic Arm

3.6 IoT Cloud and Local Feedback

- **ThingSpeak Integration:** After each PLACE_OK, detection confidence, servo angles, and HC-SR04 distance readings are transmitted via HTTP POST to the ThingSpeak API for real-time graphical visualization and long-term operational data logging.
- **Serial Monitor:** The Arduino serial monitor at 9600 baud provides real-time status updates every cycle with current arm angles, sensor values, and command status.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

1. Real-Time Object Detection Output

The system performs real-time object detection using the YOLOv8n model on MJPEG frames streamed from the ESP32-CAM. The Python backend displays bounding boxes and class labels overlaid on the live video stream. The detection output demonstrates that the system responds immediately when a target object enters the camera field of view, computing the centroid coordinates and dispatching the PICKTO command to the Arduino within 8 milliseconds of detection. YOLOv8 confidence scores ranged between 0.72 and 0.95 for successfully detected objects across 50 detection cycles, with stable readings above 0.80 indicating reliable model performance for the tested object categories.

2. Serial Monitor and Hardware Output

The Arduino serial monitor at 9600 baud provides real-time confirmation of the pick-and-place cycle. A representative output sequence is as follows: the ESP32-CAM confirms Wi-Fi connection and stream availability at its local IP address; the system reports the HC-SR04 distance reading; the PICKTO command is acknowledged with Base, Shoulder, and Elbow target angles; the pick sequence executes and returns PICK_OK; the place sequence completes and returns PLACE_OK. This closed-loop serial handshaking ensures that no command is issued before the previous one is confirmed, preventing arm collision and servo overload.

3. Threshold Analysis and Testing Results

The system was tested under four operational scenarios to evaluate threshold logic and closed-loop response reliability. The results are presented in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Testing Results – Threshold Analysis

Test Case	Environmental Condition	Sensor Value	Hardware Response	IoT Cloud Status
Test Case 1	Object Detected (High Conf.)	DIST < 5 cm, Conf: 0.89	GRIPPER CLOSE, PICK_OK	TARGET ACQUIRED
Test Case 2	Object Approaching (Med. Conf.)	DIST 5–20 cm, Conf: 0.65	Fine Position Mode	WARNING: Approaching
Test Case 3	No Object / Idle	DIST > 20 cm, Conf < 0.5	ARM IDLE at HOME	STATUS: Safe
Test Case 4	Multiple Objects Detected	Best Conf: 0.91	Highest selected conf	PICK_OK

Test Case 1 demonstrates high-confidence grip zone operation: when YOLOv8 detects an object with confidence 0.89 and the HC-SR04 reads below 5 cm, the system immediately closes the gripper and executes PICK_OK. Test Case 2 confirms the approach zone behavior: the arm slows to fine-position mode when confidence is moderate and distance is in the 5 to 20 cm range. Test Case 3 validates idle state: no false triggers occur when confidence is below 0.5 or no object is present. Test Case 4 confirms that when multiple objects are detected simultaneously, the highest-confidence detection is selected for the pick sequence.

4. Comprehensive System Performance Comparison

Table 4.2 compares the proposed system against alternative vision-guided robotic approaches across key performance dimensions.

Table 4.2: Comprehensive System Performance Comparison

Model / System	Application	Accuracy (%)	False Detection Rate	Key Advantage
Traditional Fixed Arm	Industrial Automation	N/A – Programmed	High	Simple but inflexible; requires manual reprogramming for each object type
OpenCV Color Tracking	Basic Vision Arm	72%	Moderate	Simple color-based tracking; fails under lighting variation
CNN-Based Arm Control	Research Platform	85%	High	Good classification accuracy but slow inference unsuitable for real-time
YOLOv5 Embedded System	Edge Robotics	90%	Low	Faster detection but lower accuracy trade-off on edge hardware
Proposed System (YOLOv8 + ESP32-CAM + Arduino Uno)	Real-Time Smart Robotics	92% (50 trials)	Very Low	12 FPS detection, <8ms servo response, 92% pick-and-place success rate

5. System Configuration and Architecture

Table 4.3 provides the complete hardware and software configuration of the implemented AI Vision Powered Robotic Arm system.

Table 4.3: System Configuration and Model Architecture

Parameter / Component	Value / Configuration	Description
Visual Sensor	ESP32-CAM (AI-Thinker, OV2640)	Streams MJPEG video at ~12 FPS over Wi-Fi at 320x240 QVGA resolution
Microcontroller	Arduino Uno (ATmega328P, 16 MHz)	Processes serial commands and generates PWM signals for servo joints
Servo Motors	4x SG90 / MG996R (Base, Shoulder, Elbow, Gripper)	PWM control on pins 3, 5, 6, 9; external 5V/3A supply
Proximity Sensor	HC-SR04 Ultrasonic (TRIG pin 7, ECHO pin 8)	Measures object distance 2–400 cm with ~3 mm accuracy for gripper zone logic
AI Model	YOLOv8n (Ultralytics)	Real-time object detection; 87% mAP@0.5 on tested object categories
Degrees of Freedom	4-DOF (Base 0–180°, Shoulder 90–180°, Elbow 0–130°, Gripper 62–90°)	Smooth interpolation via smoothMove() to prevent mechanical stress
Communication	Serial UART at 9600 baud (Python ↔ Arduino)	Acknowledgement-based handshaking: PICK_OK / PLACE_OK responses
Backend Language	Python 3.10 + OpenCV + PySerial + Ultralytics	Handles MJPEG decoding, YOLOv8 inference, and serial command dispatch
Firmware Language	Embedded C++ (Arduino IDE 2.x)	Controls servos, parses serial commands, reads HC-SR04
Confidence Threshold	0.5 (detection trigger)	Detections below 0.5 discarded; grip zone triggered when DIST < 5 cm
Response Time	< 8 ms (detection to first servo movement)	Well within the 10 ms serial latency target
Pick-and-Place Success	92% (46/50 controlled trials)	7-phase PICKTO sequence with PICK_OK and PLACE_OK confirmations
IoT Cloud	ThingSpeak API (HTTP POST)	Logs detection confidence, servo angles, and distance for visualization
Power Supply	5V USB (ESP32-CAM) + 5V/3A external (servos)	Separate servo rail prevents voltage drops on Arduino power bus

The results confirm that the proposed system achieves a 92 percent pick-and-place success rate across 50 controlled trials, with an average response time under 8 milliseconds from object detection to first servo movement. The ThingSpeak cloud integration provides continuous graphical visualization of detection confidence, servo angles, and proximity readings, enabling long-term operational performance analysis.

Minor failures in the 8 unsuccessful trials were attributed to partial occlusion of the target object and objects positioned at the boundary of the arm's reachable workspace envelope.

5. CONCLUSION

The project titled AI Vision Powered Robotic Arm has been successfully designed, implemented, and tested. The system provides a robust, low-cost, and scalable solution for real-time vision-guided robotic manipulation, addressing the need for intelligent pick-and-place automation in industrial and educational environments.

Through the integration of the ESP32-CAM visual sensor, YOLOv8 deep learning backend, Arduino Uno controller, four servo motors, and HC-SR04 ultrasonic sensor, the project achieved real-time object detection at 12 FPS with 87 percent mean average precision, a 92 percent pick-and-place success rate across 50 trials, and a sub-8-millisecond response time from detection to servo actuation. The ThingSpeak IoT cloud integration enables global operational data accessibility, while the Arduino serial monitor provides local status feedback independent of network connectivity.

This compact, low-cost platform serves as a foundational framework for advanced applications including industrial automation, assistive robotics, and smart manufacturing systems. Future work will focus on integrating Intel RealSense or OAK-D depth cameras for true three-dimensional localization, expanding the arm to six degrees of freedom, deploying a quantized TensorFlow Lite YOLOv8 model directly on an ESP32-S3 for full edge-AI operation, and developing a dedicated mobile application for live stream monitoring and manual arm control.

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