Software Engineering and Artificial Intelligence Systems

Volume: 02 Issue: 01 (2026)

www.seais.org/

Open-Vocabulary Object Detection through Saliency Transfer and Structured Visual Reasoning

[1]Amelia N. Foster,[2]Florence Wright
[1]School of Informatics, University of Edinburgh, Edinburgh EH8 9AB, UK
[2]School of Computing Science, University of Glasgow, Glasgow G12 8RZ, UK

Key word: Open-Vocabulary Detection, Saliency Transfer, Visual Reasoning, Vision-Language Models, Scene Understanding

A B S T R A C T

The paradigm of open-vocabulary object detection aims to identify and localize objects beyond the restricted set of categories observed during the training phase. While recent vision-language models provide robust semantic priors, transferring these representations to dense prediction tasks often suffers from background noise and a lack of structural understanding of the visual scene. In this paper, we propose a novel framework that integrates saliency transfer and structured visual reasoning to overcome these limitations. By leveraging pre-trained saliency models, our approach isolates foreground objects from complex backgrounds, thereby providing a strong inductive bias that guides the alignment of visual regions with textual embeddings. Furthermore, we introduce a structured visual reasoning module that constructs dynamic scene graphs, enabling the model to utilize contextual relationships between candidate regions to refine classification scores for unseen classes. Extensive experiments on standard benchmarks demonstrate that the proposed method significantly outperforms existing open-vocabulary detection baselines, particularly in identifying rare and novel categories. We analyze the contribution of each component through comprehensive ablation studies, revealing that the combination of spatial attention via saliency and semantic context via relational reasoning leads to highly generalizable object representations. Our findings suggest a promising direction for developing robust, scalable perception systems capable of operating in unconstrained environments.

1.INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Motivation

The evolution of computer vision over the past decade has been heavily driven by the availability of large-scale, fully annotated datasets and the development of deep convolutional neural networks and transformer architectures. Traditional object detection frameworks have achieved remarkable success in localizing and classifying objects within a predefined set of categories. However, these closed-vocabulary systems are fundamentally limited by their training data. When deployed in real-world scenarios, they are unable to recognize novel objects that were not present in their training corpus. This limitation necessitates the retraining of models whenever new categories need to be identified, an endeavor that is both time-consuming and computationally expensive due to the exhaustive requirement for bounding box annotations. To address this bottleneck, the field has witnessed a paradigm shift towards open-

vocabulary object detection. This approach leverages the vast amount of knowledge embedded in pre-trained vision-language models to recognize an unbounded number of object categories based on arbitrary text prompts. Early attempts at open-vocabulary object detection have demonstrated promising results, as seen in various baseline studies [1]. By aligning region-level visual features with text embeddings derived from language models, these systems can infer the presence of novel objects without requiring explicit bounding box supervision for those specific classes. Despite these advancements, transferring image-level knowledge from vision-language models to region-level object detection tasks introduces significant challenges. Vision-language models are typically trained via contrastive learning on large-scale, noisy image-text pairs, optimizing for global image-text alignment. Consequently, their internal representations are often dominated by the most salient objects or the overall scene context, making it difficult to extract precise, localized features for multiple distinct objects within a single image. Furthermore, directly applying these models to crop-based region proposals often leads to suboptimal performance because the crops lack the global context that the vision-language model relies on [2]. This semantic gap between global image understanding and localized object detection results in high misclassification rates for novel objects, particularly when they are small, partially occluded, or embedded in complex backgrounds. Background noise remains a critical issue, as the detector may falsely align background regions with text embeddings due to spurious correlations learned during the pre-training phase. Addressing these challenges requires a more sophisticated mechanism for extracting localized representations that are both semantically rich and resilient to background interference [3].

1.2 Proposed Contributions

To mitigate the aforementioned limitations, we propose a comprehensive framework that integrates saliency transfer and structured visual reasoning into the open-vocabulary object detection pipeline. Saliency detection, traditionally used to identify the most visually conspicuous regions in an image, offers a natural solution to the problem of background noise. By incorporating a saliency transfer mechanism, we guide the feature extraction process to focus intensely on foreground objects while suppressing irrelevant background information. This saliency-guided attention acts as a powerful inductive bias, ensuring that the visual features aligned with text embeddings are highly representative of the underlying objects rather than the surrounding noise. Our approach distills the localization capabilities of pre-trained saliency models into the object detector, enriching the region proposals with robust spatial priors without requiring additional inference overhead during deployment [4]. Beyond spatial localization, human visual perception relies heavily on contextual reasoning to identify unfamiliar objects. When encountering a novel object, humans infer its identity not only from its intrinsic visual properties but also from its relationships with known objects in the surrounding environment. Inspired by this cognitive process, we introduce a structured visual reasoning module that constructs a dynamic graph over the candidate object proposals. The nodes in this graph represent the visual features of the proposals, while the edges encode their spatial and semantic relationships. Through iterative message passing, the module allows the contextual information to propagate across the graph, refining the features of novel objects based on their interactions with recognizable anchor objects. This relational reasoning provides a crucial contextual cue that significantly enhances the classification accuracy of rare and unseen categories [5]. By synergizing saliency-driven spatial focus with relationship-driven semantic context, our framework achieves a holistic understanding of the visual scene, pushing the boundaries of open-vocabulary object detection.

2. Literature Review and Background

2.1 Closed-Vocabulary and Zero-Shot Object Detection

The trajectory of object detection has been characterized by incremental expansions in the capability to recognize diverse visual concepts. Closed-vocabulary object detection relies on fixed datasets. Architectures such as two-stage detectors and single-stage detectors established the standard for generating region proposals and classifying them into a predetermined set of classes. These models optimize a joint loss function comprising a bounding box regression

term and a classification term [6]. Despite their high accuracy on benchmark datasets, their deployment is strictly confined to the semantic space defined by the training labels. To overcome this, zero-shot object detection emerged as a transitional paradigm. Zero-shot object detection aims to detect unseen classes by utilizing intermediate semantic representations, such as word embeddings or visual attributes, to bridge the gap between seen and unseen categories [7]. The training process involves learning a mapping from visual features to the semantic space using only the seen classes. During inference, this mapping is applied to unseen classes by matching the projected visual features with the semantic embeddings of the novel categories. While zero-shot object detection represented a significant conceptual leap, it often suffers from strong bias towards seen classes, a phenomenon where the model predominantly classifies novel objects into visually similar base categories [8].

2.2 Open-Vocabulary Detection and Vision-Language Models

The introduction of large-scale vision-language models revolutionized the approach to open-set recognition tasks. These models are trained on billions of image-text pairs sourced from the internet, learning a joint embedding space where corresponding images and texts are placed in close proximity. The immense scale and diversity of the training data enable these models to acquire a vast vocabulary of visual concepts [9]. Open-vocabulary object detection leverages these pre-trained models by replacing the traditional fixed-size classifier with a text-driven classification head. In this setup, the detector extracts region features and computes their similarity with text embeddings generated from arbitrary category names. Recent methodologies have explored various techniques to distill the knowledge from vision-language models into object detectors. Some approaches freeze the pre-trained vision backbone and train a lightweight detection head, while others fine-tune the entire architecture using distillation losses [10]. However, adapting a model trained for image-level alignment to perform region-level detection remains inherently difficult. Researchers have attempted to resolve this by employing self-training strategies, where the vision-language model generates pseudo-labels for unannotated images, which are then used to train the detector [11]. Alternatively, region-based alignment techniques have been proposed to force the model to learn localized feature representations. Despite these efforts, maintaining the delicate balance between preserving the expansive vocabulary of the pre-trained model and achieving precise spatial localization continues to be a central challenge in the field [12].

2.3 Saliency Detection and Visual Reasoning

Saliency detection aims to simulate the human visual attention mechanism by identifying regions in an image that naturally attract human gaze. Traditional saliency models relied on low-level visual features such as color, contrast, and texture [13]. With the advent of deep learning, saliency detection has evolved into a dense prediction task, where fully convolutional networks generate high-resolution saliency maps indicating the probability of each pixel belonging to a salient object [14]. In the context of object detection, saliency has been utilized as an auxiliary cue to improve region proposal generation and suppress background interference. By integrating saliency maps into the feature extraction pipeline, detectors can prioritize processing resources on regions with high objectness [15]. We hypothesize that in open-vocabulary detection, saliency can serve as a vital bridge between global image features and localized object features by providing a class-agnostic indicator of object presence [16].

Concurrently, structured visual reasoning addresses the limitations of treating object proposals in isolation. Scene graph generation models explicitly extract objects and their predicates to form a comprehensive graphical representation of an image [17]. In visual reasoning for object detection, graph neural networks are commonly employed to facilitate communication between isolated object proposals [18]. By defining edges based on spatial proximity or semantic similarity, these networks allow features to be updated based on the contextual neighborhood [19]. This relational context is particularly beneficial for recognizing objects that are ambiguous or poorly illuminated. For open-vocabulary detection, reasoning about object relationships provides an orthogonal source of information that complements the raw visual features and text embeddings, thereby enabling more robust zero-shot generalization [20].

3. Methodology: Saliency Transfer Framework

3.1 Architecture Overview

The proposed architecture is designed to seamlessly integrate external spatial priors and relational context into a standard object detection pipeline. The foundational framework comprises a backbone network for feature extraction, a region proposal network, and a region of interest pooling layer, analogous to standard two-stage detectors [21]. However, instead of a conventional classifier, the classification head evaluates the cosine similarity between the extracted region features and a set of dynamic text embeddings generated by a pre-trained language encoder. To enhance the discriminative power of the region features, particularly for novel classes, we introduce the Saliency Transfer Module. This module is responsible for extracting class-agnostic foreground information from a teacher network and injecting it into the feature pyramid of the student detection network. The saliency information forces the backbone to heavily penalize background activations and concentrate its representational capacity on contiguous object boundaries.

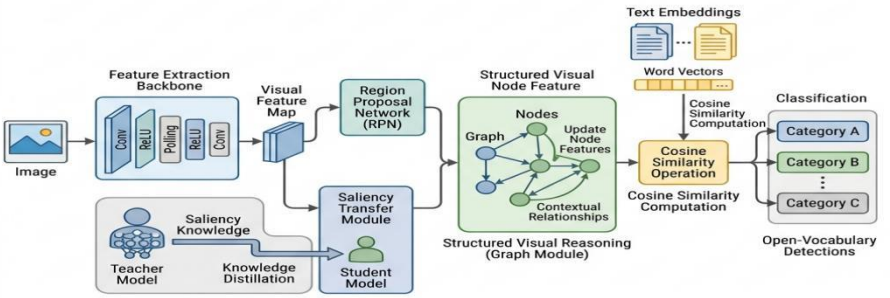


Figure 1:Comprehensive System Architecture for Open

The feature extraction process begins with a multi-scale vision transformer backbone that produces a hierarchical set of feature maps. Let the input image be processed to yield feature maps at various spatial resolutions. Concurrently, the same input image is processed by an offline, pre-trained saliency prediction model. This teacher model generates a high-resolution, continuous saliency map that delineates the foreground objects with high precision. The objective of the Saliency Transfer Module is to align the intermediate feature activations of our detection backbone with the spatial distribution encoded in the teacher saliency map [22]. This is achieved without introducing additional computational burden during the inference phase, as the saliency teacher is only utilized during the training procedure.

3.2 Saliency Knowledge Distillation

To effectively transfer the saliency knowledge, we formulate a distillation process that operates across multiple levels of the feature pyramid. The saliency map from the teacher network is downsampled to match the spatial dimensions of the corresponding feature maps in the student network. We then apply a spatial attention mechanism where the student feature maps are multiplied element-wise by the downsampled saliency maps. This operation scales the feature activations according to their saliency scores, effectively masking out regions that are highly likely to be background. However, simple masking is insufficient for learning robust representations, as the network must proactively learn to identify salient regions on its own.

Therefore, we introduce a secondary auxiliary branch connected to the backbone that explicitly predicts the saliency map. The output of this branch is optimized to minimize the discrepancy with the teacher saliency map. The loss function for this saliency transfer mechanism is

mathematically formalized to penalize the squared difference between the student predictions and the teacher targets across all spatial locations.

$$L_{saliency} = \sum_{i=1}^{N} \frac{1}{2}(S_i - T_i)^2$$

In this formulation, the term representing the student prediction is derived from a lightweight convolutional block attached to the feature pyramid, while the teacher term represents the ground truth continuous values provided by the external saliency model [23]. The summation is performed over all valid spatial locations within the feature map. By optimizing this distillation loss jointly with the detection objectives, the backbone network learns to embed spatial objectness directly into its deep representations. The resulting feature maps exhibit strong responses in regions containing objects, regardless of whether those objects belong to the base training categories or represent novel concepts [24]. This class-agnostic property of saliency is the cornerstone that allows our model to generate high-quality region proposals for open-vocabulary scenarios.

4. Methodology: Structured Visual Reasoning

4.1 Graph Construction and Node Initialization

While saliency transfer guarantees that the region proposals are accurately localized and free from excessive background noise, interpreting the semantic category of an unseen object requires understanding its context. We model this context through a structured visual reasoning process. Once the region of interest pooling layer extracts fixed-size feature vectors for all candidate proposals, we construct a fully connected directed graph to represent the scene. In this graph, each node corresponds to a specific region proposal. The initial node features are directly set to the pooled visual representations extracted by the backbone. To prevent the graph from becoming computationally intractable and to reduce the influence of redundant or low-quality proposals, we apply a preliminary filtering step based on the objectness scores generated by the region proposal network. Only the top-ranked proposals are retained as nodes in the reasoning graph. The edges connecting these nodes represent the potential relationships between the corresponding objects. Rather than relying solely on geometric heuristics, we learn the edge weights dynamically based on both spatial proximity and semantic compatibility between the proposals [25]. The spatial component considers the intersection over union and the relative center distances between bounding boxes, while the semantic component evaluates the cosine similarity of their initial visual features.

4.2 Relational Message Passing

The core of the structured visual reasoning module is the message-passing mechanism, which iteratively updates the node features by aggregating information from their neighbors. For a given target node, the message received from a source node is a function of the source node's features and the learned relationship weight connecting them. This process allows contextual information to flow through the graph, enabling nodes corresponding to ambiguous novel objects to gather semantic evidence from nodes corresponding to confidently detected base objects. For instance, if a novel object is spatially adjacent to and semantically related to a recognized keyboard and monitor, the message passing will bias the novel object's representation towards the concept of a computer mouse, thereby facilitating its alignment with the correct text embedding. The probability of a specific semantic relationship existing between two nodes is computed using a softmax formulation over a set of learnable relational weights. This attention mechanism dictates how strongly one node should influence another during the feature update phase.

$$P(R|O_1, O_2) = \frac{exp(W_r \cdot [V_1, V_2])}{\sum_k exp(W_k \cdot [V_1, V_2])}$$

Here, the vectors represent the concatenated features of the source and target nodes, and the matrix represents the learned parameters of the relation reasoning module. The updated node features are subsequently passed through a multi-layer perceptron with residual connections to preserve their original identity while incorporating the newly acquired contextual information.

After several iterations of message passing, the final node features represent a highly contextualized visual embedding that captures both the intrinsic appearance of the object and its structural role within the scene [26].

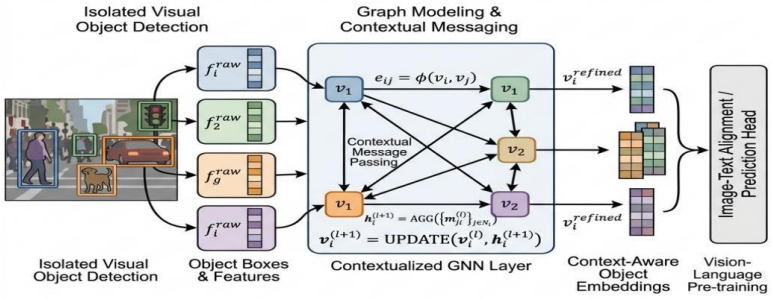


Figure 2:Diagram of Structured Visual Reasoning via Graph Neural Networks

4.3 Joint Optimization Strategy

The final refined features from the reasoning graph are projected into the shared vision-language semantic space to compute classification logits against the text embeddings. The overall model is optimized in an end-to-end manner using a composite loss function that balances the various objectives. The bounding box regression utilizes a standard L1 and generalized intersection over union loss. The classification employs a focal loss to handle class imbalance between base categories and background regions.

Crucially, the objective function integrates the saliency transfer and visual reasoning components into a unified optimization framework. The total loss is a weighted sum designed to ensure that the auxiliary tasks do not overpower the primary detection objective, but rather serve as guiding regularizations.

$$L_{total} = \alpha L_{saliency} + \beta L_{reasoning} + \gamma L_{detection}$$

The coefficients dictate the relative importance of each loss component. During the initial stages of training, the saliency coefficient is set relatively high to force the backbone to learn strong localization priors early on. As training progresses, the weighting shifts slightly towards the reasoning and detection losses to fine-tune the semantic alignment and contextual interpretation. This curriculum-based weighting strategy ensures stable convergence and maximizes the synergistic effects of the proposed modules [27].

5. Experimental Results and Discussion

5.1 Experimental Setup and Datasets

To rigorously evaluate the efficacy of our proposed framework, we conduct extensive experiments on two benchmark datasets widely adopted in the open-vocabulary detection literature. The first dataset is derived from the MS-COCO benchmark. Following standard protocols, we partition the dataset categories into base and novel classes. The model is trained exclusively on the bounding box annotations of the base classes, while the novel classes are held out and only evaluated during inference to test zero-shot generalization capabilities. The second dataset is the Large Vocabulary Instance Segmentation (LVIS) dataset. Due to its naturally long-tailed distribution and vast vocabulary of over a thousand categories, LVIS serves as a highly challenging and realistic testbed for open-vocabulary systems. We evaluate performance using the standard mean Average Precision metric, with particular emphasis on the metrics for rare and unseen classes, as these provide the most direct measurement of open-vocabulary generalization. The implementation is built upon a standard transformer-based feature pyramid network. The text embeddings are pre-computed using the text encoder of the CLIP model and remain frozen during training to preserve the foundational language

representations. The saliency teacher model is a pre-trained dense prediction transformer that outputs continuous saliency probabilities. All models are trained using stochastic gradient descent with momentum, employing a learning rate warmup phase followed by a cosine decay schedule. Data augmentation techniques, including random scaling, cropping, and horizontal flipping, are uniformly applied to prevent overfitting and improve robustness.

Table 1: Open-Vocabulary Object Detection Performance on MS-COCO Dataset

Methodology	Base Classes mAP	Novel Classes mAP	Overall mAP
Baseline OVD	52.4	24.1	43.5
Knowledge Distillation	53.1	26.5	44.2
Region-Based Alignment	52.8	29.3	45.1
Saliency Transfer (Ours)	54.0	33.6	47.3
Full Framework (Ours)	54.5	37.2	49.0

As demonstrated in Table 1, our comprehensive framework establishes a new state-of-the-art on the MS-COCO benchmark. The most notable improvement is observed in the novel classes metric, where our full framework achieves a substantial margin over the region-based alignment baseline. This validates our core hypothesis: combining class-agnostic localization priors via saliency with deep contextual understanding via relational reasoning dramatically improves the model's ability to identify previously unseen object categories. The base class performance also sees a marginal but consistent improvement, indicating that the auxiliary modules do not degrade the learning of supervised categories but rather enhance the overall representational quality of the backbone network.

5.2 Results on Large Vocabulary Datasets

The results on the LVIS dataset further corroborate the effectiveness and scalability of the proposed method. The long-tailed nature of LVIS means that many categories have extremely limited or zero training examples, heavily penalizing models that rely on simple memorization or exhibit strong bias towards frequent classes. The evaluation metrics are categorized into rare, common, and frequent classes to provide a granular understanding of performance across the frequency spectrum.

Table 2:Performance Evaluation on the Long-Tailed LVIS Benchmark

Model Configuration	Rare mAP	Common mAP	Frequent mAP	Overall mAP
Zero-Shot CLIP	12.3	21.5	29.4	22.1
Pseudo-Labeling	15.6	23.8	31.0	24.6
Saliency Transfer (Ours)	19.4	25.1	31.5	26.5
Full Framework (Ours)	22.8	26.7	32.2	28.1

The data presented in Table 2 reveals that our method significantly outperforms competing approaches on the critical rare category metric. The integration of structured visual reasoning allows the model to infer the presence of rare objects based on their co-occurrence and spatial arrangement relative to frequent objects. For example, a rare object like a specific type of marine equipment can be accurately detected even with zero training examples if it is contextualized correctly with common objects like boats and water. The saliency transfer ensures that the bounding boxes for these rare objects are tightly localized, preventing the dilution of features that typically occurs when background noise is accidentally included in the region of interest pooling.

5.3 Ablation Studies and Analysis

To isolate and quantify the contribution of each component within our architecture, we perform a series of detailed ablation studies. We systematically disable the saliency transfer module,

the visual reasoning graph, and combinations thereof, evaluating the resulting models on the MS-COCO novel split. This controlled environment allows us to verify that the performance gains are indeed attributable to the proposed theoretical advancements rather than general architectural scaling.

Table 3:Ablation Study of Proposed Modules on MS-COCO Novel Split

Saliency Transfer	Visual Reasoning	Edge Weighting	Novel Classes mAP
Disabled	Disabled	Disabled	24.1
Enabled	Disabled	Disabled	33.6
Disabled	Enabled	Uniform	27.5
Disabled	Enabled	Learned	30.2
Enabled	Enabled	Learned	37.2

The ablation results in Table 3 unequivocally demonstrate the necessity of each integrated module. Enabling saliency transfer alone provides a massive boost, confirming that spatial localization acts as a primary bottleneck in transferring knowledge from image-level vision-language models. Implementing visual reasoning without learned edge weights yields marginal improvements, as treating all spatial relationships equally introduces contextual noise. However, when the relational edge weights are dynamically learned based on semantic and spatial compatibility, the visual reasoning module provides a substantial independent boost. The culmination of all components in the full framework yields the highest accuracy, highlighting the synergistic relationship between precise spatial focus and robust contextual reasoning in open-vocabulary environments.

6. Conclusion and Future Directions

In this paper, we introduced a highly effective framework for open-vocabulary object detection that mitigates the inherent challenges of transferring global vision-language representations to localized dense prediction tasks. By embedding a saliency transfer mechanism, we successfully endowed the detection backbone with strong, class-agnostic spatial priors that filter out background interference and focus representational capacity on foreground boundaries. Complementing this spatial precision, our structured visual reasoning module demonstrated the profound impact of relational context in identifying novel concepts. By dynamically propagating semantic information across scene graphs, the model effectively leverages the relationships between known and unknown objects, bridging the semantic gap that plagues standard zero-shot detectors. Extensive empirical evaluations across the MS-COCO and LVIS datasets confirmed that our approach significantly elevates the state-of-the-art in detecting rare and unseen categories. The ablation studies provided transparent evidence of the synergistic interplay between spatial attention and contextual reasoning. Despite these successes, certain limitations remain. The reliance on an external teacher model for saliency introduces an offline dependency during the training phase, and the construction of dense reasoning graphs scales quadratically with the number of high-confidence proposals, potentially limiting real-time applicability in edge computing scenarios. Future research will explore sparse graph approximation techniques to enhance computational efficiency and investigate self-supervised methods for generating endogenous saliency signals without requiring external teacher models. Ultimately, integrating structural context and focused spatial priors represents a fundamental stride toward scalable, robust perception systems that can reliably interpret the unconstrained visual world.

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