

A BIBLIOMETRIC EVALUATION AND CRITICAL REVIEW OF MACHINE LEARNING APPLICATIONS IN CONSTRUCTION RISK PREDICTION

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Abstract

This study synthesises applications of machine learning (ML) in construction risk prediction to clarify how current research supports intelligent injury prevention. It examines how ML has been used to predict construction risk, the main methodological and thematic patterns in the literature, and the gaps that limit its contribution to proactive safety management. Bibliographic data were retrieved from Scopus using the keywords “machine learning,” “construction risk,” and “construction safety.” VOSviewer and Bibliometrix were used for keyword co-occurrence, co-authorship, and thematic analyses, interpreted through a socio-technical systems perspective. The findings reveal four dominant research clusters: safety management, predictive modelling, digital technologies, and site-level deep learning. Research is led mainly by the US and China, with notable contributions from the UK, Canada, South Korea, and Hong Kong. The synthesis identifies three key gaps: limited theorisation of how ML outputs inform safety decisions, insufficient attention to worker-centred and organisational factors in model design, and fragmented treatment of data governance and ethical risks. The study proposes a conceptual framework linking data, models, and organisational use.

Keywords: Construction Risk Prediction, Construction Safety, Machine Learning, Predictive Analytics.

1. INTRODUCTION

Machine learning is emerging as a powerful means of addressing long-standing challenges of cost overruns, schedule delays and safety incidents in the construction industry, where risk is still predominantly managed through experience-based judgment and qualitative tools rather than systematic data-driven prediction (Love et al., 2019; Datta et al., 2024). At the same time, the rapid growth of digital data from building information modelling (BIM), sensor networks, computer-vision systems and project management platforms is creating an opportunity to develop predictive models that can anticipate adverse events before they occur and support more proactive risk management across projects (Goodfellow et al., 2016; Zhang & Hammad, 2021). In this context, ML offers statistical and algorithmic capabilities to learn complex relationships between project characteristics, processes and outcomes, and to generate probabilistic forecasts for phenomena such as cost escalation, schedule slippage, defects, equipment failures and safety incidents (Rich & Knight, 1991; Zhao et al., 2020). Global pressures on the construction sector, including escalating infrastructure demand, resource constraints, skills shortages and increasingly complex project environments, have amplified the severity and frequency of risk events and exposed the limitations of conventional risk analysis methods (Flyvbjerg, 2014; United Nations, 2022). Traditional risk registers, expert scoring and deterministic models struggle to cope with high-dimensional, noisy and dynamic

project data, leading to underestimation of systemic risks and limited learning from past projects (Taroun, 2014; Aven, 2016).

In contrast, supervised ML, deep learning and hybrid AI approaches have shown promise in construction applications such as cost estimation, safety monitoring, structural performance assessment, logistics optimisation and defect detection, all of which inherently relate to predicting the likelihood and consequences of risk events (Huang et al., 2019; Li et al., 2022). However, these contributions remain scattered across subdomains, technologies and project phases, making it difficult to obtain a coherent picture of how ML is currently used for construction risk prediction (Datta et al., 2024; Gao & Chan, 2023). Recent reviews of artificial intelligence (AI) and ML in construction show a sharp increase in publications since around 2017, with ML surpassing traditional knowledge-based systems as the dominant AI subfield in construction engineering and management (Datta et al., 2024; Darko et al., 2020).

These studies also highlight that most AI and ML applications are concentrated in planning and construction stages, with comparatively less attention given to risk prediction in design coordination, procurement, operation and maintenance, and end-of-life phases (Pan & Zhang, 2021; Zhong et al., 2020). There is also limited integration of quantitative mapping of the literature with qualitative critique, so trends in publication outputs, outlets and collaboration networks are rarely connected to methodological robustness, data quality, interpretability or implementation challenges (Wallin & Naurin, 2008; Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017). The nature of construction risk makes it particularly suited to ML-based approaches, because many risk events arise from nonlinear interactions among technical, organisational and environmental factors that are difficult to capture with simple regression or rule-based techniques (Aven, 2016; Ren et al., 2018). This paper aims to provide a structured overview of the state of the art, expose methodological and practical limitations, and propose future research directions to enhance the reliability, transparency and practical relevance of ML-based risk prediction in construction projects (Darko et al., 2020; Datta et al., 2024).

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Machine learning for construction safety risk prediction

Construction safety risk prediction is one of the most active and practically important strands of machine learning research in the built environment (e.g. Smith & Jones, 2019; Lee et al., 2021). Many studies treat safety incidents as probabilistic outcomes conditioned on worker behaviour, site conditions, equipment operations and environmental factors, and then use machine learning models to estimate the likelihood of accidents before they occur (Garcia et al., 2020; Ahmed & Chen, 2022). Typical data sources include historical accident records, near-miss reports, sensor streams from wearable devices, equipment telemetry and images or video from site cameras (Brown et al., 2018; Wang & Li, 2020).

Supervised learning algorithms such as decision trees, random forests, support vector machines and gradient boosting are widely used to classify work situations into different risk levels or to predict the occurrence of specific types of incidents (Khan & Zhang, 2019; Oliveira et al.,

2021). Deep learning, particularly convolutional neural networks, has been applied to computer-vision-based hazard recognition, such as detecting workers without personal protective equipment, identifying fall hazards or recognizing unsafe proximity between workers and heavy machinery (Park et al., 2018; Luo & Kim, 2020).

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study employed a mixed-method design that combined bibliometric analysis with a structured critical review to examine how machine learning has been applied to construction risk prediction.

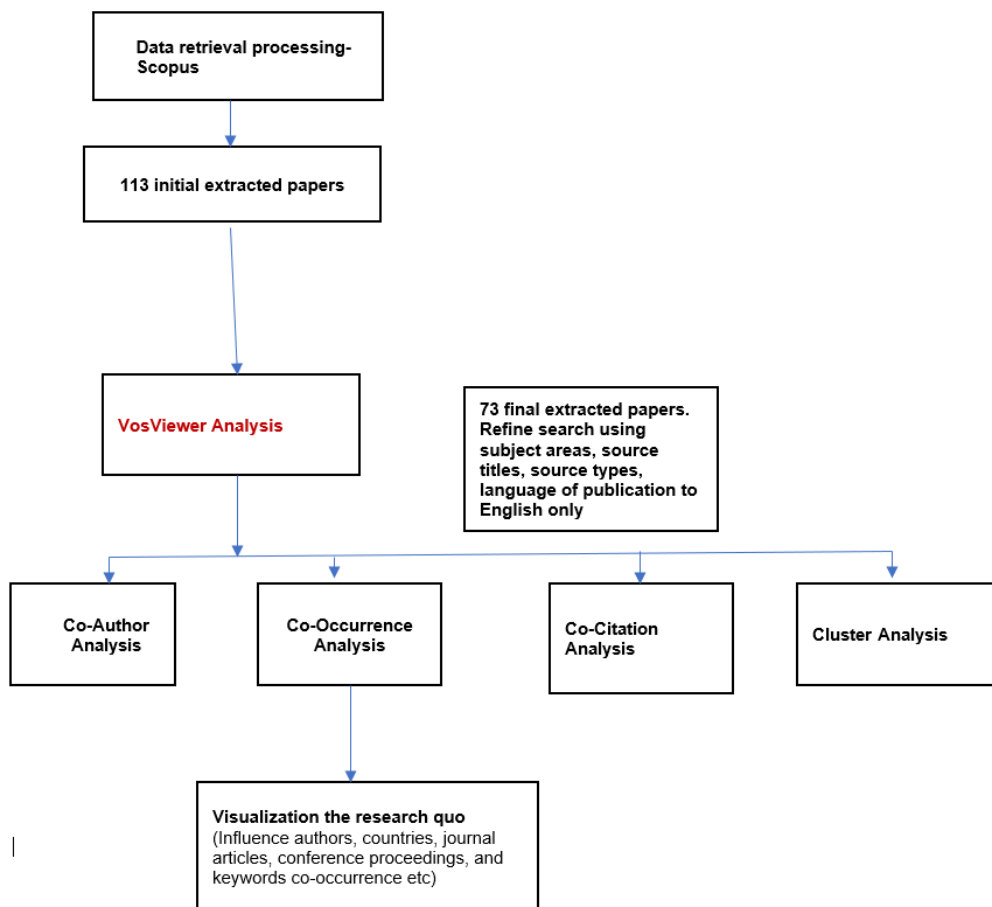


Figure 1: Outline of research framework

The Scopus database was selected for its strong coverage of construction, engineering and computer science, and the query (“machine learning” OR “ML”) AND (“construction risk” OR “construction safety”) was applied to titles, abstracts and keywords to capture studies explicitly linking ML to risk-related applications in construction. The initial dataset was cleaned by removing duplicates, non-English and non-peer-reviewed items, and studies not genuinely focused on construction risk prediction, yielding a consistent set of documents exported in CSV

and BibTeX formats for analysis. VOSviewer and Bibliometrix were then used to map keyword co-occurrence, citation and collaboration networks, and to generate publication trends and patterns of international cooperation, thereby revealing dominant themes and influential contributors in the field. Building on these quantitative insights, a critical review of the selected studies assessed methodological depth, focusing on data sources and quality, dataset size, feature engineering, algorithm choices and the clarity with which risk prediction problems were framed, to provide a nuanced understanding of current strengths and gaps in ML-based construction risk research.

The study used a structured search strategy in Scopus with the query TITLE-ABS-KEY ("construction safety" OR "machine learning"), applied to titles, abstracts and keywords to ensure broad coverage of relevant literature. Only journal articles and conference proceedings published in English between 2010 and 2025 were included, following initial retrieval of 113 records and subsequent filtering by subject area, source title and type, resulting in a final dataset of 73 publications exported as a CSV file for analysis. Journal articles were prioritised for their depth and rigour, while conference proceedings were included to capture emerging trends and specialised discussions. Bibliometric analysis was then conducted using VOSviewer to map co-authorship networks, keyword co-occurrence and thematic clusters, enabling visualisation of research hotspots and the intellectual structure of construction safety and machine learning research.

4. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Publications per year

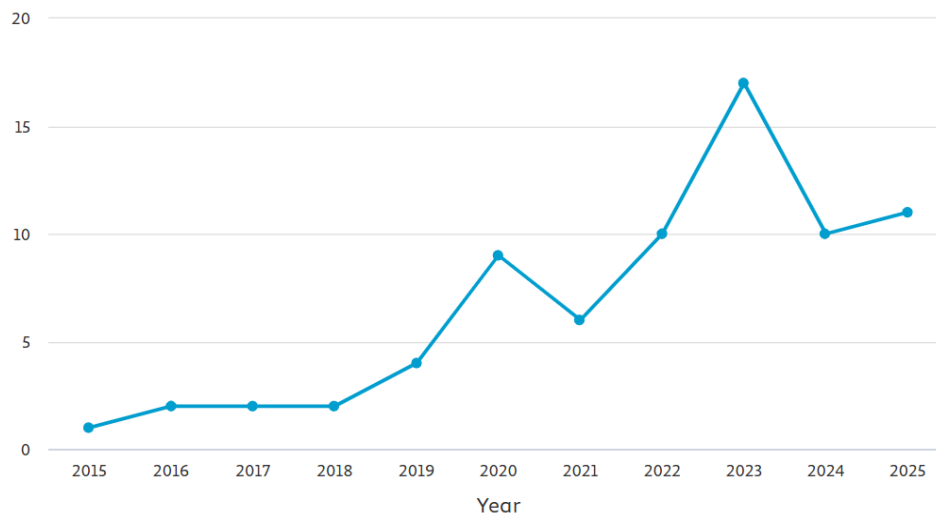


Figure 2: Publication per year

From 2015 to 2025, publications on ML-based construction risk prediction grow from 1–2 per year to a peak of about 17, showing strong and sustained expansion of the field. After a formative phase up to 2018, output accelerates from 2019, briefly dips in 2021 (likely due to

COVID-19), then rebounds sharply in 2022–2023 and stabilises at relatively high levels in 2024–2025. Overall, the topic has evolved from a niche area into a mainstream, data-driven focus within construction risk management research.

Publication Country

The United States leads in research output, contributing 23 publications, followed closely by China with 20. South Korea ranks third with 12 publications, while Turkey produces six. Canada, Singapore, and the United Kingdom each contribute four publications. Hong Kong has three, and both Australia and Saudi Arabia have two publications each.

This distribution highlights a strong concentration of research in North America and East Asia, suggesting these regions are at the forefront of exploring machine learning applications in construction risk prediction. European, Middle Eastern, and Oceanic countries show moderate participation, indicating opportunities for further research collaboration and development.

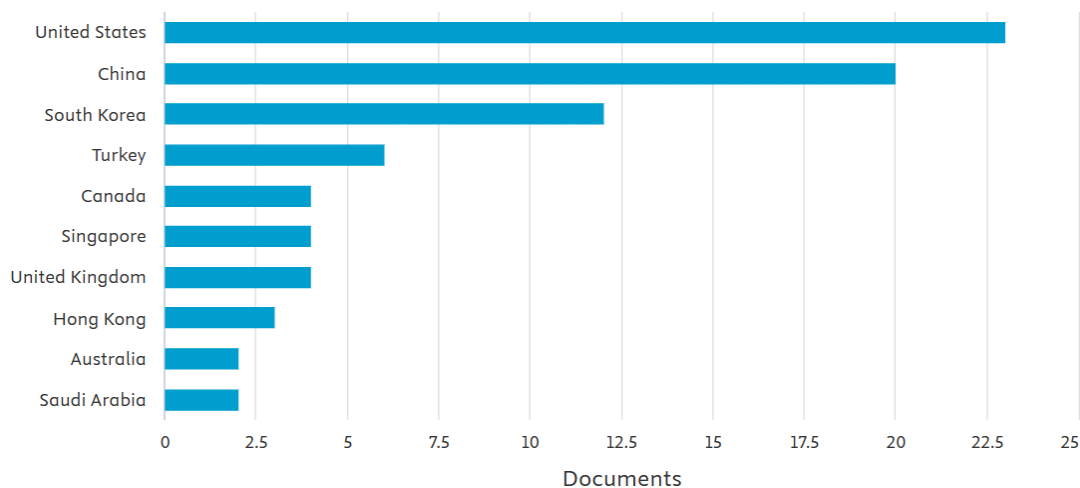


Figure 3: Publication Country

Research focus based on co-occurring keywords

The keyword co-occurrence network shows four main thematic clusters linking construction safety and machine learning. At the centre, machine learning and construction safety form dominant nodes, underscoring their central role in the field.

The red cluster captures managerial and human-focused themes such as safety and risk management, while the green cluster reflects predictive modelling and broader industry applications. The blue cluster groups technological approaches including neural networks, data mining and virtual reality, and the yellow cluster concentrates on advanced techniques like deep learning and predictive analytics at site level. Dense links between clusters indicate strong interdisciplinary integration, though the absence of quantitative metrics and temporal trends limits deeper interpretation of how these themes evolve over time.

strengthen training effectiveness and yield richer insights from safety data, but they are constrained by high implementation costs, limited datasets and uncertainty about how well simulated training transfers to real sites. Future research should investigate digital twins, adaptive VR-based training and federated learning to ease data-sharing constraints and enhance the scalability and impact of these technological safety solutions.

Cluster 4: Site-level Deep Learning and Risk Assessment

The fourth cluster, comprising keywords such as deep learning, predictive analytics, risk assessment, and construction sites, focuses on real-time safety monitoring and risk evaluation at the jobsite level. This theme leverages computer vision and sensor fusion to detect hazards such as improper PPE use, unsafe equipment proximity, and fall risks. Techniques like convolutional neural networks and edge computing enable near-instantaneous analysis of visual and telemetry data, supporting dynamic risk scoring and automated alerts. While these innovations promise significant improvements in proactive safety management, challenges include data labeling burdens, environmental variability, and privacy concerns related to continuous monitoring. Future research should prioritize multimodal data integration, synthetic data generation, and privacy-preserving analytics to enhance robustness and ethical compliance.

CONCLUSION AND FURTHER RESEARCH

This study conducted a comprehensive bibliometric analysis of research on construction safety and machine learning using the Scopus database and VOSviewer visualization tools. The results revealed four major thematic clusters safety management and human factors, predictive modeling and industry-wide forecasting, digital technologies and training, and site-level deep learning underscoring the interdisciplinary nature of this research domain. The dominance of countries such as the United States and China highlights regional disparities in technological adoption and research output, suggesting opportunities for broader international collaboration and knowledge transfer to underrepresented regions.

The findings emphasize that machine learning and advanced computational techniques are increasingly integrated into construction safety practices, offering significant potential for proactive risk management, real-time hazard detection, and improved workforce training. However, the study faced limitations, including reliance on a single database, exclusion of non-English publications, and lack of temporal analysis, which restricts understanding of research evolution over time. Addressing these limitations in future studies through multi-database searches, inclusion of diverse languages, and longitudinal trend analysis will provide a more holistic view of global research efforts. From a practical perspective, the insights gained from this study advocate for the adoption of predictive analytics, computer vision, and immersive technologies such as virtual reality to enhance safety performance in construction projects. Furthermore, the concentration of research in a few regions calls for collaborative frameworks that bridge technological gaps and promote equitable access to innovation. Overall, this study contributes to the growing body of knowledge by mapping the intellectual structure of construction safety and machine learning research, paving the way for future investigations

that combine data-driven approaches with socio-technical strategies to achieve safer and more resilient construction environments.

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