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Enhancing Photovoltaic System Efficiency Through Integrated Thermal Management and Optical Enhancement

Akash Daharwal [1*], Monika Daharwal [2]

[1] Assistant Professor, Wainganga College of Engineering and Management, Nagpur, India

[2] Technical Inspector, Western Coalfield Limited, Nagpur, India

Corresponding Author: * Akash Daharwal

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Abstract

The rapid growth in global energy demand, coupled with increasing concerns regarding climate change, fossil fuel depletion, and environmental sustainability, has accelerated the deployment of renewable energy technologies worldwide. Among the various renewable energy sources, solar energy has emerged as one of the most promising and widely adopted alternatives due to its abundance, accessibility, and environmentally friendly nature. Photovoltaic (PV) systems, which directly convert solar radiation into electrical energy, have experienced significant technological advancements and cost reductions over the past few decades. The present study investigates the enhancement of solar panel thermal efficiency through a comprehensive experimental evaluation of various photovoltaic thermal configurations incorporating active cooling.

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KEYWORDS: Photovoltaic-thermal (PV/T) systems, phase change materials (PCMs), and hybrid cooling strategies.

1. INTRODUCTION

Conventional photovoltaic (PV) panels experience efficiency degradation at elevated operating temperatures as a large portion of incident solar energy is dissipated as heat. To address this, numerous experimental studies have sought to recover waste heat and limit PV temperature rise by integrating thermal extraction techniques such as forced or natural convection cooling—using air, water, or nanofluids—reflective optical surfaces, hybridized system architectures (with phase change materials or thermoelectric modules), and advanced absorber/collector geometries. These approaches contribute not only to maintaining higher electrical outputs but also to directly utilizing the harvested thermal energy for heating or supplementary power generation, shown valid under various climatic and field conditions. To address these challenges, photovoltaic thermal (PV/T) systems have gained considerable attention as an effective approach for improving the overall utilization of solar energy. PV/T technology integrates photovoltaic modules with thermal energy recovery systems, enabling the simultaneous generation of electricity and useful heat from the same collector area. By extracting excess heat from the PV surface, these systems help maintain lower operating temperatures, thereby enhancing electrical efficiency while also producing thermal energy for residential, commercial, agricultural, and industrial applications.

Hybrid Cooling Strategies

1. Water and Phase Change Material (PCM) Cooling

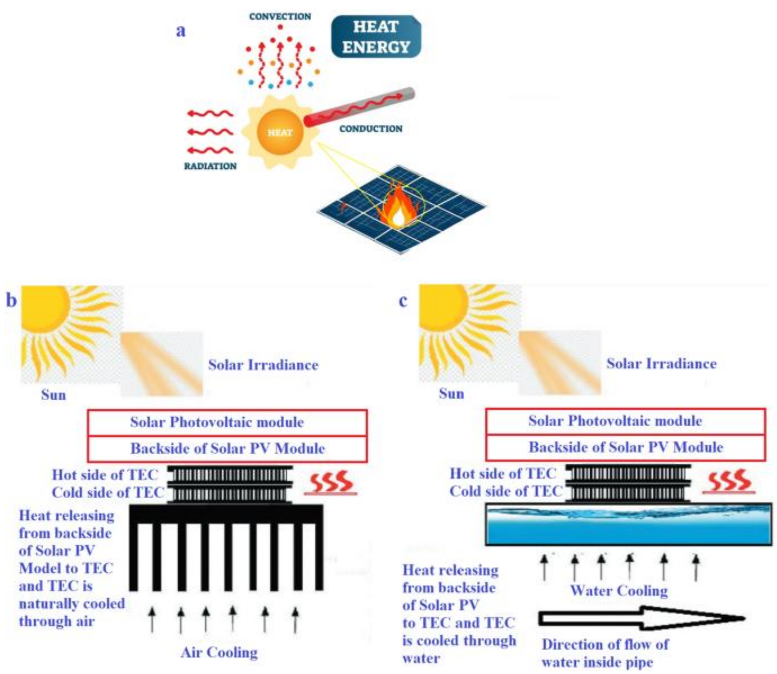
Active water cooling and passive PCM strategies have found prominent success in lowering PV surface temperatures. Direct water flows over or beneath PV panels dissipate heat rapidly, resulting in substantial efficiency improvements. For example, water trickling can increase system output by up to 15% under peak radiation, and even sustained annual gains of 5% are reported during hot weather compared to uncooled modules [11]. Passive systems using form-stable PCMs—such as polyethylene glycol/expanded graphite composites—maintain cell temperatures within the ideal operational range, leading to temperature reductions up to 11.5°C and efficiency improvements of 3.7% over baseline panels, notably surpassing that of traditional fin heat sinks [12]. Integrated water cooling can also be leveraged for self-cleaning to combat dust accumulation and maintain module efficiency [13].

2. Thermoelectric Cooling and Hybrid PV-TE Designs

Thermoelectric cooling modules (TECs) further advance cooling efficacy, as they can maintain the PV module well below the ambient temperature, especially during periods of intense irradiance. Experimental deployment of TECs has yielded up to 12.2°C surface temperature reduction and a 5% rise in electrical efficiency [14]. More sophisticated hybrid systems exploit the waste heat collected during PV operation to power thermoelectric generators (TEGs), thus producing additional electricity and enhancing total solar spectrum utilization [15][16]. The overall electrical productivity of PV/TE/HW designs can be up to 30% higher than conventional PV alone when considering both electrical and thermal outputs, though gains are presently limited by the relatively low efficiency of bulk TE materials [15]. Benchmarking of such hybrid PV-TE systems has shown that employing active cooling (such as water or nanofluid) alongside TECs consistently raises both PV and TE component efficiencies [16].

3. Compressed Air Cooling and Cleaning

An alternative hybrid approach employs compressed air to both cool and clean panels, removing dust and lowering surface temperature. Simulations of such systems show that strategic use of compressed air can achieve a 23.8-fold return on energy investment for cleaning and cooling, without significant manual intervention [17].



4. Radiative and Photonic Cooling

Emerging strategies involve the application of photonic coolers—one-dimensional films engineered to enhance thermal emission in the infrared, while reflecting unproductive solar wavelengths. Experimentally, these photonic structures have been deployed to decrease cell temperatures by over 5.7°C without any fluidic components, and are compatible with concentrated PV systems to manage excess heat loads [18].

5. System Integration and Cost Effectiveness

Combining passive (PCM, fins) and active (water, TEC, compressed air) systems often leads to multiplicative, not merely additive, gains in efficiency. In addition, the economics are promising: despite a higher up-front investment, hybrid cooled modules show lower levelized cost of electricity, due to increased energy yield [14][19].

Optical Enhancement Strategies

1. Hydrophobic Nanocoatings

Hydrophobic nanocoatings—such as SiO_2—function as both anti-soiling and anti-reflective layers. Experimentally, such coatings have demonstrated a 15% efficiency improvement over uncoated, dusty modules and a 5% improvement even over regularly cleaned, uncoated panels [20]. This performance arises from improved light transmission (lower surface reflectance, e.g., 4% versus 12%) and the self-cleaning action in repelling dust and moisture, reducing soiling-induced power losses.

2. Concentrating Optics and Spectral Management

Optical elements like Fresnel lenses and micro-prisms can increase the intensity of sunlight incident on the most efficient regions of the PV surface, but reliable operation requires rigorous thermal management to avoid overheating. Photonic coolers and radiative surfaces support these configurations by radiating excess heat to the sky [18]. Meanwhile, spectral conversion techniques that reflect or absorb non-productive (sub-band-gap or UV) wavelengths further optimize PV cell performance by limiting unnecessary heating [18].

Synergistic Effects, Dust, and Long-Term Performance

Layering multiple strategies brings pronounced, synergistic benefits. For example, a setup combining PCM cooling, TECs, SiO_2 nanocoating, and optical concentration can result in net daily output rises of 18–25% compared to baseline panels. However, these improvements are sustainable only when soiling is mitigated—dust accumulation alone can reduce output by 20% within five weeks if not addressed [11][13]. Self-cleaning coatings and hybrid cooling/cleaning systems (using water or compressed air) are therefore essential for long-term efficiency.

6. METHODOLOGY

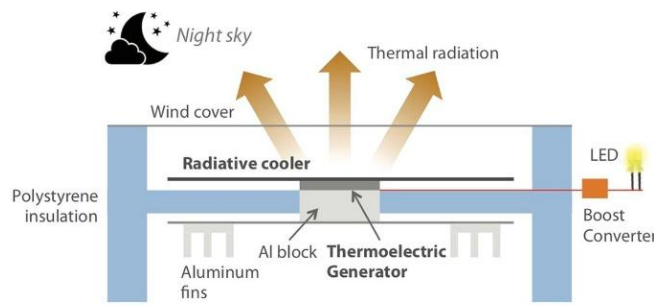
Key methods for improving thermal efficiency in experimental studies include:

PV/T Collector Design: PV panels are equipped with air or liquid (water, nanofluid) cooling channels integrated onto the back or bottom surface, frequently using aluminum or copper heat exchangers to maximize thermal conductivity

PCM and Heat Sink Addition: Phase change materials, often encapsulated in metallic tubes or expanded graphite matrices, are attached behind the PV module to absorb and release latent heat during temperature fluctuations

Reflectors and Optical Enhancement: Aluminum or mirrored reflectors optimally positioned beneath or at the sides of panels direct additional solar radiation onto the absorber surface, thereby increasing available thermal energy, though care is required as reflectors can increase local panel temperature and drive down electrical efficiency if not properly managed.

Instrumentation: Typical setups deploy thermocouples on panel surfaces and at fluid entry/exit, pyranometers for irradiance, and data loggers for continuous measurements. Electrical efficiency is determined via real-time monitoring of voltage and current output only.



Experimental Procedure

System Configuration: Experiments compare baseline (uncooled) panels, air-cooled PV/T, water or nanofluid-cooled PV/T, PV/T with reflectors, and PCM-enhanced PV/T panels.

Operational Window: Systems are tested under natural (outdoor) solar conditions (typically between 10:00–16:00 for several days) or controlled indoor conditions with a calibrated solar simulator.

Data Collection: Surface and fluid temperatures, mass flow rates, irradiance, ambient conditions, and electrical outputs are sampled at minute-level intervals.

Calculations:

Thermal Efficiency: $\eta th = \dot{m}\ cp\ (Tout - Tin)\ G\ A \eta th = GA\dot{m}cp(Tout - Tin)$

Electrical Efficiency: $\eta el = V \times IG\ A \eta el = GAV \times I$ where $\dot{m}\ \dot{m}$ is the mass flow rate, cpcp is specific heat, Tout,Tin$Tout,Tin$ (outlet/inlet fluid temperatures), GG solar irradiance, and AA collector area.

Exergy Analysis: For advanced analysis, exergy efficiency considers the available energy quality and irreversibilities in both the thermal and electrical sub-systems.

7. DISCUSSION

Thermal performance gains are most substantial when combining active liquid (water or nanofluid) cooling with optical augmentation via reflectors. Nanofluids further enhance heat transfer, though their incremental benefit over water may vary with concentration and stability

Air cooling remains less effective but offers integration advantages in retrofits and building applications, especially where recovered warm air can be directly utilized

PCM integration provides sustained temperature moderation over diurnal cycles but introduces mass and cost overhead.

Multi-junction concentrated systems (CPVT) with forced cooling enable both high electrical and significant thermal outputs, demonstrating the role of system integration and advanced materials.

Operational optimization (e.g., flow rate management, energy-based analysis) can further improve system design and site-specific performance.

8. CONCLUSION

Experimental research conclusively demonstrates that thermal efficiency of solar panels can be substantially enhanced by Implementing active cooling systems (especially water or nanofluid-based). Integrating optical reflectors and/or phase change materials, and leveraging advanced collector designs and hybridized architectures. Thermal efficiencies from 59.7% (water cooling) up to 62.1% (water + reflectors) and even higher for multi-junction CPVT (up to 49.5% experimentally) have been documented. These enhancements directly translate to increased exergy utilization and system effectiveness, especially for combined heat and power (CHP) solar installations. Field implementation should consider economic, maintenance, and climatic factors to select the optimal configuration.

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About the Author

Akash Daharwal is an Assistant Professor at Wainganga College of Engineering and Management, Nagpur, India. He is engaged in teaching and research in the field of engineering and technology, with interests in renewable energy systems, photovoltaic technologies, and sustainable engineering applications. He is committed to academic excellence and innovation in technical education.