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# Powering the Future: A Comprehensive Review of Polymer Composite Energy Storage Applications †

**Manickam Ramesh [1], Tamil Selvan Manickam [2,*], Felix Sahayaraj Arockiasamy [1], Balakrishnan Ponnusamy [1], Rishiprakash Sivakumar [3], Princy Sivakumar [3] and Prethiga Kandasamy [3]**

1 Department of Mechanical Engineering, KIT-Kalaignarkarunanidhi Institute of Technology (Autonomous), Coimbatore 641402, Tamil Nadu, India; mramesh97@gmail.com (M.R.); go2feli@gmail.com (F.S.A.); krishna234431@gmail.com (B.P.)
2 Department of Mechanical Engineering, Dhanalakshmi Srinivasan College of Engineering, Coimbatore 641105, Tamil Nadu, India
3 Department of Agriculture Engineering, KIT-Kalaignarkarunanidhi Institute of Technology (Autonomous), Coimbatore 641402, Tamil Nadu, India; princyooo022@gmail.com (R.S.); rishiprakash131@gmail.com (P.S.); prethiga182003@gmail.com (P.K.)
* Correspondence: tamilmmech@gmail.com; Tel.: +91-85085-84225
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**Abstract:** This review provides an overview of polymer composite materials and their application in energy storage. Polymer composites are an attractive option for energy storage owing to their light weight, low cost, and high flexibility. We discuss the different types of polymer composites used for energy storage, including carbon-based, metal oxide, and conductive polymer composites. We also discuss the various energy storage mechanisms employed by polymer composites, including supercapacitors, batteries, and hybrid systems. In addition to discussing the materials and mechanisms, we review recent advancements in the energy storage applications of polymer composites, including their use in electric vehicles, renewable energy systems, and portable electronics. We also examined the challenges associated with polymer composite energy storage, such as limited energy density and long-term durability. Overall, this review highlights the potential of polymer composite materials for energy storage applications and emphasizes the need for further research and development to fully exploit their advantages and overcome their limitations.

**Keywords:** polymer composites; energy storage materials; battery materials; supercapacitors; energy storage applications; electric vehicle batteries; energy storage mechanisms; renewable energy; electrochemical devices

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## 1. Introduction

In recent years, energy storage devices have become an increasingly important component of the global energy landscape. The market for energy storage devices grew by 40% in 2020, with the United States, China, and Japan leading in terms of installed capacity [1]. The market is projected to continue to grow at a rapid pace, with lithium-ion batteries being the most widely used technology. The applications of energy storage devices are diverse, and include grid-scale energy storage, electric vehicles, and portable electronics [2]. Grid-scale energy storage currently accounts for the majority of the installed capacity worldwide, but residential energy storage is also growing in popularity. The cost of energy storage devices has declined significantly, making them more accessible to consumers and businesses. Overall, the data suggest that energy storage devices play a vital role in the transition to a cleaner, more sustainable energy system [3].

Polymer composites have gained significant attention in the field of energy storage devices owing to their unique properties and potential applications. First, polymer composites can be designed with high surface areas and porosity, making them well suited for use in energy storage devices such as supercapacitors. In addition, they offer high mechanical strength, flexibility, and durability, which are crucial for applications in which the material is subjected to stress, strain, and cyclic loading. Moreover, polymer composites can be engineered with specific conductive properties, allowing them to act as electrodes or current collectors in energy storage devices [4]. For example, conductive polymer composites can be designed with high electrical conductivity and low resistance, making them an attractive option for use in batteries. Polymer composites are lightweight and cost-effective, which is particularly important for energy storage applications in transportation and portable electronics. Compared to traditional metal-based materials, polymer composites can significantly reduce the weight and cost of energy storage devices, making them more practical and accessible. Overall, the unique combination of properties offered by polymer composites makes them attractive materials for use in energy storage devices, particularly in applications that require high performance, flexibility, and cost-effectiveness. With ongoing research and development, polymer composites are likely to play an increasingly important role in the future of energy storage technology [5].

The research objectives for investigating the use of polymer composites in energy storage devices are broad and multidisciplinary. By exploring the suitability, performance, and potential applications of polymer composites, researchers can gain a better understanding of the unique advantages and limitations of these materials for energy storage. This knowledge can lead to the development of new and innovative energy storage devices that can address the challenges faced by modern energy landscapes, such as energy density, durability, and cost-effectiveness. The investigation of polymer composites in energy storage can also contribute to the ongoing effort to transition to cleaner, more sustainable energy systems. Achieving these research objectives requires a diverse set of skills and expertise from materials science, engineering, physics, and chemistry, as well as a collaborative and interdisciplinary approach. By addressing these research objectives, we can advance our understanding of polymer composites for energy storage and pave the way for the development of new and improved energy storage devices that can meet the needs of the future.

## 2. Suitability

### *2.1. Carbon-Based Polymer Composites*

Carbon-based polymer composites have been widely explored for use in energy storage devices, particularly supercapacitors, owing to their high surface area, good conductivity, and electrochemical stability. These materials can be synthesized using various methods, such as sol–gel, hydrothermal, or electrochemical deposition techniques, and can be tailored to have specific properties [6,7]. One of the primary advantages of carbon-based polymer composites is their large surface area, which is critical for energy storage in supercapacitors. The surface area can be increased by controlling the synthesis conditions, such as the temperature and reaction time, and by using carbon precursors with a high degree of graphitization. The high surface area of carbon-based polymer composites facilitates more efficient ion transport and enhances the energy storage capacity of supercapacitors [8].

### *2.2. Metal Oxide-Based Polymer Composites*

Metal oxide-based polymer composites have also been investigated as potential materials for energy storage devices. Metal oxides such as $MnO_2$, $Fe_2O_3$, and $CO_3O_4$ have high theoretical capacities for energy storage because of their ability to undergo reversible redox reactions [9]. Metal oxide particles can also undergo reversible redox reactions, resulting in high energy storage capacities. Another advantage of metal oxide-based polymer composites is their improved electrical conductivity, which is critical for rapid charge and discharge cycles in energy storage devices. The conductivity of metal oxide-based polymer composites can be enhanced by introducing conducting polymer matrices, such as polypyrrole or polythiophene, to the composite. The conducting polymer matrix can provide a pathway for electron transport and improve the electrochemical performance of the metal oxide [10].

### 2.3. Conductive Polymer Composites

Conductive polymer composites are a type of composite material that has been widely studied for use in energy storage devices, particularly batteries and supercapacitors. These materials are composed of a conductive polymer matrix, such as polyaniline, polypyrrole, or polythiophene, which is reinforced with a filler material, such as carbon nanotubes or graphene. The resulting material has several unique properties that make it suitable for energy storage applications. One of the primary advantages of conductive polymer composites is their high electrical conductivity, which is critical for efficient charge and discharge cycling in energy storage devices. The conductive polymer matrix provides a pathway for electron transport, whereas the filler material increases the surface area and provides additional pathways for ion transport. This leads to an improved energy storage capacity and faster charging and discharging times [11].

## 3. Energy Density

The performance characteristics of polymer composite materials in energy storage devices can be evaluated based on their energy density, which is a measure of the amount of energy stored per unit volume or mass of the material. Polymer composite materials have the potential to achieve high energy densities in energy storage devices owing to their unique properties. For example, carbon-based polymer composites, such as carbon nanotubes and graphene-reinforced polymer composites, have a high surface area and electrical conductivity, which can improve their energy storage capacity. These materials can achieve energy densities of up to 400 Wh/kg for supercapacitors and 200 Wh/kg for batteries. Metal oxide-based polymer composites also have high energy densities owing to their high theoretical capacity for energy storage. For example, $MnO_2$-based polymer composites can achieve energy densities of up to 120 Wh/kg, whereas $Fe_2O_3$-based polymer composites can achieve energy densities of up to 180 Wh/kg. Conductive polymer composites, such as polyaniline or polypyrrole-reinforced polymer composites, also exhibit high energy densities owing to their high electrical conductivity and ion transport properties. These materials can achieve energy densities of up to 120 Wh/kg for supercapacitors and 180 Wh/kg for batteries [12].

## 4. Power Density

Another important performance characteristic of polymer composite materials in energy storage devices is their power density, which is a measure of the rate at which energy can be delivered from the device. A high power density is essential for applications that require rapid charging and discharging, such as electric vehicles or high-speed data processing. Polymer composite materials have the potential to achieve high power densities in energy storage devices owing to their unique properties. For example, carbon-based polymer composites, such as carbon nanotubes and graphene-reinforced polymer composites, have high electrical conductivities and surface areas, which enable fast charge and discharge cycles. These materials can achieve power densities of up to 20 kW/kg for supercapacitors and 5 kW/kg for batteries. Metal oxide-based polymer composites also have high power densities owing to their high charge-transfer rates and fast ion diffusion. For example, $TiO_2$-based polymer composites can achieve power densities of up to 10 kW/kg, whereas $Fe_2O_3$-based polymer composites can achieve power densities of up to 3 kW/kg [13].

## 5. Durability

Metal oxide-based polymer composites also exhibit high durability owing to their high stability in harsh environments and their ability to maintain their performance over time. For example, $Fe_2O_3$-based polymer composites can maintain 80% of their initial capacity after 1000 charge–discharge cycles, whereas $TiO_2$-based polymer composites can maintain 90% of their initial capacity after 500 cycles. Conductive polymer composites, such as polyaniline or polypyrrole-reinforced polymer composites, also exhibit high durability owing to their ability to maintain their mechanical and electrical properties over time. These materials can also maintain their performance at high temperatures and harsh chemical environments [14,15]. In addition to their durability, polymer composite materials have the advantage of being lightweight and flexible, which is important for portable and wearable energy storage devices. However, some challenges still need to be addressed to further improve the durability of polymer composite materials in energy storage devices. These include developing new materials with enhanced mechanical and chemical stability, improving the interfacial properties between the composite materials and electrodes, and increasing the cycle life and safety of the devices [16].

## 6. Cost Effectiveness

The cost-effectiveness of polymer composite materials in energy storage devices is an important performance characteristic that refers to the ability of the materials to provide high performance at a reasonable cost. Conductive polymer composites, such as polyaniline or polypyrrole-reinforced polymer composites, can also be cost-effective because of their relatively low production cost and high electrical conductivity, which can lead to a reduced cost per unit of power. In addition to their cost-effectiveness, polymer composite materials also have the advantage of being lightweight and flexible, which can lead to reduced installation and maintenance costs, particularly for portable and wearable energy storage devices. However, there are still some challenges that need to be addressed to further improve the cost-effectiveness of polymer composite materials in energy storage devices. These include reducing the cost of production, improving the energy and power density of devices, and increasing the cycle life and safety of devices [17].

## 7. Future and Development

In the realm of polymer composite energy storage applications, the future holds exciting prospects and critical challenges. Advanced energy storage materials that offer higher energy density and faster charging capabilities are ripe for exploration, alongside a commitment to sustainability through eco-friendly materials. The integration of polymer composites with renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind power, stands as a pivotal avenue for enhancing energy efficiency [18,19]. Further innovations in electrochemical device design, particularly in the realm of smart grids and energy management systems, will be paramount. Electric vehicles (EVs) also demand lightweight and high-capacity polymer composites to extend their range and reduce charging times. Sustainable manufacturing processes and recycling methods will underpin eco-conscious production. Safety and durability considerations necessitate ongoing research to mitigate risks and develop robust monitoring techniques. Collaborations across disciplines and stakeholders are essential for realizing the full potential of these materials. As energy density remains a challenge, concerted efforts will be crucial in bridging the gap and propelling polymer composite energy storage toward a sustainable and innovative energy future [20,21].

## 8. Applications

Polymer composites have the potential to be used in a variety of energy storage devices, including batteries, supercapacitors, and hybrid systems. These devices can be utilized for various end-uses, such as electric vehicles, grid-scale energy storage, and portable electronics. In the field of batteries, polymer composites and separator materials have been investigated as anode and cathode materials. For example, a study published in the journal *Nano Letters* demonstrated that a lithium-ion battery with a polymer composite anode exhibited a high capacity and long cycle life [22]. Another study published in the journal *Electrochimica Acta* showed that a sodium-ion battery with a polymer composite cathode exhibited an improved electrochemical performance [23]. These results suggest that polymer composites have great potential for use in various batteries.

## 9. Optimization

Optimizing the performance of polymer composite materials in energy storage applications is contingent upon several critical factors. Material selection plays a pivotal role, with a preference for materials characterized by high electrical conductivity, substantial specific surface area, and robust mechanical properties. Carbon-based materials, including graphene, carbon nanotubes, and carbon black, serve as indispensable conductive components, while polymers like polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) function as the matrix material. Synthesis methods wield substantial influence; in situ polymerization, where the conductive component integrates with the polymer matrix during polymerization, and solution mixing, which combines the conductive element and matrix in a solvent, are common approaches. Ensuring uniform dispersion of the conductive component in the polymer matrix through techniques such as high-shear mixing, ultrasonication, and ball milling is paramount. The fabrication process choice further affects energy storage performance, exemplified by electrospinning to generate a high specific surface area, porous composite fibers, and 3D printing for crafting intricate structures with tailored porosity and surface area, collectively advancing the optimization of polymer composite materials for energy storage [24].

## 10. Challenges and Limitations

Polymer composite materials exhibit significant potential for energy storage applications, yet they confront several noteworthy challenges. Chief among these challenges is their low electrical conductivity, limiting charge transport and overall energy storage capacity. Proposed solutions involve integrating highly conductive additives, such as carbon nanotubes, graphene, or metal nanoparticles, into the composite. Additionally, concerns arise regarding the stability of these materials, particularly under harsh electrochemical conditions, which can lead to electrode degradation and reduced cycling stability. Strategies to address this issue include the development of more stable electrode materials and modifications to enhance the polymer matrix's resilience [25–27]. Poor interfacial adhesion between the conductive component and the polymer matrix hampers charge transfer efficiency. Solutions entail surface chemistry modifications of the conductive component through coupling agents or functionalized polymers. Scalability of synthesis and fabrication methods remains a significant challenge, prompting exploration of more scalable, cost-effective methods like roll-to-roll processing or inkjet printing. Lastly, environmental impact considerations highlight the need for sustainable materials and recycling methods in large-scale energy storage applications, encouraging research into biodegradable polymers and natural fibers as potential solutions. Addressing these challenges collectively propels the advancement of polymer composite materials in the field of energy storage. These efforts will help to further advance the development of polymer composite materials for energy storage and address the increasing demand for efficient and sustainable energy storage solutions [28].

## 11. Conclusions

Polymer composite materials have emerged as promising candidates for energy storage applications owing to their high specific surface areas, mechanical flexibilities, and tunable electrochemical properties. However, several challenges and limitations must be addressed to optimize their performance and enable their practical implementation. These challenges include low conductivity, limited stability, poor interfacial adhesion, scalability, and environmental impacts. The proposed solutions to these challenges include the incorporation of highly conductive additives, modification of the polymer matrix, use of scalable and cost-effective methods, and exploration of sustainable and environmentally friendly materials. Through continued research and development, these solutions can help overcome these challenges and advance the development of polymer composite materials for energy storage, leading to more efficient and sustainable energy storage solutions for the future.

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