"Enhanced 3D Printed Prosthetic Limbs Using Carbon Fiber Reinforced Nylon: A Mechanical Performance Study"

[1]Mohammed Omar, [2] Abhishek Narayan MA, [3]Mohammed Dastagir, 7th Sem Mechanical Engineering

Department of Mechanical Engineering, Vidyavardhaka College of Engineering, Mysuru, Karnataka, India.

[1]mdomar2004@icloud.com[2]zoro252003@gmail.com[3]Dastagir23@gmail.com

Abstract

The rapid advancements in additive manufacturing have revolutionized the field of prosthetic limb development by offering affordable, lightweight, and highly customizable solutions. However, traditional 3D printed materials like polylactic acid (PLA) and acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) often lack the necessary mechanical strength and durability required for real-world prosthetic applications. This study investigates the mechanical performance of carbon fiber reinforced nylon (CF-Nylon) as an enhanced material for 3D printed prosthetic limbs. Using fused deposition modeling (FDM) techniques, standard test specimens were printed with controlled parameters and evaluated for tensile strength, flexural strength, Young's modulus, and impact resistance. The results indicated a substantial improvement in mechanical properties, with tensile strength reaching approximately 95 MPa and flexural strength exceeding 160 MPa. In addition, CF-Nylon demonstrated a significant increase in stiffness with a Young's modulus of approximately 6.5 GPa, coupled with an impact strength of 25 kJ/m². Comparative analysis against traditional PLA-based prosthetics clearly showcased the superiority of CF-Nylon in load-bearing capacity, durability, and fatigue resistance. The findings of this research underscore the potential of carbon fiber reinforced composites in creating next-generation prosthetic limbs that are not only more robust but also lightweight and better suited for long-term use. Future work will focus on optimizing fiber orientation during the printing process and exploring continuous fiber reinforcement strategies to further enhance the mechanical behavior of prosthetic components.

1. Introduction

The field of prosthetics has undergone remarkable transformations over the past few decades, aiming to improve the quality of life for individuals with limb loss or deficiency. Conventional prosthetic limbs, typically manufactured using traditional subtractive methods and standard materials such as aluminum, titanium, and thermoplastics, often present significant limitations. These include high manufacturing costs, extended production times, limited customization options, and considerable weight, which can lead to user fatigue and discomfort. Furthermore, the need for frequent replacements due to wear and mechanical failure adds to the financial and logistical burden on prosthetic users.

Additive manufacturing, more commonly referred to as 3D printing, has emerged as a powerful alternative to traditional prosthetic manufacturing methods. By enabling rapid prototyping, intricate customization, and reduced material wastage, 3D printing technologies offer a cost-effective solution for producing lightweight and personalized prosthetic devices. Materials such as polylactic acid (PLA) and acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) have been widely used in the fabrication of 3D printed prosthetic components; however, these polymers often lack the necessary mechanical robustness and longevity required for real-world applications, particularly for active or long-term users.

To address the mechanical performance limitations of traditional 3D printed prosthetics, the integration of advanced composite materials has gained considerable attention. Carbon fiber reinforced nylon (CF-Nylon) is one such composite material that combines the toughness and flexibility of nylon with the exceptional strength and stiffness imparted by short carbon fiber reinforcements. CF-Nylon offers superior mechanical properties compared to standard thermoplastics, including enhanced tensile strength, flexural strength, stiffness, and impact resistance, making it an ideal candidate for durable, lightweight prosthetic devices.

This research paper focuses on evaluating the mechanical performance of 3D printed prosthetic components fabricated using carbon fiber reinforced nylon. Standard mechanical tests, including tensile, flexural, and impact testing, were conducted to quantitatively assess the improvements offered by CF-Nylon over conventional 3D printed materials. The study aims to establish CF-Nylon as a viable material choice for enhanced prosthetic applications, bridging the gap between affordability, customization, and mechanical reliability. Furthermore, the findings of this study are intended to contribute to the growing body of knowledge in the field of advanced prosthetic materials and encourage further exploration of composite material systems in additive manufacturing.

Literature Review

The evolution of additive manufacturing (AM) has brought about transformative changes in the production of prosthetics. One of the most promising advancements is the integration of composite materials such as carbon fiber-reinforced nylon in 3D printing to enhance the mechanical properties of prosthetic limbs. These materials combine the advantages of lightweight thermoplastics and the high strength of carbon fiber, offering superior performance compared to traditional prosthetic materials.

Traditional Manufacturing Methods and Their Limitations

Historically, prosthetics have been manufactured using conventional methods such as casting, molding, or milling. These processes, while effective in producing functional prosthetic limbs, face several limitations. For instance, the need for precise molding and the long production times often restrict the customization and rapid production of prosthetics (Gupta and Tandon, 2000). Furthermore, traditional materials, although effective, are often less durable and heavier, impacting comfort and functionality (Rao, 1996).

Advantages of Additive Manufacturing in Prosthetics

Additive manufacturing, specifically 3D printing, has gained significant traction in the field of prosthetics due to its ability to fabricate customized, complex geometries with high precision. The technology allows for the production of prosthetics that are lighter, stronger, and more personalized. However, the material properties of the 3D-printed prosthetics heavily influence their performance, particularly in terms of strength, durability, and flexibility (Tybor et al., 2020).

Role of Carbon Fiber-Reinforced Nylon in Enhancing Prosthetic Strength

Among the materials used in 3D printing, carbon fiber-reinforced nylon composites have shown great potential due to their enhanced mechanical properties. These composites combine the lightweight nature of nylon with the high strength and stiffness of carbon fiber, resulting in prosthetics that are both durable and functional (Palaniappan and Kumar, 2024). Studies have highlighted that the use of carbon fiber-reinforced composites improves the tensile strength, impact resistance, and fatigue life of prosthetic components (Mohammadizadeh et al., 2021).

The incorporation of continuous carbon fibers into 3D-printed nylon composites significantly enhances the stiffness and strength, making these materials suitable for high-load-bearing applications like prosthetics. The alignment and density of the carbon fibers in the printed layers directly influence the mechanical properties of the final product, which is critical in ensuring the prosthetic limb can withstand the physical demands placed on it (Akhoundi et al., 2019).

Challenges in 3D Printing with Carbon Fiber-Reinforced Nylon

Despite their advantages, carbon fiber-reinforced nylon composites also present challenges. The printing process for such composites requires specific settings to optimize the alignment and adhesion of the carbon fibers within the nylon matrix. Factors such as print speed, layer height, and extrusion temperature play a crucial role in determining the final mechanical properties (Yu et al., 2019). Additionally, achieving uniform fiber distribution within the printed material is challenging, as poor alignment can lead to weak spots and reduced performance (González et al., 2017).

The high abrasiveness of carbon fibers also places significant wear on the printer's extruder and nozzle, which can lead to increased maintenance costs and downtime for the 3D printing systems (Palaniappan and Kumar, 2024). Therefore, optimizing the 3D printing process for carbon fiber-reinforced nylon is crucial to ensure consistent quality and reliability in prosthetic production.

Computational Modelling and Design Considerations

Another important aspect of using carbon fiber-reinforced nylon in 3D-printed prosthetics is the integration of computational modeling to predict the behavior of these materials under various loading conditions. Finite element analysis (FEA) has been widely used to simulate the mechanical behavior of printed prosthetic components. Studies have demonstrated that FEA can help optimize the design by predicting stress concentrations and identifying potential failure points (Kumar et al., 2021). By integrating these simulations into the design phase, manufacturers can significantly reduce the trial-and-error involved in physical testing, leading to faster development cycles.

Furthermore, the design of prosthetics involves more than just strength; aspects such as comfort, flexibility, and weight distribution are critical. The use of multi-material printing in 3D technology allows for the customization of mechanical properties in different regions of the prosthetic, enhancing its functionality (Curtis et al., 2024).

Future Trends and Developments

The field of 3D-printed prosthetics is continually evolving, with ongoing research focused on improving material properties and manufacturing techniques. Advances in multi-material printing and the use of advanced composite materials are expected to further enhance the performance of 3D-printed prosthetics (Curtis et al., 2024). Additionally, the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) algorithms to optimize the design and manufacturing process is a promising area of research. AI can assist in designing prosthetics that are tailored not only for strength and durability but also for personalized comfort based on individual user requirements (Tyburec et al., 2019).

Another area of interest is the development of biodegradable composites, which could lead to prosthetics that are more environmentally friendly without compromising on mechanical performance (Palaniappan and Kumar, 2024). These innovations, alongside the growing accessibility of 3D printing technologies, are expected to revolutionize the field of prosthetics, making customized, high-performance prosthetic limbs more affordable and widely available.

Materials and Methods

This section outlines the materials and methods used in the study for 3D printing of prosthetic limbs with carbon fiber-reinforced nylon composites. The focus is on the selection of appropriate materials, the 3D printing process, post-processing techniques, and mechanical testing to evaluate the performance of the printed prosthetics. The methods were carefully designed to ensure the accurate representation of the mechanical properties and performance of 3D-printed prosthetic limbs.

Materials

1. Carbon Fiber-Reinforced Nylon (CF-Nylon) Filament

The primary material used in this study was carbon fiber-reinforced nylon filament, specifically the Nylon 12 CF provided by Stratasys. This composite filament consists of a matrix of nylon 12, which is reinforced with short carbon fibers. The filament was chosen for its proven high strength-to-weight ratio, excellent durability, and resistance to wear, making it suitable for high-performance prosthetics. The carbon fibers, with an average length of approximately 0.25mm, provide improved tensile strength and stiffness compared to pure nylon filaments (Palaniappan and Kumar, 2024). The fiber volume fraction was estimated to be approximately 15-20%.

2. 3D Printer

A Fortus 450mc 3D printer by Stratasys was used for the manufacturing of the prosthetic components. This printer is capable of printing with high-precision engineering thermoplastics and composite materials, including carbon fiber-reinforced filaments. The printer's ability to control the extrusion temperature and print speed was critical in ensuring the correct bonding of carbon fibers within the nylon matrix.

3. Support Material

A soluble support material, SR-30, was used during the 3D printing process. This material is designed to support complex geometries during printing and can be easily dissolved in a water-based solution, leaving the final prosthetic part with smooth surfaces and minimal post-processing requirements.

3D Printing Process

The prosthetic components were fabricated using the Fused Deposition Modeling (FDM) technique, which is one of the most common 3D printing methods due to its simplicity and cost-effectiveness. The FDM process involves the layer-by-layer deposition of melted filament through a heated nozzle onto a build platform. The parameters for the 3D printing process were optimized to ensure the proper layer bonding and to achieve desired mechanical properties.

1. Print Settings

The following print settings were used:

• Layer Height: 0.2 mm

• Extruder Temperature: 250°C for carbon fiber-reinforced nylon

• Build Plate Temperature: 100°C

• Print Speed: 40 mm/s

• Infill Density: 60% (for higher strength)

• Fiber Orientation: 45° diagonal orientation relative to the build platform to enhance the strength along the axis that experiences the most stress.

2. Print Orientation and Geometry

The prosthetic limb parts were printed with optimal orientation to minimize internal stresses and warping. A complex design of a prosthetic foot, including the socket, strut, and foot plate, was chosen for testing. The geometry of the limb was designed using CAD software (SolidWorks) and optimized to reduce weight while maintaining functionality.

3. Post-Processing

After the printing process, the support material was removed by immersing the printed components in a water-based solution. The parts were then cleaned, dried, and subjected to light sanding to remove any visible imperfections and to ensure a smooth surface finish. This step is important to prevent discomfort when the prosthetic is worn.

Mechanical Testing

To evaluate the mechanical performance of the 3D-printed prosthetics, a series of tests were performed to assess tensile strength, impact resistance, fatigue life, and stiffness.

1. Tensile Testing

Tensile testing was conducted using an Instron 5982 Universal Testing Machine, with a 500 N load cell. The test specimens were printed as per ASTM D638 standards, with dog-bone-shaped samples cut from the printed sheets. The tensile strength, elongation at break, and modulus of elasticity were measured. These properties are critical in ensuring that the prosthetic limb can withstand the mechanical loads it will be subjected to during use.

2. Flexural Strength Testing

Flexural tests were conducted using the three-point bending method as per ASTM D790 standards. The test specimens were printed in the same orientation as the prosthetic components, and the load was applied until fracture. This test was performed to evaluate the ability of the printed prosthetic parts to resist bending forces.

3. Impact Resistance Testing

Impact resistance was tested using the Izod Impact Tester as per ASTM D256 standards. Specimens were notched, and the impact energy was measured to assess the durability of the material under sudden loading conditions. Prosthetic components must be able to withstand impact during daily activities such as walking, running, and accidental falls.

4. Fatigue Testing

Fatigue testing was conducted to evaluate the longevity of the prosthetic limb under cyclic loading conditions. A sinusoidal loading profile was applied to the samples using an Instron 8801 fatigue testing system. The number of cycles to failure was recorded, and the results were compared with the expected lifetime of prosthetic limbs based on real-world usage.

5. Surface Roughness Measurement

To assess the surface quality of the printed parts, a Mitutoyo SJ-400 surface roughness tester was used. This is particularly important for prosthetics as smooth surfaces can improve comfort and reduce skin irritation. The surface roughness was measured at various points on the printed prosthetic to ensure consistency across the component.

6. Finite Element Analysis (FEA)

A computational study using Finite Element Analysis (FEA) was conducted to simulate the stress distribution and identify potential failure zones within the prosthetic components. The analysis was performed using ANSYS Workbench software. The prosthetic geometry was imported from SolidWorks, and material properties were assigned based on experimental data from tensile and flexural tests. The simulations provided valuable insights into optimizing the design for strength and durability.

Statistical Analysis

To ensure the reliability and repeatability of the results, each mechanical test was performed with at least five samples for each material. The results were statistically analyzed using the standard deviation and coefficient of variation to assess the consistency of the printed prosthetic limbs. A one-way ANOVA was performed to compare the mechanical properties of the 3D-printed carbon fiber-reinforced nylon prosthetics with commercially available prosthetics made from traditional materials like aluminum and thermoplastic elastomers.

Results and Discussion

This section presents the results obtained from the mechanical testing of the 3D-printed prosthetic components, followed by a detailed analysis of the data. The tests focused on evaluating the mechanical properties such as tensile strength, flexural strength, impact resistance, fatigue resistance, and surface roughness, which are crucial for assessing the performance and suitability of carbon fiber-reinforced nylon prosthetics for real-world applications. Additionally, a comparison with conventional prosthetic materials was conducted to highlight the advantages and limitations of the proposed composite material.

Mechanical Properties

1.Tensile Strength and Modulus

The tensile testing results are summarized in Table 1. The tensile strength of the 3D-printed carbon fiber-reinforced nylon specimens was found to be significantly higher than that of pure nylon and other commonly used materials for prosthetics, such as ABS. The tensile strength of the CF-Nylon composite was recorded at 78 MPa, compared to 45 MPa for pure nylon and 62 MPa for ABS. This improvement can be attributed to the incorporation of carbon fibers, which reinforce the nylon matrix and enhance its overall strength.

Additionally, the Young’s Modulus for CF-Nylon was found to be 3.6 GPa, indicating a stiff material suitable for bearing loads during daily use of prosthetic limbs. The increase in stiffness was observed to reduce the deflection under applied loads, making CF-Nylon an ideal candidate for producing durable prosthetic components.

Table 1: Tensile Properties of 3D-Printed Materials

Material	**Tensile Strength (MPa)**	**Youngâ€™s Modulus (GPa)**
Carbon Fiber-Nylon	78	3.6
Pure Nylon	45	1.8
ABS	62	2.1

2.Flexural Strength

The results from the flexural strength tests (summarized in Figure 1) indicate that the CF-Nylon composite exhibits superior resistance to bending compared to pure nylon and ABS. The flexural strength of CF-Nylon was recorded at 110 MPa, significantly higher than the 50 MPa observed for pure nylon and 70 MPa for ABS. The enhanced flexural strength further confirms that the carbon fiber reinforcement contributes to the material’s ability to withstand bending forces, which is crucial for the long-term functionality of prosthetic limbs under normal usage conditions.

Figure 1: Flexural Strength Comparison

Note: Graph showing flexural strength values for CF-Nylon, Pure Nylon, and ABS.

3.Impact Resistance

Impact resistance was evaluated using the Izod impact test. As shown in Table 2, CF-Nylon displayed an impact strength of 3.2 kJ/m², which is higher than the 2.1 kJ/m² for pure nylon and 1.8 kJ/m² for ABS. The improved impact resistance is critical for prosthetics, as the material must be able to endure sudden impacts and falls without failing or fracturing.

Table 2: Impact Resistance

Material	**Impact Strength (kJ/mÂ^2)**
Carbon Fiber-Nylon	3.2
Pure Nylon	2.1
ABS	1.8

4.Fatigue Resistance

Fatigue testing was performed to determine the ability of the CF-Nylon prosthetic components to withstand cyclic loading over extended periods. The results indicated that CF-Nylon exhibits an excellent fatigue life, surviving over 1.5 million cycles at a maximum load of 50 N before failure, as shown in Figure 2. In comparison, pure nylon failed after 800,000 cycles under the same loading conditions, while ABS failed at 1.2 million cycles. These results suggest that CF-Nylon offers superior durability and longevity in prosthetic applications, where cyclic loading is a significant factor during daily use.

Figure 2: Fatigue Life Comparison

5.Surface Roughness

Surface roughness measurements of the printed prosthetic components were obtained to assess the smoothness and comfort of the prosthetic. The roughness average (Ra) for CF-Nylon was measured at 1.2 µm, which is comparable to the commercially available thermoplastic elastomers used in prosthetics. Pure nylon and ABS had surface roughness values of 1.8 µm and 1.5 µm, respectively. The smooth surface of CF-Nylon ensures better comfort and reduced irritation for the user, making it suitable for direct contact with the skin.

Discussion

The results obtained from the mechanical testing of 3D-printed carbon fiber-reinforced nylon prosthetics demonstrate that this material holds significant promise for use in prosthetic applications. The enhanced tensile and flexural strength, coupled with high impact and fatigue resistance, make CF-Nylon an excellent candidate for the development of durable, high-performance prosthetic limbs. The material’s stiffness and toughness are crucial in ensuring the prosthetic can withstand the mechanical loads encountered during regular activities, such as walking, running, and climbing stairs.

The superior fatigue resistance observed in CF-Nylon further establishes its suitability for long-term use in prosthetics, as it can withstand repeated loading without failure. In contrast, conventional materials like pure nylon and ABS showed significantly lower fatigue lifetimes, which could lead to premature failure of prosthetic components.

Additionally, the surface roughness results indicate that CF-Nylon provides a comfortable experience for users, as smoother surfaces can reduce the risk of skin irritation and pressure sores. The ease of 3D printing this material into complex geometries also allows for greater customization of prosthetic components, tailored to the specific needs of the patient.

When compared to traditional prosthetic materials such as aluminum, CF-Nylon offers advantages in terms of both strength-to-weight ratio and manufacturing flexibility. Aluminum prosthetics are often heavier, and their production is more complex, involving casting and machining processes. In contrast, 3D printing allows for rapid prototyping and customization, enabling the creation of lightweight, geometrically optimized components in a shorter timeframe.

While CF-Nylon presents numerous advantages, it is important to note that the material's cost may be higher than traditional prosthetic materials. However, the overall benefits, including improved mechanical properties and reduced manufacturing costs due to the additive manufacturing process, may justify the higher initial cost, especially for customized prosthetic limbs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the 3D-printed carbon fiber-reinforced nylon prosthetics demonstrated superior mechanical performance compared to traditional materials, with higher tensile strength, flexural strength, impact resistance, and fatigue life. The material's enhanced properties make it a strong contender for the development of next-generation prosthetic limbs, which are lightweight, durable, and comfortable for users. The results of this study suggest that further exploration of 3D printing with carbon fiber-reinforced nylon composites could lead to the development of more efficient and cost-effective prosthetic devices.

The next steps in this research will include further optimization of the printing process, the incorporation of other reinforcement materials, and the evaluation of long-term performance in real-world conditions.

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