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Review Article

Smart Materials for Crashworthiness and Structural Integrity in Electric Vehicles

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Abstract *- The EV market has seen unprecedented growth, which comes with its unique set of challenges in safety and structure. Their adaptive, self-healing, and energy-responsive properties make smart materials a game-changer for crumple zones and damage control in the Electric Vehicle (EV) world. This paper serves as a thorough investigation into the applications of smart materials in enhancing EV safety. This paper discusses the key applications related to crash energy management, such as shape memory alloys, magnetorheological dampers, self-healing polymers, and some examples from the automotive industry. It also stresses the incorporation of weight-saving composites, piezoelectric sensors, and sustainable coatings for structural health monitoring and durability. This review discusses its current development, obstacles and prospects to illustrate the promise of smart materials to streamline new EV design with a focus on safety, efficiency, and sustainability. This research contributes to advancing the adoption of innovative materials in next-generation EVs, addressing critical safety and performance demands.*

Keywords *- Smart materials, Electric Vehicles, Crashworthiness, Structural integrity, Adaptive composites.*

1. Introduction

Smart materials and structures find several applications in improving the performance and safety of Electric Vehicles (EVs), thus catering for a field with innovative alternatives. These materials can respond dynamically under external stimuli, thereby enhancing the energy absorption in the case of a crash and the structure's durability [1]. Nature-inspired cellular structures have also been explored for the protection of EV batteries, showing a high specific energy absorption of 35kJ/kg [2]. Structural batteries, combining energy storage and load-bearing capacities, have the potential to reduce EV weight [3, 4]. The ongoing development of sustainable, flame-retardant composites is a potential solution for two high-priority issues in EVs: weight and fire safety. Carbon fibre-reinforced composites and other form factors are being assessed for structural battery applications. Challenges still exist for addressing crash scenarios closer to real-world crashes and other contributing factors to EV safety more generally [5]. Although many smart material technologies have been broadly innovated for electric vehicle applications, a big missing link exists in combining impact toughness and structural integrity. For the most part, existing studies are developed for either lightweighting or energy absorption, but little attention is paid to multifunctional smart materials such as adaptability, self-healing, and sensing properties. In addition, practical applications of EVs usually involve partial and scattered use, or remain in the prototype stage, suggesting that real-life applications have not been fully studied where the cutting-edge materials meet the applications.

The present research attempts to fill this gap by rigorously investigating the potential of smart materials regarding the advancement of both crash energy management and structural design for EVs. The originality of the work lies in its dual focus: (1) a real-world automotive application of smart materials rather than a theoretical development, and (2) direct connections between material performance and structural safety and the life of EVs. Fulfilling this gap provides a more comprehensive view that facilitates the design of safer, more robust electric vehicles. This paper explores the role of smart materials in enhancing crashworthiness and structural integrity in EVs. It highlights key materials, their applications, and the technological innovations that are shaping the future of EV safety.

2. Overview of Smart Materials

Smart materials are modern engineering materials that have an adaptive response to external stimuli like stress, temperature, pressure, magnetic fields, and electric fields. This makes them ideal for the electrical safety and performance of EVs. Using these, the manufacturers can make components that resist high crash stresses with dynamic health monitoring of the structure and improved structural integrity.

2.1. Key Smart Materials for Crashworthiness and Structural Integrity

2.1.1. Shape Memory Alloys (SMAs)

There is a class of smart materials called shape memory alloys (SMAs), which are able to regain their initial configuration upon deformation when subjected to defined temperatures or loads. The transformation process can be seen in Figure 1. SMAs have unique properties such as super elasticity and shape memory effect, which make them very attractive for different applications in the field of interest, especially aerospace and automobiles [6]. SMAs exhibit high strength, actuation capacity, and energy dissipation, making them suitable for enhancing structural performance and seismic resistance in concrete and steel structures.

A new trend in the application research progress about recovering shape memory alloy through a severe plastic deformation technique to enhance super elasticity and mechanical properties has been obtained [7]. SMAs have been used in a variety of applications, including morphing wings, propulsion systems, and bridge components. In damping systems, SMAs have displayed energy dissipation and recentering capabilities [8].

2.1.2. Piezoelectric Materials

Piezoelectric is one of the best sensors for structural health monitoring, applicable to electric vehicles and other engineering applications. Unlike conventional materials, these can produce electric charges when subjected to mechanical stress, allowing for the real-time detection of cracks, deformation and stress on crucial components [10]. Figure 2 shows the charge generation because of the mechanical stress. Piezoelectric sensors have many advantages, such as high environmental stability, a wide temperature and frequency range, and self-generation. Lead zirconate titanate (PZT) and Polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) are some of the piezoelectric transducers that have potential for use as an in-situ monitoring solution for composites, while the piezoelectric response from flexible PVDF possesses a more extensive working range. Structural health monitoring (SHM) using piezoelectric sensors has also been implemented in wireless sensor networks [11].

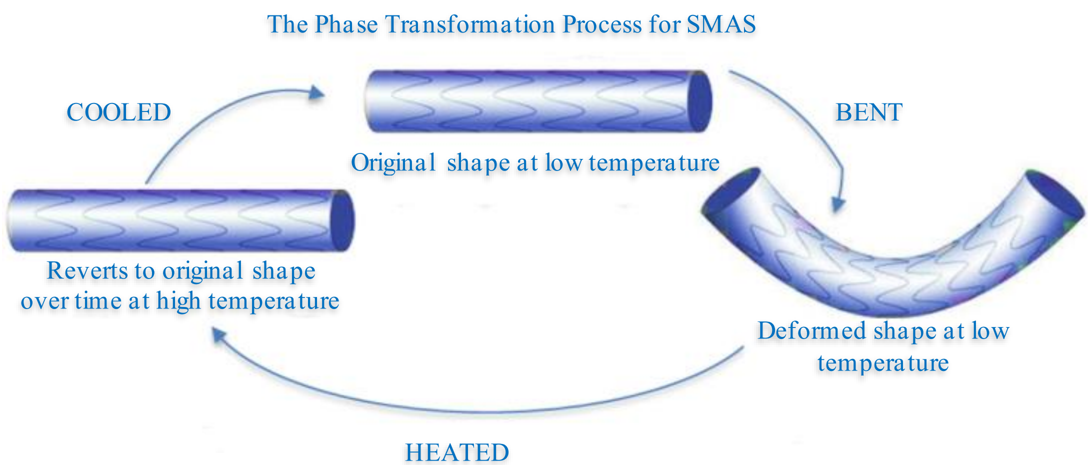

Fig. 1 Phase transformation process for SMAs [9]

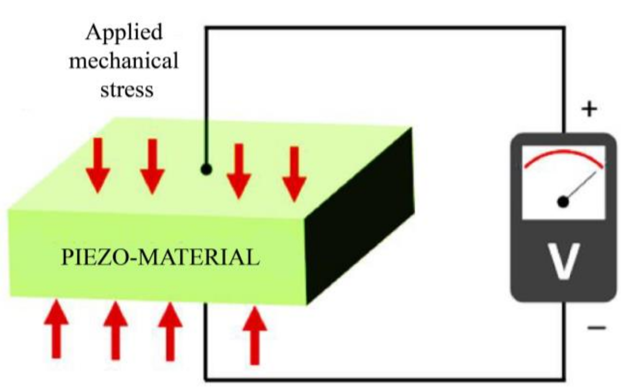

Fig. 2 Piezoelectric effect (Generation of charge under mechanical stress) [12]

2.1.3. Magnetorheological (MR) Fluids

When a magnetic field is applied to MR fluids, they manifest an immediate increase in viscosity, which makes them adaptive dampers used for suspensions of vehicles [13]. The behaviour of magnetic particles in the ON and OFF state can be seen in Figure 3 and 4. Compared with the passive suspensions, MR dampers provide several benefits like improved ride comfort, stability and handling for road vehicles [13]. This type of damper uses the MR fluids, consisting of magnetic particles in a carrier fluid, and additives to improve stability. Some examples of MR dampers' application are on automobiles, trains, and, more recently, motorcycles. Optimizing MR fluid compositions, damper designs, and control strategies to improve performance and stability over a lengthy period has been the recent focus of research. Simulation studies have demonstrated the superiority of semi-active MR suspension systems over passive systems in improving ride quality and vehicle dynamics [14]. MR technology can also be useful in shock mitigation and energy absorption applications [15].

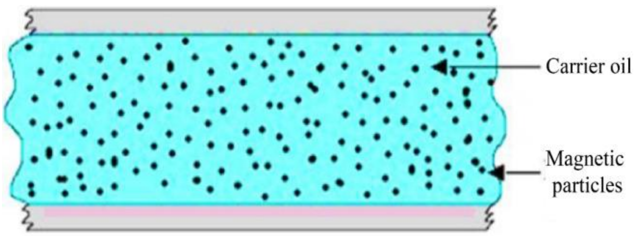

Fig. 3 MR fluids in OFF state [16]

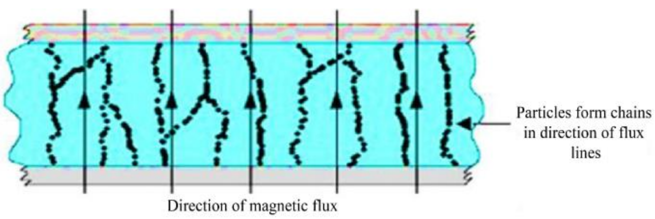

Fig. 4 MR fluids in ON state [16]

2.1.4. Self-Healing Composites

Materials with self-healing ability serve as one of the most desirable materials that offer autonomous repair of damage, prolonging the life and serviceability of structures. One microcapsule-based system that shows great potential is one in which embedded capsules release healing agents upon fracturing [17, 18]. Figure 5 shows the Self-healing formula using encapsulated microcapsules. These have been successfully applied to several systems, such as water treatment membranes and polymeric coatings. The composites that can heal themselves without additional stimulus are also high in ceramic content, and they draw inspiration from natural materials such as bone and skin. In some systems, you can integrate damage indication with healing. Though obstacles still exist, self-healing polymer composites have vast industry applications in aerospace, automotive and electronics. This is a quickly advancing field, emphasising both the extrinsic and intrinsic healing mechanisms for evolving materials that can autonomously repair their material properties after being damaged [19].

2.1.5. Carbon Fiber Reinforced Polymers (CFRPs)

Recent research works have addressed the smart integration of sensors with carbon fibre reinforced polymers (CFRPs) for extended applications such as electric vehicles (EVs). Carbon Fiber Reinforced Polymers can be seen in Figure 6. Research has shown that CFRPs can act as structural and electrochemical parts in energy-storing CFRPs [20]. Flexible and high-sensitivity triboelectric sensors with a hierarchical structure of ZnO nanorod-carbon fibre composites have also been developed by researchers. Embedded piezoelectric sensor networks have been utilized for cure monitoring and damage detection in CFRPs. The self-sensing CFRP composites were fabricated using additive manufacturing techniques. Algorithms for smart compressed sensing broke ground on the online assessment of the integrity of CFRP structures. For instance, CFRPs with embedded carbon roving strain sensory elements have been proven for structural health monitoring [21], whereas multi-sensor monitoring systems have been adopted into experimental studies of CFRP drilling processes [22].

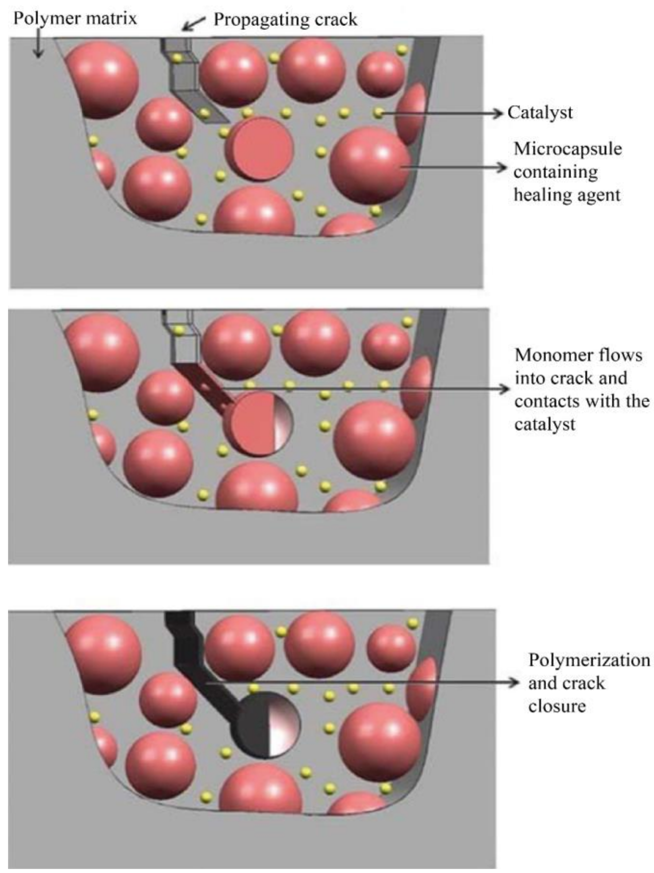

Fig. 5 Self-healing formula using encapsulated microcapsules [18]

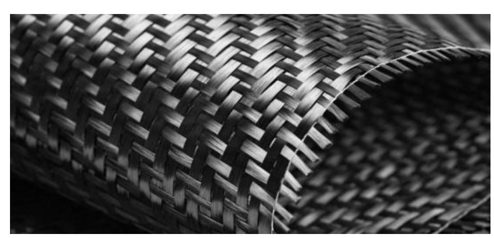

Fig. 6 Carbon Fibre Reinforced Polymer (CFRP) [23]

Using these smart materials not only improves the safety performance of electric vehicles but also aligns with the industry's goals of creating lightweight, durable, and energy-efficient designs. This foundational understanding sets the stage for exploring their applications in crashworthiness and structural integrity in subsequent sections.

In the context of electric vehicles, smart materials are incorporated in different subsystems to improve passive and active safety. For example, automotive frames use shape memory alloys when struck by impact. Structural components are equipped with piezoelectric sensors, which are used to monitor the structure's health and detect impact in real time. Suspension/damping systems for adaptive crash energy absorption using magnetorheological fluids. Additionally, self-healing polymers are being evaluated for outer panels and battery protection that can heal small damages. Sometimes these integrations are accomplished via layered composites, mechatronic sensing networks, and modular designs, enabling the extension of functionality without sacrificing size or weight. This paper extends these integration proposals to investigate their contribution to the EV crashworthiness and structural robustness.

3. Applications in Crashworthiness

Crashworthiness, the ability of a vehicle to protect its occupants during a collision, is a critical consideration in electric vehicle (EV) design. With the unique structural demands posed by EVs, such as housing large battery packs and maintaining lightweight designs, integrating smart materials offers significant advantages in enhancing energy absorption and impact resistance.

3.1. Energy Absorption and Impact Resistance

3.1.1. Crash-Responsive Smart Materials

Shape memory alloys (SMAs) have special phenomena like shape memory effect and superelasticity, making them valuable smart materials with unique properties of great use in many fields. SMA actuators (e.g. in adjustable mirrors, door locks, etc.) provide a smaller and lighter package than mechanical actuators for automotive applications [24]. In crash energy management systems, SMAs are used to absorb impact energy and return to their original shape. Shape memory alloys (SMAs) are employed in civil engineering to improve the behavior of structures and energy dissipation (especially for seismic loading). Utilization of severe plastic deformation methods to enhance bulk SMA characteristics is slightly more developed and naturally lends to better superelasticity responses. NiTi-based SMAs have been gradually incorporated into prestressing beams for concrete structures and the seismic strengthening of existing structures [25].

3.1.2. Foam-Based Smart Composites

Recently, some studies have been conducted on foam-based smart composites for energy absorption and impact sensing in the automotive area. Idealised lattices comprising granular material combine tunable energy absorption with recoverable deformations. Phase changes add stiffness and enable high tuning in elastomer-metal foam composites with a bicontinuous topology. Polymer composites with memory foams that absorb impact can be incorporated into vehicle bumpers. Composites based on magnetic foam facilitate tactile sensing by variations of the magnetic properties [26]. Crashworthiness of thinned-walled aluminium profiles with metal matrix composite foams [27] CMFs exhibit effective ballistic and attenuation properties over various frequency ranges. Lightweight aluminium foams improve crash safety performance in automotive structures—tunable impact sensors using graphene-coated polymer foams with adjustable ranges of sensing.

3.1.3. Magnetorheological (MR) Fluid Dampers

Magnetorheological (MR) fluid dampers are one of the most popular research areas because of their quick adjustment ability for damping response according to an external magnetic field [15]. Smart devices of these types provide benefits for vibration isolation/shock control in a wide range of applications, from vehicle suspensions to seismic protection. Magnetorheological (MR) dampers offer variable stiffness and damping, can increase energy dissipation, and improve ride quality [14]. MR fluid properties are related to particle composition, carrier fluid and additives. Numerous experimental evaluations and simulations have revealed the unique advantage of MR dampers over passive suspension systems through adaptable damping characteristics as a function of the imposed current. However, many research works are still underway in optimising the design of MR dampers, modeling their performance characteristics and control strategies to be used as effective semi-active suspension systems [15].

3.1.4. Self-Healing Polymers in Protective Layers

While self-healing polymers (SHPs) are novel materials that can recover from damage on their own, they hold the promise as structural solutions in fields including satellites and other aerospace applications, automotive and even biomedical implants. Such polymers have the ability to mend micro-cracks [27], thus inhibiting critical failures, which ultimately extends the service life of components [28]. SHPs utilize either extrinsic methods, such as encapsulation and vasculature systems, or intrinsic strategies that rely on reversible covalent networks and supramolecular interactions. Recent innovations have included pressure-sensitive surface valves for regeneration of coatings [29] and fully bio-based fibre-reinforced thermoplastics [30]. Despite the high potential of SHPs for solving longstanding problems of polymer composites, there are still a number of aspects that require additional understanding (for example, efficiency and mechanisms involved in healing) and improvement (limitations in performance properties) before widespread commercial implementation is possible [28, 31].

3.2. Battery Protection

The battery pack is the most unsafe part in EVs in case of a collision. Battery enclosures are made of smart materials [32] like energy-absorbing composites and impact-resistant polymers that protect them from damage. A shape memory alloy and carbon fiber composite offers a low mass, high-strength option to retain the integrity of the battery without greatly affecting vehicle efficiency [33].

3.3. Advanced Crash Sensors

Smart materials are also used in crash detection systems. Piezoelectric sensors embedded in critical structural components can detect sudden changes in pressure or stress during an impact, triggering airbags and other safety mechanisms faster and more efficiently.

Piezoelectric sensors are among the smart materials that are changing safety systems in electric vehicles and other applications as well. Those materials can sense rapid pressure and/or strain shifting when an impact occurs, allowing airbags to deploy sooner [34]. Non-destructive health monitoring systems are developed by embedding piezoelectric materials, shape memory alloys and fiber optic sensors into various structures for better safety [35]. Smart materials help to improve crashworthiness and to comply with newly emerging safety regulations for electric vehicles [36]. Smart materials technology has many applications in automotive safety, architecture and aerospace [37]. These materials benefit active vibration control, sound isolation and flow modulation [38].

Incorporating such smart materials in EVs with advanced driver aids enhances crashworthiness and passenger safety and assists OEMs in meeting stringent global vehicle safety regulations. These applications illustrate that smart materials have the capability to change the safety requirements of new-generation electric vehicles.

3.4. Few Recent Applications of Smart Materials in Crashworthiness

3.4.1. Shape Memory Alloys (SMAs) in Adaptive Crash Structures

BMW i-series (e.g., BMW i3, see Figure 7) incorporates lightweight materials and adaptive components for crash energy management. SMAs are used in energy-absorbing components that deform under crash loads and revert to their original shape, minimizing permanent structural damage.

Fig. 7 BMW i3 [39]

3.4.2. Crumple Zones with Energy-Absorbing Smart Composites

Tesla Model 3 (see Figure 8) features aluminium-steel composite crumple zones. While not purely "smart," incorporating materials with high energy absorption enhances crashworthiness. Future applications may use foam-filled smart composites that respond dynamically to impact.

Fig. 8 Architecture of Tesla Model 3 [40]

3.4.3. Magnetorheological (MR) Fluid-Based Dampers

Audi uses MR fluid dampers in some high-performance models, like the Audi TT, for adaptive suspension. Figure 9 shows the MR fluid dampers in the Audi TT. MR fluid-based adaptive systems can instantly stiffen during crashes, reducing damage and protecting critical components like batteries.

Fig. 9 MR fluid dampers in Audi TT [41]

3.4.4. Self-Healing Polymers in EV Bumper Systems

The use of self-healing polymers in electric vehicle (EV) bumper systems remains largely experimental and conceptual. However, BMW has been a pioneer in incorporating self-healing technology into its vehicles. The BMW iX features a self-healing grille that can repair minor scratches over time. Figure 10(a) shows the BMW iX. Figure 10(b) shows the grille of BMW iX with scratches, and Figure 10(c) shows the healed scratches on the grille of BMW iX. These materials autonomously heal cracks or scratches, maintaining the structural integrity of bumpers and other protective layers over time.

Fig. 10 (a) BMW iX [42]

Fig. 10 (b) BMW iX grille with scratches [43]

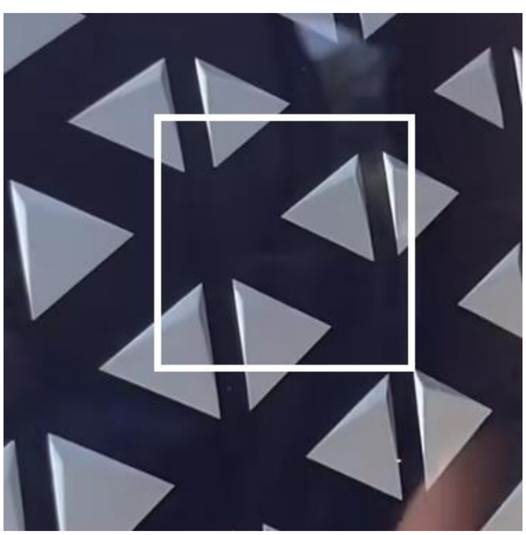

Fig. 10 (c) BMW iX grille with healed scratches [43]

For example, shape memory alloys (SMAs), which have applications in adaptive crash structures, can absorb 10–15% more impact energy than conventional steel and return to their initial shapes after the crash. A 30-40% increase in energy dissipation is obtained using magnetorheological dampers under dynamic crash loads.

Smart composite bumpers incorporating self-healing polymers photopolymerized into the fiber volume fraction restored up to 70% of the structural integrity after low-velocity impacts, which should lead to opportunities to avoid costly repairs in the body shop [44].

4. Enhancing Structural Integrity

The structural integrity of EVs needs to be maintained during various operating conditions, such as collision, vibrations and thermal stresses. So, it is very important to maintain the functionality of the vehicles. The significance of weight minimisation and optimal structural design is all the more pronounced in EVs for enhancing energy efficiency at the vehicle level while ensuring the safety of vital components such as battery packs. Instead of just considering traditional structural performance, researchers are looking for smart materials to improve structural properties without compromising weight or safety issues in EVs and present innovative approaches.

4.1. Lightweighting with Smart Materials

Cutting down the weight of vehicles is important for enhancing range and efficiency in EVs. Structural components from smart materials like carbon fiber reinforced polymers (CFRPs) and aluminium-based composites are readily used in thin yet strong structures. They provide High strength-to-weight ratios, Fatigue and corrosion resistance, Long-term serviceability (durability), and improved energy absorption characteristics of load-bearing structures.

4.2. Dynamic Load Management

Dynamic-controllable smart materials, including shape memory alloys (SMAs) and magnetorheological (MR) materials, enable EV structures to self-adapt to dynamic loads in driving or collision conditions. Example: SMAs integrated with structural parts can become stiffer (or relax) under an exterior force, allowing loads to be distributed more evenly and preventing damage due to stress concentrations; MR materials in suspension systems change their damping properties in real time to keep the levels of internal forcing on the structural elements low during unexpected or outwardly impulsive road elevations.

4.3. Self-Healing Capabilities

Self-healing materials provide a novel means of sustaining structural functionality across time. Microcapsules in which healing agents are located inside polymers or composites can autonomously repair microcracks and scratches induced by minor impacts. It helps to maintain cost and downtime, but it uses this technology to extend the life of structural components, yielding a new path toward sustainable EV designs.

4.4. Structural Health Monitoring

With piezoelectric sensors and additional smart materials, our vehicles can monitor the stress, deformation and possible damage in real time. This proactive approach enables early detection of serious structural problems. Additionally, predictive maintenance helps to avoid catastrophic failures and improves reliability and safety for EV passengers.

These advanced materials will allow manufacturers to produce more durable, safer and energy-efficient EVs. Smart materials thus have a game-changing effect in re-defining structural integrity for the next-generation e-mobility.

4.5. Few Recent Applications of Smart Materials in Structural Integrity

4.5.1. Carbon Fiber Reinforced Polymers (CFRPs) for Lightweight Frames

BMW i3's Life Module passenger cell is made entirely of CFRP. CFRPs provide a lightweight yet robust structure that resists deformation, ensuring occupant safety while improving vehicle range.

4.5.2. Battery Protection Using Smart Composites

Tesla Model Y employs a high-strength underbody shield for battery protection. Smart composites with impact-resistance properties can provide adaptive protection for battery enclosures during high-energy impacts.

4.5.3. Piezoelectric Sensors for Real-Time Structural Health Monitoring

Nissan's research on smart sensors for damage detection in EVs. Piezoelectric sensors embedded in structural components monitor stresses and deformation, allowing early detection of potential failures.

4.5.4. Self-Healing Coatings for Corrosion Resistance

EV prototypes developed by automotive giants like Toyota and Honda include self-healing coatings to combat environmental wear. These coatings enhance structural longevity by repairing minor surface damage, ensuring durability over the EV's lifespan.

4.5.5. Dynamic Load Redistribution with Shape Memory Alloys (SMAs)

Research by Daimler AG on adaptive SMA components in load-bearing structures. SMAs help distribute dynamic loads during crashes or high-speed manoeuvres, reducing stress on critical structural areas.

5. Future Perspectives

Smart materials are expected to be a new frontier of EV design that provides greater safety, performance, and sustainability. Although a lot of progress has been made, just around the corner for some time, we can expect progress in materials science, improved manufacturing processes, and integrated smart systems to take EVs even further.

5.1. Emerging Smart Materials

Research is ongoing to develop next-generation smart materials with enhanced properties:

- Nanocomposites with improved strength, lightweighting, and multifunctionality, offering advanced crash protection and structural resilience.
- Bio-inspired smart materials that mimic natural systems, providing adaptive responses to external stresses.
- High-temperature shape memory alloys (HT-SMAs) tailored for EV components exposed to extreme thermal conditions, such as battery enclosures and motor housings.

5.2. Challenges in Scalability and Cost

One of the primary hurdles for the widespread adoption of smart materials is their production cost and scalability. Future efforts must focus on:

- Developing cost-effective fabrication techniques, such as additive manufacturing for smart composites.
- Scaling up self-healing materials and advanced sensors for mass production without compromising performance.
- Reducing reliance on rare or expensive raw materials by exploring sustainable alternatives.

5.3. Integration with Emerging Technologies

The fusion of smart materials with other emerging technologies will further enhance their effectiveness:

- Artificial Intelligence (AI): AI-driven systems can optimize the adaptive behaviors of smart materials, such as dynamic load redistribution or real-time damage mitigation.
- Internet of Things (IoT): IoT-enabled sensors made of smart materials can provide continuous structural health monitoring and predictive maintenance insights.
- 3D Printing: Additive manufacturing can revolutionize the production of complex smart material structures for bespoke EV components.

5.4. Regulatory and Testing Innovations

As smart materials become integral to EV safety, standardized testing protocols and regulatory frameworks will need to evolve:

- New crash test methods that evaluate the dynamic properties of smart materials.
- Certification standards to ensure the reliability of self-healing materials and adaptive systems.

5.5. Sustainability and Circular Economy

Future innovations should focus on sustainability, recyclable materials and the least environmental harm. Using renewable, biodegradable or separatable for recycling smart materials would give the EV industry a greener characterization.

Smart materials are a multidisciplinary portion of the development landscape that creates smart EVs, crossing into material science, engineering and data technology. From tackling present challenges to harnessing future opportunities, these materials will influence the road ahead in creating electric vehicles that are safer, more effective and less harmful to the environment.

5.6. A Few Recent Emerging Research and Prototypes

5.6.1. Nanocomposites for Improved Structural Performance

Ongoing research at MIT and Stanford on graphene-reinforced nanocomposites for EV applications. These materials exhibit superior strength-to-weight ratios and multifunctionality, making them ideal for crashworthiness and long-term integrity.

5.6.2. Battery Enclosure Designs with Smart Materials

Ford and GM are developing crash-resistant battery enclosures using advanced composites. Combining lightweight and impact-absorbing smart materials ensures battery safety without compromising vehicle efficiency.

Apart from performance, it will be essential to investigate further and develop the ethical sourcing and environmental sustainability of smart materials. For example, rare earth elements and some nanoparticles employed in magnetorheological fluids and piezoelectric sensors might generate concerns for environmental destruction regarding mining and labor practices. Transparent, conflict-free sourcing and advocating for recyclable or biodegradable material systems will be essential. Moreover, the use of life-cycle assessment (LCA) tools during the design phase can assist with assessing the environmental impact of smart materials, from production to the product’s use and end-of-life stage. Such sustainability-oriented pathways are indispensable for harmonizing EV innovation with the world’s environmental and social obligations.

6. Conclusion

The integration of smart materials into electric vehicle (EV) design represents a transformative leap forward in ensuring safety, performance, and sustainability. These advanced materials, with their adaptive properties, offer substantial improvements in crashworthiness and structural integrity, two critical factors for the future of EVs. By enhancing energy absorption during collisions, reducing vehicle weight, and enabling real-time health monitoring, smart materials provide innovative solutions that traditional materials cannot match.

Key materials such as shape memory alloys, piezoelectric sensors, magnetorheological fluids, and self-healing composites already demonstrate their potential to revolutionize vehicle safety. These materials contribute to the protection of occupants and extend the lifespan and reliability of EV structures. Furthermore, the ability to integrate these materials with emerging technologies like artificial intelligence and IoT opens new possibilities for dynamic, responsive vehicle systems.

While challenges remain in cost, scalability, and standardization, the future for smart materials in EVs is incredibly promising. Ongoing research and development will likely yield even more advanced materials and manufacturing techniques, paving the way for safer, lighter, and more efficient electric vehicles. As the EV industry continues to grow and mature, smart materials will play an increasingly critical role in shaping the next generation of vehicles that meet the demands of both performance and safety in an environmentally responsible manner. In conclusion, smart materials in EV design enhance crashworthiness and structural integrity and contribute to a more sustainable, efficient, and innovative automotive future. The continued evolution of these materials will be key to driving the next wave of automotive safety and performance standards.

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