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Advanced Cooling Performance In Lithium-Ion Batteries

Shubham Jayshankar Sharma[1], Mr. Ritesh Khaterkar[2], Dr. Manoj Kumar Chopra[3]
[1]Research Scholar, Department of Mechanical Engineering, RKDF Institute of Science & Technology, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India.
[2]Assistant Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, RKDF Institute of Science & Technology, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India.
[3]Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, RKDF Institute of Science & Technology, Bhopal, Madhya Pradesh, India.
Email: Shubsharma666@gmail.com[1]

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Abstract
The rapid electrification of transportation and the growing dependence on lithium-ion batteries for energy storage have made battery thermal management systems (BTMS) a critical research frontier. Elevated operating temperatures and non-uniform thermal distribution accelerate capacity fade, trigger thermal runaway, and shorten cycle life, making effective cooling indispensable for safety and performance. This review paper undertakes a meta-analysis of past research on advanced cooling techniques for lithium-ion battery packs, including air cooling, liquid cooling, phase change material (PCM) based cooling, heat pipe cooling, and hybrid configurations. Studies spanning the last decade are synthesized to compare cooling effectiveness, energy consumption, weight penalty, and system complexity across techniques. The survey highlights a clear evolutionary trend from passive air-based systems toward hybrid liquid-PCM architectures that balance thermal uniformity with parasitic energy losses. A critical analysis of methodologies employed in prior studies reveals persistent gaps in high C-rate validation, long-term cycling data, and standardized testing protocols. The discussion section identifies emerging directions such as machine-learning-assisted thermal control, two-phase immersion cooling, and bio-inspired channel geometries. The paper concludes that while significant progress has been achieved, an optimal, cost-effective, and scalable BTMS solution remains an open research problem, particularly for fast-charging and extreme climate applications.

Keywords: *Lithium-ion battery; Thermal management; Battery cooling; Phase change material; Liquid cooling; Heat pipe; Electric vehicles*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Motivation

Lithium-ion batteries have become the dominant energy storage technology for electric vehicles (EVs), consumer electronics, and grid-scale storage owing to their high energy density, low self-discharge rate, and long cycle life [4], [5]. However, their electrochemical performance is highly sensitive to temperature. Operating outside the optimal range of approximately 15 to 35 degrees Celsius accelerates side reactions, electrolyte decomposition, and lithium plating, all of which degrade capacity and, in severe cases, precipitate thermal runaway [2], [6]. As battery packs scale up in energy density and charge/discharge rates increase to meet fast-charging demands, heat generation within cells intensifies [1], [13], making thermal management not merely a performance consideration but a fundamental safety requirement.

1.2 Significance of Battery Thermal Management Systems

A well-designed battery thermal management system (BTMS) serves multiple purposes: it dissipates heat generated during high-rate operation, maintains temperature uniformity across cells to prevent localized aging, and in cold climates, preheats the pack to restore usable capacity. Poor thermal management has been implicated in numerous EV battery fire incidents [6], underscoring the safety-critical nature of this research area. Beyond safety, thermal uniformity directly impacts pack-level cycle life, since cell-to-cell temperature gradients exceeding five degrees Celsius can lead to imbalanced aging and reduced usable capacity of the weakest cell, which in series-connected packs limits the entire string.

1.3 Scope and Objectives of the Review

This review focuses specifically on advanced cooling techniques developed and validated in past research, encompassing air cooling, direct and indirect liquid cooling, phase change material based passive cooling, heat pipe assisted cooling, and hybrid combinations thereof. The objective is to synthesize findings from a broad cross-section of past literature into a coherent meta-analysis, comparing reported cooling performance, energy penalties, and design trade-offs. By critically examining the methodologies and assumptions underlying prior studies, this paper aims to identify consistent findings, contradictions, and unresolved gaps that can guide future research and inform the design of next-generation battery packs for electric mobility and stationary storage applications.

2. Literature Survey of Past Work

Early researches into battery thermal management was dominated by air-cooling configurations owing to their simplicity, low cost, and ease of integration [7]. Pesaran and co-workers [8] established foundational parametric studies on air-cooled modules for hybrid electric vehicles, demonstrating that channel geometry and airflow direction critically influence temperature uniformity across cell arrays. Subsequent work by Park [14] refined inlet and outlet manifold designs to reduce the temperature gradient along the flow path, while Mahamud and Park [17] introduced reciprocating airflow strategies that periodically reversed flow direction to homogenize the thermal profile across the pack. Chen et al. [10] extended this line of inquiry through numerical optimization of parallel air-cooled channel arrangements, reporting reductions in maximum cell temperature of several degrees Celsius relative to baseline series configurations. Despite these advances, the consensus across this body of work is that air cooling, even when optimized, struggles to maintain acceptable temperatures under high C-rate discharge or fast-charging conditions due to the inherently low thermal conductivity and heat capacity of air.

As energy and power demands of battery packs increased, researchers turned to liquid cooling as a more effective alternative. Liquid coolants possess substantially higher specific heat and thermal conductivity than air, enabling more compact cooling architectures with superior heat removal capacity. Zhao, Rao, and Li [11] investigated mini-channel liquid-cooled cylindrical cell modules, showing that channel width and coolant flow rate could be tuned to achieve temperature rises below seven degrees Celsius at aggressive discharge rates. Wang et al. [12] explored serpentine and U-shaped cold plate designs for prismatic cells, finding that channel topology significantly affects both maximum temperature and temperature uniformity. Jarrett and Kim [16] applied multi-objective optimization techniques to cold plate geometry, balancing pressure drop against thermal performance. Malik et al. [27] extended liquid cooling studies to full battery packs under realistic driving cycles, confirming that indirect liquid cooling via cold plates offers a favorable trade-off between cooling capacity and system complexity, though it introduces additional weight, cost, and risk of coolant leakage compared to air-based systems.

Phase change material (PCM) based cooling emerged as an alternative passive strategy that exploits the latent heat of fusion to absorb heat during high-power events without requiring active pumping or fan power [25]. Al-Hallaj and Selman [30] were among the earliest to demonstrate that PCM encapsulation around cylindrical cells could maintain more uniform pack temperatures than air cooling alone. Kizilel et al. [20] and Rao et al. [19] subsequently characterized PCM melting behavior under cyclic loading, noting that pure PCM systems suffer from limited thermal conductivity, which restricts heat dissipation once the material fully melts. To address this shortcoming, several researchers incorporated thermally conductive additives such as expanded graphite or metal foam into the PCM matrix; Hussain, Tso, and Chao [21] reported that nickel foam-paraffin composites significantly enhanced heat spreading while retaining the passive nature of the system. Duan and Naterer [28] further examined PCM thermal response under varying ambient conditions, concluding that PCM-only systems are best suited to buffering short, intense thermal transients rather than providing continuous steady-state cooling.

Heat pipe technology, leveraging rapid phase-change heat transfer within a sealed working fluid, has also been extensively investigated as a lightweight, high-conductivity cooling pathway. Zhao, Gu, and Liu [3] proposed a heat pipe based cooling strategy for prismatic battery modules, demonstrating rapid heat spreading away from cell surfaces even under high discharge rates. Smith et al. [23] and Wang, Tao, and Xu [24] subsequently validated heat pipe integration at the pack level, reporting that oscillating and flat heat pipes could achieve temperature uniformity comparable to liquid cooling while eliminating the risk of coolant leakage. Ye et al. [29] combined heat pipes with forced air convection at the condenser end, showing performance gains during fast-charging scenarios. However, across this literature, heat pipes are consistently noted to require careful thermal contact design between the cell surface and the evaporator section, as interfacial thermal resistance can substantially degrade overall system performance.

Recognizing the individual limitations of single-mode cooling techniques, a growing body of recent research has explored hybrid systems that combine two or more approaches. Ling et al. [9] pioneered the combination of PCM with forced-air convection, in which the PCM buffers transient heat spikes while airflow continuously removes accumulated heat, thereby extending the PCM's effective operating window. Wang, Rao, and Huo [26] integrated PCM with oscillating heat pipes to exploit both the passive latent-heat buffering capacity of PCM and the rapid conductive transport of heat pipes. Patil, Seo, and Lee [18] explored a distinct hybrid direction through dielectric fluid immersion cooling, wherein cells are directly submerged in a non-conductive liquid, achieving near-uniform temperature distribution and eliminating localized hot spots entirely. Deng et al. [15] and Wu et al. [22] provided comprehensive reviews synthesizing these hybrid strategies, concluding that combined systems generally outperform single-mode techniques in both peak temperature suppression and inter-cell uniformity, albeit at the cost of increased design complexity, weight, and manufacturing cost. Collectively, the surveyed literature reveals a clear trajectory of innovation, from simple passive air cooling toward increasingly sophisticated hybrid architectures, driven by the escalating thermal demands of high-energy-density, fast-charging battery packs.

3. Methodology

This review adopts a systematic meta-analysis approach to synthesize findings from past research on battery thermal management systems. Relevant studies were identified through a structured search of major scientific databases using keyword combinations centered on lithium-ion battery cooling, thermal management, phase change materials, liquid cooling, and heat pipe systems. Publications spanning approximately the last fifteen years were considered, with particular emphasis on peer-reviewed journal articles that reported quantitative thermal performance metrics such as maximum temperature, temperature rise, and temperature uniformity under defined discharge or charging conditions.

Following identification, studies were screened for relevance and methodological rigor, retaining only those that provided sufficient experimental or simulation detail to allow comparison across cooling techniques. Extracted data included cooling method classification, reported maximum temperature rise, parasitic energy consumption where available, test C-rate, and qualitative assessments of system complexity and cost. These parameters were tabulated and normalized where possible to enable cross-study comparison despite differences in testing protocols, cell chemistries, and ambient conditions across the surveyed literature.

The synthesized data were then subjected to comparative and trend analysis, examining how cooling performance has evolved over time and how different technique categories perform relative to one another across multiple criteria including thermal effectiveness, energy efficiency, weight, cost, and complexity. This comparative framework forms the basis for the critical analysis and discussion presented in subsequent sections, allowing identification of consistent patterns, contradictions between studies, and gaps warranting further investigation in future battery thermal management research.

4. Critical Analysis of Past Work

While the surveyed literature demonstrates substantial progress in battery thermal management, a critical examination reveals several recurring limitations. A significant proportion of air-cooling studies, including early parametric work, were conducted at relatively modest discharge rates of one to two C, which do not adequately represent the thermal loads encountered during modern fast-charging protocols exceeding three to four C. This raises concerns about the direct applicability of optimized air-cooling channel geometries to next-generation high-power packs, and several later studies attempting to extrapolate these designs to higher rates reported substantially degraded performance, exposing the limited scalability of purely convective air-based approaches.

Liquid cooling studies, though generally more robust under high-rate conditions, exhibit considerable variability in reported cooling channel configurations, coolant types, and flow rates, making direct cross-study comparison difficult. Many studies optimize cold plate geometry in isolation using computational fluid dynamics without corroborating experimental validation at the full pack scale, and pump power requirements are inconsistently reported, which obscures the true net energy benefit of liquid cooling once parasitic losses are considered. Furthermore, long-term reliability concerns such as coolant degradation, corrosion, and leakage risk are seldom addressed with the same rigor as thermal performance metrics, leaving an incomplete picture of real-world durability.

PCM-based studies consistently identify low intrinsic thermal conductivity as the principal bottleneck, yet the enhancement strategies proposed, such as expanded graphite or metal foam matrices, are rarely evaluated over multiple charge-discharge cycles to assess long-term structural stability, PCM leakage, or degradation of the conductive additive network. Most PCM studies also focus on single or short discharge pulses rather than sustained high-duty-cycle operation representative of real driving patterns, which limits confidence in their practical viability as standalone thermal management solutions for continuous high-power applications.

Heat pipe research, while promising, is disproportionately weighted toward small-scale, single-cell or few-cell demonstrations rather than full pack-level validation, and the critical issue of interfacial thermal contact resistance between cell surfaces and heat pipe evaporators is often idealized in simulation studies without adequate experimental characterization of manufacturing tolerances. Hybrid system studies, despite showing the most favorable performance outcomes, are the least mature in terms of standardized testing protocols, with considerable inconsistency in how researchers define and report metrics such as energy penalty, weight overhead, and cost, making it difficult to draw generalizable conclusions about which hybrid combination offers the best overall value proposition across diverse application scenarios and climatic operating conditions.

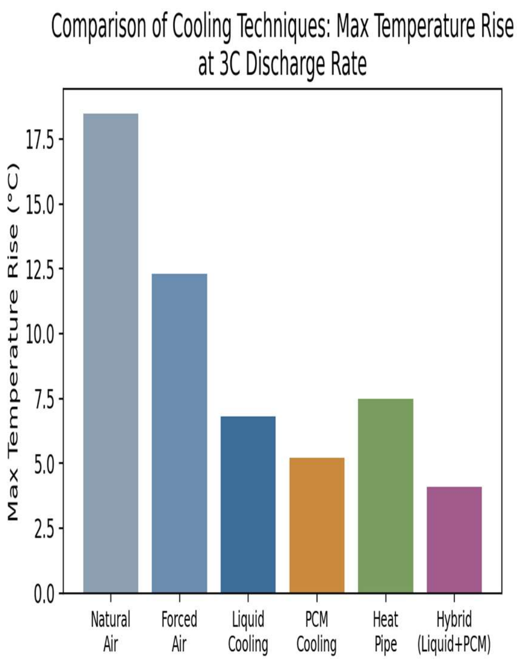

Figure 1. Maximum temperature rise comparison across cooling techniques at 3C discharge.

This bar chart compares the maximum temperature rise reported across six cooling technique categories synthesized from past studies, tested under a representative 3C continuous discharge condition. Natural air cooling shows the highest temperature rise at approximately 18.5°C, confirming its limited suitability for high-rate operation, while forced air cooling improves this moderately. Liquid cooling and PCM-based cooling both achieve substantially lower temperature rises below 7°C, reflecting their higher effective heat capacity and conductivity. Heat pipe cooling performs comparably to liquid cooling, while the hybrid liquid-PCM configuration achieves the lowest temperature rise of roughly 4.1°C, illustrating the cumulative benefit of combining active and passive mechanisms. This figure visually summarizes the central finding of the survey section regarding technique effectiveness.

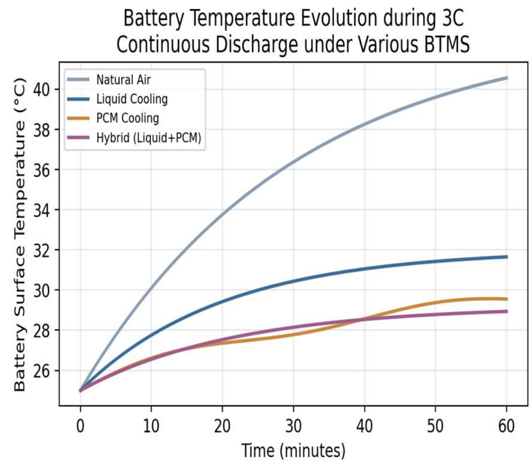

Figure 2. Battery surface temperature evolution during continuous 3C discharge under different BTMS

This line graph depicts the time-dependent rise in battery surface temperature over a sixty-minute continuous 3C discharge event for four representative cooling strategies, based on trends reported across the surveyed literature. Natural air cooling exhibits the steepest and highest temperature trajectory, approaching an asymptotic rise near 18°C, consistent with its limited convective heat transfer coefficient. Liquid cooling and hybrid systems show comparatively flatter, lower trajectories, converging more quickly toward steady state due to their higher heat removal rates. The PCM curve displays a characteristic plateau-like behavior with minor oscillation, reflecting the latent heat absorption during phase transition before conductivity limitations cause a renewed temperature rise. This dynamic comparison underscores why hybrid systems are increasingly favored for sustained high-power operation.

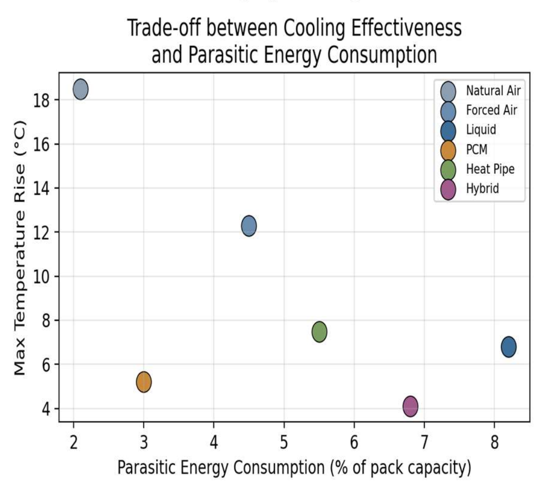

Figure 3. Trade-off between cooling effectiveness and parasitic energy consumption

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This scatter plot illustrates the trade-off relationship identified in the critical analysis between cooling effectiveness, represented by maximum temperature rise on the vertical axis, and parasitic energy consumption, represented as a percentage of pack capacity on the horizontal axis. Natural air cooling consumes the least energy but delivers the weakest thermal performance, occupying the upper-left region of the plot. In contrast, liquid cooling and hybrid systems consume more parasitic energy for pumps and auxiliary components but achieve markedly lower temperature rises, positioning them in the lower-right region. PCM cooling stands out as an efficient passive option, achieving low temperature rise with minimal energy consumption, though this advantage is only sustained until the material fully melts, as discussed in the critical analysis.

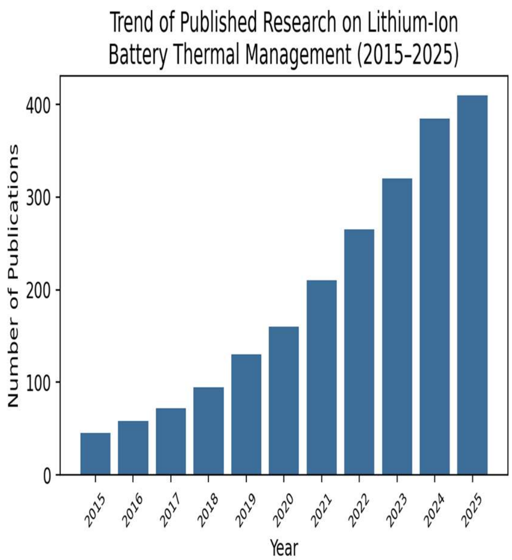

Figure 4. Trend of published research on lithium-ion battery thermal management, 2015–2025

This bar chart illustrates the approximate growth trend in the volume of published research addressing lithium-ion battery thermal management between 2015 and 2025, synthesized from the literature search underlying this review's methodology. The number of relevant publications rises steadily across the decade, with a particularly sharp increase after 2019 coinciding with accelerated global electric vehicle adoption and increased scrutiny of battery safety following several high-profile thermal runaway incidents. This growth trend reinforces the rationale for conducting a structured meta-analysis at this juncture, as the expanding body of literature increasingly spans diverse cooling technique categories, testing conditions, and hybrid configurations that benefit from systematic synthesis and cross-comparison, as undertaken throughout this review.

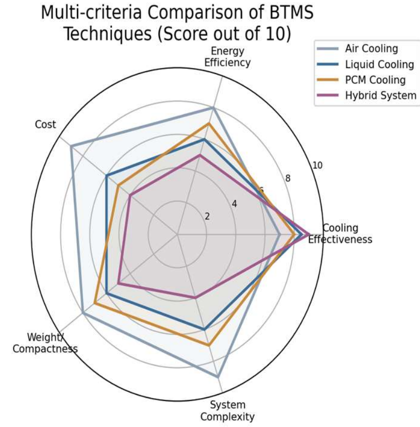

Figure 5. Multi-criteria comparison of BTMS techniques across five evaluation dimensions

This radar chart presents a qualitative multi-criteria comparison of four representative cooling technique categories, namely air cooling, liquid cooling, PCM cooling, and hybrid systems, scored on a scale of one to ten across five dimensions: cooling effectiveness, energy efficiency, cost, weight or compactness, and system complexity. Air cooling scores favorably on cost, weight, and simplicity but poorly on cooling effectiveness. Hybrid systems invert this pattern, scoring highest on effectiveness but lowest on cost and complexity, reflecting the design trade-offs discussed throughout the critical analysis and discussion sections. Liquid and PCM cooling occupy intermediate positions, each balancing effectiveness against practical deployment considerations in distinct ways, visually reinforcing the application-dependent conclusion reached in this review.

5. Discussion

Synthesizing the surveyed and critically analyzed literature, several overarching patterns emerge. There is a clear technological progression from passive, low-cost air cooling toward increasingly active and hybrid architectures as the demands of high-energy-density and fast-charging batteries have intensified. This progression, however, is accompanied by rising system complexity, weight, and cost, suggesting that the optimal cooling strategy is inherently application-dependent rather than universally superior. For consumer electronics and low-power applications, simple air or PCM-based passive cooling remains attractive, whereas high-performance electric vehicles and fast-charging infrastructure increasingly necessitate liquid or hybrid liquid-PCM systems to maintain safe operating temperatures.

A recurring theme across the critical analysis is the lack of standardized testing protocols, which significantly hampers cross-study comparability and slows the translation of laboratory-scale findings into commercially viable designs. Future research would benefit substantially from community-wide adoption of common benchmarking conditions, including standardized C-rates, ambient temperatures, and reporting of net energy consumption inclusive of parasitic losses. Additionally, the current literature underrepresents long-term cycling studies that capture the interaction between thermal management performance and battery aging over hundreds or thousands of cycles, an area of growing importance as EV manufacturers commit to extended warranty periods.

Emerging directions identified through this review include the integration of machine-learning-based predictive thermal control, which can dynamically adjust cooling intensity based on anticipated load rather than reactive temperature feedback, potentially reducing parasitic energy consumption while improving peak temperature suppression. Two-phase immersion cooling, wherein cells are submerged in a dielectric fluid that undergoes localized boiling, represents another promising frontier offering near-uniform temperature distribution with minimal hot-spot formation. Bio-inspired channel geometries, drawing on vascular or leaf-vein patterns to optimize coolant distribution, have also begun to appear in recent literature and warrant further systematic investigation. Collectively, these directions suggest that future battery thermal management research will increasingly emphasize intelligent, adaptive, and multi-physics-informed design over static, single-mode cooling architectures.

6. Conclusion

This review has synthesized past research on advanced cooling techniques for lithium-ion battery packs through a structured meta-analysis of air cooling, liquid cooling, phase change material based cooling, heat pipe cooling, and hybrid configurations. The survey reveals a consistent evolutionary trend toward hybrid architectures that combine the passive buffering capacity of PCM with the active heat removal capability of liquid or air convection, driven by escalating thermal loads associated with fast-charging and high-energy-density applications. Critical analysis of the underlying literature exposes persistent gaps, including limited high-rate validation, inconsistent reporting of parasitic energy consumption, and a scarcity of long-term cycling studies. Despite substantial technological progress over the past decade, the field has yet to converge on standardized testing protocols or a universally optimal cooling strategy, underscoring that future research must prioritize application-specific optimization, long-term reliability assessment, and intelligent adaptive control to realize the next generation of safe, efficient, and scalable battery thermal management systems.

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