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Optimization of Concrete Properties with the Use of Carbon Nanotubes and Advance Nanomaterials: A Review

Rimi Pandit[1], Dr. Biman Mukherjee[2], Souvik Sharma[3]

[1,3]Post-Graduate Students of Structural Engineering, Department of Civil Engineering, Narula Institute of Technology, Kolkata, West Bengal, India
[2]Professor, Department of Civil Engineering, Narula Institute of Technology, Kolkata, India

ABSTRACT

The mechanical properties and bond strength of triple hybrid-reinforced concrete incorporating carbon nanotubes (CNT), nano-silica, and graphene oxide. Experimental results demonstrate that the addition of these nano-materials significantly enhances flexural strength, while reducing Poisson's ratio and volumetric strain, with the most pronounced effects observed with graphene oxide. Additionally, pull-out tests conducted on the concrete specimens indicate improved bond performance attributed to reduced volumetric deformation. Further analysis focuses on the application of CNT and carbon nanofibers (CNF) in cement mortar, revealing substantial increases in 28-day compressive (up to 154% for CNT and 217% for CNF) and flexural strengths. The study also explores the incorporation of nano-materials in asphalt pavement, highlighting their ability to enhance visco-elasticity and resistance to aging and moisture. Importantly, the findings underscore the promising role of nanotechnology in improving the durability and sustainability of construction materials, paving the way for innovative applications in the construction industry. Future research should include a broader evaluation of mechanical properties and their relationships to bond strength for optimized performance in structural applications..

Keywords: Cement Mortar, Carbon Nanotubes, Carbon Nanofibers, Cementitious Products, Compressive Strength, Flexural Strength Nanomaterials, nanotechnologies, construction Concrete, Sonication process, Tensile Strength, Durability.

INTRODUCTION

The enhancement of nanotechnology, as witnessed with carbon nanotubes, has remarkably improved the construction industry, especially the cement composites. It has been established that the use of single or multi wall carbon nanotubes in cemented or concrete mixtures can greatly elevate compressive strength, flexural strength ratios as well as tensile properties. Besides, having a high aspect ratio coupled with their incredibly high strength and elasticity renders CNTs superior in terms of both material reinforcement at a nano scale and structural durability. Recent studies (2000s – present) have stressed the capacity of CNTs to lower porosity, improve cement hydration rates and bridge cracks via fiber pullout mechanisms.

In addition, the use of CNTs in construction materials echoes the increasing urge for construction that is both high performing and 'eco-friendly'. The construction industry is under siege, in the face of high demand for enhanced materials that would withstand and perform under heavy pavements traffic loads, rendering the above requirements necessary. CNTs when applied to cement and concrete composites have shown potential in concrete rehabilitation and surface repair, for instance, high performance polymers.

MATERIAL

OPC Type I/II, with its compressive strength at 3500 psi (24 MPa), conforms to ASTM C150 and is majorly applied in concrete mix as the binder itself and during experimental works. Graded Sand, which contains a bulk density of 1497 kg/m³ and has specific gravity at 2.65 conformed by ASTM C778, is an example of fine aggregates used to strengthen and make more workable in concrete mixes. It refers to polycarboxylate ether superplasticizers, adding increased flow and workability particularly at addition of nanomaterials - Glenium 7700;

Carbon nanotubes - NC 7000 9.5nm diameter/ 1.5µm with superb mechanical and thermal and electric behavior, can also be found within asphalt cement which improves long term durability to provide crack proof real time Structural health monitoring. Carbon Nanofibers (CNF) - PR-24-XT-LHT, which exhibit high tensile strength and modulus, are applied to enhance the mechanical properties of concrete and asphalt, particularly to resist cracking and ensure structural integrity under heavy loads.

Nano-Carbon is a black powdery nanoparticle with large surface area used to enhance rheological properties in materials, particularly in asphalt, improving viscosity and elasticity for improved performance in traffic and temperature conditions. Nano-Clay, a layered silicate material, is a cost-effective additive for modifying matrices and enhances the mechanical and thermal properties of asphalt, concrete, and other materials.

Nano-Titanium Dioxide (TiO2), a white pigment with photocatalytic properties, is used in concrete, paints, and cements to promote self-cleaning and reduce air pollutants through photocatalytic reactions. Nano-SiO2 derived from silicates enhances compressive strength, cohesiveness, and durability of concrete specially in the presences of fly ash; nano-ZnO has been observed to improve resistance of the concrete by improving water resistance and processing time.

Nano-Silver (Ag) is antibacterial, kills bacteria and fungi, and affects cellular metabolism in inhibiting bacterial growth. It is applied in coatings and construction materials to remove infections and odors by killing bacteria and fungi. Nano-Aluminum Oxide (Al2O3) has been added to concrete that has improved its mechanical strength significantly in split tensile and flexural strength, while Nano-Zirconium Oxide (ZrO2) offers high physical resistance and chemical stability; it has found applications mainly in high durability like coatings, ceramics, and in concretes with enhanced resistance. Nano-Wolfram (Tungsten) Oxide (WO3) is another valued material with electrochromic properties that can modulate light penetration. It finds its application in smart windows and coatings to manage both heat and light penetration.

Carbon Nanotubes (CNTs) and Carbon Nanofibers (CNFs) are used in both asphalt and concrete to enhance mechanical durability and prevent cracking under heavy vehicle loading. Nano-Silica (SiO2) and Nano- Zinc Oxide (ZnO) improve the compressive strength of these materials and enhance their resistance to environmental factors like water and temperature fluctuations. In addition, Nano-Clay and Nano-Titanium Dioxide (TiO2) improve the rheological properties besides self-cleaning properties of concrete and asphalt surfaces, which help in making concrete and asphalt stronger and more durable over time.

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Mixing Procedure

In the preparation of nanomaterial-modified mortar, one of the most important parameters to achieve mortar strength, durability, and performance is uniform dispersion of Carbon Nanotubes (CNT) and Cellulose Nanofibers (CNF). The proper distribution of these nanomaterials in the cement matrix is essential to avoid weak spots in the final product, which may lead to reduced mechanical properties. It does not only have the effect on interaction between the nanomaterials and cement matrix, but it also improves material's structural properties.

Preparation includes dispersion of CNT in water with incorporation of a surfactant or plasticizer which could break aggregates/clumps into the solution; in addition, to ensure effective breakup, a relatively intense dispersion for CNF could be more important than CNT that forms bundles and aggregates due to the strong forces of inter-particles. To ensure effective and uniform dispersion, CNT is subjected to sonication for 30 minutes using a horn-type sonicator. The sonicator operates at an amplitude of 120 µm with a 0.5-inch (12 mm) tip. The duration and intensity of sonication are carefully controlled to break apart CNT bundles without overheating, which could potentially damage the material and reduce its effectiveness. In contrast, CNF, being more fibrous in nature, requires only 15 minutes of sonication to achieve the same level of dispersion, as its structure is less prone to clumping compared to CNT. The sonication process, through the application of high-frequency sound waves, helps to achieve a uniform and stable dispersion, thereby preventing the formation of agglomerates that could negatively impact the performance of the mortar.

After the effective dispersion of the CNT and CNF in the water, the next process is the preparation of the mortar mixture. The base mixture was composed of 1 part cement to 2.75 parts graded sand. This cement-sand mixture gives the basic framework to which the dispersions of the nanomaterials are added. The CNT and CNF dispersions are added into the mortar mixture, and a comprehensive blending is carried out. A Hobart mixer is used, equipped with a flat beater and mixed for 4 minutes. The purpose of the mixing step here is to distribute the nanomaterials evenly within the cement-sand mixture. Proper integration of CNT and CNF in the mortar is important because inconsistency in mixing might lead to a non-uniform distribution, hence causing weak points or areas with reduced performance in the final cured mortar.

The mortar mixture, after proper blending, is cast into molds, and the samples are left for 24 hours to set and cure. This curing period is critical because the mortar gains its shape stability and begins to harden. Once the first 24-hour setting period has elapsed, the samples are taken out of the molds, but curing is not halted. To ensure the continued growth of strength and durability, samples are placed in a lime- saturated water tank, providing a controlled environment conducive to proper curing. This lime-saturated water aids in maintaining that the samples will cure evenly and consistently, avoiding drying and premature changes in them, which might otherwise lead to an impact on the properties in the final stage. Testing was conducted after the lapse of 7, 14, and 28 days during the curing period while keeping the samples submerged in lime-saturated water throughout.

The cured samples undergo a series of tests for evaluating the mechanical properties of compressive strength, flexural strength, workability or flowability, and strain at load. In the compressive strength test, the mortar is placed within a universal testing machine. Incremental load is applied until specimen failure occurs, which will yield the force when the mortar breaks. The obtained force provides a measure of load-bearing capacity of the mortar. Testing is carried out at 7, 14, and 28 days to monitor the development of strength over time. The flexural strength test is performed by using a three-point loading setup to measure the mortar's resistance to bending under applied stress, which replicates the real-life situation where the mortar may be subjected to bending forces. This test is very crucial in understanding the performance of the mortar under different types of stress. Furthermore, there is a flow test by ASTM C1437 for testing workability and flow ability of mortar. The specimen is put on a flow table. Then after dropping it a number of times, the diameter of the flow is measured and indicated as an index to evaluate the flow ability when applying it. In strain measurement, there is an attachment of the specimens using strain gauges. Strains are thus detected in vertical as well as lateral directions from a mortar tested to undergo a form of mechanical measurement. As this will reflect clearly on deformation the mortar undertakes, very high values regarding material behavior would have been discovered while subjected to particular loads and the material stress pattern would be explained accordingly.

Optimization in all process steps beginning with preparation to testing is what ultimately yields mechanically ideal nanomaterial-modified mortars. This means that the distribution of CNT and CNF is uniform, thus ensuring a positive contribution by nanomaterials to mortar properties, thus strengthening, reinforcing, and providing the mortar with strength and robustness. Cautious processes such as mixing and curing provide the mortar a more enhanced ability in relation to resisting actual application challenges. These sets of mechanical tests provided an integral evaluation of material capability and validated the idea that nanomaterial-modified mortar was stronger but more durable for applications in advanced constructions.

Consideration

Sonication was carefully controlled throughout the process to avoid overheating, which is critical because excessive heat can have detrimental effects on the structure and properties of the nanomaterials. For Carbon Nanotubes (CNT), for example, overheating could potentially cause structural damage, leading to the degradation of the nanotubes and a reduction in their reinforcing capabilities. The length and aspect ratio of CNTs are critical parameters that directly impact their mechanical performance in the mortar matrix. When the CNTs break up into shorter lengths due to overheating, the connections they establish within the cementitious matrix become less effective and reduce their reinforcing effect. Similarly, for Cellulose Nanofibers (CNF), excessive heat could affect the fiber’s morphology and bonding properties, ultimately reducing the mechanical enhancements it imparts to the mortar. By carefully monitoring and controlling the sonication process, including adjusting parameters such as sonication time and amplitude, it ensures that the nanomaterials maintain their structural integrity, thus preserving their ability to reinforce the mortar effectively.

Besides the careful sonication process, optimizing the mixing time and equipment used in preparing the nanomaterial-modified mortar is critical to achieving homogeneous distribution of CNT and CNF within the mixture. For this purpose, the Hobart mixer with a flat beater was selected for the thorough blending of cement, sand, and dispersed nanomaterials. The mixing time was set at 4 minutes, which is a balance between providing enough time for uniform distribution of the nanomaterials while preventing excessive mechanical energy that could potentially damage the structure of the nanomaterials. The goal of this controlled mixing process is to achieve a well-dispersed, homogeneous mixture where the CNT and CNF are evenly distributed throughout the mortar. Inadequate mixing may lead to uneven dispersion, which may result in localized concentrations of nanomaterials, thus creating weak spots in the cured mortar and affecting the overall mechanical performance.

Optimization of the mixing process also directly affects the interaction between the nanomaterials and the cement matrix. Uniform dispersion ensures that the CNT and CNF are well-integrated into the structure, allowing them to enhance the mechanical properties of the mortar, such as compressive strength, flexural strength, and durability. The nanomaterials contribute to the formation of a more robust network of bonds within the cementitious matrix, improving the load-bearing capacity and overall structural integrity of the mortar. A well-prepared final product, thereby showing enhanced performance, can be achieved by preventing agglomerates and ensuring a homogeneous distribution of the nanomaterials. Mechanical properties, in terms of resistance to stresses, might be higher than the common mortar.

Controlled sonication to avoid overheating and optimal time of mixing as well as equipment is very important in order to get effective dispersion and integration of CNT and CNF into the mortar. These careful steps contribute significantly to the mortar's enhanced mechanical properties, ultimately producing a more durable, strong, and reliable material for construction applications. Careful attention to detail in both sonication and mixing processes ensures that the nanomaterials contribute their maximum potential to the final product, resulting in improved overall performance and longevity.

Test Result

Failure modes of the nanomaterial specimens of cement mortar depended on the bond length (ld) and concrete cover. Pull-out failure was reported for specimens with bond length of 1.5db in which usual failure included cracks, as shown in Fig. 8(a). **Splitting failure** occurred at a bond length of 3db with a concrete cover that is less than or equal to 3.1cs/db at the side of the specimen, as shown in Fig. 8(b).

If the concrete cover of the specimen is thicker than or equal to 4.5cs/db, then there is a combination of failure modes, which occur in both the pull-out and splitting failures. These failures depended on factors including the type of cement used: 0GCS versus OPC, and on the reinforcing bar diameter. Furthermore, in some specimens, especially those with the higher fc′ and fsp values (0GCS for example), **yielding of reinforcing bars** caused failure before it was possible to measure the actual bond strength.

Compressive strength at 28 days: For the control mixes, the **control mix (0.4 w/c ratio)** showed the highest compressive strength of all the control samples. For the **CNT composites**, the highest compressive strengths were recorded in samples having a w/c ratio of 0.45–0.5, reaching approximately 38–45 MPa.

The **CNF composites** showed higher strengths at lower w/c ratios, ranging from 52 to 54 MPa, for 0.35–0.45 w/c ratios. Compared to the control mix, **CNT composites** had a percentage increase in compressive strength of 37%-154% depending on the w/c ratio and dosage, whereas **CNF composites** showed a more significant increase ranging from 36% to 217%, with the best performance at CNF (0.1%-0.2%) and a 0.35 w/c ratio.

All nano-reinforced samples exhibited a higher flexural strength at 28 days than the control samples. Improvement ranged from 14% to 53% based on dosage and w/c ratio. The best performance was obtained in terms of flexural strength at a 0.35 w/c ratio for both CNT and CNF composites. These improvements were **statistically significant** when compared to control samples, with a P-value of less than 0.05, meaning that the addition of nanomaterials had a statistically significant impact on the flexural strength.

Statistical analysis in the form of a t-test was applied to check whether improvements in nano-composites strengths are significant. Null hypothesis is rejected, confirming the results wherein nano composites show substantially enhanced compressive and flexural strength as against the control sample; thus the strong evidence supports nanomaterial reinforcement efficiency in cement mortar.

In MWNT-cement composites, the slant shear test had a 20%-23% increase in slant shear strength at 3 and 7 days, respectively, and had a 22% increase at 28 days compared to normal cement mortar.

Although the slant shear strengths of the 0.1% MWNT composites were low compared with the quick-hardening Pro Poxy 300 epoxy resin at an early age, by 28 days, the strength of the MWNT composites was about 80% of the epoxy.

This means that MWNT-reinforced cement mortar shows enhanced slant shear strength compared to the control mortar and may be recommended for repair grout applications, provided further research is aimed at enhancing early bonding performance. General observations from the experiment were that w/c ratio had a significant impact on the mechanical properties of cement composites along with the kind of nanomaterial used such as CNT or CNF.

CNF Composites have performed better in lower w/c ratios with regard to superior compressive and flexural strengths than that of CNT composites.

However, a workability challenge was identified in CNF composites at those lower w/c ratios, which will create practical challenges in handling this material. This notwithstanding, compressive and flexural strengths in CNF composites at those lower w/c ratios were extremely superior, thereby meaning that there is the potential for improving properties in cement-based materials with the use of CNF.

Combination
The optimal ratio of water-to-cement with respect to achieving compressive strength has been achieved at a dosage level of 0.1% - 0.2% for Cellulose Nanofibers (CNF) incorporated at this range of dosage with the use of 0.35 water-to-cement ratio. Such specific dosing produced mixtures with significantly the highest compressive strength amongst those that had been tested when compared to controls. Such strengths improved remarkably and in the low ranges of water-to-cement ratio that result in higher denseness and strength within the matrix.

Flexural Strength: Like compressive strength, both CNT and CNF composites achieved the highest flexural strength value at 0.35 w/c ratio. That ratio seemed to combine just the right amount of workability with mechanical strength to facilitate sufficient dispersion of nanomaterials and enhance the resilience of the cement mortar against bending and deformation under stress. The values for nano-reinforced samples indicated significant increases in flexural strength, especially at that w/c ratio.

Nano-Enhanced Cement Mortar: The addition of nanomaterials to cement mortar showed considerable improvements in both compressive and flexural strengths, which clearly indicated the positive influence of nanotechnology on the performance of cement-based materials. CNF composites showed the most significant improvements in both strength categories. A more efficient hydration process using CNTs and CNFs as inclusions resulted in the formation of a more efficient interfacial bonding between the aggregates and the cement matrix, contributing to a stronger and much more durable material. Such results support the use of nano- enhanced cement mortar in structural applications that entail a great need for strength and durability.

Slant Shear Strength: The MWNT-reinforced cement mortar showed promising results in the slant shear strength test, demonstrating its potential for use in repair applications, such as grouting and bonding materials. The slant shear strength of 0.1% MWNT composites exhibited a 20%-23% increase over normal cement mortar at 3 and 7 days and a 22% increase at 28 days.

The MWNT-reinforced cement mortar did not approach the early strength of the Pro Poxy 300 epoxy resin but got closer at 28 days, at around 80% of the epoxy's strength. This means that while the MWNT-cement composites demonstrated significant promise, further research and refinement are necessary to enhance their early bonding strength for more immediate applications, particularly where quick-setting characteristics are important.

Application of Nanotechnology in Construction

Nanotechnology has improved concrete by adding nano-silica in order to provide increased strength, reduce water permeability, and lower porosity, making it a more long-lasting concrete. **Self-healing concrete** can repair cracks through microcapsules filled with healing agents and increase the structure's longevity. **CNTs** enhances tensile strength and prevents cracking from spreading while providing more resistance to wear of concrete.

Nanotechnology enhances steel by using copper nanoparticles that fill surface unevenness in order to mitigate fatigue cracking, vanadium and molybdenum nanoparticles, which increase fracture toughness, and magnesium and calcium nanoparticles that enhance weld toughness, making steel more robust and dependable for constructions.

Nanoparticle-infused coatings, such as TiO_2 (titanium dioxide), offer self-cleaning and anti-fouling properties, especially in glazing. These coatings break down dirt and pollutants with sunlight exposure, improving maintenance efficiency. Additionally, nanoparticles improve anti-graffiti, thermal control, and energy-saving coatings, contributing to sustainability and energy efficiency.

Nanotechnology enhances wood by making it water-repellent and potentially self-repairing, extending its lifespan. It also allows for self-sterilizing wood, which is ideal for hygienic environments, and enables the embedding of electronic devices for environmental monitoring, turning wood into a smart material for modern construction.

Nanotechnology improves corrosion protection in painting, through creating hydrophobic coatings that prevent the damage caused by water and saltwater on metal surfaces. Such advanced coatings resist fading, cracking, and peeling and can thus enhance the durability of structures and save costs from maintenance.

Nanotechnology has affected glass in the following ways: it improved fire resistance with silica nanoparticles and made electrochromic coatings that can change the opacity of glass for privacy and energy efficiency. TiO_2 coatings create self-cleaning glass, reducing maintenance needs while enhancing the building's performance and safety.

Nano-cement reinforced with CNTs in fire protection enhances the fire resistance of building materials. Besides, CNTs exhibit flame retardant properties, making them the best choice for protective clothing as well as providing safety in both construction and hazardous environments. Nanotechnology revolutionizes green building concepts through new materials like smog-eating concrete, self-cleaning windows, and energy-producing facades. This is sustainable construction that makes way for smart buildings, the ones with adaptive features like color-changing walls and photosynthetic surfaces-to thrive in environmental harmony.

Nano sensors embedded into construction materials monitor the temperature, humidity, and stress in these materials. Such sensors feed real time data into the computers, thus allowing early detection of structural anomalies, facilitating proactive maintenance thus making buildings safer and longer-lived.

CNTs enhance concrete by improving strength, durability, and flexibility, controlling crack propagation and enhancing stress transfer. Their incorporation creates high-performance, durable cement composites, making them ideal for infrastructure that must withstand harsh environmental conditions.

CONCLUSION

The study on the mechanical properties and bond strength of triple hybrid-reinforced concrete with nanomaterial incorporation provides valuable insights into the potential of nano-engineered materials in improving concrete performance. The research primarily focuses on the effects of incorporating graphene oxide (GO) and other nanomaterials such as nano-clay, carbon fiber, and various nano-oxides into concrete, and the results highlight both the advantages and challenges of using nanotechnology in construction.

Although nanomaterials did not significantly enhance the compressive strength of concrete, there was a significant increase in the splitting tensile strength compared to OPC. In particular, concrete with 0.04% graphene oxide (0.04GCS) showed improved tensile performance and reduced volumetric strain, indicating enhanced structural behavior. This improvement suggests that graphene oxide can effectively improve the tensile properties of concrete, contributing to better overall performance under tensile stresses.

The addition of graphene oxide (GO) to concrete led to a decrease in slip and an increase in bond strength, particularly in the 0.04GCS sample. This concrete showed the lowest strain during pull-out testing, thus indicating the significance of nanomaterials in enhancing the bonding between aggregates and cement paste. These results indicate that graphene oxide can be the key to improving the interfacial bond between reinforcement and concrete. Calculations using mechanical properties indicated that the bond strength of nano- concretes was predicted with little error for 0.04GCS but was overestimated for 0GCS, since graphene oxide was absent and might have caused agglomeration of nanomaterials.

Furthermore, strain was reduced considerably, and mechanical properties were improved using nanomaterials, in particular graphene oxide. Fatigue life, resistance to crack and moisture were further improved with addition of nanomaterials within the concrete system, which adds up to greater overall durability. Various nano-fillers like nano-clay, carbon fiber, and nano-oxides (ZnO, SiO_2, TiO_2) have resulted in both better performance at high temperatures and low-temperature performance while also showing greater oxidation resistance to provide better resistance to aging along with greater durability. These developments point to the ability of nanomaterials to significantly increase the lifespan and extend the service life of concrete structures.

The researchers found that effective dispersion of nanomaterials into the concrete matrix was one of the main obstacles. Other key factors included mixing temperature, time, and rate, which played a significant role in dispersion and, therefore, the final properties of the nanomaterial-enhanced concrete. Proper assessment of nanomaterial dispersion remains an open challenge and requires further research to ensure consistent performance. The effective dispersion of nanomaterials is the key to fully exploiting their potential, and hence, optimization of the mixing process is the main challenge to be overcome.

While the incorporation of nanomaterials presents potential for great enhancements in performance, the study further calls for assessing the environmental, economic, and ecological impacts related to the incorporation of nanomaterials into construction. Significant opportunities exist with regard to saving energy and resources within construction, although large-scale utilization of nanomaterials demands careful assessment of the costs associated with producing and using nanomaterials along with their associated environmental impact. Sustainability concerns will play a vital role in the widespread adoption of nanotechnology in the construction industry.

Future Challenges

Future research on nanomaterial-enhanced concrete should pursue a few key areas in order to maximize its potential and make it more practical. The first includes the development of standardized methods for distributing nanomaterials uniformly throughout concrete; such uniform distribution would then ensure that the material's properties are uniformly achieved. Long-term durability testing is considered necessary to ascertain the performance of concrete over longer periods, specifically regarding aging, moisture resistance, and fatigue life, and explore the impact of nanomaterial content on sustainability under different environmental conditions. There is a pressing need to determine health and safety issues related to the handling and application of nanoparticles and their long-term effects on human health and the environment. Standardization of the testing methods, including pull-out and lap splice tests, is required to generate reliable and consistent results in different studies that can help in designing concrete structures containing nanomaterials. Economic feasibility in terms of production cost, mixing, and application, as well as evaluating lifecycle cost savings for structures constructed with improved concrete, should also be considered. Finally, the sustainability of nanomaterial production, including the use of eco-friendly materials and processes, should be examined to ensure that these advanced materials are used in an environmentally responsible manner in construction.

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