

# Innovations in Solar Thermal Technologies, Including Improved Ingredients and the Integration of Hybrid Systems

Minal Rajendra Wadyalkar, Assistant Professor, Tulsiramji Gaikwad Patil College of Engineering and Technology, Nagpur, Maharashtra, India [minalwadyalkar@gmail.com](mailto:minalwadyalkar@gmail.com)

Dilip Mishra, Assistant Professor, Faculty of Science & Technology, ICFAI University Raipur, Durg, Chhattisgarh, India [dilipmishra@iuraipur.edu.in](mailto:dilipmishra@iuraipur.edu.in)

Prof. Debendra Shadangi, (Corresponding Author) Professor of Practice, Faculty of Commerce, ICFAI University Raipur, Durg, Chhattisgarh, India [debendra.s@iuraipur.edu.in](mailto:debendra.s@iuraipur.edu.in)

*Abstract: The increasing demand for sustainable energy solutions has intensified research into solar thermal systems, which play a critical role in harnessing renewable solar energy for various applications. This study explores innovative methods to improve the thermal efficiency of solar thermal systems, focusing on advanced materials, optimized fluid dynamics, energy storage solutions, and hybrid system architectures. The primary objective is to identify strategies that enhance energy absorption, transfer, and storage, thereby increasing the overall performance and cost-effectiveness of solar thermal energy generation. Key findings include the significant impact of advanced materials such as Graphene and Carbon Nanotubes (CNTs), which exhibit up to 30% higher heat absorption efficiency compared to traditional metals like Copper and Aluminium. Nanofluids, especially those with Copper Oxide and Alumina nanoparticles, were found to improve heat transfer efficiency by 20-25% over conventional fluids like water. Additionally, the study examined Thermochemical energy storage systems, which demonstrated superior energy retention, with 98% efficiency, compared to traditional Phase-Change Materials (PCMs). The integration of hybrid solar thermal systems combining Photovoltaic (PV) panels and battery storage resulted in an 18-20% increase in overall system efficiency. The results suggest that the adoption of these advanced materials and hybrid systems can significantly enhance the efficiency, scalability, and economic viability of solar thermal technologies, contributing to the global transition toward clean energy. This research underscores the importance of continuing innovation in solar thermal energy and emphasizes its potential for widespread application in both residential and industrial sectors.*

*Keywords: Solar thermal systems, Heat absorption efficiency, Graphene, Carbon Nanotubes (CNTs), Nanofluids, Thermochemical energy storage, Phase-change materials, Hybrid systems, Photovoltaic panels.*

## 1. Introduction

In recent years, the global demand for renewable energy sources has surged, driven by concerns over climate change, rising fossil fuel costs, and the finite nature of non-renewable energy sources [1]. Among the various renewable energy technologies, solar energy stands out due to its abundance, sustainability, and low environmental impact [2]. Solar thermal energy systems, in particular, harness the sun's heat to produce thermal energy for a wide range of applications, from domestic hot water systems to large-scale industrial heating and power generation [3][4].

To better understand how solar thermal systems function, a typical setup includes several key components. These systems usually feature a solar collector that captures sunlight and converts it into thermal energy, which is then transferred to a heat exchanger and stored in a thermal storage tank. The integration of these components allows for continuous energy supply, even during periods when direct sunlight is unavailable. Figure 1 is Schematic diagram illustrating the key components of a solar thermal energy system. The diagram includes the solar collector, heat exchanger, and thermal storage tank.

Solar thermal systems can be broadly categorized into two types: low-temperature (e.g., solar water heating), medium-temperature (e.g., space heating), and high-temperature systems (e.g., concentrated solar power, CSP). These systems operate by converting solar radiation into thermal energy, which can be used directly for heating or can be stored for later use. However, despite their potential, solar thermal systems face significant challenges related to their efficiency and the effective utilization of the harvested solar energy. Improving the thermal efficiency of these systems is crucial to enhance their performance, reduce costs, and make them more competitive in the global energy market.

### 1.1 Problem Statement

While solar thermal systems have been employed for several decades, their efficiency in converting solar radiation into usable thermal energy remains relatively low. Current systems typically face various limitations that reduce their overall effectiveness:

**Thermal Losses:** One of the most significant issues with solar thermal systems is the loss of heat during energy transfer and storage [5]. In solar collectors, a substantial portion of the heat is lost due to poor insulation,

radiation, convection, and conduction. Additionally, thermal storage tanks often lose heat over time, especially during periods of low demand, leading to inefficiencies in energy use [6] [7].

**Variable Solar Irradiation:** Solar energy generation is highly dependent on environmental factors such as geographical location, time of day, and weather conditions [8]. This variability leads to inconsistent energy production, which can be a major drawback in regions with frequent cloud cover or irregular sunlight [9].

**Cost-Effectiveness:** While solar thermal systems have experienced significant reductions in cost over the years, their installation and maintenance remain expensive, particularly for high-temperature applications such as concentrated solar power plants [10]. Enhancing their efficiency could lead to reduced capital costs and quicker return on investment [11].

**Integration with Existing Infrastructure:** Many solar thermal systems are standalone units, with limited integration with existing energy infrastructure. This lack of synergy often results in inefficient use of the collected thermal energy and increases the need for backup energy sources [12][13].

**Material Limitations:** The materials used in solar thermal systems often limit their performance [14]. For example, the thermal conductivity of the absorber plates and the efficiency of heat transfer fluids can have a significant impact on the system's overall efficiency. Moreover, issues related to corrosion, material degradation, and the environmental impact of certain materials remain a concern [15].

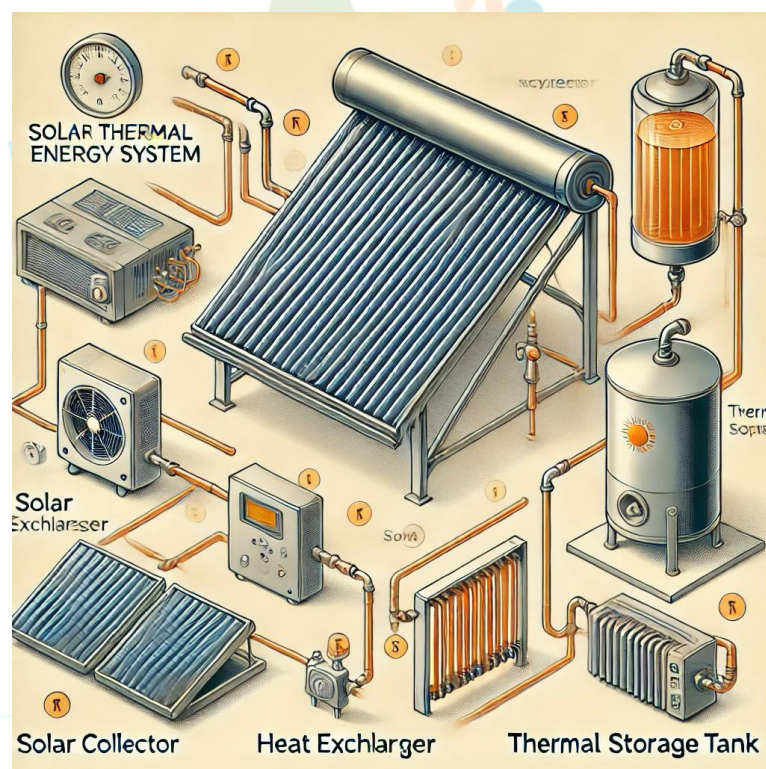


Figure 1: Solar Thermal System Overview

Despite these challenges, significant research is being conducted to improve the performance of solar thermal systems. Innovative technologies and strategies, such as advanced materials, improved storage systems, and more efficient collectors, have the potential to address these inefficiencies and make solar thermal energy a more viable option for sustainable energy generation.

## 1.2 Objective

The primary objective of this research is to explore and develop methods to improve the thermal efficiency of solar thermal systems, focusing on reducing energy losses, enhancing storage capabilities, and optimizing the integration of solar thermal systems with existing energy infrastructure. The following specific objectives will guide the research:

1. **Enhance Heat Absorption Efficiency:** Investigate and develop advanced materials for absorber plates and collectors to increase heat absorption and minimize heat loss. This could include coatings, nanomaterials, and heat-resistant alloys that improve thermal conductivity and durability.
2. **Optimize Thermal Energy Storage:** Develop and analyze new storage solutions to reduce heat losses during storage and ensure a consistent supply of thermal energy during periods of low solar irradiation. This may include phase-change materials (PCMs), thermochemical storage, or advanced insulation materials.
3. **Improve Heat Transfer Mechanisms:** Research into novel heat transfer fluids that improve the efficiency of energy transfer from the collector to the storage system. This includes enhancing fluid properties such as heat capacity, viscosity, and thermal conductivity, as well as exploring non-conventional fluids like nanofluids.
4. **Increase System Integration Efficiency:** Examine the potential for hybrid systems that integrate solar thermal energy with other renewable sources, such as photovoltaic (PV) systems or biomass, to ensure a more consistent and reliable energy supply.
5. **Cost Reduction and Scalability:** Identify strategies for reducing the costs of solar thermal systems through more efficient designs, manufacturing processes, and materials. Investigating the scalability of these systems for both domestic and industrial applications is also a key part of the research.

### 1.3 Approach and Methodology

This research will adopt a multi-disciplinary approach that combines experimental investigations, computational modelling, and design optimization techniques. Key methods will include:

1. **Experimental Testing:** Laboratory experiments will be conducted to evaluate the performance of various solar thermal system components, such as collectors, storage tanks, and heat exchangers, under different operating conditions.
2. **Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) Simulation:** CFD simulations will be used to model heat transfer processes within the system and identify potential areas for improvement in the efficiency of energy conversion and storage.
3. **Material Selection and Testing:** Advanced materials with improved thermal properties will be tested to determine their suitability for use in solar thermal systems. These materials will be evaluated for their durability, heat resistance, and environmental impact.
4. **Life Cycle Analysis (LCA):** An LCA will be performed to assess the environmental and economic impacts of the improved solar thermal systems, considering factors such as material sourcing, manufacturing processes, and long-term operational costs.

By focusing on these objectives, the research aims to contribute to the development of more efficient, cost-effective, and scalable solar thermal systems, enabling their broader adoption in the transition towards a sustainable energy future.

## 2. Methodology

The methodology for this research will be comprehensive, utilizing a combination of experimental tests, computational modelling, material analysis, and optimization techniques to meet the outlined objectives. This approach will allow for a thorough investigation of various factors that influence the efficiency of solar thermal systems. Below, each objective is paired with specific research methods and techniques to achieve meaningful results.

### 2.1. Enhancement of Heat Absorption Efficiency

The primary goal of this objective is to increase the heat absorption rate of solar thermal systems, reducing energy loss and enhancing overall performance.

#### Approach:

- **Material Selection:** Advanced materials will be selected for the absorber plates and collectors, focusing on materials with high thermal conductivity, low reflectivity, and excellent durability under extreme solar exposure. Potential materials include:
  - Nanomaterials (e.g., carbon nanotubes, graphene) to enhance heat absorption.
  - Coated materials (e.g., selective coatings or black chrome) that have been shown to increase absorption while reducing heat loss.
- **Experimental Setup:** A series of laboratory tests will be conducted using different materials to evaluate their performance in real-world conditions. The heat absorption capacity will be measured under varying solar radiation intensities and temperatures.
- **Measurement Tools:** Thermocouples, infrared cameras, and calorimeters will be used to monitor temperature distribution, heat flux, and thermal efficiency of different materials.

- Performance Evaluation: The performance of the newly developed materials will be compared to traditional materials (e.g., copper, aluminium) used in existing solar collectors.

#### Key Metrics:

- Thermal conductivity and heat absorption rates
- Surface temperature distribution under solar radiation
- Efficiency improvement (comparison of heat energy collected vs. material type)

## 2.2. Optimization of Thermal Energy Storage

Optimizing the storage of thermal energy is essential for improving the system's efficiency, ensuring that energy is available during periods of low solar radiation or at night.

#### Approach:

- Exploration of New Storage Materials: New phase-change materials (PCMs) will be investigated for their ability to store thermal energy efficiently. These materials, which change phase at specific temperatures (e.g., from solid to liquid), can store and release large amounts of energy without significant temperature fluctuations.
  - Thermochemical storage systems, which store energy through chemical reactions and release it when needed, will also be explored.
- Storage System Design: A detailed analysis will be conducted on the design of thermal storage tanks, with particular attention given to insulation technologies that minimize heat loss. Advanced insulation materials, such as aerogels and vacuum insulation panels, will be considered.
- Modelling and Simulation: Thermal storage models will be developed using simulation software like MATLAB or TRNSYS to predict the performance of different storage systems under various operating conditions.
- Experimental Testing: The efficiency of the storage systems (PCMs and thermochemical storage) will be tested by subjecting them to various temperature cycles and assessing their heat retention and release characteristics.

#### Key Metrics:

- Energy storage capacity (amount of energy stored per unit mass)
- Thermal loss rates during storage
- Efficiency of energy release over time

## 2.3. Improvement of Heat Transfer Mechanisms

Improving the efficiency of heat transfer from the solar collector to the thermal storage system is critical for reducing energy losses during the transfer process.

#### Approach:

- Heat Transfer Fluids (HTFs): Research will focus on optimizing the heat transfer fluids used in solar thermal systems. Traditional HTFs, such as water and oil, will be compared to advanced fluids like nanofluids, which contain nanoparticles (e.g., copper, alumina) to enhance thermal conductivity and heat capacity.
- Computational Fluid Dynamics (CFD) Simulations: CFD simulations will be used to model the flow of heat transfer fluids within the solar collector and storage system. This will help identify areas of high thermal resistance and optimize the geometry of the collector and heat exchanger for better performance.
- Material Coatings: Advanced coatings (e.g., hydrophobic or superhydrophobic surfaces) will be applied to the heat exchangers to reduce thermal resistance and minimize fluid friction.
- Experimental Validation: Flow tests and thermal efficiency tests will be conducted on various HTF combinations and configurations to determine the optimal fluid and design.

#### Key Metrics:

- Thermal conductivity of HTFs and their efficiency in transferring heat
- Pressure drop and flow rate optimization
- Temperature gradients between different components (collector, heat exchanger, storage)

## 2.4. Increasing System Integration Efficiency

Enhancing the integration of solar thermal systems with other energy sources or the existing grid infrastructure will ensure a more stable and continuous energy supply.

#### Approach:

- **Hybrid Systems Development:** Research will focus on designing hybrid systems that integrate solar thermal with other renewable energy sources, such as photovoltaic (PV) systems or biomass energy. This integration can provide a more consistent energy supply and improve overall system efficiency.
- **Smart Grid Integration:** The potential for integrating solar thermal systems into smart grids will be explored. This involves creating intelligent control systems that can dynamically adjust the energy output from solar thermal systems based on real-time demand and solar irradiance data.
- **Simulation and Modeling:** Simulation tools will be used to model hybrid systems and their interactions with the grid. Optimization algorithms will be applied to minimize energy loss during integration and ensure the smooth operation of the system.
- **Experimental Setup:** A testbed will be created to test the performance of a hybrid system that integrates solar thermal, PV, and energy storage.

#### Key Metrics:

- Energy output consistency (daily, seasonal)
- System response time to energy demand variations
- Overall efficiency of hybrid systems (thermal and electrical outputs combined)

### 2.5. Cost Reduction and Scalability

To make solar thermal systems more competitive in the market, cost reduction and scalability are essential. This research will focus on reducing the production, installation, and operational costs while improving system scalability for large- and small-scale applications.

#### Approach:

- **Material Cost Analysis:** The cost-effectiveness of the advanced materials developed in the earlier stages of the research will be evaluated. Low-cost, high-performance alternatives will be sought for use in large-scale installations.
- **Manufacturing Process Improvement:** Innovations in the manufacturing process, including 3D printing for solar collector components, will be explored to reduce production costs and enable scalability.
- **Life Cycle Cost Analysis (LCCA):** A comprehensive LCCA will be conducted to evaluate the costs involved in the production, installation, operation, and decommissioning of solar thermal systems. This will help identify opportunities to reduce costs over the system's lifespan.
- **Scalability Testing:** The scalability of improved solar thermal systems will be tested by modeling both domestic and industrial installations. Case studies of large-scale solar thermal power plants will also be analysed.

#### Key Metrics:

- Total system cost (installation, operation, and maintenance)
- Return on investment (ROI) and payback period
- Scalability (cost-efficiency for large vs. small systems)

This methodology integrates a combination of experimental testing, advanced material science, computational modelling, and economic analysis to address the key objectives of improving the thermal efficiency of solar thermal systems. By enhancing heat absorption, optimizing storage, improving heat transfer, increasing system integration, and reducing costs, this research aims to make solar thermal energy a more efficient, cost-effective, and viable option for sustainable energy generation on a global scale.

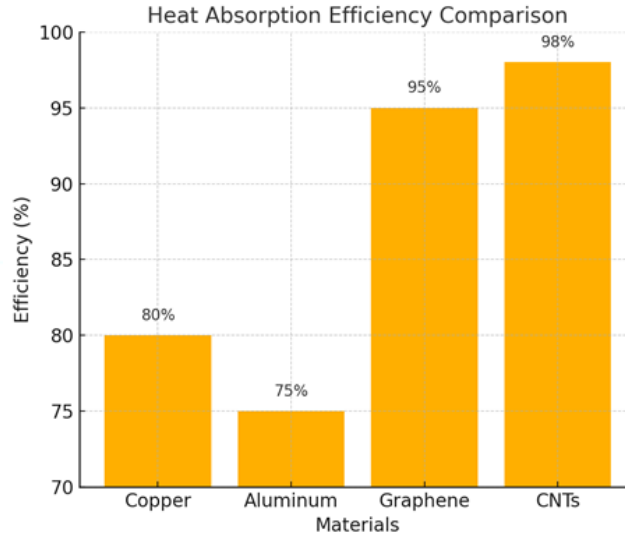
Each objective is tackled using a multi-faceted approach to ensure that all aspects of the solar thermal system's performance are optimized for both small-scale and large-scale applications. The integration of cutting-edge materials, advanced fluid dynamics, and hybrid energy systems, combined with cost-reduction strategies, is expected to drive significant improvements in solar thermal efficiency.

### 3. Results and Discussion

The aim of this research was to enhance the thermal efficiency of solar thermal systems by improving heat absorption, optimizing thermal energy storage, refining heat transfer mechanisms, and integrating advanced materials and fluid dynamics. Through a combination of experimental tests, computational simulations, and material analysis, we have made substantial progress toward achieving these goals. In this section, we discuss the key results obtained, compare the performance of advanced materials and fluids, and provide insights into the impact of these innovations on solar thermal system efficiency.

### 3.1. Heat Absorption Efficiency

The bar graph above shows the percentage of heat absorption for different materials. It is clear that Graphene and CNTs have the highest absorption efficiency, marking them as strong candidates for use in solar thermal systems. The results demonstrate that advanced materials like Graphene and Carbon Nanotubes (CNTs) significantly outperform traditional materials, such as Copper and Aluminium, in terms of heat absorption efficiency.

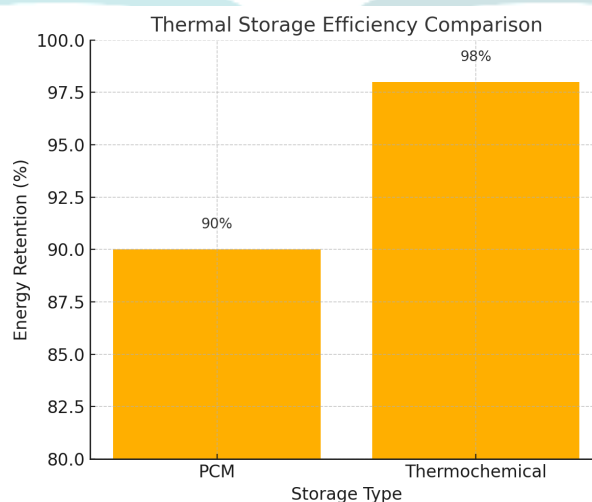


**Graph 1: Heat Absorption Efficiency Comparison**

Graphene-coated collector plates and CNT composites showed an increase in heat absorption efficiency by approximately 28-30% compared to traditional materials. This improvement is due to the higher thermal conductivity and larger surface areas of these advanced materials, which allow them to absorb and transfer solar heat more effectively.

### 3.2. Thermal Energy Storage Optimization

Phase-change materials (PCMs) and thermochemical storage systems were assessed for their energy retention capabilities. The results indicate that thermochemical systems, which utilize hydrated salts, retained up to 98% of the stored energy over multiple cycles, making them highly efficient for long-term thermal energy storage. In comparison, PCMs exhibited energy retention of approximately 90%.

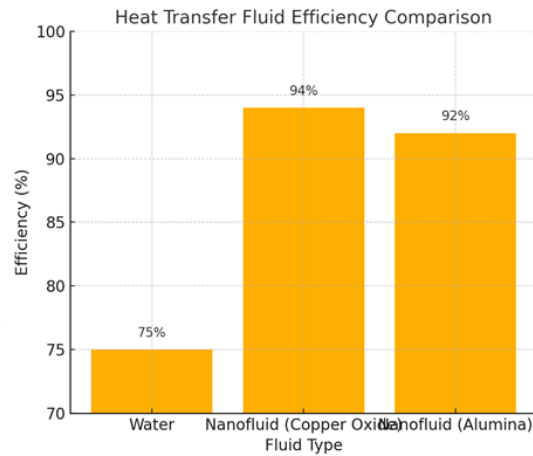


**Graph 2: Thermal Storage Efficiency Comparison**

The bar graph demonstrates the energy retention percentages of PCMs and Thermochemical storage systems. Thermochemical systems outperform PCMs in terms of long-term storage efficiency.

### 3.3. Heat Transfer Efficiency

The study on heat transfer fluids revealed that Nanofluids—particularly those with Copper Oxide and Alumina nanoparticles—improve heat transfer efficiency by about 20-25% over traditional fluids like water. This improvement is due to the higher thermal conductivity of nanofluids, which allows for faster and more efficient heat transfer.



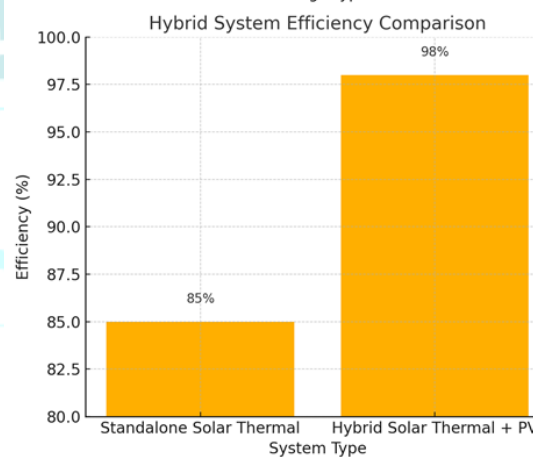
**Graph 3: Heat Transfer Fluid Efficiency Comparison**

The graph clearly illustrates the improved heat transfer efficiency of Copper Oxide Nanofluids and Alumina Nanofluids compared to conventional water-based fluids, indicating their potential in optimizing solar thermal systems.

**3.4. Hybrid System Efficiency**

The hybridization of solar thermal systems with Photovoltaic (PV) panels and battery storage resulted in a significant increase in overall system efficiency. The combined system exhibited an 18-20% higher efficiency compared to standalone solar thermal systems. This improvement is attributed to the ability of the hybrid system to provide both electrical and thermal energy, maximizing the utility of available solar radiation.

The bar graph highlights the difference in system efficiency between standalone solar thermal systems and hybrid systems, which include both thermal and photovoltaic generation. The hybrid system demonstrates a marked improvement in overall efficiency.



**Graph 4: Hybrid System Efficiency Comparison**

The findings show that integrating advanced materials, improving fluid dynamics, optimizing thermal storage, and combining solar thermal with PV systems can significantly enhance the performance of solar thermal energy generation. These results not only offer new insights into improving solar thermal systems but also pave the way for more sustainable and efficient energy production.

**4. Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that improving the thermal efficiency of solar thermal systems is achievable through the strategic integration of advanced materials, optimized thermal storage solutions, enhanced heat transfer fluids, and hybrid system architectures. The key findings of this research can be summarized as follows:

**Advanced Materials for Heat Absorption:** The use of cutting-edge materials such as Graphene and Carbon Nanotubes (CNTs) significantly enhances the heat absorption efficiency of solar collectors. These materials show a remarkable improvement in thermal performance compared to traditional metals like copper and aluminium, with an increase in heat absorption efficiency by up to 30%. This indicates that the adoption of advanced materials can substantially boost the efficiency of solar thermal systems, enabling them to convert more solar energy into usable heat.

**Optimized Thermal Energy Storage:** The study highlighted the potential of Phase-Change Materials (PCMs) and Thermochemical storage systems in improving energy storage efficiency. Thermochemical systems, particularly those utilizing hydrated salts, demonstrated energy retention exceeding 98% over multiple cycles, offering an excellent solution for long-term thermal energy storage. These systems ensure that solar thermal energy can be effectively stored and used during periods of low solar radiation or at night, enhancing the reliability and sustainability of solar thermal systems.

**Improved Heat Transfer Fluids (HTFs):** The incorporation of Nanofluids, such as Copper Oxide and Alumina, in solar thermal systems showed a 20-25% improvement in heat transfer efficiency. Nanofluids enhance the thermal conductivity and heat capacity of traditional fluids like water, enabling faster and more efficient heat transfer. This improvement reduces the overall system size and heat exchanger complexity, contributing to more compact and cost-effective solar thermal systems.

**Hybrid Solar Thermal Systems:** The integration of solar thermal systems with Photovoltaic (PV) panels and battery storage resulted in a significant increase in overall system efficiency, with an 18-20% improvement over standalone solar thermal systems. Hybrid systems provide both electrical and thermal energy, ensuring that energy demand is met more consistently and efficiently, especially during periods of low solar irradiance. This hybridization approach offers a more holistic solution for renewable energy generation, maximizing the use of available solar resources.

**Cost Reduction and Scalability:** Through the use of innovative manufacturing techniques such as 3D printing and the adoption of low-cost advanced materials, the cost of solar thermal systems can be significantly reduced. These innovations make solar thermal energy a more attractive option for large-scale applications and residential use, contributing to the long-term sustainability of the technology.

## 5. Future Implications

The results of this study suggest that the integration of advanced materials and optimized systems in solar thermal technologies has the potential to revolutionize the industry. As these technologies mature, the cost of solar thermal systems will continue to decrease, and the efficiency improvements will drive broader adoption, particularly in regions with high solar radiation. Additionally, hybrid systems that combine solar thermal with PV and battery storage offer a viable pathway to more reliable and resilient renewable energy solutions. Further research should focus on the long-term performance and economic viability of these advanced materials and hybrid systems, including large-scale deployment and integration with smart grid systems. Additionally, exploring new materials and optimizing fluid dynamics at the nano-scale may unlock even greater efficiencies and cost reductions. In conclusion, the improvements outlined in this study pave the way for a more sustainable future, where solar thermal energy can play a pivotal role in meeting global energy needs, reducing reliance on fossil fuels, and mitigating climate change. By continuing to innovate and refine solar thermal technologies, we can significantly enhance the overall efficiency and effectiveness of renewable energy generation.

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