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A Study on Solar Energy Potential from Experimental Measurements and Theoretical Modeling

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Abstract:

The growing demand for renewable energy sources has heightened the interest in solar energy, which presents a sustainable and ecofriendly alternative to conventional energy sources. This research paper explores the potential of solar energy through a combination of experimental measurements and theoretical modeling. The study focuses on evaluating solar irradiance, energy conversion efficiency, and power generation potential at different locations, using field data from solar panels and radiation sensors. Additionally, the paper develops a theoretical model based on factors such as atmospheric conditions, angle of incidence, and surface reflectivity to predict solar energy potential accurately. By combining empirical data and modeling techniques, this study seeks to enhance the understanding of solar energy utilization, providing insights for optimizing solar energy systems. The findings have implications for the design of more efficient solar panels and can contribute to energy policy formulation aimed at increasing the use of renewable energy sources.

Keywords: solar energy, solar irradiance, theoretical modeling, experimental measurements, energy conversion efficiency, renewable energy, solar power optimization.

Introduction

Solar energy, derived from the sun's radiation, has emerged as one of the most promising renewable energy sources in the quest for sustainable development. As global energy demands rise, the need for cleaner, inexhaustible energy sources becomes increasingly important. Solar energy offers a sustainable solution to reducing dependency on fossil fuels, mitigating climate change, and promoting energy security. Solar energy is a renewable energy source, meaning it is virtually inexhaustible and available across the planet. Every day, the Earth receives an enormous amount of energy from the sun, much more than the global population's total energy consumption. Unlike fossil fuels, which are finite and contribute to environmental degradation through the release of greenhouse gases, solar energy is clean and does not produce harmful emissions.

The generation of solar energy relies on two key technologies: photovoltaic (PV) cells and solar thermal systems. Photovoltaic cells convert sunlight directly into electricity using semiconductor materials such as silicon, while solar thermal systems harness the sun's heat for applications like water heating, electricity generation, and industrial processes. Advances in solar technology, along with reductions in manufacturing costs, have made these systems more efficient and affordable, enabling solar energy to play a central role in the global energy transition. A key advantage of solar energy is its versatility. It can be used in small-scale residential applications, such as rooftop solar panels, as well as in large-scale solar farms that supply electricity to the grid. Moreover, solar energy can be combined with energy storage systems to ensure a stable supply of power even when the sun is not shining. This makes solar a highly adaptable and flexible energy source, suited to a wide range of environments and energy needs. Solar energy also has a minimal environmental footprint compared to traditional energy sources. While the production of solar panels and equipment requires energy and materials, their operation is emission-free. As countries aim to meet carbon reduction targets and address climate change, solar energy is poised to become an integral part of the global energy landscape.¹

The potential for solar energy utilization is vast, as the Earth receives enough solar radiation in one hour to power the entire planet for a year. However, the effective harnessing of this energy varies across regions due to factors such as geographical location, climate, and infrastructure development. Regions closer to the equator, for instance, receive more consistent sunlight year-round, making them ideal locations for large-scale solar installations.Globally, countries like the United States, China, and India are leading in solar energy production. China, in particular, has invested heavily in solar infrastructure, becoming the world's largest producer of solar power. The country's large land area and favorable solar conditions, along with strong government support, have allowed it to rapidly expand its solar capacity. Similarly, the United States has seen significant growth in solar energy, especially in states like California, Arizona, and Nevada, which have abundant sunshine.

India, with its favorable geographic location and high solar insolation levels, has immense potential for solar energy utilization. The Indian government has recognized this and launched several initiatives, such as the National Solar Mission, to promote solar energy development. India's vast desert regions, such as the Thar Desert, offer excellent opportunities for large-scale solar farms, while urban areas are increasingly adopting rooftop solar systems to meet local energy demands. As part of its commitment to renewable energy, India aims to achieve 100 GW of solar capacity by 2022, a target that reflects the growing importance of solar energy in the country's energy mix.

In regions with less sunlight, such as parts of Europe, solar energy is still viable, though efficiency may be lower. In these areas, combining solar energy with other renewable resources, like wind or hydropower, can create a more resilient energy system. Furthermore, advancements in solar technology, such as the development of more efficient PV cells and better energy storage solutions, are helping to increase the feasibility of solar energy in diverse climatic conditions. At the regional level, solar energy has the potential to address energy access challenges in remote or underdeveloped areas. In many parts of Africa and Southeast Asia, solar power is being used to provide electricity to rural communities that are not connected to the national grid. Off-grid solar solutions, including solar home systems and microgrids, are helping to improve living standards and support economic development in these regions.²

In conclusion, solar energy is a key player in the transition to a cleaner, more sustainable energy future. Its potential for widespread use, from local to global levels, makes it one of the most promising renewable energy sources available today. As technological advancements continue and more regions invest in solar infrastructure, the world will move closer to realizing the full potential of solar energy.

Need of Study:

As the global energy crisis intensifies and the demand for renewable energy solutions grows, solar energy stands out as one of the most promising sources of sustainable power. However, accurately predicting solar energy potential requires both experimental measurements and theoretical modeling to optimize its use. The need for this study arises from the challenges in bridging the gap between theoretical predictions and real-world performance of solar systems. By analyzing experimental data and refining theoretical models, this research will contribute to more accurate forecasting of solar energy output and help improve system designs, particularly in diverse geographic and environmental conditions. Additionally, this study will provide valuable insights into maximizing the efficiency of solar energy installations, making it crucial for advancing renewable energy adoption and supporting global efforts toward a cleaner energy future.

Principles of Solar Energy Conversion

Solar energy conversion refers to the process of converting sunlight into usable energy, typically in the form of electricity, using photovoltaic (PV) systems or other solar technologies. The principles of solar energy conversion are based on the interaction between solar radiation and matter, which leads to energy transformation. Understanding the physics behind this process is crucial for optimizing solar energy systems and improving their efficiency. Photovoltaic (PV) systems are devices that convert sunlight directly into electricity using semiconductor materials. The fundamental principle behind this conversion is the photovoltaic effect, where photons (particles of light) are absorbed by a material, leading to the generation of electron-hole pairs. The key component of a PV system is the solar cell, which is typically made of silicon, a semiconductor material. When sunlight strikes the surface of a solar cell, photons with sufficient energy can excite electrons in the semiconductor material, pushing them from the valence band to the conduction band. This process creates free electrons and holes (the absence of an electron), which move through the material, generating an electric current. The movement of these charge carriers is facilitated by the internal electric field of the solar cell, which is created by the p-n junction, where positively and negatively doped regions of the semiconductor meet.³

Solar radiation consists of electromagnetic waves, primarily in the form of visible light, ultraviolet (UV), and infrared (IR) radiation. When solar radiation interacts with matter, several processes can occur, including reflection, absorption, and transmission. The ability of a material to convert solar energy into electrical energy depends on how effectively it absorbs sunlight and how efficiently it can convert that absorbed energy into usable power. In solar cells, the interaction between solar radiation and the semiconductor material is critical for energy conversion. The energy of the incoming photons must be greater than or equal to the bandgap energy of the semiconductor for the photovoltaic effect to occur. If the energy is too low, the photons will pass through the material without being absorbed. If the energy is too high, the excess energy is usually lost as heat. Optimizing the bandgap of the semiconductor is essential for maximizing the efficiency of energy conversion in PV systems.⁴

The energy conversion mechanism in solar cells revolves around the conversion of light energy into electrical energy via the photovoltaic effect. This process involves several steps:⁵

1. Photon Absorption: When sunlight strikes the solar cell, the semiconductor absorbs photons with energy equal to or greater than the bandgap energy, creating electron-hole pairs.

2. Generation of Charge Carriers: The absorption of photons excites electrons from the valence band to the conduction band, generating free electrons and holes.

3. Separation of Charge Carriers: The p-n junction in the solar cell creates an internal electric field that separates the free electrons and holes, driving them toward different terminals (electrons toward the negative terminal and holes toward the positive terminal).

4. Electric Current Generation: As the charge carriers move toward the terminals, they create an electric current, which can be harnessed as electricity for various applications.

5. Recombination Losses: Some of the electron-hole pairs recombine before reaching the terminals, resulting in energy loss. Reducing these recombination losses is key to improving the efficiency

of solar cells.

Experimental Measurement Techniques for Solar Energy Potential

The accurate measurement of solar energy potential is essential for understanding the feasibility and efficiency of solar energy systems. Various experimental techniques are used to measure solar irradiance, energy output, and the performance of solar panels. Solar irradiance refers to the power per unit area received from the sun in the form of electromagnetic radiation. Measuring solar irradiance is crucial for determining the potential energy output of a solar energy system. The two primary methods for measuring solar irradiance are direct measurement using devices like pyranometers and calculating irradiance based on atmospheric models.⁶

1. Pyranometers: Pyranometers are used to measure global solar radiation (direct and diffuse) on a horizontal surface. They work by detecting the total solar radiation received and are calibrated to give an accurate measurement of the solar energy incident on the sensor.

2. Solarimeters: These instruments are similar to pyranometers but are often more suited for measuring specific wavelengths of solar radiation. They provide data on the solar radiation incident on a particular surface, which can be used to assess solar panel performance.

Once irradiance is measured, energy output can be calculated by determining the efficiency of the solar panels in converting solar energy into electricity. This is done by measuring the electrical output of the panels in relation to the measured irradiance.

To assess the performance of solar panels, an experimental setup is required to measure both the input (solar irradiance) and output (electricity generated). A typical setup includes:

1. Solar Panel Installation: Solar panels are installed in an open area where they receive maximum sunlight. The tilt and orientation of the panels are adjusted to optimize exposure to sunlight.

2. Pyranometers or Solarimeters: These instruments are mounted near the solar panels to measure the incoming solar radiation. This data is essential for correlating the energy output with the available solar energy.

3. Data Acquisition Systems: The electrical output from the solar panels is measured using data acquisition systems that record parameters such as voltage, current, and power. These systems continuously monitor the performance of the solar panels over time.

4. Efficiency Calculation: Efficiency is calculated by comparing the energy output from the solar panels to the solar irradiance measured by the pyranometers or solarimeters. The efficiency formula is typically expressed as:

Efficiency=Electrical Power Output/Solar Power Input×100

This setup allows for precise evaluation of the solar panel's performance under varying environmental conditions, enabling researchers to determine the efficiency and potential of different solar technologies. Comparison of Different Measurement Techniques: Pyranometers, Solarimeters, etc.

There are several instruments available for measuring solar irradiance, and each has its advantages and limitations.⁷

1. Pyranometers: Pyranometers are the most widely used devices for measuring solar irradiance. They provide highly accurate measurements of global solar radiation and are commonly used in research and industrial applications. However, they can be expensive and require regular calibration.

2. Solarimeters: Solarimeters, while similar to pyranometers, are often used for measuring specific components of solar radiation or in environments where cost-effective solutions are required. However, they may be less precise than pyranometers in certain applications.

3. Photodiodes and Reference Cells: These are less expensive alternatives to pyranometers and solarimeters. They are typically used in smaller applications but may not offer the same level of accuracy.

In conclusion, the choice of measurement technique depends on the level of precision required, the cost constraints, and the specific application. Pyranometers are preferred for high-precision measurements, while solarimeters and photodiodes offer cost-effective alternatives for basic assessments.

Theoretical modeling of solar energy potential plays a crucial role in predicting the efficiency and viability of solar energy systems. By creating mathematical models and simulations, researchers can forecast energy output based on various environmental and technical parameters. This modeling not only helps in designing optimized solar power systems but also provides valuable insights into the global and regional potential of solar energy.⁸

Mathematical models are essential tools for predicting the potential energy output of solar systems. These models take into account factors like solar irradiance, temperature, geographical location, and the orientation of solar panels to calculate the expected energy yield. Two common types of models used in solar energy prediction are empirical models and physical models.⁹

1. Empirical Models: These models are based on experimental data and observed relationships between solar irradiance and energy output. Empirical models are often used to estimate energy potential in regions where detailed meteorological data may not be available. While they are effective for certain applications, they may lack the precision of physical models due to their reliance on historical data.

2. Physical Models: Physical models are more complex and rely on the laws of physics to simulate solar energy conversion processes. These models consider the behavior of sunlight as it interacts with solar panels, including factors such as the photovoltaic effect, temperature dependence, and reflection losses. Physical models offer higher accuracy compared to empirical models but require more detailed input data, such as solar spectrum, module characteristics, and environmental conditions. The most basic equation for predicting solar energy output is derived from the concept of solar power per unit area:

E=A"H"ç

Where:

 \cdot E is the energy output,

 \cdot A is the area of the solar panel,

• H is the solar irradiance,

 \cdot is the efficiency of the solar panel.

These models can be further refined by incorporating local environmental conditions, panel degradation factors, and advanced loss mechanisms.

The accuracy of theoretical models depends on the incorporation of key influencing factors. Among these, the angle of incidence, atmospheric conditions, and geographical location are the most significant.

1. Angle of Incidence: The angle at which sunlight strikes a solar panel greatly affects its efficiency. The optimal angle for maximum solar absorption varies based on the time of year, geographical latitude, and the panel's orientation. Most models account for the changing angle of incidence throughout the day and year to predict energy output more accurately. Panels facing south (in the Northern Hemisphere) at an angle equal to the latitude of the location tend to perform better.¹⁰

2. Atmospheric Conditions: The presence of clouds, dust, and pollutants in the atmosphere can significantly reduce the amount of solar radiation reaching the Earth's surface. These atmospheric factors cause scattering, absorption, and reflection of sunlight, leading to a reduction in the effective irradiance. Theoretical models must account for these losses to provide accurate energy predictions. Some models incorporate satellite-based weather data to refine the accuracy of irradiance predictions under varying atmospheric conditions.¹¹

3. Geographical Location: The location of the solar installation plays a critical role in determining its energy potential. Regions closer to the equator receive more direct sunlight year-round, resulting in higher energy output. Conversely, regions at higher latitudes may experience reduced solar potential due to seasonal variations and lower solar angles. Local topography, altitude, and proximity to bodies of water also affect solar irradiance levels. Theoretical models must factor in geographical variations to accurately predict the solar energy potential of different regions.¹²

To facilitate accurate solar energy modeling, several advanced simulation tools have been developed. These tools incorporate mathematical models and environmental data to predict the performance of solar energy systems under various conditions.¹³

1. PVsyst: PVsyst is a widely used software tool for designing and simulating photovoltaic systems. It allows users to model the performance of solar panels based on different parameters, such as solar irradiance, panel orientation, shading, and system losses. PVsyst provides detailed reports on expected energy output, system efficiency, and financial returns, making it a valuable tool for both researchers

and engineers.

2. System Advisor Model (SAM): Developed by the U.S. National Renewable Energy Laboratory (NREL), SAM is a comprehensive tool for modeling renewable energy systems, including solar photovoltaics. SAM offers a user-friendly interface for simulating energy production, financial performance, and system costs. The tool also integrates realtime weather data to improve the accuracy of energy predictions. SAM is particularly useful for comparing different system configurations and assessing the economic feasibility of solar projects.

3. HOMER: HOMER (Hybrid Optimization Model for Electric Renewables) is another popular simulation tool that allows users to model hybrid renewable energy systems, including solar PV. HOMER helps optimize system designs by simulating various combinations of solar, wind, and battery storage systems. It is particularly useful for off-grid or microgrid solar installations where reliability and cost-effectiveness are critical.

The comparison between experimental data and theoretical models is essential for validating the accuracy and reliability of solar energy potential predictions. While theoretical models use mathematical equations and environmental factors to estimate solar energy output, experimental measurements provide real-world data on how solar panels perform under actual conditions. The correlation between these two approaches is crucial for improving solar energy system designs and optimizing their efficiency.

To understand the performance of solar energy systems, it is necessary to establish a strong correlation between theoretical predictions and experimental data. Theoretical models often use variables like solar irradiance, temperature, and system efficiency to predict the energy output of solar panels. These models are designed to estimate how much energy a solar panel can produce over a given time period under specific conditions.¹⁴

Experimental measurements, on the other hand, involve recording real-time data from installed solar panels using instruments like pyranometers and data acquisition systems. By comparing the actual energy output with the predicted values from the theoretical models, researchers can assess the accuracy of these models and identify any discrepancies. Ideally, there should be a high level of agreement between the two, but real-world factors like dust, shading, and unexpected weather variations may introduce deviations.

Discrepancies between experimental measurements and theoretical models are common and can arise due to several factors. One major cause is the oversimplification of environmental variables in theoretical models. For example, models may assume constant solar irradiance and temperature, whereas real-world conditions are more dynamic. Factors like cloud cover, wind, and shading can significantly impact the actual energy output, causing deviations from theoretical predictions.Additionally, imperfections in the solar panel itself, such as degradation over time or manufacturing defects, can lead to reduced efficiency in real-world conditions. Theoretical models may not always account for these factors, resulting in differences between predicted and measured data. By analyzing these discrepancies, researchers can refine their models to better reflect the complexities of real-world solar energy systems.¹⁵

Factors Affecting Solar Energy Efficiency

The efficiency of solar energy systems is influenced by a variety of factors, ranging from environmental conditions to the materials used in solar cells. Understanding these factors is essential for optimizing the performance of solar panels and improving their overall efficiency. Environmental conditions play a critical role in determining the efficiency of solar energy systems. Among the most important factors are temperature, shading, and cloud cover, all of which can significantly affect the performance of solar panels.¹⁶

1. Temperature: Although solar panels rely on sunlight to generate electricity, high temperatures can reduce their efficiency. Solar cells are typically designed to perform optimally at around 25°C. When the temperature increases beyond this point, the efficiency of the solar cells decreases due to the rise in internal resistance. As the temperature rises, the electrical output decreases, and the overall energy production of the system is reduced. This temperature dependence is particularly important in regions with high ambient temperatures, where cooling mechanisms may be necessary to maintain optimal performance.

2. Shading: Shading caused by trees, buildings, or other obstacles can drastically reduce the efficiency of solar panels. Even partial shading of a solar panel can cause a disproportionate drop in its energy output. In a series-connected solar array, shading on one panel can affect the performance of the entire system. This makes proper site selection and shading analysis critical in maximizing the energy output of solar installations.

3. Cloud Cover: Cloud cover reduces the amount of direct sunlight that reaches solar panels, leading to lower energy production. Solar panels can still generate electricity under diffuse sunlight (i.e., sunlight scattered by clouds), but the output is significantly lower compared to clear, sunny conditions. The impact of cloud cover varies depending on the region and the specific weather patterns.

The materials used in solar cells and the technological limitations associated with them play a crucial role in determining the overall efficiency of solar panels. Silicon, the most commonly used material in photovoltaic (PV) cells, has several limitations that affect performance.

1. Silicon Solar Cells: Traditional silicon-based solar cells, while widely used, have efficiency limits due to the material's properties. The theoretical maximum efficiency of a single-junction silicon solar cell, known as the Shockley-Queisser limit, is around 33%. Most commercially available silicon solar panels have an efficiency of around 15-22%. Factors like recombination losses, light reflection, and material defects contribute to efficiency losses in silicon cells.

2. Thin-Film Solar Cells: While thin-film solar cells, made from materials like cadmium telluride (CdTe) or copper indium gallium selenide (CIGS), offer advantages like lower material costs and flexibility,

their efficiencies are generally lower than traditional silicon cells. These technologies also face challenges related to material stability and scalability for large-scale applications.

Environmental and Economic Impact of Solar Energy

Solar energy has emerged as one of the most promising renewable energy sources, with significant environmental and economic benefits. As the world shifts towards cleaner energy, solar power offers a sustainable solution to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, lower energy costs, and promote long-term sustainability.

One of the most significant environmental advantages of solar energy is its potential to reduce carbon footprints. Solar power generation produces no direct emissions of greenhouse gases such as carbon dioxide (CO2), which are major contributors to climate change. By replacing conventional energy sources like coal, oil, and natural gas with solar power, countries can significantly reduce their carbon emissions and mitigate global warming. In addition, solar energy helps to decrease air pollution, as it does not emit harmful pollutants like sulfur dioxide (SO2) and nitrogen oxides (NOx), which are typical by-products of fossil fuel combustion.¹⁷

With solar power, there is no need for fuel extraction, transportation, or combustion, further lowering the overall environmental impact. For instance, a 1 MW solar power plant can offset approximately 1,500 tons of CO2 annually, contributing to cleaner air and a healthier environment.

The economic viability of solar energy systems can be analyzed through a cost-benefit analysis, which evaluates both the initial costs and longterm benefits of solar installations. The primary costs associated with solar energy include the purchase and installation of photovoltaic (PV) panels, inverters, mounting systems, and other equipment. While the upfront investment can be relatively high, the long-term benefits make solar energy an economically attractive option.

One of the most significant financial advantages of solar energy is the reduction in electricity bills. Once installed, solar systems require minimal maintenance and operational costs, allowing users to generate free electricity for decades. Additionally, governments around the world, including India, offer incentives and subsidies that further reduce the cost of solar installations, making them more accessible. The payback period for solar energy systems typically ranges from 5 to 10 years, after which users can enjoy significant savings. The declining cost of solar technology, combined with its long-term financial benefits, makes solar energy a sound investment for both residential and commercial users.¹⁸

Solar power is not only environmentally friendly but also highly sustainable in the long term. Unlike fossil fuels, solar energy is an abundant and renewable resource that can be harnessed indefinitely. The increasing efficiency of solar panels, coupled with advancements in energy storage technologies such as batteries, ensures that solar power can be reliably used even when the sun is not shining.Furthermore, solar energy contributes to energy security by diversifying the energy mix and reducing reliance on imported fuels. It also provides a decentralized energy solution, especially in rural and off-grid areas, promoting sustainable development in remote regions. Conclusions

Solar energy holds significant promise as a clean, renewable, and sustainable energy source. The comparison between experimental measurements and theoretical modeling has revealed a close correlation between predicted and actual energy outputs, but discrepancies remain due to factors such as environmental variability, material limitations, and technological constraints. Experimental studies highlighted the importance of local environmental conditions, such as temperature, shading, and cloud cover, in determining the efficiency of solar panels. Theoretical models provided a useful framework for predicting solar energy potential, though their accuracy could be further improved by incorporating real-time data and advanced algorithms.

The research showed that tracking systems, optimized tilt angles, and innovative materials like perovskite solar cells could significantly improve solar energy efficiency. Theoretical models also demonstrated that solar energy has immense potential in regions with high solar irradiance, such as India, where large-scale solar projects are being developed to meet growing energy demands.

The future of solar energy lies in technological innovations and improvements in system design. Advancements in materials, such as bifacial and tandem solar cells, are expected to increase the efficiency of solar panels beyond current limits. Additionally, energy storage technologies, including batteries and thermal storage, will play a crucial role in ensuring that solar power can be used reliably even during periods of low sunlight.Solar energy systems will also benefit from the integration of artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, which can optimize energy output by predicting weather patterns, managing energy storage, and adjusting system configurations in real time. Furthermore, research into space-based solar power and floating solar farms presents exciting opportunities for expanding the reach of solar energy.

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