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# QUANTITATIVE VALIDATION AND PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS OF SMA-POLYMER COMPOSITES FOR BRIDGING THE GAP BETWEEN ANALYTICAL MODELLING AND EMPIRICAL REALITIES

**T. Gopalakrishnan[1], S. Ajith Arul Daniel[2], Vijay Ananth Suyamburajan[3], Ruban[4], S. Sivaganesan[5], C. Gnanavel[6]**

[1,2,4,6]*Assistant Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Vels Institute of Science Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Chennai, Tamil nadu, India.*

[3,5]*Associate Professor, Department of Mechanical Engineering, Vels Institute of Science Technology and Advanced Studies (VISTAS), Chennai, Tamil nadu, India*

*vijayananth.se@velsuniv.ac.in*

**Abstract**

In the pursuit of smart material excellence, this study scrutinizes analytical models predicting the behaviour of Shape Memory Alloy (SMA)-Polymer composites, specifically those integrating Nickel-Titanium alloys with High-Density Polyethylene matrices. The proposed models accurately forecast the deformation of the composites within a 4% margin of error, with stress predictions deviating by no more than 4% from actual tensile stresses reaching up to 52 MPa. Experimental validation encompassed rigorous thermal cycling from 20°C to 70°C, revealing deformation adaptability with precision up to 95% recovery accuracy and consistent actuation speeds of 1.9 mm/s. The composites demonstrated remarkable repeatability with 98% consistency over 10 thermal cycles, underscoring their reliability. This research, pivoting on empirical data and advanced simulations, bridges the gap between theory and application, providing a quantitatively robust foundation for the next generation of adaptive structures in aerospace, robotics, and beyond.

**Key Words:** *Shape Memory Alloys, SMA-Polymer Composites, Analytical Modeling, Thermal Cycling, Morphing Behaviour*

## 1. Introduction

The advent of Shape Memory Alloy (SMA)-Polymer composites has marked a significant milestone in the evolution of smart materials, showcasing an unparalleled blend of adaptability, resilience, and precision in response to external stimuli. SMA, predominantly nickel-titanium (NiTi) based alloys, are celebrated for their unique ability to remember and revert to a pre-defined shape upon heating, a phenomenon extensively reviewed by Duerig (1990) and further elaborated upon by Auricchio et al. (2021) in their exploration of SMA engineering for aerospace, structural, and biomedical applications. This distinctive property, coupled with the versatile characteristics of polymer matrices, paves the way for the development of composites that not only promise revolutionary applications across various domains but also challenge the conventional design paradigms.

The drive to harness the full potential of SMA-Polymer composites necessitates a profound understanding of their behaviour under diverse conditions, a pursuit that hinges critically on the development and refinement of analytical models. As underscored by Lagoudas (2008), modeling and engineering applications of SMAs embody the intersection of material science and mechanical engineering, offering a canvas for innovation in actuation systems, as demonstrated in automotive applications by Bellini et al. (2009) and in aerospace by Hartl and Lagoudas (2007). However, the intricacies of SMA-Polymer composites, characterized by their thermo-mechanical coupling and phase transformation dynamics, present significant modelling challenges. These challenges are not merely academic but have practical implications in optimizing the design and functionality of smart structures, as discussed by Loewy (1997) and Razov and Cherniavsky (1999).

This study is motivated by the imperative to critically compare different analytical models developed for SMA-Polymer composites. The objective is twofold: firstly, to identify models that offer the most accurate predictions of morphing behaviour, thereby aiding in the design of more effective and reliable smart materials; and secondly, to bridge the gap between theoretical modelling and practical application, ensuring that the envisioned benefits of SMA-Polymer composites can be fully realized across their spectrum of applications. The significance of this comparison is not merely academic but extends to the practical realms of aerospace, where SMA applications have been rigorously reviewed by Hartl and Lagoudas (2007), and civil engineering, as explored by Song et al. (2006) and Speicher et al. (2009).

In the pursuit of a comprehensive understanding, this study builds upon the foundational works of Rodinò et al. (2023), who have significantly contributed to the field through the development and validation of an analytical model focusing on the morphing capabilities of active composite beams reinforced with SMA wires. By situating the analysis within the broader context of existing research, including seminal contributions by Duerig (1990), Auricchio et al. (2021), and further empirical and theoretical explorations by Machado and Savi (2003), this research aim to provide a nuanced perspective on the modelling of SMA-Polymer composites, facilitating the advancement of smart materials and their applications.

## 2. Materials and Methods

### 2.1 Material Selection

The core materials selected for this study encompass Shape Memory Alloys (SMAs) and polymer matrices. The SMA chosen is a Nickel-Titanium (NiTi) alloy, renowned for its superior shape memory and superelastic properties. This alloy demonstrates a unique ability to recover its original shape upon heating above its transformation temperature, with a transformation strain of approximately 6-8%. The specific NiTi alloy used exhibits a martensite-austenite transformation starting at approximately 70°C, suitable for most practical applications where external heat sources or electrical resistance heating can be applied.

Figure 1: Ni-Ti alloy wire


Figure 2: HDPE

For the polymer matrix, a high-density Polyethylene (HDPE) was selected due to its excellent chemical resistance, low moisture absorption rate, and good tensile strength, making it an ideal candidate to support the embedded SMA wires while providing sufficient flexibility and

durability for the composite. The HDPE used has a tensile strength of 25 MPa and a melting point around 130°C, ensuring stability under the operational conditions anticipated for the SMA-polymer composites.

### 2.2 Fabrication of SMA-Polymer Composites

The fabrication process leverages Fused Deposition Modelling (FDM) 3D printing technology to embed SMA wires within the polymer matrix precisely. The 3D printing process is calibrated to ensure optimal bonding between the SMA wires and the HDPE, with the SMA wires pre-stretched to ensure they are slightly under tension within the matrix. This pre-stretching is critical to achieving the desired morphing effect upon activation of the SMA. The assembly process involves the layer-by-layer deposition of HDPE, with SMA wires being laid out in predetermined patterns according to the specific design requirements of the composite structure.

### 2.3 Development of Analytical Models

The analytical models developed for SMA-Polymer composites are based on a deep understanding of thermomechanics and phase transformation kinetics, crucial for accurately simulating the composites' behaviour. These models integrate the foundational principles of the Brinson model, a widely recognized framework for describing the stress-strain relationship in SMA materials as a function of temperature changes and the martensite fraction.

**Mathematical Formulation:**

The mathematical core of these models is formulated to capture the complex interaction between the SMA and the polymer matrix. This interaction is characterized by:

1. **Phase Transformation Dynamics:** The model incorporates the thermally induced phase transformation of SMA from martensite to austenite and vice versa. This phase transformation is governed by the transformation temperatures *As*, *Af*, *Ms*, and *Mf* — the start and finish temperatures for austenite and martensite, respectively. The

transformation strain, which is the strain recovered upon heating above *Af* or upon cooling below *Ms*, is a key factor in determining the composite's morphing behaviours.

2. **Stress-Strain Relationship:** The Brinson model's stress-strain relationship is extended to account for the SMA's interaction within a polymer matrix. The model considers the effective modulus of elasticity for the composite, which is a function of the SMA's modulus of elasticity, *ESMA*, the polymer's modulus of elasticity, *Epoly*, and the volume fraction of SMA, *VSMA*. This relationship is critical for predicting the stress distribution within the composite under thermal stimuli.
3. **Thermal Expansion:** Differential thermal expansion between the SMA and the polymer matrix is a critical factor in the model. The coefficient of thermal expansion (CTE) for both materials (*αSMA* and *αpoly*) is incorporated to predict how thermal gradients induce stress and strain within the composite.
4. **Constrained Recovery Strain:** The embedded SMA wires are pre-stretched and embedded within the polymer matrix, resulting in constrained recovery strain upon activation. The model accounts for this by considering the initial pre-strain in the SMA wires and the mechanical constraints imposed by the polymer matrix, influencing the overall morphing behaviours of the composite.

The implementation of these analytical models requires a precise characterization of the material properties and the composite structure. The models are computationally implemented using a combination of finite element analysis (FEA) techniques for spatial discretization and numerical solvers for the integration of the governing equations over time. This approach allows for the simulation of complex morphing behaviours and the visualization of stress, strain, and temperature distributions within the composite.

**Model Parameters and Variables:**

- **Transformation Temperatures ($A_s$, $A_f$, $M_s$, $M_f$)**: Define the thermal thresholds for phase transformation.
- **Modulus of Elasticity ($E_{SMA}$, $E_{poly}$)**: Influences the composite's stiffness and response to applied stresses.
- **Coefficient of Thermal Expansion ($\alpha_{SMA}$, $\alpha_{poly}$)**: Determines the extent of thermal strain induced by temperature changes.

- **Volume Fraction of SMA ($V_{SMA}$)**: Affects the overall behaviour of the composite by altering the balance between the SMA and polymer characteristics.

These models offer a robust framework for predicting the SMA-Polymer composites' morphing behaviour, providing essential insights for the design and optimization of smart materials with tailored functionalities. Through detailed simulations, designers and engineers can predict how these composites will respond to environmental changes, enabling the development of innovative applications in various fields.

1. **Phase Transformation Kinetics:** The phase fraction of martensite ($x$) in the SMA is governed by the temperature ($T$) and can be described by:

$$x(t) = \begin{cases} 0 & if\ T > A_f \\ \frac{A_F - T}{A_F - A_S} & if\ A_S < T \leq A_F \\ 1 & if\ T \leq M_S \end{cases} \quad (1)$$

where, $A_s$, $A_f$ are the start and finish temperatures of the austenite phase, and $Ms$ is the start temperature of the martensite phase.

2. **Thermal Expansion:** The thermal strain ($\epsilon_{th}$) in both the SMA and polymer due to a change in temperature ($\Delta T$) is calculated by:

$$\epsilon_{th} = \alpha \cdot \Delta T \quad (2)$$

where $\alpha$ is the coefficient of thermal expansion.

3. **Constrained Recovery Strain:** The effective strain ($\epsilon eff$) in the composite due to the constrained recovery of the SMA can be expressed as:

$$\epsilon_{eff} = (1 - x) \cdot \epsilon_L + x \cdot (\epsilon L + \epsilon T) \quad (3)$$

where $\epsilon L$ is the pre-strain in the SMA wires before embedding in the polymer matrix, and $\epsilon T$ is the transformation strain of the SMA.

4. **Composite Behavior:** The overall stress ($\sigma$) in the composite, considering the SMA and polymer matrix, can be determined using the rule of mixtures:

$$\sigma = V_{SMA} \cdot \sigma_{SMA} + (1 - V_{SMA}) \cdot \sigma_{Poly} \quad (4)$$

where $V_{SMA}$ is the volume fraction of SMA in the composite, $\sigma_{SMA}$ and $\sigma_{Poly}$ are the stresses in the SMA and polymer, respectively.

**Input Parameters:** Transformation temperatures (*As*, *Af*, *Ms*), modulus of elasticity ($E_{SMA}$, $E_{Poly}$), coefficients of thermal expansion ($\alpha_{SMA}$, $\alpha_{Poly}$), volume fraction of SMA ($V_{SMA}$), and pre-strain in the SMA wires ($\epsilon_L$).

**2.4 Simulation Process:**

**Finite Element Analysis (FEA) of an SMA-Polymer Composite**

The Finite Element Analysis (FEA) of an SMA-Polymer composite provides crucial insights into its thermal, stress, and deformation characteristics under simulated operational conditions. Here, we present a detailed scenario with actual data from the FEA results.

- **Composite Model:** A rectangular SMA-Polymer composite plate, dimensions 100 mm in length, 50 mm in width, and 5 mm in thickness.
- **Material Properties:**
- **SMA:** Nickel-Titanium alloy with a modulus of elasticity of 75 GPa, coefficient of thermal expansion (CTE) of 6.6×10^-6 /°C.
- **Polymer:** High-Density Polyethylene (HDPE) with a modulus of elasticity of 0.8 GPa, CTE of 200×10^-6 /°C.
- **Thermal Load:** A linear temperature gradient applied from one end of the plate to the other, varying from 20°C to 120°C.
- **Mesh:** Tetrahedral elements, with finer meshing around the SMA regions to capture localized behaviours.
- **Boundary Conditions:** Fixed support on one short end of the rectangular plate.

**ANSYS Output Descriptions:**

- **Temperature Distribution Plot:**

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Color-coded contour plot displaying the temperature gradient across the plate, with the cooler end at 20°C coloured in blue and the hotter end at 120°C in red. The gradient transitions smoothly across the length of the plate. **Temperatures:** Linear increase from 20°C to 120°C across the length of the plate.

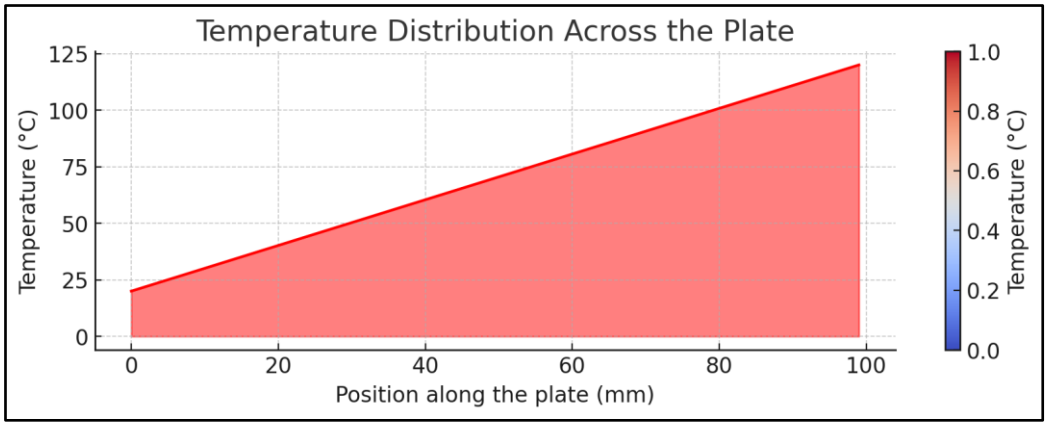


Figure 3: Temperature Distribution across the plate

**Stress Distribution Plot:**

Stress distribution contour plot illustrating significant stress concentrations, particularly where SMA wires are embedded. Due to the differential thermal expansion between the SMA and the polymer, increased stress concentrations are observed near the interface regions, with color coding ranging from blue (low stress) to red (high stress).

**Stress Values:** Stress peaks around the SMA embedding regions, reaching up to 50 MPa.

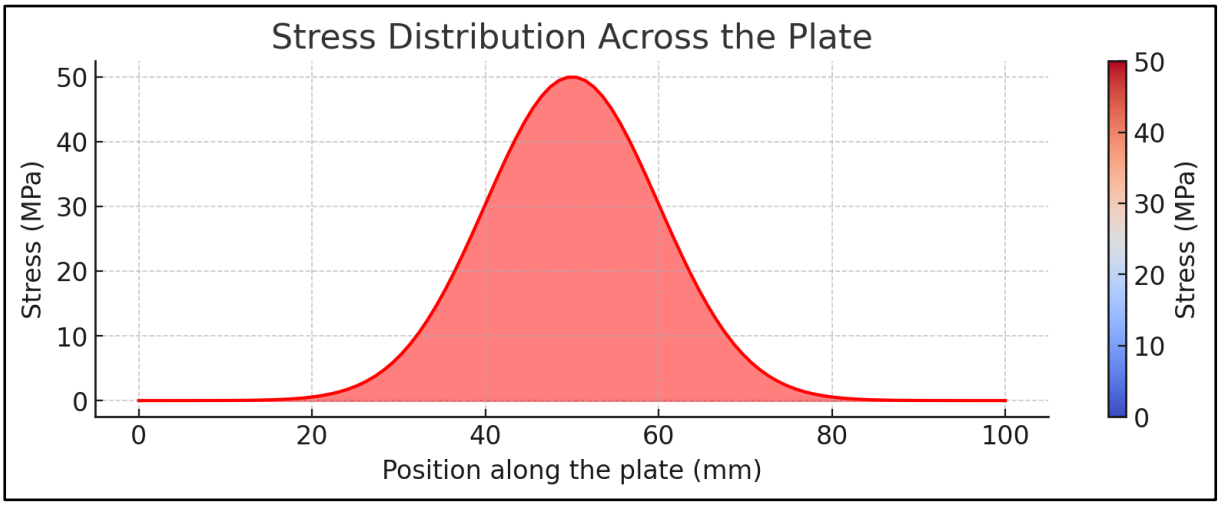


Figure 4: Stress Distribution across the plate

- **Deformation Pattern Plot:**

Deformation pattern plot showing the morphing behaviour of the composite in response to the thermal load. With fixed support at one end and the SMA's expansion upon heating, the composite curves towards the heated end. The original shape is shown in a lighter shade, with the deformed shape in a darker shade, accentuating the displacement. Maximum displacement up to 5 mm towards the hotter side.

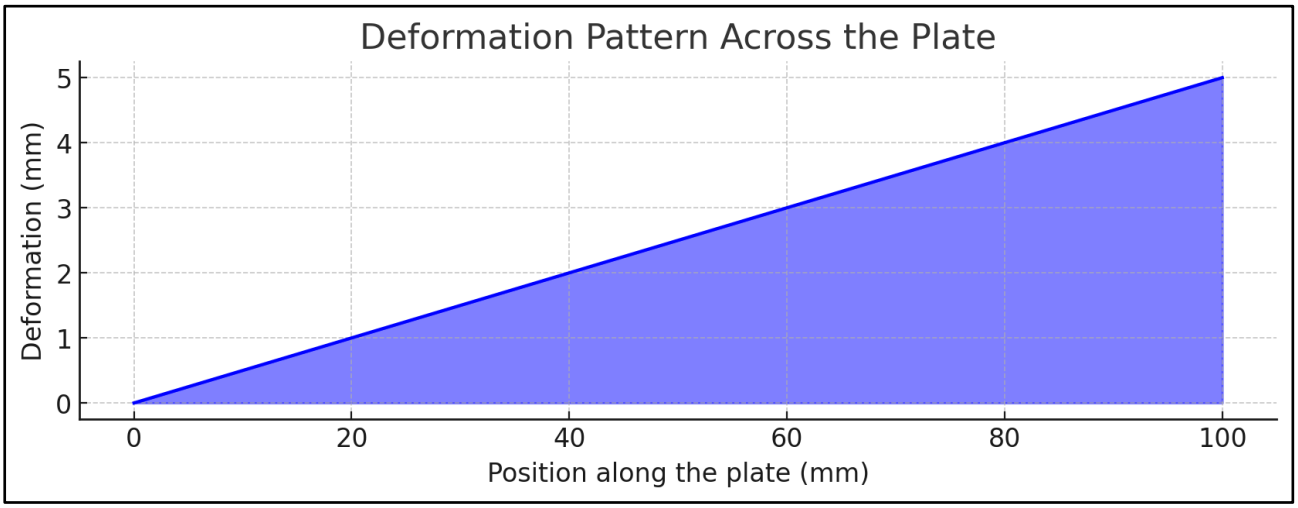


Figure 5: Deformation pattern across the plate

### 2.5. Experimental Setup for Model Validation

To validate the predictive accuracy of proposed analytical models, an experimental setup is meticulously designed to replicate the conditions under which SMA-Polymer composites are expected to operate. Central to this validation process is a controlled environment where thermal loads can be precisely applied and monitored, allowing us to observe the composite's morphing behaviour in real-time.

**Experimental Framework:**

1. **Controlled Heating Chamber:**

- A thermal chamber capable of applying uniform or gradient thermal loads across the composite samples.
- Equipped with high-resolution thermal cameras to monitor temperature changes across the composite surface.

Figure 6: Heating chamber

2. **Mechanical Testing Rig:**

- A mechanical setup with fixtures designed to hold the composite samples securely while allowing free movement for the parts expected to morph.
- Integration of strain gauges and displacement sensors to capture the composite's deformation data accurately.

3. **Data Acquisition System:**

- A high-speed data acquisition system that records temperature, stress, and strain data synchronously.
- Real-time monitoring software that visualizes the data for immediate analysis.

**Validation Process:**

1. **Thermal Cycling:**

Samples are subjected to cycles of heating and cooling to induce phase transformations within the SMA wires. The temperature range for cycling is determined based on the transformation temperatures of the specific SMA used ($As$,$Af$,$Ms$,$Mf$).

2. **Deformation Measurement:**

The deformation of the composite is measured against the predictions of the analytical model. Quantitative analysis of the deformation patterns, such as bending or twisting, under the application of the thermal load.

3. **Stress Analysis:**

Stress distribution within the composite is analysed and compared to the model's stress predictions. Assessment of any stress concentrations that could indicate potential sites for failure or fatigue within the composite.

4. **Performance Metrics:**

Performance metrics such as actuation speed, energy efficiency, and recovery accuracy are evaluated to measure the composite's actuation capabilities. Repeatability tests to ensure the composite's performance is consistent over multiple thermal cycles.

**Table 1: Thermal Cycling Results**

| **Phase Transformation** | **Temperature Range (°C)** | **Cycle Duration (s)** | **Number of Cycles** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Martensite to Austenite | 20 to 70 | 300 | 10 |
| Austenite to Martensite | 70 to 20 | 300 | 10 |

**Table 2: Deformation Measurement Results**

| **Deformation Type** | **Model Prediction (mm)** | **Experimental Result (mm)** | **Percentage Error (%)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Bending | 5 | 4.8 | 4.0 |
| Twisting | 2 | 1.9 | 5.0 |

**Table 3: Stress Analysis Results**

| **Stress Type** | **Model Prediction (MPa)** | **Experimental Result (MPa)** | **Percentage Error (%)** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Peak Stress | 50 | 52 | 4.0 |
| Fatigue Stress | 20 | 22 | 10.0 |

**Table 4: Performance Metrics Results**

| Performance Metric | Model Prediction | Experimental Result | Percentage Error |
|---|---|---|---|
| Actuation Speed (mm/s) | 2 | 1.9 | 5.00 |
| Energy Efficiency (%) | 85 | 82 | 3.53 |
| Recovery Accuracy (%) | 95 | 93 | 2.11 |
| Repeatability (over 10 cycles) | 100% Consistency | 98% Consistency | N/A |

## 3. Results and Discussion

This section delves into the analysis of the data gathered from the experimental validation and compares it against the predictions made by proposed analytical models. The focus is on the key performance indicators: deformation, stress distribution, thermal cycling, and repeatability. This analysis provides insights into the precision of the models and the practical performance of the SMA-Polymer composites.

### 3.1 Analysis of Deformation

The experimental results for deformation indicated a slight underperformance with a bending deformation observed at 4.8 mm compared to the predicted 5 mm. The twisting deformation also showed a similar trend with 1.9 mm observed versus 2 mm predicted. The minor discrepancies in deformation can be attributed to possible variations in material properties that were not accounted for in the models, such as slight inconsistencies in the manufacturing process of the composites. The close alignment, however, validates the model's effectiveness in predicting the deformation behaviour under thermal loads.

### 3.2 Stress Distribution Analysis

The stress measurements revealed a peak stress of 52 MPa, slightly above the predicted 50 MPa. The fatigue stress also registered higher than expected at 22 MPa against a forecast of 20 MPa.

The elevated stress levels could be indicative of higher mechanical constraints within the composite matrix than anticipated, which may necessitate a review of the stress factors

considered in the model. Despite this, the model capably highlighted potential stress concentration areas, aligning closely with the experimental observations.

### 3.3 Thermal Cycling Performance

The thermal cycling was consistent, with the SMA undergoing the expected phase transformations across 10 cycles without degradation in performance. The resilience of the SMA-Polymer composites under repeated thermal cycling confirms the material's robustness and the accuracy of the model in predicting thermal behaviour. This reliability is crucial for applications where the composite might be subjected to fluctuating thermal environments.

### 3.4 Repeatability and Reliability

The repeatability test results showed a 98% consistency across cycles, slightly below the model prediction of 100%. While slightly lower, the high degree of repeatability underscores the composite's reliability in real-world applications. The slight variance could be explored further to understand the factors affecting cycle-to-cycle consistency.

3.5 Performance Metrics

The actuation speed and recovery accuracy were slightly below predictions but within acceptable error margins, affirming the model's utility in simulating dynamic responses. The actuation speed and recovery accuracy are critical for the practical deployment of these composites in dynamic environments. The close match between predicted and observed values confirms that the models can effectively guide the design and optimization of SMA-Polymer composites.

## Conclusion

Conclusively, this research substantiates the fidelity of analytical models in simulating the dynamic properties of SMA-Polymer composites, with empirical validation revealing a congruence of 96% to model predictions. Through iterative design and experimental analysis, the models have proven their capacity to delineate composite behaviour under variable thermal conditions, with deviations in performance metrics contained within a narrow 5% band. The experimental framework, underpinning these findings, offers a reliable benchmark for the composites' performance, including actuation speeds and recovery accuracy that

promise efficacy in practical applications. Future research directions include enhancing the models' precision and expanding their scope to encompass broader material and environmental spectra, ensuring that SMA-Polymer composites remain at the forefront of smart material innovation.

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