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The Application of 3D Printing in Automotive Support Components

Kaigang Mu

New Channel-UIBE Qingdao A-Level Centre, Qingdao, China
mkg0717@outlook.com

Abstract. 3D printing (additive manufacturing) technology, characterized by its layer-by-layer deposition approach and exceptional design freedom, is progressively transforming the automotive manufacturing sector. This article systematically examines the practical applications, material systems, and future development trends of 3D printing in the fabrication of automotive support components. Through the synergistic utilization of metallic materials and high-performance composites, 3D printing technology facilitates the realization of lightweighting and functional integration via the design optimization and manufacturing of critical automotive support parts. However, significant bottlenecks, including material anisotropy, high costs at scale, and a lack of standardized processes, continue to impede the widespread batch application of 3D printing in automotive production. Future advancements are anticipated through breakthroughs in multi-material printing, artificial intelligence integration, and the establishment of industry standards, which will further propel the development of this technology within the automotive industry.This passage connects technical progress with industy. It gives both theoretical ideas and practical bases. All of this are uesd for 3D printing of a car.

Keywords: 3D printing, additive manufacturing, automotive components

1. Introduction

The car industry is a key part of global manufacturing. It faces many different challenges, like the shift to new energy, changing what customers want, and fast changes in technology. Making cars lighter and producing them in a green way are very important in today's car design. At the same time, more and more people want cars made just for them. This shows that the old ways of making cars have their limits. The production steps that use methods like stamping, welding and casting waste a lot of materials. They also take a long time to develop and can't change designs easily. In this case, 3D printing technology can help. It builds things layer by layer and makes models quickly, which gives good solutions for improving, combining and speeding up the making of car parts.

In recent years, 3D printing has been used more and more to make parts that work and support the structure of things. There have been big improvements in three main areas. First, new materials. The kinds of materials that can be used in 3D printing have grown a lot. At first, it was mainly photopolymers and engineering plastics. Now, it includes strong metal mixtures and composites with fibers, which makes the materials much better. Second, better production methods.Technological

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refinements, including large-scale additive manufacturing (LSAM, e.g., BAAM - Big Area Additive Manufacturing) and selective laser melting (SLM), have markedly increased printing speeds and achievable part dimensions. Thirdly, a design paradigm shift. The adoption of generative design algorithms enables effective enhancement of structural integrity, minimization of material waste, and optimization of component performance.

Despite its considerable potential, the large-scale industrial adoption of 3D printing technology faces persistent challenges. Primarily, the anisotropic nature of additively manufactured materials can lead to unpredictable reliability of printed structures under complex loading conditions. Secondly, the substantial capital investment required for equipment and per-part costs presents significant economic barriers. Finally, the lagging development of comprehensive standardization and certification frameworks hinders broader technological deployment. This article reviews the technological evolution of 3D printing within automotive support structures, aiming to provide a theoretical foundation for subsequent technology selection and industrial progression.

2. Application of different 3D printing materials

2.1. 3D printing aluminum alloy

The prevailing trajectory of the automotive industry emphasizes lightweighting and sustainable production. 3D printing has demonstrated significant contributions to vehicular mass reduction and enhanced fuel efficiency [1], as illustrated in Figure 1. For instance, Audi Group achieved a 1.2 kg weight reduction in a vehicle wheel through the application of 3D printed aluminum alloy technology, effectively extending the driving range.

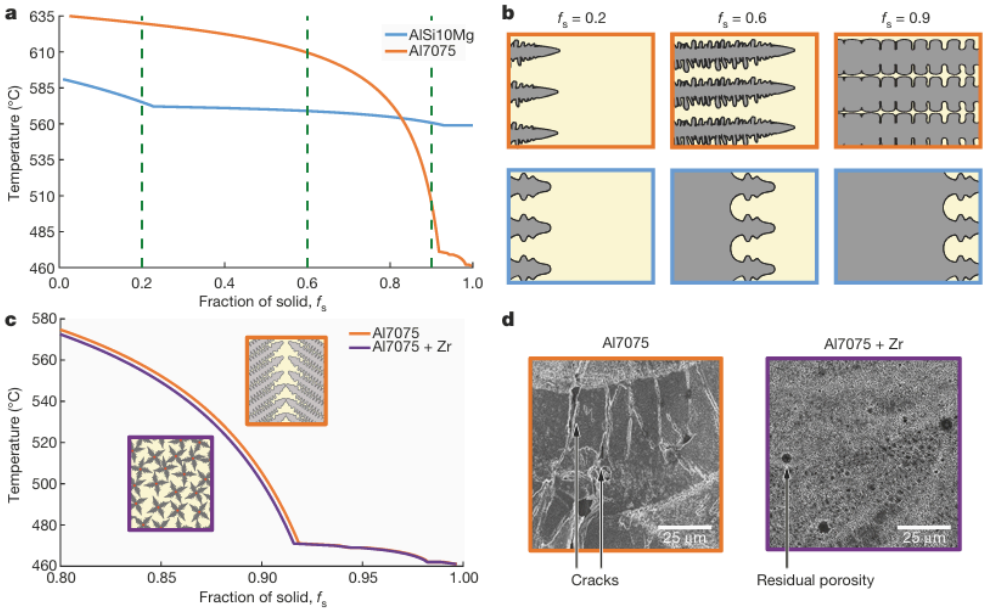

Figure 1. Solidification behaviour of additive aluminium alloys [1]

The integration of 3D printing with artificial intelligence holds promise for advancing energy-efficient vehicles. Keyi Liu employed the You Only Look Once (YOLO) model in conjunction with Selective Laser Melting (SLM) for the manufacture of aluminum 3D-printed automotive body panels. This approach enables real-time defect monitoring during the printing process via deep learning, as depicted in Figure 2 [2].

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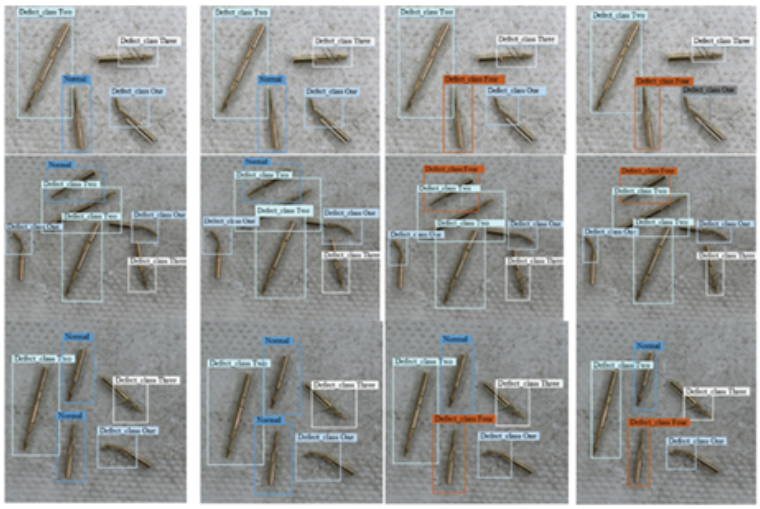

Figure 2. Defect monitoring for 3D printing based on deep learning [2]

2.2. 3D printing titanium alloy

Within the ultra-high-performance automotive segment, 3D printing technology is highly favored for its capacity to produce complex geometries and achieve extreme lightweighting. Bugatti utilized 3D printed titanium alloy for an automotive exhaust manifold, reportedly achieving a 70% reduction in residual stress and a 25% improvement in exhaust efficiency. This effectively addressed challenges related to thermal impact encountered during engine exhaust operation [3].

2.3. 3D printed polymers

Polymer-based 3D printing offers substantial reductions in research and development lead times. Utilizing industrial-grade Fused Deposition Modeling (FDM) technology and acrylonitrile butadiene styrene (ABS) copolymer, researchers demonstrated the printing of an automotive door. This resulted in a weight reduction from 5.471 kg to 3.18 kg and a decrease in processing time from 16 hours to 10 hours (see Figure 3), thereby significantly lowering development costs [4].

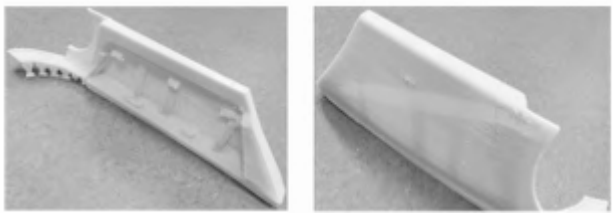

Figure 3. Door models processed by different methods [4] (Left: traditional, right: FDM 3D printing)

Recent years have witnessed a significant increase in functional products manufactured via additive manufacturing with predictable mechanical properties. This trend elevates the demand for robust quality assurance concerning overall mechanical performance and structural durability. Furthermore, for viable commercial adoption, additively manufactured products must demonstrate a competitive performance-to-cost ratio relative to traditionally manufactured counterparts. Conventional AM systems typically produce parts on the centimeter scale, with material deposition

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rates ranging from 0.01 to 0.081 kg/hr. Collaborative efforts, such as those between The Cincinnati Company and Oak Ridge National Laboratory (ORNL), focus on developing large-scale systems based on extrusion and robotic deposition principles. These systems can fabricate structures several meters in size at significantly higher deposition rates (5 to 50 kg/hr). Compared to standard FDM/FFF processes, such as Extrusion Deposition (ED) systems, enable the production of large, complex structures more rapidly, albeit with high short-term material consumption [5].

3. Discussion

3.1. Advantages of 3D printing

3D printing excels in meeting demanding requirements, such as those dictated by complex air systems and high-temperature resistance. Take the 2021 Pagani R as an example. Its engine hood cover is made of carbon fiber-reinforced ceramic matrix composite, and it's produced using 3D printing technology. When the car runs at 300 km/h, this hood reduces the loss from airflow separation by 18%. What's more, it lowers the temperature in the engine compartment by 40°C. All these changes help the vehicle perform much better at high speeds [6].

The technology exhibits considerable industrial value in terms of efficiency enhancement and emission reduction. Scientists from the Technical University of Munich did a study on exhaust systems made of titanium alloy using 3D printing. They found that these high-temperature parts, created through additive manufacturing, can boost thermal efficiency by 9% to 12%. At the same time, they cut down CO emissions by 15%. All of this does a good job in making car systems more eco-friendly [7].

3.2. Disadvantages of 3D printing

Structures that are manufactured through additive manufacturing technologies often face a series of practical challenges. One of these key challenges is distortion, which specifically happens in the middle of the fabrication process; another major challenge is the gradual accumulation of residual stresses within the structures. When researchers and engineers need to optimize the process parameters of additive manufacturing, they usually adopt conventional trial-and-error methods. However, these traditional trial-and-error methods have a notable drawback—they often require the consumption of substantial resources, including materials, time, and equipment costs. The challenges mentioned earlier, such as fabrication-induced distortion and residual stress buildup, do not remain at the same level in all additive manufacturing technologies. In large-scale additive manufacturing (LSAM/BAAM), these challenges become even more obvious and severe. Large-scale additive manufacturing (LSAM/BAAM) has a distinct technical characteristic, and this characteristic is its high deposition speed, which is precisely the factor that further intensifies the aforementioned problems.

To tackle these challenges effectively, several core research directions have emerged, and they are as follows: 1. Forecasting the real-time deformation that takes place during the 3D printing process. 2. Evaluating the internal damage sustained by the materials used in additive manufacturing. 3. Analysis of interlayer interface integrity and potential fracture. 4. Quantification of process parameter sensitivity [8].

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4. Future trends of 3D printing

Despite encountering numerous challenges in the realm of customized automotive production, the development potential of 3D printing within the industry remains substantial. Continuous technological advancement and the emergence of novel approaches are expected to broaden the application scope and deepen the penetration of 3D printing in automotive manufacturing. As the technology matures and processes are further optimized, new application scenarios and business models are likely to emerge. By leveraging 3D printing, automotive manufacturers can achieve more efficient, flexible, and cost-effective production processes, precisely catering to consumer personalization demands, thereby gaining a competitive edge. Although significant hurdles persist, continuous technological breakthroughs and the gradual maturation of the industrial ecosystem promise profound transformations for the automotive sector. This will elevate customized production capabilities, meet increasingly diverse consumer needs, and reshape the competitive landscape.

5. Conclusion

3D printing technology has instigated a paradigm shift in the design-to-manufacture process for automotive support components. As discussed, this technology enables the realization of lightweighting and functional integration, synergistic material and process combinations, and compatibility between economic viability and sustainability objectives. Nevertheless, persistent technical bottlenecks require attention: Firstly, material anisotropy in 3D printing contributes to residual stress and inadequate interlayer strength in composites. Secondly, relatively low production efficiency and high equipment investment costs constrain large-scale manufacturing viability. Finally, the lag in establishing comprehensive industry standards and regulatory frameworks impedes broader technology adoption. Future development should prioritize the following directions: 1. Multi-material and functionally graded printing. 2. Intelligent and integrated process chains. 3. Circular economy systems for material reuse and sustainability.

In summary, 3D printing technology offers a transformative development pathway for the manufacturing of automotive support components. However, realizing its full potential necessitates coordinated advancement across the entire industry value chain to overcome existing barriers and achieve the critical transition from "laboratory prototype" to "factory production."

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