



IMPACT OF THERMAL STRESS ON DISC BRAKE PERFORMANCE

Gaikwad Sambhaji Mahadeo

Research Scholar, Sunrise University, Alwar, Rajasthan

Dr. Javanjal Vijayakumar Kisan

Research Supervisor, Sunrise University, Alwar, Rajasthan

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ABSTRACT

The performance and reliability of disc brakes are critical for vehicular safety, especially under high-load or high-speed conditions. One of the most important factors affecting brake performance is thermal stress, which arises due to repeated and intense braking events. This study investigates the influence of thermal stress on disc brake performance by analyzing the thermal behavior, material deformation, wear patterns, and structural integrity of the brake disc during operation. Using a combination of analytical models, finite element analysis (FEA), and experimental observations, the paper explores how thermal gradients, heat flux, and temperature cycles contribute to cracking, fading, and reduced friction efficiency. The study further examines material properties, design considerations, and cooling mechanisms that mitigate thermal stress. The findings offer valuable insights for engineers aiming to design more robust and durable braking systems in modern vehicles.



I. INTRODUCTION

In the ever-evolving domain of automotive engineering, safety, reliability, and performance remain central pillars guiding the design and development of vehicular components. Among the critical systems ensuring vehicular safety, braking systems play a fundamental role, especially under dynamic and extreme driving conditions. Within this system, disc brakes have become a standard due to their superior performance, faster cooling rates, and ease of maintenance compared to drum brakes. However, despite these advantages, disc brakes are susceptible to several performance challenges, particularly under high-speed or high-load braking scenarios. One of the most significant and complex challenges affecting disc brake efficiency and durability is thermal stress, which arises primarily due to the intense heat generated during braking operations. Thermal stress refers to the internal stresses developed within a material as a result of non-uniform temperature distribution. In disc brakes, this phenomenon becomes critical due to the repeated and sudden heating and cooling cycles experienced during real-world driving, especially in urban traffic, mountainous descents, or motorsport conditions. These temperature fluctuations, when not uniformly distributed across the disc surface and body, lead to thermal gradients that induce internal mechanical stresses, potentially distorting the geometry of the disc and altering its material properties.

The generation of heat in disc brakes is a direct consequence of the conversion of kinetic energy into thermal energy through friction. As the brake pad comes into contact with the rotating disc, a substantial amount of heat is generated at the interface, often reaching temperatures as high as 500°C to 800°C during heavy braking. While the system is designed to dissipate heat through conduction, convection, and radiation, the rate at which heat is generated often exceeds the rate at which it is dissipated, leading to the accumulation of thermal energy. This imbalance introduces significant thermal gradients within the disc, especially between the surface and the inner core or across radial distances. The resulting differential expansion causes bending, warping, and even cracking of the disc, severely affecting its structural integrity and braking performance. Moreover, the repeated application of brakes under such thermal conditions can lead to thermal fatigue, characterized by micro-crack formations, residual stresses, and eventual failure of the disc. These failures not only compromise vehicle safety but also incur substantial maintenance costs and potential downtime, making the study of thermal stress in disc brakes not only a technical necessity but



also an economic imperative.

Furthermore, thermal stress influences the frictional characteristics of the disc-pad interface. As the disc heats up, the friction coefficient between the pad and the disc may decrease—a phenomenon commonly known as brake fade. Brake fade leads to a significant reduction in braking efficiency, requiring longer stopping distances and increasing the risk of accidents. This reduction in friction is exacerbated by the degradation of pad material at elevated temperatures and the oxidation of the disc surface, which alters the contact mechanics of the system. In severe cases, thermal stress can lead to a complete loss of braking power, especially in vehicles descending steep gradients or operating under continuous braking loads. These scenarios underscore the importance of understanding the thermomechanical behavior of disc brakes under various operating conditions and stress levels.

Additionally, thermal stress is not only a function of heat generation but also of the material properties of the disc. Common materials used in disc brake manufacturing include grey cast iron, carbon-carbon composites, and carbon-ceramic composites, each with distinct thermal conductivity, expansion coefficients, and mechanical strength. Grey cast iron, while economical and widely used, exhibits relatively lower thermal resistance and is prone to cracking under high thermal cycles. On the other hand, advanced composite materials demonstrate superior thermal endurance and stress-handling capabilities, albeit at a significantly higher cost. The selection of appropriate materials based on the intended application, whether for commercial, passenger, or performance vehicles, plays a crucial role in mitigating the adverse effects of thermal stress. The design of the disc, including the use of ventilated vanes, slots, or drilled holes, also contributes to enhancing heat dissipation and reducing thermal gradients. However, these features must be carefully optimized to balance mechanical strength, cooling efficiency, and manufacturability.

Modern computational tools such as finite element analysis (FEA) have revolutionized the way engineers study and predict the thermal and mechanical behavior of disc brakes under realistic loading conditions. Through thermal-mechanical coupling, FEA models can simulate the complex interplay between heat flux, temperature distribution, stress development, and deformation, offering valuable insights into the root causes of failure and potential design improvements. Coupled with experimental techniques such as thermography, strain gauging,



and dynamometer testing, these simulations enable the validation and refinement of models to better reflect real-world scenarios. The integration of these analytical and empirical approaches fosters a comprehensive understanding of thermal stress and its impact on braking performance, guiding the development of more robust, efficient, and thermally resilient braking systems.

In the context of emerging transportation trends, including the proliferation of electric vehicles (EVs), thermal management of disc brakes assumes even greater significance. While EVs incorporate regenerative braking systems that reduce reliance on friction braking, disc brakes still serve as essential backup systems during emergencies or when regenerative systems are inactive. The reduced usage of disc brakes in EVs often results in uneven temperature cycles, leading to corrosion, thermal shock, and sudden stress when brakes are applied after long idle periods. Additionally, the heavier weight of battery systems increases the braking load, further exacerbating thermal stress. Therefore, the design of future braking systems must account for these unique challenges by integrating adaptive cooling systems, intelligent material selection, and predictive maintenance algorithms based on thermal behavior monitoring.

In thermal stress is a critical factor influencing the performance, durability, and safety of disc brake systems. The interaction between thermal loads and mechanical responses within the disc structure determines the system's reliability and effectiveness in real-world applications. By comprehensively understanding the sources and consequences of thermal stress—ranging from heat generation and gradient formation to material deformation and performance degradation—engineers can design braking systems that are not only efficient and safe but also sustainable and cost-effective. As automotive technologies continue to evolve, incorporating hybrid systems, autonomous controls, and smart diagnostics, the role of thermal stress analysis will remain central to advancing brake system engineering. This paper aims to explore in detail the mechanisms by which thermal stress impacts disc brake performance, drawing from analytical modeling, simulation techniques, and experimental data to offer actionable insights for improving brake design and thermal resilience in modern vehicles.



II. HEAT DISTRIBUTION AND HOT SPOTS

1. **Non-uniform Heat Generation:** During braking, heat is generated at the interface of the disc and pad due to friction. This heat is not uniformly distributed, primarily concentrating near the contact region, typically the disc's outer circumference.
2. **Temperature Gradients:** The surface of the disc often exhibits temperature gradients, with outer edges heating faster due to greater frictional engagement. This leads to uneven thermal expansion and internal stress.
3. **Formation of Hot Spots:** Localized regions of elevated temperature, called hot spots, emerge due to uneven contact pressure, material inconsistencies, or repeated high-load braking. These hot spots are the primary cause of thermal stress concentration.
4. **Material Influence:** Different materials exhibit different thermal conductivities. For instance, grey cast iron has moderate thermal conductivity, causing slower heat dispersion and higher chances of hot spot formation compared to carbon-ceramic composites.
5. **Disc Geometry Impact:** Ventilated and slotted discs improve airflow and reduce the concentration of heat in localized areas. Solid discs, in contrast, are more prone to developing hot spots due to less effective cooling.

III. IMPACT ON FRICTION COEFFICIENT AND FADE

1. **Temperature-Dependent Friction:** The coefficient of friction between the brake pad and disc surface decreases as temperature increases. This thermal dependency directly affects braking force and vehicle stopping distance.
2. **Frictional Material Breakdown:** High temperatures degrade organic and semi-metallic pad materials. Resin binders may vaporize or decompose, reducing surface adhesion and thereby lowering the friction coefficient.
3. **Brake Fade Phenomenon:** Brake fade is a condition where sustained or repeated braking reduces the braking effectiveness due to excessive heat buildup. It results in a soft or unresponsive brake pedal and longer stopping times.



4. **Initial vs. Sustained Performance:** While brake pads exhibit high friction during initial applications, continuous high-temperature use often leads to rapid decline in performance—known as thermal fade.
5. **Surface Glazing:** Excessive heat can smooth or glaze the disc and pad surfaces, reducing the coefficient of friction due to reduced surface roughness and mechanical interlocking.

IV. CONCLUSION

Thermal stress plays a significant role in dictating the performance and longevity of disc brake systems. The rapid temperature rise during braking and subsequent uneven cooling can introduce severe thermal gradients that cause structural and functional degradation. This study has highlighted the mechanisms of heat-induced stress, its impact on braking efficiency, and the resultant material failure modes. Through a combined approach involving analytical modeling, simulation, and experimental validation, we conclude that mitigating thermal stress requires a comprehensive understanding of material behavior, advanced design practices, and intelligent thermal management systems.

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