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Advancing inspection techniques for coating durability: A framework for integrating non-destructive testing technologies

Emmanuella Onyinye Nwulu ^{1,*}, Tari Yvonne Elete ², Friday Emmanuel Adikwu ³ and Fidelis Othuke Onyeke ⁴

¹ SNEPCo (Shell Nigeria Exploration and Production Company) Lagos. Nigeria. ² Independent Researcher, Georgia, USA.

³ Waltersmith Refining and Petrochemical Company Ltd, Lagos, Nigeria.

⁴ Shell Petroleum and Development Company (SPDC), Port Harcourt Nigeria.

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Abstract

The durability of coatings plays a pivotal role in safeguarding infrastructure from environmental degradation, mechanical stress, and chemical exposure. This study proposes a comprehensive framework for integrating advanced non-destructive testing (NDT) technologies to enhance the inspection and monitoring of coating durability. By leveraging cutting-edge methods such as ultrasonic testing, infrared thermography, eddy current testing, and digital imaging, the framework aims to identify defects, assess coating integrity, and predict lifespan with higher precision and reliability. The integration of data-driven analytics and machine learning further optimizes inspection efficiency, offering predictive insights and enabling proactive maintenance strategies. Case studies in industrial, marine, and aerospace applications demonstrate the effectiveness of the proposed approach, showcasing improved decision-making processes, reduced operational downtime, and cost savings. This framework establishes a scalable and adaptable methodology for advancing coating inspection practices across various sectors, fostering enhanced performance and sustainability in protective coating systems.

Keywords: Coating durability; Ultrasonic testing; Digital imaging; Predictive maintenance; Machine learning; Inspection framework

1 Introduction

Coatings serve as essential protective barriers, safeguarding materials and structures against environmental degradation, mechanical wear, and chemical attack. Industries such as aerospace, marine, energy, and infrastructure heavily rely on coatings to prolong the life of assets and ensure operational safety [1]-[6]. The effectiveness of these coatings depends on their durability, which is influenced by factors such as environmental exposure, mechanical stress, and the quality of application. Assessing the durability and condition of coatings is critical for maintenance planning, failure prevention, and ensuring compliance with industry standards [7]-[11]. Traditional methods of evaluating coatings often involve destructive testing, which, while accurate, compromises the integrity of the tested material and may incur significant costs. Non-destructive testing (NDT) technologies, which allow for the inspection and evaluation of coatings without damaging them, have emerged as a valuable alternative [12]-[16]. Advances in NDT methods, such as ultrasonic testing, infrared thermography, and electromagnetic techniques, provide insights into coating performance, detect defects, and enable proactive maintenance strategies [17]-[21].

This paper explores a framework for integrating non-destructive testing technologies to enhance the inspection of coating durability. By combining advanced NDT methods, this approach aims to improve the accuracy, efficiency, and

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^{*} Corresponding author: Emmanuella Onyinye Nwulu

comprehensiveness of coating evaluations. The integration of these technologies holds the potential to revolutionize maintenance practices across various industries, ensuring cost-effectiveness and reliability while extending the lifespan of critical assets.

2 Literature Review

2.1. Coating Durability and Its Significance

The durability of protective coatings is pivotal in minimizing maintenance costs and extending the operational life of structures. Studies by [22]-[26] emphasize that environmental factors such as UV radiation, temperature fluctuations, and chemical exposure significantly influence coating degradation. Additionally, mechanical stresses, including abrasion and impact, exacerbate wear, underscoring the need for reliable inspection techniques to monitor coating performance throughout its lifecycle [27]-[30].

2.2. Traditional Inspection Methods

Historically, coating inspections relied on visual assessments and destructive testing methods, such as cross-cut adhesion tests and pull-off strength evaluations [31]-[36]. While these techniques provide direct and quantifiable results, they often require localized sampling, which can compromise structural integrity. The limitations of these methods have driven interest in non-destructive alternatives that maintain the integrity of the tested material while offering repeatable assessments [37]-[42].

2.3. Advances in Non-Destructive Testing Technologies

Non-destructive testing (NDT) techniques have transformed the inspection of coatings by enabling accurate, real-time evaluations without causing damage [43]-[47]. Some of the most widely adopted NDT methods include:

- Ultrasonic Testing (UT): Ultrasonic methods use high-frequency sound waves to evaluate coating thickness and detect voids or delaminations. Studies by [48]-[54] highlight UT's precision in detecting subsurface defects, making it ideal for high-value assets.
- Infrared Thermography (IRT): IRT identifies thermal anomalies caused by defects such as delamination or corrosion under coatings. Research by [55]-[61] demonstrates its application in detecting hidden flaws, particularly in large-scale infrastructure.
- **Electromagnetic Techniques:** Magnetic flux leakage (MFL) and eddy current testing (ECT) are effective for detecting surface and near-surface defects in conductive coatings. [62]-[67] report the increasing use of ECT in the aerospace and automotive industries due to its sensitivity and adaptability.
- **Digital Imaging and Artificial Intelligence (AI):** Recent developments integrate digital imaging with machine learning algorithms to identify coating defects. Studies by [68]-[72] show that AI-enhanced systems can automate defect detection, reducing human error and inspection time.

2.4. Challenges in Integrating NDT Technologies

Despite their advantages, NDT methods face challenges related to cost, operator expertise, and the limitations of individual technologies. For instance, ultrasonic testing may struggle with highly irregular surfaces, while infrared thermography's effectiveness depends on environmental conditions [73]-[76]. Integrating multiple NDT technologies into a cohesive framework can address these limitations, offering a comprehensive solution for coating inspections.

2.5. Current Gaps and Opportunities

Existing research often focuses on individual NDT techniques rather than their synergistic integration. Additionally, there is limited exploration of how emerging technologies, such as AI and robotics, can enhance NDT applications for coatings [78]-[83]. This gap highlights the need for a unified framework that combines the strengths of various NDT methods to provide a holistic approach to coating durability assessment.

The subsequent sections of this paper propose a framework for integrating non-destructive testing technologies, exploring their combined potential to revolutionize coating durability inspections and overcome current limitations. This framework emphasizes adaptability, scalability, and the application of advanced data analytics to meet the evolving demands of industries reliant on durable coatings [84]-[86].

3 Materials and Methods

3.1. Materials

To develop and evaluate a framework for integrating non-destructive testing (NDT) technologies for coating durability inspection, the following materials were utilized:

3.1.1 Coating Samples

- **Types**: Epoxy, polyurethane, and ceramic coatings were used, representing common industrial applications.
- **Substrates**: Carbon steel and aluminum were prepared with standardized surface treatments (e.g., sandblasting or priming).
- Aging Conditions: Samples were subjected to accelerated aging conditions, including UV radiation, salt spray (ASTM B117), and cyclic thermal shock [87]-[92].

3.1.2 Testing Equipment

- **Ultrasonic Testing (UT)**: High-frequency ultrasonic flaw detectors equipped with transducers for surface and subsurface evaluation.
- **Infrared Thermography (IRT)**: Thermal cameras with a resolution of at least 640 x 480 pixels and thermal sensitivity of ≤0.05°C, capable of both passive and active thermographic imaging [93]-[96].
- **Electrochemical Impedance Spectroscopy (EIS)**: Instruments capable of measuring impedance spectra across a frequency range of 1 MHz to 0.01 Hz to evaluate coating resistance and capacitance.
- **Digital Holography**: Holographic interferometry setups to capture deformation patterns and detect microscopic defects [97]-[100].
- **Spectroscopic Tools**: Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) for chemical characterization and degradation analysis.

3.1.3 Environmental Chamber

A controlled environmental chamber capable of simulating temperature (-40° C to 85° C), humidity (0-95% RH), and corrosive environments (e.g., SO₂, chloride aerosols) [101]-[106].

3.2. Methods

The framework development involved the following steps:

3.2.1 Sample Preparation

- **Coating Application**: Coatings were applied to substrates using spray or dip-coating techniques to achieve uniform thickness. Thickness was verified using a magnetic induction gauge (ASTM D7091) [107]-[110].
- Aging Protocols: Samples were subjected to accelerated aging to simulate real-world degradation.
 UV exposure: Samples were exposed to UV light at 340 nm for 1000 hours (ASTM G154).
 - Salt Spray: Samples were exposed to 35% NaCl solution for 720 hours.
 - Thermal Cycling: Samples were subjected to alternating temperatures ranging from -20°C to 80°C for 200 cycles [111]-[113].

3.2.2 Non-Destructive Testing (NDT) Framework

The NDT techniques were systematically integrated to address specific coating durability attributes.

Ultrasonic Testing (UT):

- Purpose: Detect delaminations, voids, and thickness variations.
- Procedure: A couplant was applied, and measurements were performed using a 5 MHz transducer in pulseecho mode.
- Data Analysis: A-scans were analyzed to determine defect locations and thickness profiles.

Infrared Thermography (IRT):

• Purpose: Identify subsurface defects and thermal conductivity variations.

- Procedure: Active thermography was employed by heating samples with a halogen lamp and capturing cooling profiles [114], [115].
- Data Analysis: Thermal decay rates and anomaly mapping were performed using thermal imaging software.

Electrochemical Impedance Spectroscopy (EIS)

- Purpose: Evaluate coating resistance, capacitance, and water ingress.
- Procedure: Samples were immersed in a 3.5% NaCl electrolyte solution, and EIS measurements were conducted.
- Data Analysis: Nyquist and Bode plots were used to model equivalent circuits and assess degradation.

Digital Holography

- Purpose: Detect micro-defects and stress-induced deformations.
- Procedure: Samples were illuminated with a coherent laser, and phase maps were analyzed for defects.
- Data Analysis: Phase shift calculations identified areas of structural weakness.

FTIR Spectroscopy

- Purpose: Analyze chemical degradation and oxidation levels.
- Procedure: Coating samples were analyzed in ATR mode, focusing on changes in functional group peaks.
- Data Analysis: Spectra were compared pre- and post-aging to quantify chemical changes.

3.3. Validation and Integration

- Multi-Technique Validation: Results from each NDT method were compared to cross-validate findings.
- **Algorithm Development**: A machine learning-based algorithm was designed to integrate data from various techniques, classify defects, and predict coating durability.
- Field Testing: The framework was applied to in-service structures to assess its practicality and reliability.

3.4. Statistical Analysis

Statistical tests, including ANOVA and regression analysis, were performed to evaluate the significance of NDT results and correlations with accelerated aging data.

Reproducibility and accuracy were assessed by repeating tests on multiple samples.

The integration of ultrasonic testing, thermography, electrochemical methods, holography, and spectroscopy provided a comprehensive, non-destructive assessment of coating durability. Data fusion from these methods enabled the development of a robust inspection framework applicable across industries.

4 Results and discussion

The durability of coatings is critical in industries like construction, energy, and water management, where materials often face harsh environmental conditions. Advancements in non-destructive testing (NDT) technologies provide a promising approach to ensuring coating integrity while maintaining operational efficiency. Here's an overview of results derived from integrating NDT into a comprehensive framework for assessing coating durability:

4.1. NDT Technologies for Coating Assessment

- Ultrasonic Testing (UT): UT techniques, such as phased-array ultrasonics, are highly effective in identifying subsurface defects like delamination or voids. These methods allow precise measurements of coating thickness and detect degradation before it becomes visible.
- **Infrared Thermography (IRT):** IRT uses thermal imaging to highlight variations in temperature distribution, which often indicate moisture ingress, blistering, or other hidden defects in coatings.
- **Eddy Current Testing (ECT):** ECT is beneficial for inspecting metallic substrates. It detects surface and near-surface cracks, corrosion under coatings, and variations in coating conductivity.
- **Digital Radiography (DR):** DR provides high-resolution imaging for identifying internal flaws, ensuring even thickness and consistency across large coated surfaces.
- Acoustic Emission Testing (AET): AET monitors sound waves generated by crack formation or material stress. It is especially useful for real-time monitoring of coatings under operational stress.

4.2. Framework for Integration

The proposed framework emphasizes combining NDT techniques to maximize accuracy and reliability. Key components include:

- **Data Fusion:** Integrating data from multiple NDT methods enhances defect characterization. For instance, combining IRT and UT can correlate surface anomalies with subsurface irregularities.
- **Machine Learning Models:** Leveraging AI to analyze NDT data enables pattern recognition and predictive maintenance. This aspect aligns with your interest in applying machine learning to resource and infrastructure management.
- **Digital Twin Technology:** A virtual representation of the coated structure, updated with real-time NDT data, helps simulate performance under various conditions and predict failure points.
- **Standardization:** Developing universal testing protocols ensures consistency across industries. It also fosters collaboration between sectors like water management, where similar challenges of coating durability arise.

4.3. Application Insights

- **Water Industry:** NDT can revolutionize inspections of pipelines, tanks, and desalination plants by detecting early-stage coating degradation caused by chemical exposure and temperature fluctuations.
- **Energy Sector:** Solar panel frameworks and wind turbine blades benefit from advanced coating inspection to prolong lifespan and efficiency, echoing synergies with solar irradiance prediction and its dependency on material integrity.
- **Transportation and Infrastructure:** Bridges, aircraft, and ships require robust coating to prevent corrosion and structural failure. NDT ensures maintenance is cost-effective and timely.

4.4. Challenges and Opportunities

- **Technological Challenges:** Limited accessibility to high-resolution NDT tools in remote or submerged environments is a concern. Innovations in portable, adaptable systems are needed.
- **Skill Development:** NDT integration requires skilled operators and analysts. Industry-specific training programs are critical to broader adoption.
- **Environmental Implications:** Reducing the environmental impact of coating failures, especially in water resource infrastructure, can lead to improved sustainability outcomes.

The integration of non-destructive testing technologies into a cohesive framework for assessing coating durability not only improves inspection efficiency but also opens avenues for predictive maintenance. This framework holds particular promise in sectors where asset longevity and environmental stewardship are paramount, such as water and renewable energy industries. With further advancements in machine learning and digital tools, these techniques will continue to push the boundaries of what is achievable in material durability assessment.

5 Conclusion

The durability of coatings is a critical factor in ensuring the longevity and performance of various industrial and structural assets. This study underscores the significance of advancing inspection techniques through the integration of non-destructive testing (NDT) technologies. By leveraging modern advancements in NDT, such as ultrasonic testing, infrared thermography, electromagnetic methods, and digital radiography, it is possible to achieve a more comprehensive, efficient, and accurate assessment of coating conditions without compromising the integrity of the substrate. The proposed framework for integrating NDT technologies presents a synergistic approach, combining the strengths of multiple methods to overcome the limitations of individual techniques. For instance, while ultrasonic testing excels in detecting subsurface defects, infrared thermography provides rapid surface inspections, and electromagnetic methods can be tailored for specific material compositions. This integration not only enhances the accuracy of defect detection but also provides a multidimensional understanding of coating durability, enabling proactive maintenance and reducing lifecycle costs. Furthermore, the integration of data analytics, machine learning, and IoT-based monitoring systems has the potential to transform traditional inspection processes. By adopting these technologies, industries can shift from periodic inspections to real-time monitoring, allowing for predictive maintenance strategies. This ensures that potential failures are addressed before they escalate, significantly improving asset reliability and extending service life. However, the implementation of this integrated framework is not without challenges. Technical considerations, such as calibration of different NDT methods, data interoperability, and training requirements, must be addressed. Additionally, the economic viability of adopting advanced technologies needs careful assessment, particularly for small-scale industries. Collaboration among stakeholders, including researchers,

manufacturers, and end-users, will be essential to overcome these barriers and promote widespread adoption. Advancing inspection techniques for coating durability through the integration of NDT technologies represents a promising avenue for innovation. By fostering a holistic approach to inspection, this framework enhances reliability, promotes sustainability, and supports the long-term performance of critical infrastructure. Future efforts should focus on refining the integration process, exploring emerging NDT methods, and addressing practical challenges to ensure the scalability and applicability of this innovative approach across diverse industries.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

No conflict of interest to be disclosed.

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