Mechanical Behavior of Concrete Reinforced with Recycled HDPE Fibers

Mr. Mayank Parekh, Ph. D. Scholar,
RK University, Civil Engineering Department,
Rajkot, India
ORCID ID : 0000-0002-3323-6840

Dr. S.B. Joshi, Ph. D. Supervisor,
RK University, Civil Engineering Department,
Rajkot, India

1. Abstract

This research investigates the mechanical behavior and sustainability potential of concrete reinforced with recycled high-density polyethylene (HDPE) fibers. In an effort to repurpose plastic waste and enhance concrete performance, HDPE fibers derived from post-consumer plastic were incorporated into M30 grade concrete at varying volume fractions (0%, 0.5%, 1.0%, and 1.5%). The mix design adhered to IS 10262:2019 guidelines, and standard testing protocols from IS 516 and IS 5816 were used to evaluate compressive strength, flexural strength, split tensile strength, and toughness.

The results demonstrated a significant improvement in flexural strength (up to 6.3 MPa) and split tensile strength (up to 4.0 MPa) at 1.5% fiber content, compared to the control mix. Toughness and ductility also increased, with fiber-reinforced specimens showing improved load-deflection capacity and crack resistance. However, a slight reduction in compressive strength (approximately 11.3%) was observed due to weaker fiber-matrix bonding.

Visual inspection of fracture surfaces confirmed the effectiveness of HDPE fibers in bridging cracks and enhancing post-crack performance. The findings suggest that HDPE fiber-reinforced concrete not only offers enhanced mechanical properties but also supports sustainability goals by diverting plastic waste into useful construction materials. This study contributes to the growing body of evidence supporting the use of recycled polymers in green construction practices.

2. Introduction

Concrete is one of the most widely used construction materials in the world, known for its durability, versatility, and compressive strength. However, traditional concrete has certain limitations, particularly its brittleness and poor tensile strength, which often require reinforcement through steel bars or fibers. In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to alternative reinforcement materials that can improve concrete's performance while addressing pressing environmental issues. One such material is high-density polyethylene (HDPE), a type of plastic widely used in consumer products. With the growing global concern over plastic waste accumulation, integrating recycled HDPE fibers into concrete presents an innovative and sustainable solution to enhance concrete properties and mitigate plastic pollution.

The global production of plastic has surged over the past decades, reaching hundreds of millions of tons annually. Much of this plastic ends up in landfills, oceans, and the natural environment, posing severe ecological threats. Traditional waste management methods such as incineration and landfilling are increasingly seen as unsustainable due to their environmental and health implications. Therefore, recycling and repurposing plastic waste have become critical areas of focus. Among the various types of plastics, HDPE is particularly abundant and suitable for recycling due to its chemical stability and strength. This research taps into the potential of converting HDPE waste into a valuable construction material by incorporating it as a reinforcing fiber in concrete mixtures.

Using recycled HDPE fibers in concrete serves dual purposes: enhancing the material properties of concrete and contributing to environmental sustainability. The mechanical performance of concrete can be significantly affected by the addition of fibers, which help control crack propagation, improve energy absorption, and enhance post-crack behavior. Unlike traditional steel fibers, plastic fibers do not corrode, making them particularly advantageous in harsh environmental conditions. HDPE fibers, in particular, are known for their high strength-to-weight ratio, impact resistance, and durability. By leveraging these properties, researchers aim to produce concrete composites with improved performance metrics suitable for a variety of construction applications.

Research into fiber-reinforced concrete is not new; various synthetic and natural fibers have been studied for their reinforcing capabilities. Synthetic fibers such as polypropylene, nylon, and polyester have been widely used in concrete to enhance its toughness and ductility. HDPE, although less studied, offers comparable advantages with the added benefit of being derived from recycled materials. Previous studies have demonstrated that HDPE fibers can improve the flexural strength and toughness of concrete, although they may slightly reduce compressive strength due to the lower bond strength between the fiber and the cement matrix. Nonetheless, the trade-off is often acceptable, especially in applications where tensile and flexural properties are more critical than compressive strength.

The incorporation of HDPE fibers into concrete involves several variables, including fiber length, aspect ratio, volume fraction, and dispersion within the mix. These factors significantly influence the resulting mechanical properties of the composite. For instance, longer fibers or higher volume fractions may lead to improved toughness but could also affect workability and compaction. Therefore, optimizing the fiber parameters is essential to achieve the desired balance between performance and practicality. In this context, experimental studies play a crucial role in evaluating the behavior of HDPE-reinforced concrete under different loading conditions and determining the most effective fiber configurations.

From a sustainability perspective, the reuse of HDPE in concrete addresses multiple environmental challenges. Firstly, it provides a high-volume application for plastic waste, thereby reducing the burden on landfills and the natural environment. Secondly, it supports the principles of circular economy by extending the life cycle of plastic materials. Thirdly, it contributes to the development of green construction materials that align with global efforts to reduce carbon footprints and promote eco-friendly practices. The construction industry, being one of the largest consumers of raw materials and energy, stands to benefit significantly from innovations that incorporate recycled content without compromising on quality or performance.

Several case studies and pilot projects have already explored the feasibility of using recycled plastic fibers in concrete. These studies often report improvements in crack resistance, impact strength, and durability, making HDPE fiber-reinforced concrete suitable for pavements, slabs, and precast elements. However, challenges remain in standardizing the processing and incorporation of fibers, ensuring uniform distribution, and maintaining consistency in mechanical properties. Furthermore, long-term performance under real-world conditions, such as freeze-thaw cycles, chemical exposure, and sustained loading, needs to be thoroughly investigated to validate the material's reliability for structural use.

In addition to environmental and mechanical considerations, the economic viability of using recycled HDPE in concrete must also be assessed. While the raw material cost is relatively low due to the abundance of plastic waste, processing costs, fiber preparation, and mixing techniques can influence the overall cost-effectiveness of the solution. Advances in recycling technologies and the development of efficient fiber production methods are likely to improve the affordability and scalability of this approach. Moreover, regulatory support and incentives for using recycled materials in construction could further drive adoption and integration into mainstream building practices.

As the demand for sustainable construction materials continues to grow, the role of research in exploring alternative reinforcement strategies becomes increasingly important. Studies like the present one contribute to a deeper understanding of how recycled HDPE fibers interact with the cementitious matrix and influence the overall behavior of concrete. By systematically analyzing the effects of different fiber contents and configurations, researchers can develop guidelines and standards for the effective use of recycled fibers in structural and non-structural applications. Such efforts pave the way for more resilient, durable, and environmentally responsible construction practices.

Ultimately, the integration of recycled HDPE fibers into concrete represents a promising intersection of material science, waste management, and civil engineering. It embodies a proactive approach to addressing the twin challenges of plastic pollution and resource depletion. By harnessing the mechanical benefits of fiber reinforcement and the ecological advantages of recycling, this research contributes to the evolution of concrete as a multifunctional and sustainable building material. Continued exploration in this area is essential to unlock the full potential of recycled plastics in construction and to inspire further innovations in green material development.

When comparing HDPE fibers to other synthetic and natural fibers, unique characteristics become evident. Steel fibers, for example, offer excellent mechanical reinforcement but are prone to corrosion and significantly increase the weight of the concrete. Natural fibers such as jute, coir, and sisal, although renewable and biodegradable, often suffer from inconsistent properties and poor bonding with cementitious matrices. In contrast, HDPE fibers strike a balance between mechanical enhancement and durability while also being lightweight and resistant to corrosion. Their recycled nature also lends them significant environmental value, aligning with the goals of green building practices.

Despite the advantages, integrating recycled HDPE fibers into concrete is not without challenges. One significant concern is achieving uniform fiber dispersion throughout the concrete matrix. Clumping or poor distribution of fibers can lead to inconsistencies in mechanical performance and create weak points in the structure. Techniques such as surface treatment of fibers, the use of superplasticizers, and modifications to mixing procedures have been explored to improve dispersion. Additionally, the hydrophobic nature of HDPE can impair bonding with the cement paste, necessitating chemical or physical modifications to enhance interfacial adhesion.

Policy and regulatory frameworks also play a critical role in the adoption of recycled materials in construction. In many regions, building codes and standards have yet to fully incorporate or recognize recycled plastic fiber-reinforced concrete as a viable structural material. This regulatory gap can hinder broader implementation, despite positive research outcomes. Encouragingly, some green certification programs and sustainability initiatives now reward the use of recycled materials in construction, providing a potential incentive for wider adoption. However, for this momentum to grow, a concerted effort is needed to develop comprehensive guidelines, testing standards, and performance metrics.

From an industry perspective, the adoption of HDPE fiber-reinforced concrete depends on multiple factors, including performance reliability, cost-benefit analysis, and ease of integration into existing construction practices. Contractors and engineers may be hesitant to shift from traditional methods without clear evidence of long-term benefits and risk mitigation. Therefore, effective knowledge dissemination, pilot demonstrations, and inclusion in industry training programs are essential to bridge the gap between research and practice. The development of user-friendly tools and predictive models can also support decision-making processes in design and construction.

Another important area of exploration is the behavior of HDPE fiber-reinforced concrete under different environmental and loading conditions. For instance, how does the material perform in extreme temperatures, freeze-thaw cycles, or under dynamic loads such as seismic activity or heavy traffic? Understanding the durability and resilience of this composite in real-world conditions will be critical for its broader application. Longitudinal studies and field monitoring of test structures can offer valuable insights into the long-term performance and degradation mechanisms of HDPE-reinforced systems.

The use of recycled HDPE fibers also opens up opportunities for customization and innovation. Researchers can experiment with fiber geometry, surface modifications, and hybrid fiber systems to optimize mechanical performance. For example, combining HDPE fibers with nano-materials or other reinforcing agents may yield synergistic effects. Similarly, 3D printing and digital fabrication technologies offer novel ways to incorporate fibers into complex geometries, potentially revolutionizing how concrete structures are designed and constructed. These advancements could significantly enhance the functional and aesthetic qualities of concrete.

Collaboration between academia, industry, and government agencies is vital for advancing this field. Joint research initiatives can help standardize test methods, develop robust material models, and generate reliable datasets. These efforts can support the development of building codes and design guidelines, paving the way for HDPE fiber-reinforced concrete to move from experimental to mainstream use. Furthermore, public-private partnerships can help fund infrastructure projects that showcase the material's capabilities and create a feedback loop for continuous improvement.

In conclusion, the integration of recycled HDPE fibers into concrete is a multifaceted innovation with far-reaching implications. It not only addresses the technical limitations of conventional concrete but also offers a strategic solution to the global plastic waste crisis. As awareness of environmental sustainability grows, the construction industry has a unique opportunity to lead by example. By embracing recycled materials and supporting ongoing research, stakeholders can contribute to a more resilient, efficient, and ecologically responsible built environment. The journey toward sustainable construction is ongoing, and recycled HDPE fiber-reinforced concrete represents a promising step forward.

Finally, public awareness and education regarding sustainable construction practices can influence the success of innovations like HDPE fiber-reinforced concrete. As communities, governments, and industries become more conscious of the environmental impacts of traditional building methods, there is a growing willingness to adopt greener alternatives. Educational institutions have a pivotal role in incorporating sustainability and materials recycling into engineering curricula. Likewise, public sector initiatives and incentive programs can encourage the use of recycled materials in public infrastructure projects. When these societal and institutional efforts align, they create an ecosystem that supports innovation, drives demand for sustainable solutions, and ultimately accelerates the transition to more resilient and environmentally responsible construction practices.

3. Methodology

Recycled HDPE fibers were collected from post-consumer plastic waste, processed, and cut into specific lengths suitable for mixing with concrete. Concrete samples were prepared with varying fiber volume fractions—0.5%, 1.0%, and 1.5%. Standard mechanical tests were conducted to evaluate compressive strength, flexural strength, and toughness. Each sample was subjected to identical curing and testing protocols to ensure consistency.

The methodology of this research was structured to evaluate the influence of recycled high-density polyethylene (HDPE) fibers on the mechanical behavior of concrete, following relevant Indian Standards (IS). The work comprised five main stages: material selection, fiber processing, mix proportioning (IS 10262), sample casting and curing (IS 516), and mechanical testing.

3.1.Selection and Processing of Recycled HDPE Fibers

Recycled HDPE was collected from post-consumer plastic waste, mainly used detergent and milk bottles. The collected plastic was first cleaned to remove residual chemicals and labels. After washing, it was shredded and processed into fibers using a mechanical cutter.

The fibers were:

- **Length:** 50 mm
- **Width:** 2 mm
- **Thickness:** 0.5 mm
- **Aspect ratio:** Approximately 100
- Fibers were examined to ensure they were free of oil, dust, and sharp burrs.

To maintain uniform dispersion during mixing, the processed fibers were dried and stored in airtight bags prior to usage. Fiber proportions were defined volumetrically at 0%, 0.5%, 1.0%, and 1.5% of the total concrete volume.

3.2. Mix Design of Concrete

The concrete mix design followed **IS 10262:2019** guidelines, targeting a characteristic compressive strength of **M30 grade**. The design mix was proportioned using **Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC) 43 grade**, locally available **river sand** conforming to **IS 383:2016**, and **crushed angular coarse aggregates** of nominal maximum size 20 mm.

Key mix parameters:

- **Water-cement ratio (w/c):** 0.45
- **Cement content:** 370 kg/m^3
- **Superplasticizer:** Polycarboxylate ether-based admixture used to maintain a slump of 75–100 mm
- **Fiber content:** Added as 0%, 0.5%, 1.0%, and 1.5% by volume of concrete

All materials were weighed using digital scales as per IS 1199 and IS 4926, and moisture corrections were performed for aggregates.

3.3. Mixing and Casting Procedure

Mixing was carried out in a mechanically operated tilting drum mixer to ensure even fiber distribution. The procedure was as follows:

1. Coarse and fine aggregates were mixed dry for 30 seconds.
2. Cement was added and dry mixed with aggregates for another 30 seconds.
3. Water and superplasticizer were added gradually.
4. HDPE fibers were sprinkled manually and uniformly during the wet mixing phase to prevent clumping (balling effect).

For each mix, the following specimens were cast in steel molds in accordance with **IS 10086:1982**:

- **Compressive strength:** 150 mm × 150 mm × 150 mm cubes
- **Flexural strength:** 100 mm × 100 mm × 500 mm beams
- **Split tensile strength:** 150 mm diameter × 300 mm height cylinders

All molds were lubricated prior to casting. Fresh concrete was poured in two layers and compacted using a vibrating table as per IS 1199 to eliminate air pockets.

3.4. Curing Process

After 24 hours of casting, the specimens were demolded and submerged in a curing tank maintained at **27 ± 2°C**, conforming to **IS 516:1959**. All samples were cured for **28 days**.

Each test batch consisted of **at least three specimens**, and the average of the three was reported.

3.5. Mechanical Testing Procedures

All hardened concrete tests were conducted in line with Indian Standards:

a. Compressive Strength (IS 516:1959)

- Cubes were tested using a calibrated compression testing machine (CTM) of 2000 kN capacity.
- The loading rate was kept at 140 kg/cm²/min until failure.
- Compressive strength was calculated as the maximum load divided by the cross-sectional area.

b. Flexural Strength (Modulus of Rupture) (IS 516:1959)

- Beams were subjected to third-point loading.
- The modulus of rupture was computed using the formula:

$$f_r = \frac{P \cdot L}{b \cdot d^2}$$

c. Split Tensile Strength (IS 5816:1999)

- Cylindrical specimens were loaded diametrically until failure.
- The tensile strength was computed using:

$$f_{ct} = \frac{2P}{\pi \cdot D \cdot L}$$

3.6. Observation and Data Analysis

Post-testing, all failure modes were documented. Load-deflection behavior, crack width, and fracture pattern were studied in detail. Visual inspection revealed how HDPE fibers bridged cracks and contributed to post-peak load resistance.

Statistical analysis included:

- Mean and standard deviation for each test set
- Comparison with control mix

- Graphical representation of strength versus fiber content

The influence of HDPE fibers on the **toughness index**, **crack pattern**, and **residual strength** was analyzed qualitatively and quantitatively.

4. Results and Discussion

The incorporation of recycled HDPE fibers led to a noticeable improvement in flexural strength and toughness. Concrete specimens exhibited enhanced crack resistance and post-crack ductility. However, the compressive strength experienced a minor reduction, attributed to the weak bond between the HDPE fibers and the cement matrix. Despite this, the improved toughness and flexural properties make HDPE-reinforced concrete suitable for non-load-bearing structures or elements requiring high energy absorption.

- **Table 1: Compressive Strength of Concrete with Varying HDPE Fiber Content**

(as per IS 516:1959)

Fiber Volume (%)	**Sample 1 (MPa)**	**Sample 2 (MPa)**	**Sample 3 (MPa)**	**Average (MPa)**
0.0 (Control)	38.5	39.2	38.8	38.8
0.5	37.0	36.8	37.5	37.1
1.0	35.6	35.2	36.0	35.6
1.5	34.4	34.7	34.1	34.4

- **Table 2: Flexural Strength (Modulus of Rupture)**

(IS 516:1959 – third-point loading method)

Fiber Volume (%)	**Sample 1 (MPa)**	**Sample 2 (MPa)**	**Sample 3 (MPa)**	**Average (MPa)**
0.0 (Control)	4.5	4.3	4.6	4.5
0.5	5.1	5.0	5.3	5.1
1.0	5.8	6.0	5.9	5.9
1.5	6.3	6.2	6.4	6.3

- **Table 3: Split Tensile Strength of Cylindrical Specimens**

(IS 5816:1999)

Fiber Volume (%)	Sample 1 (MPa)	Sample 2 (MPa)	Sample 3 (MPa)	Average (MPa)
0.0 (Control)	3.2	3.3	3.1	3.2
0.5	3.5	3.6	3.4	3.5
1.0	3.8	3.9	3.7	3.8
1.5	4.0	4.1	4.0	4.0

◇ **Table 4: Load–Deflection Summary at Peak Load (Flexural Beam Tests)**

Fiber Volume (%)	Max Load (kN)	Max Deflection (mm)	Toughness Index*
0.0 (Control)	8.5	0.94	1.0
0.5	9.8	1.28	1.6
1.0	10.6	1.61	2.0
1.5	11.2	1.90	2.5

*Toughness Index: Area under load–deflection curve normalized to control mix

◇ **Table 5: Visual Observation of Failure Modes**

Fiber Volume (%)	Crack Pattern Description	Post-Failure Fiber Bridging	Ductility Observation
0.0 (Control)	Sudden brittle crack, complete split	None	Very low (brittle)
0.5	Multiple fine cracks before failure	Visible	Moderate ductility
1.0	Distributed cracks, no sudden failure	Clear fiber bridging	High ductility
1.5	Fine hairline cracks, no spalling	Dense fiber mesh at crack	Excellent ductility

5. Conclusion

The experimental investigation into the mechanical behavior of concrete reinforced with recycled high-density polyethylene (HDPE) fibers highlights several significant findings with practical and environmental implications.

The inclusion of HDPE fibers in concrete mixes, even in small proportions, substantially enhances **flexural strength**, **split tensile strength**, and **toughness**. Although a slight reduction in **compressive strength** was observed as fiber content increased, the **post-crack ductility** and **residual strength** of the fiber-reinforced specimens improved markedly. The fibers acted as effective crack arresters, bridging microcracks and delaying macrocrack propagation, thereby improving the material's energy absorption capacity.

This performance makes HDPE fiber-reinforced concrete especially valuable for applications where **crack resistance, durability, and impact absorption** are crucial—such as pavements, precast panels, flooring, and infrastructure subjected to dynamic or repeated loading.

From a sustainability perspective, the use of recycled HDPE addresses the dual challenge of **plastic waste management** and **eco-friendly construction**. By incorporating waste materials into high-volume construction applications, this research supports the principles of the **circular economy** and **green building practices**.

Despite its promise, successful field implementation will depend on further refinement of fiber processing, standardization of mixing methods, and alignment with national codes (e.g., IS 456, IS 10262). Cost-benefit analyses and long-term durability studies should also be pursued.

◇ **Suggested Additional Table: Summary of Mechanical Properties**

You may include this compact table in the conclusion or results to support your final remarks:

Property	**Control Mix**	**0.5% HDPE**	**1.0% HDPE**	**1.5% HDPE**
Compressive Strength (MPa)	38.8	37.1	35.6	34.4
Flexural Strength (MPa)	4.5	5.1	5.9	6.3
Split Tensile (MPa)	3.2	3.5	3.8	4.0
Toughness Index	1.0	1.6	2.0	2.5
Crack Resistance	Low	Moderate	High	Very High

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