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Reliability Assessment of Power Electronic Converters in Renewable Energy Applications

Muhammad Zaryab Qureshi

Department of Electrical Engineering, University of Engineering and Technology (UET), Lahore, Pakistan

ABSTRACT

Power electronic converters provide essential interfaces between renewable energy sources, storage devices, and electrical networks. Their reliability affects energy production, maintenance expenditure, and continuity of electricity supply. This narrative review examines failure mechanisms and develops an integrated assessment framework connecting mission profiles, component stresses, lifetime models, condition monitoring, and maintenance decisions. Attention is given to electrothermal modeling, cumulative fatigue, probabilistic analysis, and the distinction between component lifetime and system availability. Topology selection, thermal management, fault tolerance, and limitations of laboratory-to-field extrapolation are discussed. An illustrative Weibull graph demonstrates the influence of assumed characteristic lifetime on survival probability; it does not represent experimental measurements. Credible assessment requires application-specific data, experimentally supported models, explicit uncertainty treatment, and operational validation. Integrating these elements can support defensible decisions about converter sizing, control, replacement, and renewable asset management.

Key words: *Power electronic converters, Renewable energy, Reliability assessment, Thermal cycling, Condition monitoring*

Introduction:

The integration of renewable energy into modern electricity systems depends heavily on power electronic conversion. Photovoltaic arrays generate direct current that must be conditioned and converted for grid connection, while wind generators require interfaces capable of controlling variable electrical output. Battery storage introduces additional bidirectional conversion requirements. Across these applications, converters regulate voltage, current, frequency, and power flow while supporting protection and grid interaction.

Converter performance is commonly evaluated through efficiency, power density, cost, and power quality. Reliability adds a further requirement: continued performance under specified conditions for a specified period. A highly efficient converter may deliver poor lifetime value if repeated failures cause prolonged outages or expensive replacements. Reliability assessment therefore connects engineering design with operational and economic performance.

Solar irradiance, wind speed, ambient temperature, and dispatch requirements change over multiple timescales. Components consequently experience fluctuating losses and temperatures rather than a single operating point. Design-for-reliability research emphasizes translating these conditions into component stresses and damage estimates rather than relying exclusively on generic failure rates (Wang et al., 2013; Blaabjerg et al., 2017).

This article presents a narrative synthesis rather than an experimental investigation or systematic review. Nine sections address reliability concepts, operating stresses, failure mechanisms, mission profiles, electrothermal analysis, lifetime prediction, monitoring, design improvement, and system-level maintenance. The objective is a coherent assessment process in which assumptions remain distinguishable from verified outcomes.

1. Reliability Concepts and Assessment Framework

Reliability is the probability that an item performs its required function without failure over a stated interval under defined conditions. This definition requires a clear function, environment, and failure criterion. Complete loss of conversion, inability to meet rated output, and unacceptable power quality may represent different failure states. Combining these outcomes without explanation makes an assessment ambiguous.

Reliability should be distinguished from availability. Reliability concerns failure-free operation, whereas availability concerns whether equipment is operational when required, including repair and restoration. A converter that fails occasionally but can be restored quickly may achieve high availability despite lower failure-free survival. A rare failure can substantially reduce availability when replacement parts or technicians are difficult to obtain.

An assessment framework begins with application requirements and proceeds through architecture definition, failure-mode identification, stress analysis, lifetime modeling, and validation. Failure mode and effects analysis identifies component faults and their consequences. Fault trees describe combinations of events producing failure, while reliability block diagrams represent functional relationships. Their selection depends on the engineering question.

Wang, Liserre, and Blaabjerg (2013) treat reliability as a concern involving components, circuit structures, control, and analysis tools. Every lifetime prediction should therefore remain traceable to its mission profile, technology, thermal boundaries, degradation model, and uncertainty

range. This prevents estimates for one installation from being treated as universal properties.

2. Operating Stresses in Renewable Energy Applications

Photovoltaic converters experience daily changes in available power and ambient temperature. Start-up and shutdown introduce additional transitions, while cloud movement produces shorter fluctuations. Electrical and thermal conditions depend on array sizing, inverter rating, control behavior, installation location, and enclosure design.

Wind power converters encounter loading influenced by wind variability, generator operation, and control actions. Their histories can include frequent changes in current and power flow. Offshore installations also introduce difficult maintenance access and environmental exposure, making the consequences of failure strongly dependent on site conditions.

Hybrid renewable systems introduce further complexity. A converter associated with battery storage may operate when photovoltaic generation is absent, and its power flow may reverse repeatedly. The actual dispatch strategy must therefore be represented rather than assuming that all converters share the same operating schedule.

Electrical stresses include overcurrent, overvoltage, switching transients, and ripple current. Thermal stresses include elevated temperature and repeated temperature excursions. Humidity, contamination, vibration, and corrosion can interact with these influences. Temperature-only models cannot represent every relevant mechanism.

Sangwongwanich et al. (2020) demonstrate the importance of irradiance and ambient temperature in photovoltaic mission profiles. Short events may challenge protection, repeated loading may govern fatigue, and prolonged heat may affect dielectric aging. A single average load can conceal the conditions most relevant to failure.

3. Critical Components and Dominant Failure Mechanisms

Power semiconductor modules perform switching and conduction under electrical and thermal stress. Their reliability depends on semiconductor structures, gate systems, packages, interconnections, and thermal interfaces. Repeated expansion and contraction can contribute to bond-wire and solder fatigue, while abnormal electrical events may cause rapid damage before measurable wear develops.

Different mechanisms require different models. Package fatigue cannot be represented adequately by a short-circuit withstand rating, and a thermal

cycling model does not establish immunity to gate-related degradation. The mechanism must be identified before selecting a mathematical relationship or accelerated test.

DC-link capacitors provide energy buffering and ripple management. Their degradation depends strongly on technology. Aluminum electrolytic and metallized film capacitors differ in construction, stress sensitivity, and diagnostic indicators. Generic lifetime rules should not be transferred between technologies without evidence. Wang and Blaabjerg (2014) examine both reliability-oriented design and operational monitoring of DC-link capacitors.

Fan degradation, blocked airflow, pump failure, and deteriorating thermal interfaces can increase the temperatures of healthy components. Gate drivers, sensors, connectors, control supplies, and circuit boards must also be included. The survey by Yang et al. (2011) provides useful context but does not establish universal failure percentages for every renewable installation. Component importance depends on architecture, environment, and operation.

4. Mission Profile Characterization and Data Requirements

A mission profile describes the operating and environmental history experienced by a converter. Photovoltaic inputs can include irradiance, ambient temperature, DC voltage, AC power, reactive power, and start-stop events. Wind applications require corresponding information about generator output, converter loading, environmental exposure, and operating modes.

Annual average temperature and mean power are insufficient when damage depends on peaks, cycle amplitude, or event duration. However, collecting every signal at the highest sampling rate creates unnecessary data volume. Sampling must reflect the dynamics and degradation mechanisms being investigated.

A practical approach uses several timescales. Long records characterize seasonal exposure and energy throughput, while shorter records capture representative transients and temperature cycles. Data compression should be checked for its ability to preserve the stress features controlling predicted damage.

Missing data require explicit treatment. Typical-value substitution can distort fatigue estimates if unusual events occurred in missing intervals. Cleaning should preserve genuine extremes while removing sensor errors through documented criteria. Plausible reconstructions should be compared where uncertainty remains.

Mission-profile-based design connects local operation to component

loading (Blaabjerg et al., 2017). Where historical records are limited, measured short-term data can be combined with environmental information and operating scenarios. These remain conditional predictions and should be updated after operational measurements become available.

5. Electrothermal Modeling and Thermal Cycling Analysis

Electrothermal modeling translates electrical operation into temperature histories. Electrical calculations estimate conduction and switching losses from current, voltage, switching frequency, modulation, and temperature-dependent characteristics. Thermal calculations determine how those losses propagate through the package, interface materials, cooling assembly, and surrounding environment.

A basic steady-state relationship is $T_j = T_c + P_{loss} R_{th,jc}$, where T_j is junction temperature, T_c is case temperature, P_{loss} is dissipated power, and $R_{th,jc}$ is junction-to-case thermal resistance. This expression is an initial approximation under stated boundary conditions; it does not reproduce transient behavior during variable operation.

Dynamic models use thermal impedances or resistance-capacitance networks. Model complexity should match the objective. Compact models support long mission-profile simulations, while detailed numerical analysis can investigate local gradients and interactions between adjacent chips. Bahman et al. (2015, 2016) examine thermal coupling and conditions relevant to high-power module modeling.

Ma et al. (2016) discuss limitations of conventional lumped representations and frequency-domain characterization. Once temperature histories are available, cycle-counting methods identify excursions relevant to fatigue. Amplitude, mean temperature, and duration may influence the lifetime model. Validation should compare predictions with representative measurements, and uncertainty in losses, cooling, and sensor placement should be propagated into damage estimates.

6. Lifetime Prediction and Probabilistic Reliability Evaluation

Lifetime models relate physical stresses to degradation or failure. For semiconductor package fatigue, relevant variables include junction temperature swing, mean temperature, heating duration, and package construction. Capacitor models may use temperature, voltage, and ripple-related heating. Model coefficients must correspond to the assessed technology and mechanism.

A common fatigue approximation is the linear damage rule, $D = \Sigma(n_i/N_{f,i})$, where n_i represents experienced cycles in stress category i and $N_{f,i}$ represents estimated cycles to failure at that stress.

Damage approaching unity is conventionally treated as a fatigue threshold within the model. It is not a universal physical boundary because sequence effects, interacting mechanisms, and manufacturing variation influence actual behavior.

Probabilistic models address differences between nominally similar components. The Weibull survival function is $R(t) = \exp[-(t/\eta)^{\beta}]$, where $R(t)$ denotes survival probability, η characteristic life, and β the shape parameter. At $t = \eta$, survival is approximately 36.8%. Characteristic life differs from mean life, median life, and warranty duration.

7. Condition Monitoring and Predictive Maintenance

Condition monitoring evaluates signals that may reveal deterioration before functional failure. Measurements can include temperature, electrical parameters, capacitor characteristics, cooling performance, and event histories. Diagnostic value depends on whether an observed change can be linked reliably to a degradation mechanism.

Selected semiconductor electrical parameters may provide information about junction temperature or interconnection condition. Temperature variation can resemble degradation, so compensation for normal operation is necessary. Indicators must remain interpretable throughout the operating range rather than only under a laboratory calibration point.

Capacitance and equivalent series resistance can provide useful capacitor information in suitable implementations. Accuracy depends on sensor quality, excitation, signal processing, and technology. Algorithms should report confidence limits rather than treat every estimated change as evidence of imminent failure.

Yang et al. (2010) review device condition monitoring. Detecting an abnormal signal and predicting remaining life are separate tasks: the latter additionally requires assumptions about degradation progression and future loading. Maintenance actions may include inspection, derating, cooling service, replacement, or continued observation.

Data-driven methods should be evaluated against realistic variation, including unseen sites, seasons, sensor drift, and unfamiliar operating modes. Nearly identical training and test records may exaggerate performance. Alarm thresholds should reflect both missed-failure consequences and the cost of unnecessary intervention.

8. Reliability Improvement through Design and Control

Reliability improvement begins with reducing avoidable stress and selecting components appropriate to the

mission profile. Voltage and current margins, thermal design, capacitor ripple capability, insulation coordination, and environmental protection should be considered together. Increasing one component rating does not necessarily improve the complete converter if another subsystem remains limiting.

Topology influences component count, stress, losses, and fault response. A more complex topology may reduce individual device stress while introducing extra switches, sensing requirements, and control dependencies. Its reliability advantage must therefore be established at system level rather than inferred from one favorable component metric.

Thermal management requires attention to both initial performance and aging. Cooling paths must remain effective under expected contamination, ambient conditions, and maintenance practices. Serviceable fans, accessible filters, and airflow or coolant monitoring may be valuable where cooling degradation represents a significant operational concern.

Control strategies also influence lifetime. Modulation, switching frequency, reactive power operation, and power limitation alter losses and temperature cycling. Mission-profile-oriented control can adapt operation to reliability objectives (Sangwongwanich et al., 2020). Its effects on delivered energy and other operating requirements must also be evaluated.

Fault tolerance and redundancy provide further improvement routes. Parallel conversion units and modular structures can retain partial functionality after a fault, but they introduce additional components and possible common-cause failures. Protection coordination, isolation, shared controls, and communication dependencies require evaluation before a system reliability benefit is assigned.

Control-based lifetime extension should be evaluated over the complete operating profile. Reducing peak junction temperature during one interval may change the number or amplitude of later thermal cycles. A local reduction in one stress measure cannot establish a net lifetime benefit without an appropriate damage calculation and validation.

Derating policies also involve an economic tradeoff. Curtailing converter output can reduce electrical or thermal stress, but it may reduce renewable energy delivery. The decision depends on avoided failure costs, repair access, energy value, and the remaining condition of the equipment. The assessment should explicitly state these assumptions.

Design choices should ultimately be compared through lifetime cost and delivered service. A more expensive design may be justified when avoided

outages and maintenance expenditure exceed the additional investment. This conclusion requires application-specific analysis rather than a general assumption that maximum margins always provide the best solution. Chung et al. (2015) provide a broad foundation for evaluating such reliability questions across converter components and applications.

9. System-Level Validation, Maintenance Planning, and Research Needs

Component lifetime predictions do not directly determine renewable plant reliability. System behavior also depends on architecture, redundancy, repair times, protection actions, spare-part availability, and failure timing. Failure during high resource availability may cause greater energy loss than an identical outage during low production.

Reliability block diagrams can represent simple systems, while state-based methods can include degraded operation, repair, and transitions between modes. Shared exposure and common controls create dependencies that may invalidate assumptions of independent failures. These relationships should be identified before system probabilities are calculated.

Peyghami et al. (2021) connect converter reliability with power system reliability analysis. Their approach supports extending assessment beyond device survival to planning, operation, and maintenance. Plant-level evaluation should therefore consider both the likelihood of faults and the operational consequences of those faults.

Validation requires laboratory and field evidence. Accelerated testing can identify mechanisms and estimate parameters, but excessive acceleration may activate mechanisms different from normal service. Stress selection should preserve the physical relevance of the process being investigated, and extrapolation should remain within a justified domain.

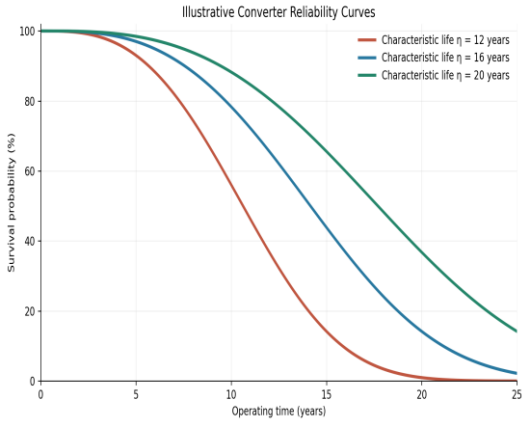
Field records should include operating exposure as well as failures. Equipment remaining functional at the end of observation contributes censored lifetime information and should not be discarded. Records should distinguish manufacturing defects, installation problems, external events, and progressive wear because these categories require different corrective actions.

Maintenance planning should include realistic restoration times. These incorporate fault detection, diagnosis, site access, spare procurement, replacement, and recommissioning. Repair duration is particularly consequential where access is weather-dependent or where replacement modules must be imported. Availability analysis should use these operational

constraints rather than assume instantaneous restoration.

For Pakistani renewable installations, locally measured temperature, loading, contamination, and maintenance-access conditions would support relevant assessments. A single national mission profile should not be assigned to sites with different climates and practices. Comparative studies could clarify local degradation influences without assuming that an imported lifetime estimate applies everywhere.

Future research should prioritize validated models, shared failure definitions, transparent datasets, and uncertainty reporting. Emerging devices and advanced monitoring methods require evidence under realistic conditions. The strongest framework combines physical understanding, operational measurements, and maintenance outcomes throughout the converter lifecycle, with predictions updated as new evidence becomes available.



Weibull model: $R(t) = \exp[-(t/\eta)^{\beta}]$. Assumed parameters; no experimental or field data.

Summary

Reliability assessment of power electronic converters is essential for evaluating the long-term performance of renewable energy systems. Changing loads and environments mean that degradation cannot be understood through rated power or efficiency alone. A meaningful assessment begins with a clear failure definition and proceeds through operating-data collection, stress estimation, degradation modeling, probabilistic analysis, and validation.

Semiconductor modules, DC-link capacitors, cooling assemblies, and auxiliary electronics contribute jointly to converter performance. Their mechanisms differ, making technology-specific models necessary. Electrothermal analysis connects operation with temperature-related stress, while mission profiles establish the application context. Both stages require validation and explicit treatment of uncertainty.

Lifetime predictions are conditional estimates. Cumulative damage calculations simplify complex degradation processes, and Weibull curves describe assumed or fitted populations rather than guarantee individual equipment life. The accompanying graph illustrates changes in mathematical survival curves with assumed characteristic life; its values do not support claims about actual converter products.

Monitoring strengthens reliability management when diagnostic indicators connect physical mechanisms with practical maintenance decisions. Design improvement, control adaptation, and fault tolerance should be assessed through complete-system outcomes. Coordinated decisions across design, testing, operation, and maintenance, supported by application-specific evidence, are necessary to translate analytical predictions into dependable renewable infrastructure.

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