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Smart Energy Optimization for Autonomous Delivery Drones : Insights for E-Commerce Applications

Mr. Harshal Shelar[1], Mr. Sagar Deo[2], Mr. Sushant Sananse[3], Mr. Bhimrao Dabhade[4]
Assistant Professor, Department of Electrical Engineering[1-4]
Guru Gobind Singh College of Engineering and Research Centre, Nashik

Abstract: *Last-mile delivery is expensive, slow, and getting harder to scale. E-commerce volumes keep climbing, and the logistics infrastructure underneath them is struggling to keep up. Autonomous delivery drones offer a way out of that bottleneck, but battery range keeps getting in the way. Most commercial drones fly for 20 to 45 minutes before they need to land and recharge, which makes anything beyond a short urban hop logistically awkward.*

This paper reports on a series of controlled flight experiments designed to find out how much energy can be saved through smarter operational choices without changing the hardware at all. We varied payload weight, cruise speed, flight altitude, and route distance across 120 flight trials and tracked battery discharge, effective delivery range, and energy consumed per kilogram of cargo.

The short version: flying at the right speed and altitude, with loads consolidated where possible, cuts energy use by up to 34% compared to default operations. We also propose a three-module Smart Energy Management Framework (SEMF) that puts these findings into a practical structure e-commerce operators can actually implement..

Keywords: Autonomous Drones, Battery Optimization, Energy Efficiency, E-Commerce Logistics, UAV, Last-Mile Delivery, Smart Energy Management

I. INTRODUCTION

E-commerce revenues hit USD 5.8 trillion in 2023 and are expected to pass USD 8 trillion by 2027. That growth puts pressure on last-mile delivery already the most expensive part of the supply chain, typically eating up 40 to 53 percent of total shipping costs. Something has to give. Delivery drones are one of the more credible answers on the table.

UAVs have real advantages: they skip ground traffic entirely, can reach addresses that are awkward for vans, and produce lower carbon emissions per delivery than diesel vehicles. Amazon, Alphabet Wing, Zipline, and Flipkart have all moved past the pilot stage in at least some markets. The technology works. The problem is that it does not work for long enough on a single charge.

LiPo and lithium-ion batteries discharge quickly under load, degrade with temperature, and offer limited energy density. A delivery drone carrying 0.5 to 5 kilograms typically gets 20 to 45 minutes of flight, which translates to a one-way range of 10 to 30 kilometers under good conditions. That range shrinks fast in the real world when packages are heavier, wind picks up, or temperatures drop. For e-commerce, where package sizes vary widely and delivery windows are tight, this is a meaningful constraint.

This study looks at what can be gained through operational changes alone, without modifying the drone or swapping out the battery. The three questions we set out to answer were:

How much does payload weight, flight altitude, and airspeed each affect battery consumption?

What operational parameters give the best flight endurance and delivery range?

Can those parameters be assembled into a practical energy management framework for e-commerce drone fleets?

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II. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 UAV Energy Models and Battery Performance

The physics of drone energy consumption are reasonably well understood. Zeng et al. (2019) modeled propulsion energy for rotary-wing UAVs and found that hovering and slow flight draw disproportionately more power than cruising at moderate speeds. Dorling et al. (2017) confirmed this with empirical data, showing that energy use per kilometer follows a U-shaped curve against speed, there is a sweet spot in the middle where efficiency peaks. Kim et al. (2021) added payload mass to the picture, finding that each extra 100 grams increases energy draw by 3.5 to 7 percent, depending on the drone.

2.2 Route Optimization and Path Planning

On the routing side, Agatz et al. (2018) applied vehicle routing frameworks to drone delivery and found that dynamic routing reduces fleet energy use by 15 to 22 percent. Sabbagh et al. (2020) looked at altitude specifically, finding that 80 to 120 meters AGL offers a reasonable balance between wind exposure and obstacle clearance. Liu et al. (2022) went further by feeding weather data into path planning, picking up another 8 to 12 percent efficiency in headwind conditions.

2.3 Gaps in Existing Research

Most of this work is simulation-based. Flight models are useful, but they paper over the messier realities of real hardware - battery aging, motor temperature variance, sensor noise. More importantly, almost none of it is anchored in the e-commerce delivery context specifically. Realistic payload distributions, parcel dimensions, and delivery density patterns are rarely modeled. Adaptive in-flight energy control, where the drone adjusts parameters based on live telemetry, is also largely unexplored. This study ran physical flight trials and focused specifically on the variables that matter for e-commerce operators.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Experimental Setup

We used a DJI Matrice 300 RTK quadrotor - a commercially available industrial drone with a 2.7 kg payload capacity and reliable battery monitoring interfaces. The drone flew on a TB60 Intelligent Flight Battery (5935 mAh, 22.8V), with a telemetry logger recording power draw, battery state of charge, GPS position, altitude, speed, and motor temperature at 10 Hz.

All trials took place at an outdoor test site with a 500-meter cleared flight corridor. To keep environmental noise low, we ran trials only when wind was below 5 km/h and ambient temperature was between 22°C and 28°C. Across the full experimental matrix, we completed 120 flight trials.

3.2 Experimental Variables

We varied four independent parameters:

- Payload Weight: 0 kg (no load), 0.5 kg, 1.0 kg, 1.5 kg, 2.0 kg
- Flight Altitude (AGL): 50 m, 80 m, 100 m, 120 m
- Cruise Airspeed: 5 m/s, 10 m/s, 15 m/s, 20 m/s
- Route Distance: 500 m, 1 km, 2 km, 5 km round trip

We measured total energy per flight (Wh), battery SoC depletion rate (%/min), payload energy ratio (Wh/kg/km), and maximum range at a 20% battery reserve.

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3.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Telemetry was exported from DJI FlightHub 2 as CSV and processed in Python using Pandas, NumPy, and Matplotlib. We ran descriptive statistics, ANOVA for multi-factor significance, and regression modeling to derive energy functions for each variable combination. Every condition was replicated three times; we used mean values in the analysis.

IV. EXPERIMENTAL DESIGN AND RESULTS

4.1 Effect of Payload Weight on Energy Consumption

Payload weight correlated strongly and linearly with energy consumption ($R^2 = 0.94$). At 10 m/s cruise speed and 100 m AGL, a 2 km round trip consumed 42.3 Wh with no load and 68.7 Wh at 2.0 kg - a 62.4% increase. What was less obvious going in: the per-kilogram efficiency actually improved as loads got heavier. Because the drone spends a fixed amount of energy just keeping itself airborne, spreading that overhead across more cargo makes each kilogram cheaper to carry. For e-commerce operations, this points directly at parcel consolidation as a lever worth pulling.

4.2 Effect of Altitude on Energy Consumption

Altitude had a more moderate effect. Flying at 80 m AGL used 6.8% less energy than 50 m, probably because of reduced air density and less ground-effect turbulence. Above 100 m, the gains flattened out and propulsion demands crept back up slightly. The 80 to 100 m AGL band came out as the practical optimum, which lines up with what simulation studies have suggested.

4.3 Effect of Cruise Speed on Energy Consumption

Speed told the most interesting story. Energy per kilometer followed the expected U-shape: worst at slow speeds, worst again at high speeds, with a clear trough in between. At 5 m/s, the drone was essentially hovering its way across the route, burning 26.3 Wh/km. At 20 m/s, aerodynamic drag pushed the figure back up to 24.8 Wh/km. The lowest readings - 18.4 to 19.1 Wh/km for a 1.0 kg payload - came in at 10 to 12 m/s. That is the target speed window for any operator who cares about range.

4.4 Comparative Scenario Analysis

Three scenarios were tested against an unoptimized baseline to show what the numbers look like in practice:
Baseline (5 m/s, 50 m AGL, 1.0 kg payload): 58.4 Wh for a 2 km round trip.
Optimized speed and altitude (11 m/s, 90 m AGL, 1.0 kg): 38.6 Wh- a 33.9% reduction.
Optimized with parcel consolidation (11 m/s, 90 m AGL, 2.0 kg): 12.1 Wh/kg/km - 41.2% more efficient per kilogram delivered than the baseline.

V. DISCUSSION

5.1 Implications for E-Commerce Drone Logistics

Cutting energy use by 30% without touching the hardware is a bigger deal than it might sound. For an operator running hundreds of drones, that margin extends battery lifespan, reduces how often drones need to cycle back for charging, lowers per-delivery operating costs, and increases how many deliveries each drone can complete in a day. None of this requires new technology - it requires better default settings.
Parcel consolidation deserves particular attention. Grouping lighter items into a single heavier load improves per-kilogram efficiency in a way that compounds across a fleet. Warehouses that handle drone dispatch could redesign their handoff protocols to favor consolidated loads, especially for addresses within the 5 km zone where drones are most competitive with ground vehicles.

5.2 Smart Energy Management Framework

The findings from this study fed into the design of a three-module Smart Energy Management Framework (SEMF):

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Pre-Flight Optimization Module: Before each dispatch, the system computes optimal speed, altitude, and route using payload weight, destination, wind forecast, and current battery SoC.
In-Flight Adaptive Controller: During flight, live telemetry triggers real-time adjustments to cruise speed and altitude when conditions shift - keeping the drone in its efficient operating zone without violating delivery time commitments.
Post-Flight Analytics Engine: After each mission, flight data feeds into a fleet-wide model that tracks inefficiencies, refines optimization parameters, and flags batteries showing degradation ahead of schedule.

5.3 Trade-offs and Limitations

Flying at 10 to 12 m/s is energy-efficient but not the fastest option. In e-commerce, where customers increasingly expect same-hour delivery, slower flight speeds may not always be acceptable. The tension between delivery time and energy use is real, and the right trade-off will depend on the operator's priorities. Future work should map this Pareto frontier explicitly and give operators a configurable parameter rather than a single recommended speed.
These trials ran in calm, controlled conditions. Rain, strong crosswinds, and temperatures below 10°C will all reduce performance relative to what we recorded. Urban environments add more variables still - building-induced turbulence, electromagnetic interference, and no-fly zone routing constraints were outside the scope of this study.

VI. CONCLUSION

Across 120 flight trials, four findings stood out clearly: cruising at 10 to 12 m/s minimizes energy per kilometer; 80 to 100 m AGL is the most efficient altitude band; consolidating payloads improves per-kilogram efficiency by a wide margin; and combining all three cuts total energy use by up to 34% against an unoptimized baseline. None of these changes require new hardware.
The SEMF proposed here gives operators a structured way to act on those findings - before dispatch, during flight, and after landing. Whether it gets implemented as a standalone system or folded into an existing fleet management platform, the underlying logic is the same: better operational decisions compound into meaningful range and cost improvements at scale.
The most interesting open questions are probably in AI-driven path planning, solar-assisted charging at delivery hubs, and coordinating multi-drone fleets to share loads and balance battery cycles across a network. Those are worth pursuing - the constraints this paper ran into are solvable.

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