

A Finite-Element-Based Framework for Topology Optimization of Lightweight Structures: Mathematical Formulation, Algorithm Selection, and Validation Requirements

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Abstract: *Lightweight structural design requires a balance between material use and mechanical performance. Topology optimization provides a mathematical approach for determining how material should be distributed within a prescribed design domain, while finite element analysis (FEA) estimates the structural response under specified loads and boundary conditions. This paper develops a reproducible framework for coupling finite element analysis with density-based topology optimization for lightweight structures. The framework defines the design domain, material properties, loading conditions, volume constraint, compliance objective, density interpolation, sensitivity evaluation, iterative design update, and post-optimization verification. The Solid Isotropic Material with Penalization (SIMP) method is identified as a practical baseline because it represents material distribution through element-wise design variables and can be coupled with standard finite element solvers. Evolutionary structural optimization and level-set methods are also discussed as alternative approaches with different implementation and geometry-control trade-offs. The manuscript is based on the methodological scope of the supplied thesis and does not claim new numerical performance results. A transparent validation protocol is specified for comparing the initial and optimized designs using mass, compliance, maximum displacement, stress, convergence behaviour, and manufacturability. To establish an original computational contribution, the framework must be completed with a defined benchmark geometry, verified solver settings, and actual simulation outputs. The paper therefore provides a structured research basis for reproducible FEA-driven lightweight design without fabricating experimental or numerical findings.*

Keywords: topology optimization; finite element analysis; lightweight structures; SIMP; compliance minimization; volume constraint; structural design.

I. INTRODUCTION

Reducing structural mass while maintaining acceptable stiffness and strength is an important design objective in aerospace, automotive, mechanical, and civil engineering. Conventional design workflows often begin with a predefined geometry and modify its dimensions or shape. Topology optimization differs by allowing the material layout within a specified design region to change, subject to performance and manufacturing constraints. This can reveal load paths and material distributions that may not be obvious from conventional geometric design.

Finite element analysis provides the numerical basis for evaluating structural response. A continuous domain is discretized into finite elements, and the assembled system is solved to estimate displacement and, from it, strain and stress fields. In an optimization loop, these outputs are used to assess the current design and guide changes to material



distribution. The accuracy of the resulting design depends not only on the optimization algorithm but also on the boundary conditions, material model, mesh resolution, load cases, and convergence criteria.

The supplied thesis, "Topology Optimization for Lightweight Structures Using Finite Element Analysis," identifies three central themes: fundamentals of FEA, integration of topology optimization and FEA, and optimization algorithms for lightweight design. It discusses density-based methods such as SIMP, evolutionary structural optimization (ESO/BESO), and level-set approaches, along with challenges including computational cost, mesh dependency, numerical instabilities, and manufacturing constraints. The present manuscript consolidates these themes into a reproducible computational workflow and specifies the evidence needed to support quantitative claims.

The contribution of this draft is methodological rather than a claim of a completed new numerical experiment. It provides a clearly defined problem formulation and validation plan that can be populated with actual outputs from a verified simulation. A publication submitted as original computational research must include those outputs and demonstrate what is new compared with existing work.

II. RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND QUESTIONS

The objectives are: (i) to formulate a compliance-based topology optimization problem under a material-volume constraint; (ii) to describe an FEA-coupled iterative workflow suitable for a density-based optimizer; (iii) to identify verification checks required for numerical credibility; and (iv) to define quantitative measures for comparing the baseline and optimized structures.

The principal research questions are: How does a specified volume constraint affect the stiffness–mass trade-off? Does the optimized design satisfy displacement, stress, and manufacturing requirements? How sensitive are the resulting topology and performance measures to mesh resolution and optimization settings? These questions can only be answered after the computational study has been run and its results recorded.

III. MATHEMATICAL FORMULATION

3.1 Finite element equilibrium

For a linear-elastic static analysis, the discretized equilibrium equation is

$$\mathbf{K}(\rho)\mathbf{u} = \mathbf{f}$$

where $\mathbf{K}(\rho)$ is the global stiffness matrix dependent on the material-density design variables ρ , $\mathbf{u}$ is the nodal displacement vector, and $\mathbf{f}$ is the applied load vector. The model must define geometry, material properties, element type, supports, loading, and units consistently. Stress and strain are derived from the displacement solution using the selected element formulation and constitutive model.

3.2 Compliance minimization

A common stiffness-oriented formulation minimizes structural compliance subject to a prescribed material-volume limit:

$$\text{Minimize: } C(\rho) = \mathbf{f}^T \mathbf{u} = \mathbf{u}^T \mathbf{K}(\rho) \mathbf{u}$$

$$\text{Subject to: } \mathbf{K}(\rho)\mathbf{u} = \mathbf{f}; \quad \sum_i \rho_i v_i \leq V^*; \quad \rho_{\min} \leq \rho_i \leq 1$$

Here, v_i is the volume of element i , V^* is the allowed material volume, and ρ_i is the element density variable. Under fixed loading, lower compliance generally indicates a stiffer structure. The formulation is not, by itself, a complete strength constraint: maximum stress, displacement, buckling, fatigue, and other requirements must be assessed separately when relevant.

3.3 SIMP density interpolation

In the SIMP approach, the element stiffness is commonly interpolated as $\mathbf{K}_i(\rho_i) = \rho_i^p \mathbf{K}_i^0$, where $\mathbf{K}_i^0$ is the stiffness matrix of the solid element and p is a penalization exponent. A small positive lower density is normally used to avoid a singular global stiffness matrix. The penalization discourages intermediate densities, while filtering or regularization



may be needed to control mesh dependency and checkerboard patterns. The chosen exponent, lower bound, filter radius, and stopping criteria must be reported.

3.4 Sensitivity and design update

An optimizer evaluates the change in the objective and constraints with respect to the design variables. Sensitivity information is used by an update scheme, such as optimality criteria or the method of moving asymptotes, to produce a new density field while respecting bounds and the volume constraint. The loop continues until a documented stopping condition is satisfied, such as a small change in objective value or design variables across successive iterations. The exact update rule and parameter values should be taken from the implementation actually used, not inferred after the fact.

IV. PROPOSED COMPUTATIONAL METHODOLOGY

4.1 Benchmark definition

A benchmark problem must be selected before running the optimization. A simple cantilever beam is a suitable starting point because its geometry, support condition, and loading can be specified unambiguously. The design domain, non-design regions, load application region, support constraints, thickness (for a two-dimensional model), material properties, and unit system must be stated. If a different structure is used, the same information is required.

4.2 Baseline finite element analysis

First, create and solve the unoptimized baseline model. Record the mesh type and element count, material parameters, solver settings, applied loads, boundary conditions, total mass or volume, compliance, maximum displacement, and an appropriate stress measure. Check that the boundary conditions prevent rigid-body motion and that the baseline solution is physically plausible.

4.3 Optimization loop

Initialize the design variables within the permitted bounds. At each iteration: (1) interpolate element stiffness from the current densities; (2) assemble and solve the equilibrium equations; (3) calculate compliance and the volume fraction; (4) evaluate objective sensitivities; (5) update densities using the selected optimizer; (6) apply the documented filter or regularization; and (7) test the stopping criteria. Save iteration history so that convergence can be assessed rather than relying solely on the final image.

4.4 Post-processing and verification

The final density field should be converted to a manufacturable geometry using a stated density threshold and geometry-cleanup procedure. The reconstructed geometry must then be re-analysed using FEA, preferably with a suitable mesh and the original design loads. This verification step is important because thresholding and geometry reconstruction can alter stiffness and stress. Report any change between the optimization model and the reconstructed design.

4.5 Mesh and parameter sensitivity

At minimum, perform a mesh-refinement check using more than one mesh resolution. Where feasible, repeat the optimization for more than one material-volume fraction and assess whether the principal load paths and performance trends remain stable. Record computational time and iteration count if algorithm efficiency is discussed. A single run is insufficient to establish general robustness.



V. EVALUATION METRICS AND REPORTING PLAN

The following measures should be calculated from the actual baseline and optimized models. No values are inserted here because the supplied thesis does not provide a verified, complete numerical dataset for a specific benchmark in the material reviewed.

Metric	Calculation / record	Purpose
Mass reduction (%)	$100 \times (m_0 - m_1) / m_0$	Quantifies mass change
Compliance change (%)	$100 \times (C_1 - C_0) / C_0$	Shows stiffness-related trade-off
Maximum displacement	Baseline and verified optimized values, with units	Checks serviceability
Stress measure	Specify von Mises or relevant criterion and units	Screens for strength concerns
Volume fraction	Optimized material volume / design-domain volume	Checks the material constraint
Convergence	Objective and design-variable history by iteration	Shows whether stopping criteria were met
Mesh sensitivity	Compare results across mesh resolutions	Assesses numerical robustness
Runtime	Wall-clock time and hardware/software details	Supports computational-efficiency claims

VI. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Report the baseline model first, followed by the optimization settings and iteration history. Include a figure of the design domain and boundary conditions, a convergence plot, the final density/topology plot, and stress/displacement plots for the reconstructed optimized geometry. A comparison table should list baseline and optimized mass, compliance, displacement, stress, and volume fraction, with units and percentage changes.

Discuss whether the volume constraint was satisfied, whether the objective converged, and whether the reconstructed design retained its predicted performance. Explain any high-stress regions, disconnected members, thin features, or manufacturing limitations. Compare trends with prior published studies only after checking that the geometry, loads, material, constraints, and metrics are sufficiently comparable. Do not claim that weight reduction occurred without reporting the measured baseline and optimized masses.

If no new simulations are available, this manuscript should be presented as a methodological framework or review-style paper, not as completed original computational research. For a journal seeking original research, the benchmark implementation and verified results are essential.

VII. LIMITATIONS

The present draft does not report a completed numerical experiment, physical test, or validated software implementation. The general mathematical formulation is well established in the topology-optimization literature; therefore, a publishable original-research contribution must be distinguished through a new benchmark study, an improved algorithm, a meaningful comparative evaluation, or another defensible novelty. Linear static compliance optimization does not automatically guarantee strength, fatigue life, buckling resistance, dynamic performance, or manufacturability. These aspects require separate modelling and verification where they are relevant to the application.

VIII. CONCLUSION

This paper organizes a reproducible framework for coupling finite element analysis with density-based topology optimization for lightweight structural design. The formulation uses compliance minimization under a material-volume constraint, with SIMP as a baseline density interpolation method and sensitivity-based updates to redistribute material. The workflow emphasizes baseline analysis, explicit modelling assumptions, convergence tracking, mesh sensitivity,



geometry reconstruction, and post-optimization verification. These checks are necessary to support credible claims about mass reduction and structural performance. Because the supplied thesis does not establish a complete, independently verifiable benchmark dataset in the material reviewed, no numerical improvement is claimed. The next step is to execute the defined study, report the actual results, and articulate the specific novelty relative to existing literature before submitting the work as original research.

Data availability

No new simulation dataset is reported in this draft. After the computational study is completed, provide the model inputs, solver settings, iteration history, and result files in a repository or as supplementary material where permitted.

Declaration of competing interests

The authors should declare any competing interests, or state that none exist, after confirming the appropriate wording.

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Author contributions

Confirm and allocate contributions for conceptualization, methodology, software, validation, formal analysis, writing, and supervision before submission.

Ethics statement

Not applicable to a computational structural-design study, unless the target journal requests a different statement.

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