



Recent advances in wearable tactile sensors: Materials, sensing mechanisms, and device performance



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ABSTRACT

Tactile sensors, most commonly referred as strain and pressure sensors, can collect mechanical property data of the human body and local environment, to provide valuable insights into the human health status or artificial intelligence systems. The introduction of a high level of wearability (bendability and stretchability) to tactile sensors can dramatically enhance their interfaces with the contact objects, providing chronically reliable functions. Therefore, the developed wearable tactile sensors are capable of conformably covering arbitrary curved surface over their stiff counterparts without incurring damage, emerging as a promising development direction toward the Internet of Things (IoT) applications. Fundamental parameters of the wearable tactile sensors such as sensitivity and stretchability have experienced unprecedented advancement, owing to the progress of device fabrication techniques and material structural engineering. Moreover, novel smart materials and mechanically durable sensor design concepts endow these sensors with multi-functionality integration (e.g., simultaneous force, temperature and humidity detection, simultaneous pressure and strain discrimination) and stirring properties (e.g., biocompatibility, biodegradability, self-healing, self-powering and visualization), further broadening the application scope of current wearable tactile sensors. Besides, it is desirable that a tactile sensor is compatible with a printing process that presents a new era of feasible wearable technology due to its large-area and high-throughput production capability. In addition to the development of sensors, packaging, and integration of the rest of the tactile device system (data memory, signal conversion, power supply, wireless transmission, feedback actuator, etc.) to build a wearable platform also emerge as major research frontiers in recent years. This review attempts to summarize the current state-of-the-art wearable tactile sensors concerning basic concepts, functional materials, sensing mechanism, promising applications, performance optimization strategies, multifunctional sensing, and system integration. Finally, the discussion will be presented regarding potential challenges, pathways, and opportunities.

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Contents

1. Introduction	2
2. Basic concepts about wearable tactile sensors	3
2.1. Definition of tactile sensors	3
2.2. Strategies to implement wearable tactile sensors	4
2.2.1. Skin-based wearable tactile sensors	4
2.2.2. Textile-based wearable tactile sensors	4

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2.3.	Promising applications for wearable tactile sensors	4
2.3.1.	Human/machine interfaces	5
2.3.2.	Robotics	5
2.3.3.	Biomedical devices	6
2.4.	Transduction principles	6
2.4.1.	Piezoresistivity	6
2.4.2.	Capacitance	8
2.4.3.	Piezoelectricity	9
2.4.4.	Other transduction methods	10
2.4.5.	Temperature sensing	10
2.4.6.	Humidity sensing	11
3.	Functional materials	11
3.1.	Substrates	11
3.2.	Active materials	11
3.2.1.	Graphene	11
3.2.2.	CNTs	13
3.2.3.	Conductive elastomer	15
3.2.4.	Si nanowires or nanostrips	16
3.2.5.	ZnO nanowires or nanobelts	16
3.2.6.	Metal nanowires, nanoparticles, and thin films	17
3.3.	Stretchable electrodes	18
4.	Mechanics, materials, processing and design considerations for enhanced sensing performance	18
4.1.	Mechanics at device level	19
4.1.1.	Bendable device mechanics	19
4.1.2.	Stretchable device mechanics	19
4.2.	Material designs and structural engineering for optimization of basic performance	20
4.2.1.	Sensitivity	20
4.2.2.	Stretchability	21
4.2.3.	Trade-off between “sensitivity” and “stretchability”	21
4.2.4.	Linearity	23
4.2.5.	Hysteresis, response time, and cyclic stability	23
4.3.	Introduction of desired properties for wearable tactile sensors with smart materials	24
4.3.1.	Self-healing	24
4.3.2.	Self-power	24
4.3.3.	Biocompatibility and biodegradability	24
4.3.4.	Visualization	26
4.4.	Advanced material processing-printing technique for wearable electronics	27
4.5.	Design considerations for multifunctional sensing	28
4.5.1.	Simultaneous differentiation of multicomponent forces	28
4.5.2.	Simultaneous sensing of multiple stimuli	29
5.	Smart wearable tactile sensor system	30
5.1.	Structure of smart sensor system	30
5.2.	Signal processing: transistor integration	30
5.3.	Energy: power supply system	31
5.4.	Communication: wireless communications and remote operation	31
5.5.	Display and operation: intelligent terminal	31
5.6.	Integration of tactile sensors with other components	31
6.	Conclusion and perspectives	33
	Acknowledgements	34
	References	34

1. Introduction

Tactile sensing which provides measurement information of given properties of an object or event through physical contact is ubiquitous in human activities. Indeed, human interact with the world using tactile sensing every day *via* the largest sensory organ, the skin. In general, there are seven types of sensory receptors in human skin, including pain receptors, cold receptors, warm receptors and four mechanoreceptors that measure innocuous mechanical stimuli [1]. Owing to these receptors embedded in the skin, human tactile sensing conveys perceptible information about material and surface properties especially the contact force and thermal properties, which helps human survive, explore, and respond to the external world [2,3].

Researchers have been pursuing the development of tactile sensing technology that can mimic the properties of human skin for decades. Since the 1980s, tactile sensing has evolved as a

research field which integrates highly diversified researchers and practitioners with interdisciplinary expertise, such as electronics, mechanics, material sciences, measurement methods, system engineering, robotics, and bioengineering. However, tactile sensing developed slowly compared with vision sensing, which can be attributed to the following challenges. First, tactile sensors need to be wearable and incorporated into surfaces of adequate shapes with compatible, durable, and abrasion resistant. Therefore, the typically used brittle materials in the semiconductor industry (*e.g.*, Si) are impracticable. Second, tactile sensing requires a sophisticated sensing system which is capable of differentiating multiple environmental stimuli (mechanics, temperature, humidity, *etc.*) as well as various mechanical components, such as normal pressure, lateral strain, shear, flexion, torsion, and vibration.

Despite these challenges, a continuous evolution of new tactile sensing devices [4–6] with wearable capabilities has been taking place throughout the years, motivated by the fast emerging ability

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