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A review of the applications of nanofluids in solar energy

Omid Mahian [a], Ali Kianifar [a], Soteris A. Kalogirou [b], Ioan Pop [c,*], Somchai Wongwises [d,e]

[a] Department of Mechanical Engineering, Engineering Faculty, Ferdowsi University of Mashhad, Mashhad, Iran
[b] Department of Mechanical Engineering and Materials Science and Engineering, Cyprus University of Technology, Cyprus
[c] Department of Mathematics, Babeş-Bolyai University, 400084 Cluj-Napoca, CP 325, Romania
[d] Fluid Mechanics, Thermal Engineering and Multiphase Flow Research Lab. (FUTURE), Department of Mechanical Engineering, Faculty of Engineering, King Mongkut's University of Technology Thonburi, Bangmod, Bangkok 10140, Thailand
[e] The Academy of Science, The Royal Institute of Thailand, Sanam Suea Pa, Dusit, Bangkok 10300, Thailand

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A B S T R A C T

Utilizing nanofluids as an advanced kind of liquid mixture with a small concentration of nanometer-sized solid particles in suspension is a relatively new field, which is less than two decades old. The aim of this review paper is the investigation of the nanofluids' applications in solar thermal engineering systems. The shortage of fossil fuels and environmental considerations motivated the researchers to use alternative energy sources such as solar energy. Therefore, it is essential to enhance the efficiency and performance of the solar thermal systems. Nearly all of the former works conducted on the applications of nanofluids in solar energy is regarding their applications in collectors and solar water heaters. Therefore, a major part of this review paper allocated to the effects of nanofluids on the performance of solar collectors and solar water heaters from the efficiency, economic and environmental considerations viewpoints. In addition, some reported works on the applications of nanofluids in thermal energy storage, solar cells, and solar stills are reviewed. Subsequently, some suggestions are made to use the nanofluids in different solar thermal systems such as photovoltaic/thermal systems, solar ponds, solar thermoelectric cells, and so on. Finally, the challenges of using nanofluids in solar energy devices are discussed.

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* Corresponding author. Tel.: +40 264405300; fax: +40 264591906.
E-mail address: popm.ioan@yahoo.co.uk (I. Pop).

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1. Introduction

Common fluids such as water, ethylene glycol, and heat transfer oil play an important role in many industrial processes such as power generation, heating or cooling processes, chemical processes, and microelectronics. However, these fluids have relatively low thermal conductivity and thus cannot reach high heat exchange rates in thermal engineering devices. A way to overcome this barrier is using ultra fine solid particles suspended in common fluids to improve their thermal conductivity. The suspension of nano-sized particles (1–100 nm) in a conventional base fluid is called a nanofluid. Choi first used the term "nanofluid" in 1995 [1]. Nanofluids, compared to suspensions with particles of millimeter-or-micrometer size, show better stability, rheological properties, and considerably higher thermal conductivities.

In recent years, many researchers have investigated the effects of nanofluids on the enhancement of heat transfer in thermal engineering devices, both experimentally and theoretically. Researchers have also applied a variety of preparation methods, characteristics, and different models used for the calculation of thermophysical properties of nanofluids (i.e., thermal conductivity, viscosity, density, specific heat capacity) [2–9]. Some investigators have also summarized the effects of nanofluids on flow and heat transfer in natural and forced convection in different systems [10–13]. The enhanced thermal behavior of nanofluids could provide a basis for an enormous innovation for heat transfer intensification, which is of major importance to a number of industrial sectors including transportation, power generation, micro-manufacturing, thermal therapy for cancer treatment, chemical and metallurgical sectors, as well as heating, cooling, ventilation and air-conditioning. Nanofluids are also important for the production of nanostructured materials for the engineering of complex fluids as well as for cleaning oil from surfaces due to their excellent wetting and spreading behavior (Ding et al. [14]). Another application of the nanofluid flow is in the delivery of nano-drug as suggested by Kleinstreuer et al. [15].

Saidur et al. [16] reviewed the potential of nanofluids in the improvement of heat transfer in refrigeration systems. The authors concluded that more studies are required to find the reasons behind the considerable improvements in heat transfer whereas an insignificant increase in pressure occurs. Thomas and Sobhan [17] presented experimental studies on nanofluids, with emphasis on the techniques of measuring the effective thermal conductivity. Escher et al. [18] investigated the applications of nanofluids in cooling electronics. Recently, applications of computer simulations and computational fluid dynamics (CFD) used to model systems employing nanofluids were reviewed and analyzed by Abouali and Ahmadi [19] and Kamyar et al. [20]. Ahn and Kim [21] also published a review on the critical heat flux of nanofluids for both convective flow boiling and pool boiling applications. In another publication, Saidur et al. [22] reviewed the general applications of nanofluids in some fields such as cooling of electronics, heat exchangers, medical applications, fuel cells, nuclear reactors, and many more. They also mentioned briefly the applications of nanofluids in solar water heaters. They investigated challenges in using nanofluids, including an increased pressure drop and pumping power, long-term stability of nanoparticles dispersion, and the high cost of nanofluids.

In recent years, the use of solar energy has had a remarkable edge. The perceived shortage of fossil fuels as well as environmental considerations will constrain the use of fossil fuels in the future. Therefore, researchers are motivated to find alternative sources of energy. This has become even more popular as the price of fossil fuels continues to rise. The earth receives in just about 1 h more energy from the sun than that consumed by the entire world for 1 year. Most solar energy applications are financially viable while small systems for individual use require just a few kilowatts of power [23,24]. It is important to apply solar energy to a wide range of applications and provide solutions through the modification of the energy proportion, improving energy stability, increasing energy sustainability, and enhancing system efficiency [25]. This paper presents a review of former studies on the application of nanofluids in solar thermal engineering systems. The former works on applications of nanofluids in solar energy are mainly related to their applications in collectors. Therefore, this review mainly investigates the effects of nanofluids on the efficiency improvement of solar collectors as well as on economic and environmental considerations regarding the usage of these systems. Other applications of nanofluids in thermal energy storage, solar cells, and solar stills are also reviewed. Some suggestions also are made for future works in this field. In addition, the existing challenges of using nanofluids in solar energy applications are discussed. Finally, the authors wish to mention that in contrast with the comprehensive references on nanofluids mentioned above much less is known about the application of nanofluids in solar energy applications. It should be reiterated here that, as this is the first systematic review paper on this subject, it is desirable to provide as complete details as possible. However, in an attempt to reduce the overall length of the paper, without compromising the technical quality, only some very important questions for problems of practical applications have been briefly described.

2. Applications of nanofluids in solar energy

Initially, the application of nanofluids in collectors and water heaters are investigated from the efficiency, economic, and environmental aspects. Some studies conducted on thermal conductivity and optical properties of nanofluids are also briefly reviewed, because these parameters can determine the capability of nanofluids to enhance the performance of solar systems.

2.1. Collectors and solar water heaters

Solar collectors are particular kind of heat exchangers that transform solar radiation energy into internal energy of the transport medium. These devices absorb the incoming solar radiation, convert it into heat, and transfer the heat to a fluid (usually air, water, or oil) flowing through the collector. The energy collected is carried from the working fluid, either directly to the hot water or space conditioning equipment or to a thermal energy storage tank, from which it can be drawn for use at night or on cloudy days [26]. Solar water heaters are the most popular devices in the field of solar energy. As mentioned in the introduction, the nanofluid-based solar collectors are investigated in two aspects. In the first, these devices are studied from the efficiency viewpoint, and in the second, from economic and environmental viewpoints.