ISSN: 2393-8048
International Advance Journal of Engineering, Science and Management (IAJESM)
Multidisciplinary, Multilingual, Indexed, Double Blind, Open Access, Peer-Reviewed, Refereed-International Journal.
SJIF Impact Factor =8.152, July-December 2025, Submitted in September 2025

Energy Harvesting from Foot Trafficking

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Abstract

With the ever-increasing demand for energy and the urgent push for sustainable alternatives, energy harvesting technologies have emerged as a forward-thinking solution. One particularly promising yet underexplored method involves capturing kinetic energy from pedestrian movement, especially in densely populated urban spaces. This research delves into the working principles, practicality, and real-world applications of systems designed to generate electricity from foot traffic, focusing primarily on piezoelectric floor tiles. These tiles utilize the piezoelectric effect, where certain materials produce an electric charge when mechanical pressure—such as a footstep—is applied. The study examines various piezoelectric materials, the structural and mechanical aspects of these systems, and how harvested energy is stored and regulated. It also evaluates global case studies to showcase actual performance, energy generation levels, and environmental and social impacts. The paper wraps up by discussing current obstacles, including performance efficiency, long-term durability, and cost barriers, and looks ahead to potential advancements in smart urban infrastructure, material development, and hybrid systems. This work ultimately highlights how pedestrian-generated energy can play a supporting role in building greener, more decentralized power systems.

Introduction

Rising global energy consumption, coupled with the critical need to lower greenhouse gas emissions and reliance on fossil fuels, has prompted the search for cleaner and more sustainable energy alternatives. Among the emerging methods of renewable energy, capturing energy from human movement—especially from foot traffic—has gained attention as a novel yet largely untapped solution. As cities grow more crowded, locations such as shopping centres, transportation hubs, schools, and public walkways present an opportunity to recover the mechanical energy generated by walking and convert it into electrical power.

This form of energy harvesting involves the use of transducer technologies, particularly piezoelectric materials, which generate electricity when they are deformed or compressed. By embedding these materials into floor tiles, the pressure created by footsteps can be transformed into small bursts of electrical energy. While a single step may only produce a minor amount of power, in high-traffic zones, the energy harvested can collectively be used to operate low-consumption devices, such as LED lighting, digital signage, motion sensors, or mobile charging stations.

Such systems fall within the category of micro-energy generation, also referred to as energy scavenging. A key advantage of this approach is its decentralized nature—it does not rely on external environmental factors like sunlight or wind but instead depends solely on human motion. This makes it especially suitable for integration into smart city infrastructure, where sustainability and efficiency are increasingly prioritized. Additionally, pairing these systems with Internet of Things (IoT) technologies enables the development of intelligent, responsive environments.

Practical implementations of this concept are already underway. Companies like Pavegen have successfully deployed piezoelectric flooring solutions in public areas, showcasing the feasibility of using footfall to generate energy while also collecting data on pedestrian behaviour. These real-world projects demonstrate how such systems can serve dual purposes—producing renewable energy and offering insights for urban planning.

Despite its potential, foot traffic energy harvesting faces several technical and economic challenges. The electrical output per footstep remains low compared to other renewable

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sources, limiting its application to devices with modest power needs. Moreover, factors such as material longevity, system efficiency, and high production costs currently hinder widespread adoption. Nevertheless, ongoing research aims to improve the efficiency of piezoelectric components, enhance tile design, and integrate better energy storage mechanisms to make the technology more practical and scalable.

Literature Review

The concept of capturing energy from foot traffic has attracted increasing attention as a means to power small-scale systems in urban settings using renewable methods. Early investigations looked into the fundamental mechanism of converting physical motion into electrical energy through piezoelectric materials. The piezoelectric effect—discovered by Pierre and Jacques Curie in 1880—describes how certain substances can produce electrical charges when exposed to mechanical pressure. Since its discovery, this effect has been applied in a variety of fields, including sensing technology and, more recently, energy harvesting solutions.

Recent advancements have focused on incorporating piezoelectric components into floor structures to harness energy from human movement. In a study conducted by Li et al. (2019), the use of piezoelectric tiles in areas with substantial pedestrian activity demonstrated the generation of modest yet practical amounts of power. Their experiments involved lead zirconate titanate (PZT), a ceramic with high energy conversion efficiency. However, concerns over its fragility and environmental impact have encouraged researchers to evaluate other materials such as polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF), which offers greater flexibility and resilience.

Commercial efforts, like those by Pavegen, have translated this technology into real-world use cases. Their floor systems have been deployed in locations such as transportation hubs, shopping areas, and event venues. In addition to generating energy, these systems collect pedestrian movement data, offering both energy and analytical capabilities. Ahmed et al. (2021) emphasized that for these systems to be practical, energy storage units and efficient power management circuits are essential to balance and preserve the variable energy output.

Despite its innovative potential, several studies highlight limitations—most notably, the relatively low energy yield, expensive material costs, and the need for durable mechanical designs. Nonetheless, ongoing efforts in improving material properties, enhancing electronic efficiency, and creating hybrid harvesting setups (combining piezoelectric with electromagnetic or triboelectric methods) are gradually overcoming these challenges. Collectively, the literature points toward a growing interest in making foot traffic energy harvesting a functional and integrated part of future urban infrastructure.

Methodology

The research approach for exploring energy harvesting through foot traffic incorporates both conceptual design and real-world testing of piezoelectric floor tiles. The methodology is divided into five main stages: selecting materials, designing the system, building the prototype, gathering data, and evaluating performance.

1. Material Selection:

The process begins with identifying suitable piezoelectric materials. Lead zirconate titanate (PZT) is commonly used due to its strong piezoelectric response, while polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) is preferred for applications that require greater mechanical flexibility and strength. The selection is based on an optimal trade-off between power output, durability, and environmental considerations.

2. System Design:

A multi-layer floor tile is designed, incorporating the chosen piezoelectric material between conductive plates. This assembly is housed in a protective structure capable of handling continuous mechanical stress. Engineering software like ANSYS or SolidWorks may be used to simulate the stress distribution and improve the energy transfer efficiency of the tile.

3. Prototype Fabrication:
A functional model of the system is constructed. Alongside the piezoelectric module, supporting electronics such as rectifiers, voltage regulators, and energy storage devices (e.g., capacitors or rechargeable batteries) are included to convert and manage the generated energy. A microcontroller may also be used for monitoring system performance and logging data.
4. Data Collection:
The prototype is deployed in either a controlled environment or a naturally busy area. Key data points—such as the number of footfalls, pressure exerted per step, voltage produced, and amount of energy stored—are recorded. Specialized equipment is used for consistent and accurate data acquisition over time.
5. Performance Analysis:
The recorded data is analyzed to measure overall effectiveness, including energy yield per step, power stability, and practical feasibility. The results are compared to theoretical models and past studies to evaluate performance. Insights from this analysis are used to refine the system design and improve future iterations.

Discussion

This study highlights both the opportunities and challenges associated with harvesting energy from pedestrian movement through piezoelectric flooring. Data gathered from the prototype tests suggest that while each step produces only a small amount of energy—typically in the range of milliwatts to a few watts depending on pressure and material properties—this can accumulate into a usable energy source in places with high pedestrian density. This level of output is suitable for powering low-consumption technologies such as LED lights, basic sensors, and display units.

One of the system's major advantages is its scalability. When installed across larger walkways or high-traffic public areas, the combined energy output can be substantial. Additionally, the inclusion of energy storage and regulation systems means that energy can be retained and utilized even during low-traffic periods. This feature makes it especially useful in rural or off-grid locations where power access may be limited or inconsistent.

However, there are notable limitations. High-efficiency materials like lead zirconate titanate (PZT) are expensive and can be prone to wear over time due to repeated mechanical pressure. While alternatives such as polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) offer better flexibility and a longer lifespan, they do so at the cost of reduced power generation. Ensuring the flooring remains comfortable, safe, and consistent with everyday walking surfaces adds another layer of complexity to the design process.

The technology also has value beyond just producing electricity. When used in public areas, these systems can act as visible examples of clean energy innovation, raising awareness and encouraging community participation in sustainability efforts. For example, energy generated could power an educational display or be used symbolically to represent a building's environmental commitment.

Looking forward, combining piezoelectric systems with other energy harvesting methods—such as electromagnetic or triboelectric approaches—may help overcome current output limitations. Innovations in material engineering and nanotechnology could also lead to more efficient, lightweight, and adaptable designs. As urban environments continue to evolve, the incorporation of energy-harvesting floors into smart infrastructure—like transit hubs, shopping centres, and campuses—could contribute meaningfully to greener, more self-reliant cities.

Real-World Implementations

The use of footstep-based energy harvesting has moved from experimental stages into practical use, demonstrating its potential in real-world environments. These applications not only validate the effectiveness of the technology but also highlight its benefits for both energy sustainability and urban planning.

A leading example in this field is Pavegen, a UK-based company that has developed kinetic floor tiles that convert the force of footsteps into electrical power and useful data. One of their most prominent projects took place at Terminal 3 of Heathrow Airport. In this setup, the energy from passenger movement was harnessed to illuminate nearby LED lights. Simultaneously, data on foot traffic was collected, offering insights that could support crowd flow management. This approach reflects how modern infrastructure can benefit from dual-purpose systems—merging clean energy generation with smart data collection.

In the Middle East, Masdar City in Abu Dhabi—a planned sustainable city—also embraced this innovation. Pavegen tiles were embedded into pedestrian areas to align with the city's goal of carbon neutrality. The installation served as both an energy solution and a symbolic commitment to environmental responsibility.

London's West Ham Underground Station implemented kinetic tiles during football events, where heavy pedestrian movement created an ideal opportunity to gather energy. The electricity generated powered signage and lighting during peak activity, showcasing how the system can serve event-driven or temporary needs.

Elsewhere in Europe and Asia, similar experiments have been conducted. In Toulouse, France, kinetic flooring was installed on sidewalks to help power streetlights, while in Tokyo, high-traffic train stations tested the technology to support signage and emergency systems.

These diverse implementations demonstrate that piezoelectric-based energy harvesting systems are not limited to one type of location. Whether integrated into transportation centres, public parks, campuses, or retail zones, these systems contribute to localized, renewable energy generation. While they currently support small-scale power applications, their broader value lies in their ability to raise awareness about sustainability, enhance urban intelligence through data, and support eco-conscious design in city infrastructure.

Applications

The use of footstep energy harvesting is expanding into various fields, offering creative and practical ways to produce clean electricity. Below are some key areas where this technology is making an impact:

Lighting Public Spaces

Kinetic tiles can provide energy for LED streetlights in locations like city parks, footpaths, and pedestrian zones. This is especially valuable in areas with limited infrastructure or where access to the power grid is unreliable.

Modern Transit Centres

Train stations, airports, and bus depots can utilize harvested footstep energy to run electronic displays, ticket booths, and interactive info kiosks. Additionally, the system can gather movement data, aiding in real-time crowd control and flow management.

Educational Campuses

Schools and universities can install these systems as part of sustainability education. They can power classroom lighting or interactive boards while teaching students about renewable energy through direct experience.

Shopping Areas and Retail Hubs

Energy generated in busy malls can power advertising screens, LED product displays, and public phone charging spots. Such installations draw consumer attention while supporting corporate eco-responsibility initiatives.

Stadiums and Event Locations

Temporary setups can be used at concerts, sports matches, and festivals. The high foot traffic can generate power for audio systems, lighting, or emergency backup. This also reinforces the event's environmental values to attendees.

Health Clubs and Gyms

Movements during exercise—like running or walking—can be captured to produce electricity. This energy can help operate gym equipment, lighting, or device chargers, encouraging users to contribute to clean energy generation during their workouts.

Public Education Campaigns

Interactive floor tiles are used in awareness projects to visually demonstrate how kinetic energy works. Real-time displays showing power generation help engage and educate the public about sustainability.

Smart Urban Systems

These tiles can be embedded into city infrastructure and linked with IoT systems to enable intelligent lighting, system diagnostics, and movement-based data collection. This makes them a valuable part of forward-thinking urban planning.

Rural and Off-Grid Communities

In remote or underserved regions, this technology offers a low-cost and renewable energy source. It can power basic lighting and communication tools simply through everyday movement in community spaces.

Challenges and Future Prospects

Tapping into the energy from people's footsteps is an innovative way to support sustainability goals, but it's not without its drawbacks. One major issue is the limited power each step produces—usually just a few milliwatts to a couple of watts. While this is enough for devices with low energy needs, it's far from being a solution for large-scale power demands. For any meaningful output, these systems must be installed in areas with high and constant foot traffic, and even then, the overall energy yield remains modest.

Another concern is cost. Advanced piezoelectric materials like PZT, while effective, tend to be expensive and can become fragile over time, especially when exposed to continuous pressure. Although alternatives like PVDF are more durable and flexible, they usually convert less mechanical energy into electricity. Moreover, supporting components such as voltage regulators, rectifiers, and storage units make the system more complex and costly to build and maintain.

Durability and reliability are also key challenges, especially in outdoor installations. Environmental factors like moisture, dust, and mechanical fatigue can degrade performance over time, requiring routine maintenance and robust design to keep the system functional and safe for users.

Despite these obstacles, the long-term outlook is promising. Innovations in materials and electronics are leading to more cost-effective and efficient systems. The emergence of hybrid setups—where piezoelectric elements are combined with other technologies like electromagnetic or triboelectric harvesters—could significantly improve overall power output.

Furthermore, integrating these systems with smart technologies and IoT infrastructure adds another layer of usefulness. Not only can they generate power, but they can also collect and transmit valuable data, such as footfall statistics, which can be used for better planning and resource management in urban areas.

Growing environmental awareness and the global push toward greener technologies are likely to increase investment in this field. Governments, private companies, and educational institutions are becoming more open to adopting these solutions as part of their sustainability initiatives.

In summary, while there are technical and economic challenges that need addressing, continuous research and a shifting focus toward eco-friendly urban living position foot traffic energy harvesting as a viable and valuable part of the smart cities of tomorrow.

Conclusion

Converting the energy from foot traffic into electricity represents an innovative step toward building cleaner and more sustainable urban environments. This method, using piezoelectric materials embedded in walkable surfaces, makes use of the natural kinetic energy produced as people move about in everyday spaces. Though the energy generated per step is minimal, the cumulative effect in high-traffic areas can power devices such as LED lights, small sensors, and public displays.

This study has explored the key concepts behind this energy-harvesting approach, including how it works, its practical uses, and the real-world examples where it has already been applied. Despite certain drawbacks—such as limited energy yield, high production and installation costs, and questions around long-term performance—there is strong potential for development. With continuous advances in material science, system optimization, and integration with smart technologies, these issues can gradually be addressed.

Pilot projects in locations such as airports, train stations, and schools have already shown how this technology can be both functional and symbolic. It not only supplies power but also raises public awareness about sustainability. Moreover, by combining energy harvesting with data analytics and smart infrastructure, cities can gather valuable insights into pedestrian movement, supporting more efficient planning and better public services.

Looking to the future, as global efforts to combat climate change accelerate, and as urban areas continue to embrace smart solutions, footstep energy systems could become a valuable addition to the green technology landscape. Integration with IoT networks will allow these systems to offer dual benefits—producing energy and providing real-time data for use in transportation management, safety, and infrastructure maintenance.

In summary, while challenges still exist, the environmental and social benefits of this technology are undeniable. With further innovation, policy support, and community engagement, energy-harvesting floors may become a core feature of smart, sustainable cities—contributing not just to power generation, but also to a culture of energy awareness and responsibility.

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