American Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Innovation and Research (AJAMIR)

E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX • Website: www.ajamir.com • Email: editor@ajamir.com

Hybrid Nanofiller Interfaces in Low-Friction Engineering Materials

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Abstract

Low-friction engineering materials increasingly incorporate nanoscale solid lubricants and reinforcing phases to reduce friction, suppress wear, stabilize transfer films, and extend service life under dry or boundary-lubricated contact. However, tribological performance is not determined by nanofiller chemistry alone. The interfacial condition among nanofillers, matrix, counterface, and dynamically generated tribofilm strongly influences whether nanoscale additives act cooperatively or become agglomerated abrasive inclusions. This study develops an interface-centered framework for evaluating hybrid nanofiller systems containing complementary reinforcing and lubricating components such as graphene-related materials, carbon nanotubes, and molybdenum disulfide. Because authenticated tribometer measurements, microscopy, surface spectroscopy, and composite-processing records were not supplied, the quantitative component is explicitly simulation based.

A synthetic experimental matrix containing 84 composite conditions is modeled across total hybrid nanofiller loadings between 0 and 2.0 wt.% and three levels of interfacial quality. A Hybrid Nanofiller Interface Quality Index is constructed from dispersion uniformity, matrix–filler adhesion, filler–filler compatibility, agglomeration resistance, stress-transfer capability, and tribofilm continuity. Tribological response is evaluated using coefficient of friction, specific wear rate, friction stability, and transfer-film persistence. Simulated analysis indicates a non-monotonic filler-loading effect. Under strong interfacial conditions, the modeled coefficient of friction decreases from 0.44 for the unfilled reference material to 0.13 at approximately 1.0 wt.% total hybrid filler, after which friction increases as filler concentration promotes agglomeration and mechanically unstable debris.

Weak-interface systems produce considerably smaller improvements. The study argues that hybrid nanofiller development should therefore shift from maximizing filler content toward engineering the interfaces that control dispersion, load transfer, nanosheet alignment, debris evolution, and formation of a stable low-shear tribofilm.

Keywords: hybrid nanofillers, low-friction materials, tribology, nanocomposites, graphene, molybdenum disulfide, carbon nanotubes, tribofilm, interfacial engineering.

1. Introduction

Friction and wear remain major limitations in mechanical components operating under repeated sliding, oscillation, rolling–sliding, or boundary-lubrication conditions. Bearings, seals, gears, guide elements, bushings, coatings, aerospace mechanisms, transport systems, and high-performance industrial components all lose energy and material through contact-interface processes. Engineering polymers and polymer-matrix composites are attractive for many of these applications because of their low density, corrosion resistance, manufacturing flexibility, and inherent capacity for self-lubricating modification. Their unmodified forms, however, may show insufficient wear resistance, unstable friction, thermal softening, or poor transfer-film stability under demanding contact conditions. Nanofillers have consequently become important tools for modifying mechanical and tribological response. Reviews of CNT- and graphene-reinforced composites show that nanoscale carbon phases can improve strength, stiffness, thermal transport, coefficient-of-friction stability, and wear resistance when appropriately incorporated into the host matrix.

Single-filler systems rarely optimize every tribological requirement simultaneously. Graphene-related fillers provide high specific surface area, load-bearing capability, and easy interlayer shear, but their effectiveness can be restricted by restacking and poor dispersion. Molybdenum disulfide provides a layered solid-lubricant structure with weak interlayer interactions, yet its behavior can depend strongly on environment, surface condition, morphology, and dispersion. Carbon nanotubes can reinforce a matrix and influence transfer-film nanostructure but can themselves agglomerate when interfacial compatibility is weak. Hybridization attempts to combine these complementary mechanisms. Epoxy–graphene–MoS_2 composites, CNT/graphene-oxide/MoS_2 hybrids, carbon-fiber/MoS_2 systems, and other multicomponent composites have demonstrated that properly designed combinations can reduce friction and wear beyond the performance obtained from individual constituents.

The decisive issue, however, is increasingly recognized as the interface rather than the nominal presence of several nanofillers. A nanofiller can provide useful reinforcement only when stresses are transferred effectively between matrix and dispersed phase. A solid-lubricant nanosheet can reduce shear only when it reaches the sliding interface in a stable form rather than detaching as coarse debris. Hybrid particles must remain sufficiently compatible with each other to resist segregation while also interacting appropriately with the surrounding matrix. Studies of MWCNT–graphene oxide hybrids have shown that interface stability is critical to the tribological performance of filler-reinforced composites, while MoS_2-decorated carbon fibers have demonstrated how nanoscale surface decoration can simultaneously enhance interfacial adhesion and provide lubricating functionality.

A further reason for focusing on interfaces is the dynamic nature of tribological contact. The surface created after sliding begins is not identical to the originally manufactured composite surface. Fractured polymer fragments, exposed nanofillers, oxide products, transferred material, carbonaceous nanosheets, and lubricating compounds can reorganize into a tribofilm on the counterface or wear track. Research on polyimide–CNT composites has shown that tribological improvement can arise through formation of nanostructured transfer films containing carbon-derived species created during sliding. Related studies of MoS_2-containing systems demonstrate that low-shear tribofilms can stabilize friction and reduce deformation at the contact. Thus, interface engineering must consider both the static matrix–filler interface produced during composite manufacturing and the evolving tribological interface produced during operation.

This study develops an interface-centered methodological framework titled Hybrid Nanofiller Interfaces in Low-Friction Engineering Materials. It evaluates the proposition that an optimum hybrid filler content exists only when dispersion, matrix adhesion, filler compatibility, mechanical support, and tribofilm formation are jointly controlled. Rather than presenting synthetic numbers as experimental findings, the analysis explicitly models hypothetical material conditions and uses them to demonstrate how interface quality could modify the relationship between filler concentration and friction. The study introduces a Hybrid Nanofiller Interface Quality Index and links it with simulated coefficient of friction, wear rate, and transfer-film behavior. The resulting framework is intended for subsequent validation using experimentally fabricated nanocomposites and appropriately controlled tribological testing.

2. Objectives of the Study

2.1 To Develop an Interface-Centered Framework for Hybrid Nanofiller Tribology

The first objective is to establish a material-design framework that separates hybrid nanofiller concentration from hybrid interface quality. Many formulations are compared primarily by stating the mass fraction of graphene, CNTs, MoS_2, or another nanophase. Such comparisons are incomplete because identical nominal loadings can produce substantially different microstructures depending on dispersion route, surface chemistry, mixing sequence, functionalization, curing conditions, and filler morphology.

The proposed framework therefore evaluates the interface through dispersion uniformity, adhesion to the matrix, compatibility among filler phases, agglomeration resistance, stress-transfer capability, and ability to participate in a stable tribofilm. This approach permits tribological performance to be interpreted as an emergent result of microstructure rather than a direct function of filler percentage.

2.2 To Examine the Nonlinear Relationship Between Filler Loading and Low-Friction Performance

The second objective is to model the existence of an optimum hybrid-nanofiller concentration. At very low loading, insufficient nanofiller may reach or sustain the contact interface, limiting formation of a continuous low-shear tribofilm. As loading increases, reinforcement, thermal dissipation, debris refinement, and solid-lubricant availability can improve simultaneously.

Beyond an optimum concentration, additional filler may become counterproductive. Agglomeration can create local stiffness gradients, stress concentration, imperfect wetting, void formation, poorly bonded particles, and larger third-body debris. The study therefore evaluates filler loading as a nonlinear variable and tests how stronger interfacial engineering shifts the achievable friction minimum.

2.3 To Connect Interfacial Quality With Tribofilm Stability and Wear Control

The third objective is to move beyond coefficient of friction as the sole measure of tribological success. Extremely low friction has limited engineering value when achieved alongside unstable wear, delamination, or severe transfer-film breakdown. The framework therefore links interfacial quality with friction stability, wear rate, load transfer, and tribofilm persistence.

This approach is consistent with experimental literature in which hybrid nanofillers improve performance through simultaneous reinforcing and lubricating mechanisms. Functionalized rGO/MoS_2 systems, carbon-fiber/MoS_2 hybrids, and CNT-containing polyimides have demonstrated that the mechanical support supplied by one constituent and the low-shear response supplied by another can reinforce each other when microstructural compatibility is sufficient.

3. Review of Literature

3.1 Hybrid Carbonaceous and Layered Nanofillers for Friction Reduction

Graphene, graphene oxide, reduced graphene oxide, CNTs, and MoS_2 are among the most frequently investigated nanoscale components in tribological composites because they contribute different combinations of reinforcement and lubrication. Graphene-related structures possess high mechanical strength and lamellar morphology, while MoS_2 contains S–Mo–S layers capable of relatively easy interlayer shear. Carbon nanotubes offer high aspect ratio, mechanical reinforcement, and the potential to influence the structure of transfer films formed under sliding.

Hybridization attempts to exploit these complementary functions. A ternary CNT/graphene-oxide/MoS_2 hybrid incorporated into epoxy produced markedly lower friction and wear than corresponding single- and binary-filler composites, illustrating that multicomponent nanofillers can provide synergistic rather than merely additive behavior. Epoxy–graphene–MoS_2 composites have similarly shown extremely low reported coefficients of friction under selected dry-sliding conditions. A graphene/MoS_2 nanocomposite film has also demonstrated improved friction behavior relative to its individual constituents, supporting the proposition that heterostructure formation can modify nanoscale and macroscale shear response.

Hybrid performance nevertheless depends on the morphology and location of the constituent phases. MoS_2 deposited onto another reinforcement may reduce shear while the supporting phase limits collapse or removal of the lubricating layer. Reviews of nanofiller-reinforced polymer tribology describe this complementary mechanism as one reason hybrid carbon/MoS_2 systems can outperform individual fillers.

3.2 Matrix–Filler Adhesion, Dispersion, and Agglomeration

Nanofillers have large specific surface areas and correspondingly strong tendencies toward filler–filler interaction. When attractive interactions among particles exceed the compatibility of the nanofiller with the matrix, agglomerates can form during processing. These regions behave differently from a uniformly distributed nanoscale reinforcement. Rather than reinforcing the entire matrix, they can generate localized stiffness contrasts, weakly infiltrated volumes, particle pull-out, stress concentrations, and abrasive fragments.

Experimental work on MWCNT–graphene oxide hybrids in fabric/phenolic composites explicitly identifies interface stability between filler and polymer matrix as a critical factor controlling tribological response. Research using MoS_2 nanosheets deposited onto carbon fibers found that surface decoration improved interfacial adhesion with polyimide and supported more effective stress transfer while also contributing low-shear lubrication. These findings show that filler hybridization can be used not only to combine independent material properties but also to redesign the interface of an existing reinforcement.
Surface modification provides another strategy. Functionalized rGO/MoS_2-containing bismaleimide systems have demonstrated improvements in mechanical and tribological behavior attributed partly to better dispersion and stronger compatibility with the organic matrix. Similarly, POSS-containing

polyimide/MoS_2 systems illustrate how an organic–inorganic architecture can improve compatibility and support high-performance friction reduction. Interface chemistry should therefore be understood as an active tribological design variable rather than a passive manufacturing detail.

3.3 Tribofilm Formation and the Dynamic Sliding Interface

The contact surface of a tribological nanocomposite evolves continuously. During sliding, near-surface polymer undergoes mechanical deformation and thermal loading, fillers become exposed, fragments are released, counterface material may transfer, and chemical reactions can occur. The resulting tribofilm can become the actual load-bearing and shear-transmitting interface during steady-state operation.

Studies of CNT-containing polyimide composites provide strong evidence that tribofilm nanostructure can determine low-friction performance. Research has reported a nanostructured transfer film containing carbon nanospheres and graphene-like nanosheets generated through sliding-induced transformation of the composite. The resulting film contributed to low friction and improved load-carrying behavior. Work on MoS_2-containing polyimide likewise shows that MoS_2-rich tribofilms can reduce deformation and stabilize frictional response.

These findings suggest that hybrid nanofillers should be optimized according to how they behave after entering the contact, not merely according to bulk composite properties. A reinforcing phase may prevent deep plastic deformation, a layered nanofiller may lower shear stress, and a carbonaceous filler may stabilize the transfer film. The best tribological system is therefore likely to be one in which matrix adhesion is strong enough to support the material during load transfer but controlled release of nanoscale lubricating constituents occurs at the sliding surface.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Research Design and Synthetic Composite System

The study adopts a simulation-based materials-engineering design. No fabricated specimens, tribometer output, microscopy, spectroscopy, nanoindentation, thermal analysis, or surface-profilometry measurements were supplied. Accordingly, all quantitative values are hypothetical and are used only to demonstrate the proposed interfacial framework.

Four nominal replicate conditions are simulated for each nonzero formulation, creating a methodological dataset of 84 filled-composite observations.

Table 1: Experimental Variables for the Hybrid Nanofiller Interface Framework

Variable	Representative Measurement	Intended Interpretation	Expected Tribological Role
Nanofiller dispersion	SEM/TEM dispersion spacing and agglomerate fraction	Uniformity of nanofiller distribution	Reduces stress concentration and abrasive particle release
Matrix–filler	Fractography,	Strength of filler retention	Improves load

Variable	Representative Measurement	Intended Interpretation	Expected Tribological Role
adhesion	spectroscopy, interfacial pull-out evidence	within matrix	transfer and suppresses premature debonding
Filler–filler compatibility	Hybrid morphology and nanoscale contact continuity	Stability of graphene/MoS_2/CNT hybrid architecture	Supports synergistic rather than segregated behavior
Agglomeration resistance	Maximum agglomerate size and particle clustering	Ability to retain nanoscale functionality at higher loading	Prevents third-body abrasion and weak inclusions
Tribofilm continuity	Wear-track/counterface microscopy and spectroscopy	Persistence of low-shear transferred layer	Controls steady-state friction and wear
Interfacial thermal stability	Thermal analysis and contact-temperature response	Resistance to interface degradation under frictional heating	Supports friction stability under prolonged sliding

4.2 Hybrid Nanofiller Interface Quality Index

The index ranges from 0 to 1. Strong-interface systems are modeled with HNIQI values above 0.75, moderate systems between approximately 0.50 and 0.75, and weak systems below approximately 0.50.

The index is not intended to replace direct characterization. Its purpose is to prevent tribological performance from being discussed only in terms of filler percentage. In an empirical study, every index component should be calculated from independently reported measurements and subjected to uncertainty analysis.

4.3 Tribological Response Measures and Test Logic

An empirical study would use a standardized ball-on-disk or pin-on-disk configuration with constant counterface material, surface roughness, normal load, speed, sliding distance, temperature, and humidity. Because the present paper is simulation based, these factors are held conceptually constant so that the analytical emphasis remains on nanofiller loading and interface quality.

where $\sigma\mu$ is the standard deviation of friction during the steady-state interval and μ^{-} is the corresponding mean friction coefficient. Higher FSC indicates more stable sliding.

4.4 Simulation and Analytical Procedure

The simulated relationship between nanofiller concentration and friction is deliberately nonlinear. At low concentration, friction reduction is limited by incomplete coverage and insufficient tribofilmforming material. At intermediate concentration, reinforcement, nanosheet availability, thermal transport, and transfer-film continuity improve. At excessive concentration, agglomeration and poor wetting increase unless interface engineering is sufficiently strong.

The analysis does not attempt to reproduce the absolute friction coefficient of any single published composite. Published hybrid systems operate under different matrices, counterfaces, loads, speeds, environments, and test geometries. The synthetic values are instead chosen to demonstrate the behavior expected from the proposed theoretical framework.

5. Analysis

5.1 Effect of Hybrid Nanofiller Loading on Friction

The simulated reference matrix begins with a coefficient of friction of 0.44. Introducing 0.25 wt.% total hybrid nanofiller reduces friction under all three interface conditions, but the magnitude of improvement differs substantially. The strong-interface condition reaches a modeled coefficient of 0.30, compared with 0.39 under weak interfacial quality.

Between 0.50 and 1.00 wt.%, the difference becomes more pronounced. Strong interfacial quality allows the reinforcing and lubricating fillers to remain well distributed while increasing the probability that low-shear nanosheets and carbonaceous material participate in the contact interface. The simulated coefficient of friction decreases to 0.21 at 0.50 wt.%, 0.16 at 0.75 wt.%, and 0.13 at 1.00 wt.%.

After the modeled optimum, friction increases. At 2.00 wt.%, even the strong-interface composite reaches a friction coefficient of 0.23. The weak-interface system rises more severely to 0.40, approaching the unfilled material. This response represents agglomeration, third-body abrasion, unstable particle pull-out, and discontinuous tribofilm formation.

5.2 Comparative Tribological Performance

Table 2: Simulated Performance of Selected Hybrid Nanofiller Conditions

Composite Condition	Total Filler (wt.%)	Mean HNIQI	Coefficient of Friction	Specific Wear Rate ($\times 10^{-6}$ mm³/N·m)	Tribofilm Continuity
Unfilled reference	0.00	—	0.44	9.8	Low
Weak-interface hybrid	1.00	0.38	0.32	6.7	Fragmented
Moderate-interface hybrid	1.00	0.63	0.23	3.9	Moderately continuous
Strong-	1.00	0.86	0.13	1.8	Stable and

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E-ISSN: XXXX-XXXX ● Website: www.ajamir.com ● Email: editor@ajamir.com

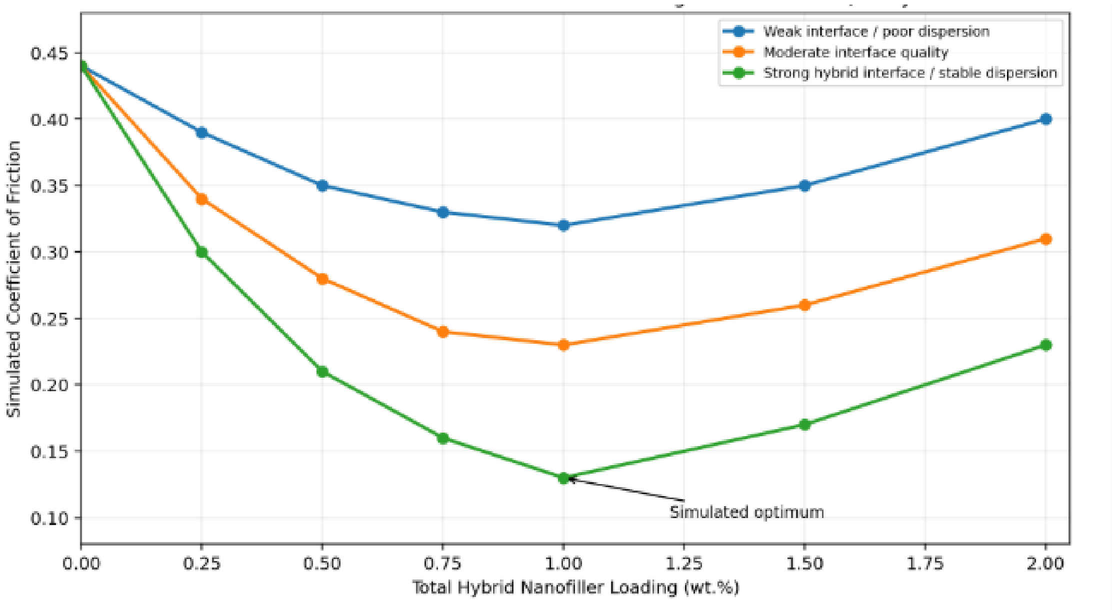
Composite Condition	Total Filler (wt.%)	Mean HNIQI	Coefficient of Friction	Specific Wear Rate (×10⁻⁶ mm³/N·m)	Tribofilm Continuity
interface hybrid					continuous
Strong interface / overfilled	2.00	0.78	0.23	3.4	Locally disrupted

Note: The numerical values are simulated and must not be interpreted as experimental measurements. The comparison demonstrates that nominal filler concentration alone cannot explain the modeled response. Three systems containing exactly 1.00 wt.% filler produce coefficients of friction ranging from 0.32 to 0.13 solely because the assumed interfacial state differs.

The overfilled strong-interface system also demonstrates that good compatibility cannot completely eliminate concentration effects. Once particle–particle interactions dominate the available matrix volume, even a comparatively strong interface can experience local clustering and unstable debris generation.

5.3 Interaction Between Interface Quality and Nanofiller Concentration

Graph 1: Simulated Interaction of Nanofiller Loading and Interface Quality



The graph shows three distinct friction-response trajectories. The strong-interface system exhibits the most pronounced reduction and reaches a modeled optimum near 1.0 wt.%, where the coefficient of friction falls to 0.13. Moderate interfacial quality produces an optimum of approximately 0.23, while the weak-interface condition reaches only about 0.32 before deterioration begins.

The results illustrate a core principle of hybrid nanocomposite tribology: a material can contain highly lubricating nanoscale constituents yet perform poorly when those constituents are not appropriately dispersed, anchored, or incorporated into a mechanically stable transfer film.

Key Finding: The simulated optimum is governed by the interaction of nanofiller loading and interfacial quality, not filler loading alone.

6. Discussion

6.1 Interfacial Engineering as the Basis of Hybrid Nanofiller Synergy

The principal implication of the analysis is that the term *hybrid nanofiller* should not be treated as evidence of synergy by itself. Combining two or three fillers produces a multicomponent material, but synergistic tribological behavior requires those components to interact in a way that reduces a limitation of the individual phases.

The published CNT/graphene-oxide/MoS_2 epoxy system provides a useful example because the ternary hybrid outperformed single- and binary-filler variants. Similarly, rGO/MoS_2/ZrO_2 hybrid particles in a bismaleimide matrix achieved strong friction and wear performance at relatively low filler content, with the authors attributing the result to synergy among the constituent phases. These results support a design philosophy in which hybrid architecture is chosen according to complementary mechanisms.

A reinforcing phase should therefore provide structural support to a lubricant phase rather than merely coexist with it. MoS_2-decorated carbon fibers illustrate this strategy particularly clearly: the carbon reinforcement supports mechanical load, while the nanoscale MoS_2 supplies lubrication and also modifies the interface with the polyimide matrix. Such architectures are more informative for future material design than formulations optimized solely by trial-and-error filler concentration.

6.2 Tribofilm Stability Explains Why More Filler Is Not Always Better

The second implication concerns the transition from bulk composite to sliding interface. Tribological performance depends on whether the contact develops a thin, coherent, low-shear layer capable of separating the bulk composite from the counterface. If the layer is continuously replenished at an appropriate rate, friction and wear may stabilize. If material release is too low, the film remains incomplete; if release is excessive, the contact contains unstable debris.

This mechanism explains the non-monotonic response modeled in the study. At low filler loading, there is insufficient nanoscale lubricant to generate a persistent tribofilm. At intermediate loading, the tribofilm becomes more continuous while the matrix retains sufficient integrity to support the load. At excessive loading, interfacial defects and particle clusters increase the probability of detachment.

Experimental polyimide–CNT work supports the importance of tribofilm nanostructure by showing that sliding-induced transformation of CNT-containing composite material can create carbon-rich nanostructures at the interface and substantially reduce friction and wear. MoS_2-containing systems similarly demonstrate that tribofilms can reduce frictional deformation and stabilize the interface.

The engineering objective should therefore be controlled tribofilm supply, not maximum particle release. This distinction can guide both filler functionalization and matrix selection.

6.3 Implications for Material Design and Experimental Validation

The third implication is methodological. Future studies should report considerably more interfacial information if hybrid nanocomposites are to become predictable engineering materials. Reporting only filler chemistry, loading, and coefficient of friction makes it difficult to understand whether a result can be reproduced in another processing route or matrix.

At minimum, experimental validation should combine electron microscopy for dispersion and wear-track morphology, spectroscopy for chemical characterization of transfer films, surface profilometry for wear-volume measurement, mechanical testing for reinforcement effects, thermal analysis for frictional-temperature stability, and statistical replication of tribometer results. Surface chemistry is particularly important where functionalization is used to improve matrix compatibility.

Experimental studies should also distinguish bulk dispersion from tribological dispersion. A composite may appear uniform before testing while selective filler migration or degradation produces a very different interface during sliding. Conversely, small initial agglomerates may become fragmented into useful nanoscale material during contact. Post-test analysis of wear track and counterface is therefore indispensable.

A final consideration is application specificity. Low-friction performance obtained in a room-temperature dry-sliding test may not persist under humidity, vacuum, elevated temperature, oil lubrication, high contact pressure, oscillating motion, or abrasive contamination. The purpose of interface engineering is not to identify a universally optimum hybrid formulation but to create predictable relationships between microstructure and operating environment.

7. Conclusion

Hybrid nanofillers provide a powerful route for producing low-friction engineering materials because different nanoscale constituents can perform complementary mechanical and lubricating functions. Graphene-related materials can provide reinforcement and lamellar shear, MoS_2 can support solid lubrication and transfer-film formation, and CNTs can reinforce the matrix while contributing to carbon-rich tribofilm structures. The present study shows, however, that these potential benefits should be interpreted through the interfaces connecting the nanofillers, matrix, wear surface, and counterface.

The proposed Hybrid Nanofiller Interface Quality Index evaluates dispersion, matrix adhesion, filler compatibility, agglomeration resistance, tribofilm continuity, and interfacial stability. The simulation demonstrates that identical filler concentrations can produce substantially different tribological responses when these interface characteristics change. At a modeled total hybrid filler loading of 1.00 wt.%, coefficient of friction ranges from 0.32 under weak interfacial conditions to 0.13 under a strongly integrated hybrid interface.

The analysis also identifies a non-monotonic filler-loading relationship. Increasing filler concentration initially improves tribological response because a larger quantity of reinforcing and solid-lubricant nanomaterial becomes available to support the matrix and form a low-shear contact layer. Beyond the optimum, additional filler increases agglomeration risk, interfacial discontinuities, particle pull-out, and unstable third-body debris. This explains why engineering optimization should focus on effective nanoscale utilization rather than maximum filler loading.

The principal limitation of the study is its simulation-based design. No claim is made that the modeled friction coefficients or wear rates represent a specific manufactured composite. Future experimental work should fabricate controlled hybrid systems across comparable loading levels and deliberately manipulate interface quality through functionalization, filler architecture, mixing sequence, and surface chemistry. Tribological measurements should then be correlated with quantitative dispersion analysis, interfacial characterization, wear-track spectroscopy, and transfer-film morphology. Such validation could determine whether an interface-quality metric can reliably predict friction minima, wear transitions, and tribofilm stability.

Hybrid nanofiller research will progress most effectively when the field moves from asking “Which nanoparticle should be added?” toward asking “Which interface architecture allows different nanofillers to reinforce, lubricate, and replenish the sliding contact cooperatively?” That transition would provide a stronger scientific basis for designing durable low-friction materials for bearings, coatings, sliding elements, aerospace mechanisms, transport systems, and other demanding engineering applications.

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