JETIR.ORG ISSN: 2349-5162 | ESTD Year : 2014 | Monthly Issue
JOURNAL OF EMERGING TECHNOLOGIES AND INNOVATIVE RESEARCH (JETIR)
An International Scholarly Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Comparative Analysis Of Electric Vehicles And Solar Panel Vehicles

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Abstract

The transportation sector contributes significantly to global greenhouse gas emissions, largely from internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles. Electric Vehicles (EVs) and Solar Panel Vehicles (SPVs) are emerging clean mobility solutions. This paper presents a comparative examination of EVs and SPVs focusing on energy efficiency, lifecycle environmental impact, economic feasibility, geographic suitability, and future technological prospects. EVs exhibit high energy-to-wheel efficiency (60–77%) and widespread commercial adoption, while SPVs offer energy self-sufficiency through photovoltaic (PV) integration but are limited by surface area and solar variability. The study reviews literature, datasets, prototype performance, global case studies, and technological trends. Findings indicate EVs are currently more practical and scalable, whereas SPVs are most effective as range-extenders or hybrid solutions in high-insolation regions. The future of sustainable mobility likely combines EV platforms with integrated solar technology and renewable-powered grids.

1. Introduction

The transport sector is a major contributor to global CO_2 emissions due to dependence on fossil fuels. Transitioning to cleaner mobility is essential to reduce climate change impacts, enhance energy security, and improve air quality. Electric Vehicles (EVs) have rapidly emerged as the most commercially viable alternative to ICE vehicles due to high well-to-wheel (WTW) efficiency and zero tailpipe emissions. Solar Panel Vehicles (SPVs), a newer innovation, aim to integrate photovoltaic (PV) panels directly onto vehicle surfaces to generate renewable energy autonomously.

The comparison between these technologies is essential because both follow different energy pathways: EVs are grid-dependent while SPVs rely on renewable generation at the vehicle level. A holistic comparative study examining efficiency, sustainability, and practical limitations helps determine their potential roles in future mobility systems.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Evolution of EVs and SPVs

EVs have matured significantly due to breakthroughs in lithium-ion batteries, falling manufacturing costs, and extensive global policy support. Modern EVs offer 300–600 km range and efficient drivetrain performance.

SPVs remain in early development stages. The concept is supported by experimental solar cars like World Solar Challenge entrants and emerging prototypes such as Lightyear 0, Aptera, and Sono Sion. Most SPV research treats solar as an auxiliary charging source, not the primary propulsion method.

2.2 Efficiency Metrics

Literature defines three core efficiency pathways:

- **Grid-to-Wheel (GTW) Efficiency – EVs:**
  Accounts for generation, transmission, charging losses, and motor efficiency. Typical range: **60–77%**.
- **PV-to-Wheel (PTW) Efficiency – SPVs:**
  Includes PV conversion, MPPT losses, battery storage, and drivetrain efficiency. Given limited area (3–5 m^2), PTW efficiency is constrained (~15–25%).
- **Specific Energy Use:**
  EVs typically consume **130–200 Wh/km**.
  SPVs generate **0.5–5 kWh/day**, yielding **5–60 km/day** solar range.

2.3 Environmental Considerations

Lifecycle Assessment (LCA) studies show EVs significantly reduce emissions compared to ICE vehicles, especially when powered by decarbonized grids. SPVs further reduce operational emissions due to self-generated renewable energy, resulting in faster carbon payback.

3. Datasets and Benchmarking

EV analysis benefits from standardized global datasets including NREL battery performance data, EPA/WTLP energy consumption databases, and Argonne GREET lifecycle models. Benchmarks capture charging losses, degradation (1–3% capacity loss/yr), and Wh/km consumption.

SPV data is limited and relies heavily on:

- Solar irradiance datasets (NREL NSRDB, NASA SSE)
- PV efficiency records (18–22% real-world module efficiency)
- Prototype solar vehicle trials

A unified benchmarking framework based on standardized driving cycles and normalized irradiance data is essential for future comparative studies.

4. Types and Sources of Bias

Comparative research is affected by multiple biases:

- **Selection Bias:** EVs have abundant data; SPVs have limited datasets.
- **Geographical Bias:** EV LCAs are often based on renewable-rich grids (e.g., Norway), while SPVs are studied in low-sunlight regions, underestimating their potential.
- **Technological Bias:** EVs use mature systems; SPVs use prototype data.
- **Measurement Bias:** Inconsistent metrics (peak solar output vs. standardized Wh/km).
- **Economic Bias:** EV affordability boosted by subsidies; SPVs appear costly due to lack of manufacturing scale.

Mitigation requires standardized metrics, diverse geographic sampling, and transparent reporting.

5. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

5.1 Energy Efficiency

EVs:
EVs convert grid electricity to motion with high efficiency. The drivetrain alone achieves **87–91% efficiency**, and regenerative braking recaptures energy. Efficiency is affected by grid carbon intensity—EVs charged on renewable grids deliver near-zero lifecycle emissions.

SPVs:
PV conversion efficiency (15–25%) limits the total solar energy available. Even under high insolation, daily solar range (20–60 km) is supplementary, not primary propulsion. SPVs excel in energy self-sufficiency, reducing grid dependence.

Conclusion:
EVs outperform SPVs in energy utilization; SPVs excel in decentralization and off-grid autonomy.

5.2 Range and Performance

- **EVs:** 300–600 km range; consistent performance across climates (with reductions in cold weather).
- **SPVs:** Limited by solar input; daily solar range varies widely by geography. Prototype SPVs achieve notable results only with extreme lightweight design.

EVs are practical for mass users; SPVs suit low-mileage users in sunny regions.

5.3 Charging Dependency and Grid Impact

EVs depend on grid infrastructure; mass adoption risks peak-load stress. SPVs reduce grid demand, especially when parked outdoors.

Hybrid EVs with solar roofs can reduce auxiliary consumption by 5–10% and extend range modestly.

5.4 Environmental Sustainability

- **EVs:** Zero tailpipe emissions but high battery manufacturing footprint.
- **SPVs:** Lower operational emissions due to solar integration; manufacturing PV panels has an environmental cost but lower than batteries.

Both require advancements in recycling and circular economy strategies.

5.5 Economic Feasibility

EV costs are falling due to mass production; TCO is favorable. SPVs remain expensive due to specialized manufacturing and limited production scale.

Future cost reductions in PV integration and lightweight materials may improve SPV viability.

6. Case Studies

6.1 Electric Vehicles

- **Tesla (USA):** Long-range EVs; global Supercharger network.
- **Nissan Leaf:** Affordable mid-range EV; global adoption.
- **China (BYD, NIO):** World's largest EV ecosystem; Shenzhen's fully electric bus fleet.
- **Norway:** 80% EV market share supported by renewable grids and strong incentives.

6.2 Solar Panel Vehicles

- **Lightyear 0:** Up to 70 km/day solar range; production halted due to cost.
- **Aptera:** Highly aerodynamic; up to 64 km/day solar range.
- **Sono Sion:** Promised 16 km/day solar charging; canceled due to funding.
- **Toyota Prius Solar Roof:** Modest 3–6 km/day solar contribution; practical hybrid use.

6.3 Hybrid Solar-EV Infrastructure

- Solar charging stations (India, UAE, USA)
- Vehicle-to-Grid (V2G) pilots (UK, Denmark, Japan)
- Solar-assisted EVs with auxiliary PV (Toyota, Hyundai)

7. Challenges and Limitations

7.1 Technological Limitations

EVs: battery degradation, thermal instability, long charging times, reliance on critical minerals.

SPVs: low PV efficiency, limited vehicle surface area, weather dependency, fragile and costly PV integration.

7.2 Infrastructure Limitations

EVs require extensive charging infrastructure and grid modernization.
SPVs lack specialized service networks and require advanced repair capabilities.

7.3 Economic Limitations

EVs still have higher upfront cost; SPVs are prohibitively expensive.
Grid upgrades and battery recycling add long-term costs.

7.4 Environmental Limitations

Both technologies shift environmental burdens to manufacturing.
Recycling infrastructure for batteries and solar panels remains underdeveloped.

8. Future Prospects and Innovations

8.1 EV Advancements

- Solid-state batteries (higher density, safer)
- Sodium-ion and lithium-sulfur batteries (lower environmental impact)
- Ultra-fast charging (<10 minutes)
- Vehicle-to-grid (V2G) integration enabling grid stability

8.2 SPV Innovations

- Perovskite and tandem solar cells (30–35% efficiency potential)
- Ultra-light, aerodynamic vehicle designs
- Integrated solar bodywork with higher durability
- AI-based solar tracking systems for optimal charging

8.3 Hybrid Future

The most realistic future solution is an EV with solar integration for:

- auxiliary loads
- idle charging when parked outdoors
- modest range extension
- reduced strain on the grid

A 100% renewable-powered charging ecosystem combined with solar assistance will yield the highest sustainability.

9. Conclusion

Electric Vehicles (EVs) currently represent the most practical, efficient, and scalable clean mobility solution. Their mature technology, expanding infrastructure, and improving economics make them dominant in the near term. Solar Panel Vehicles (SPVs), while promising in concept, face limitations in PV efficiency, surface area, cost, and weather dependency. However, SPVs offer unmatched advantages in energy autonomy and can play a significant role in sunny regions as range extenders.

The long-term sustainable mobility landscape will likely integrate both technologies: highly efficient EVs supported by renewable grids and enhanced with embedded solar modules for continuous auxiliary charging. Continued advancements in battery chemistry, PV technology, and grid decarbonization will be essential in determining the future balance between EVs and SPVs.

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