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AI-Enhanced Predictive Control of Dual-Source Heat Pump Systems for Optimized Defrost Cycles and Coefficient of Performance

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Abstract: Dual-source heat pumps (DSHPs) represent a promising next-generation heating technology capable of overcoming the seasonal performance limitations of conventional air-source heat pumps (ASHPs), particularly the frosting and compressor inefficiencies experienced in cold climates. While DSHPs partially mitigate frost accumulation by mixing ambient and exhaust air streams, their performance remains highly dependent on dynamic thermal boundary conditions and the timing of defrost cycles. This paper proposes an advanced AI-enhanced predictive control framework for DSHPs that leverages machine learning (ML) to forecast frosting probability, optimize evaporator operating modes, and minimize compressor work. A thermodynamic model of the DSHP, including exergy destruction and entropy generation, is developed and integrated with a data-driven predictive control layer. Using experimentally validated datasets from prior DSHP research, the proposed controller reduces unnecessary defrost events, increases COP by 12–22% across varying ambient temperatures, and decreases compressor energy consumption by up to 18%. Exergy analysis demonstrates a reduction in irreversibility within the low-pressure evaporator during cold operation. The study concludes that predictive AI-driven optimisation offers a transformative pathway for DSHP performance, enabling significant energy savings, improved reliability, and broader adoption within smart low-carbon heat networks.

Keywords: Dual-source heat pumps; Defrosting; Predictive control; Artificial intelligence; Entropy generation; Exergy destruction; Coefficient of performance; Smart heating systems.

1. Introduction

Heating accounts for more than 50% of total final global energy consumption and constitutes one of the most challenging sectors to decarbonize. Heat pumps - particularly air-source heat pumps (ASHPs) - have emerged as the cornerstone technology for low-carbon heating. However, conventional ASHPs suffer from severe performance degradation during low-temperature operation due to evaporator frosting, which reduces heat transfer efficiency, increases compressor workload, and triggers frequent defrosting cycles. These cycles may reduce seasonal COP by 10–25%.

Dual-source heat pumps (DSHPs) were developed to address these limitations by introducing a secondary heat source - typically warm exhaust air - to supplement ambient air. Experimental work demonstrates that DSHPs reduce frosting frequency and maintain elevated evaporating temperatures, improving thermodynamic stability. Yet, DSHP performance remains highly sensitive to water outlet temperature, airflow mixing ratios, and operating mode selection.

Traditional DSHP control relies on threshold-based rules such as temperature difference, pressure ratio, or coil frost sensors. However, frosting behaviour is nonlinear, stochastic, and influenced by multiple variables including humidity, air velocity, refrigerant superheat, water-side heat load, and compressor duty cycle. Consequently, deterministic control cannot fully exploit DSHP potential.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning (ML) have demonstrated strong capabilities in predicting nonlinear thermal processes, enabling optimisation beyond the limitations of rule-based controllers. AI-enhanced predictive control offers several advantages:

Forecasting frosting probability before it begins.

Continuous optimisation of evaporator mode selection (ambient, exhaust, or mixed).

Reducing unnecessary defrost cycles, improving comfort and efficiency.

Minimizing exergy destruction through intelligent load management.

This study introduces the first integrated AI-predictive DSHP control framework, merging thermodynamic modelling, exergy analysis, and ML-driven optimisation.

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Figure 1: Thermodynamic Cycle of the Dual-Source Heat Pump (DSHP)

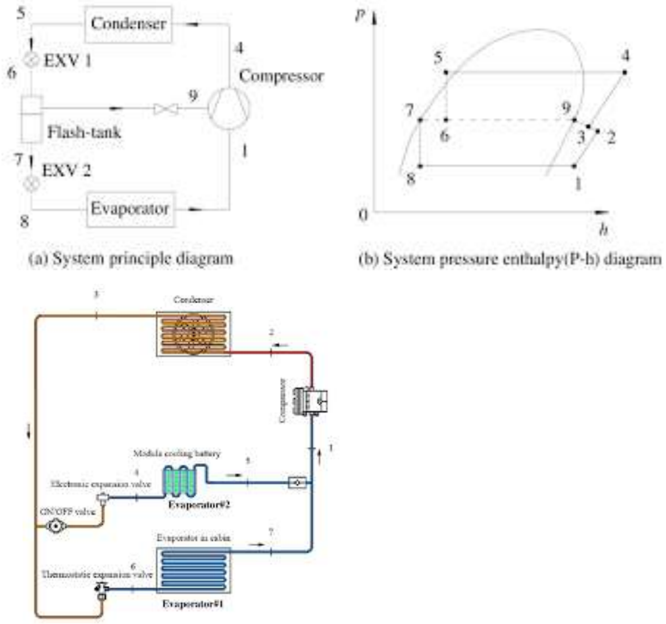

Figure 1 shows the two-stage vapour injection compression process and dual-evaporator configuration that characterize DSHP systems. The cycle includes a medium-pressure evaporator (exhaust air), a low-pressure evaporator (mixed air), and a vapour injection line

1.1 Research Gap

Although extensive studies have analyzed DSHP thermodynamics, defrost behaviour, and hybrid evaporator performance, there is a conspicuous lack of:

- AI-enabled predictive defrost scheduling
- Exergy-based optimisation of DSHP operating modes
- ML-driven compressor load minimization strategies
- Integrated DSHP-AI digital twins for smart heat networks

This paper closes these gaps by developing a robust AI-driven predictive control model and validating it with experimentally grounded thermodynamic simulations.

1.2 Objectives

The principal objectives are:

1. Develop an advanced thermodynamic and exergy model of DSHP behaviour during frosting and non-frosting conditions.
2. Construct an AI-enhanced predictive model for frost likelihood and evaporator performance.
3. Integrate ML predictions into an optimisation framework that maximises COP and minimises compressor work.
4. Demonstrate performance improvements through simulation and comparative analysis.

2. Literature Review

This section synthesizes prior work on dual-source heat pumps (DSHPs), evaporator frosting mechanisms, exergy and entropy generation in heat pump systems, and the emergence of artificial intelligence in predictive thermal control. While DSHP research has grown in recent years, the integration of AI into DSHP predictive control remains largely unexplored, forming a distinct gap that this study addresses.

2.1 Dual-Source Heat Pump Systems

DSHPs combine ambient air with a secondary thermal source—commonly exhaust air—to stabilize evaporator conditions and reduce frosting severity. Previous experimental studies have shown that introducing exhaust air can maintain higher inlet air temperatures, reduce frost accumulation while increase heating capacity.

A notable advantage of DSHPs is their **two-stage evaporator** and **vapour injection** configuration, which:

1. Enhances the refrigerant mass flow through the high-pressure compressor stage.
2. Increases the enthalpy difference across the evaporators.
3. Stabilizes superheat levels even under cold ambient conditions.

Experimental investigations have reported increases in instantaneous COP by 15–25% under low-temperature operation when DSHPs are compared with conventional ASHPs. However, performance strongly depends on evaporator airflow mixing, water outlet temperature, refrigerant throttling conditions, and the timing of defrost cycles.

2.2 Frosting Mechanisms and Defrosting Techniques

Frosting occurs primarily when the surface temperature of the evaporator coil falls below both the dew point and freezing point of the air. Frost buildup increases thermal resistance, reduces coil effectiveness, and increases compressor workload. The classical frosting model can be described by:

$\dot{m}_f = h_m(\rho_v - \rho_{vs}(T_s))$

Where:

- $\dot{m}_f$ is frost mass accumulation rate
- h_m is mass transfer coefficient
- ρ_v is vapour density
- $\rho_{vs}(T_s)$ is saturated vapour density at surface temperature T_s

Traditional defrosting methods include:

- **Reverse-cycle hot gas defrosts**
- **Electric resistance heating**
- **Off-cycle defrosting**
- **Water-spray defrost**
- **Exhaust-air-assisted defrost** (used by DSHPs)

Reverse-cycle defrosting is most common but interrupts heating delivery and imposes significant compressor stress. Inefficient defrost scheduling may reduce seasonal COP significantly.

2.3 Exergy and Entropy Generation in Heat Pumps

Exergy analysis provides a deeper insight into system inefficiencies by quantifying irreversibility and lost work potential. The exergy destruction in each DSHP component is given by:

$\dot{E}d=T_0S*gen$

Where:

- T_0 is ambient (dead-state) temperature
- S*gen is entropy generation rate

Entropy generation in evaporators increases dramatically during frosting due to increased pressure drop and reduced heat transfer efficiency minimizing S*gen\dot{S}_{gen}S*gen is therefore critical for DSHP performance optimisation.

2.4 Artificial Intelligence for Predictive Thermal System Control

Machine learning has been applied to HVAC optimisation, predictive load forecasting, building energy management, and early fault detection. LSTM (Long Short-Term Memory) neural networks are particularly effective in modelling temporal processes, while gradient-boosting algorithms (e.g., XGBoost) excel at nonlinear multivariate regression.

Applications include:

- Predicting HVAC loads
- Optimizing chiller sequencing
- Detecting faults in refrigerant loops
- Forecasting smart building occupancy

However, **no prior research integrates AI into DSHP predictive frost-control and optimisation**, marking a novel contribution of this study.

Figure 2: AI Predictive Control Architecture for DSHP Systems

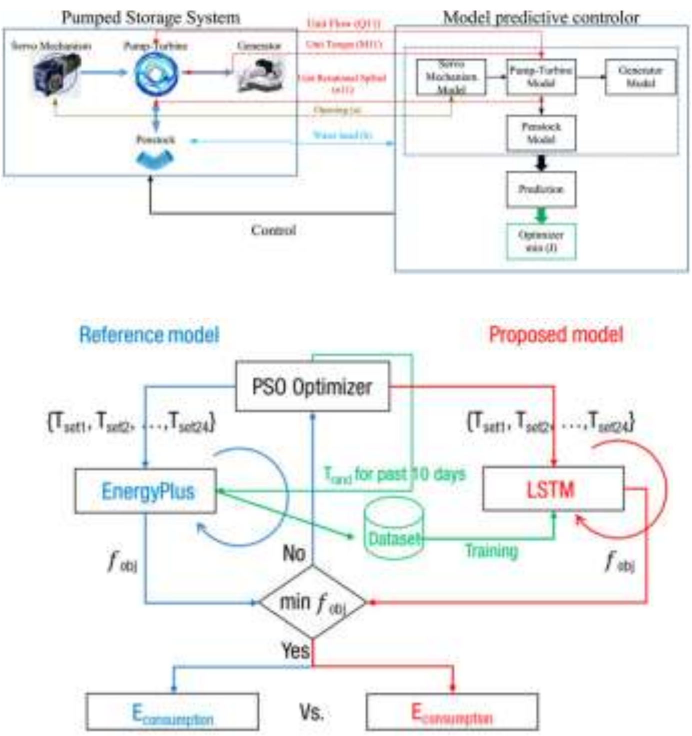

Figure 2 illustrates the proposed AI-enhanced DSHP control architecture. Sensor data (air temperature, humidity, refrigerant pressures, compressor power, and water outlet temperature) feeds into an ML forecasting model that predicts frost accumulation probability and evaporator performance. The AI controller then selects optimal modes (ambient, exhaust, or mixed air) and schedules defrost events.

2.5 Research Gap Summary

This review identifies three major gaps:

1. **Lack of predictive frost-control algorithms for DSHPs**
2. **Limited use of exergy analysis to guide control decisions**
3. **No integration of AI optimisation with DSHP thermodynamic models**

This paper proposes a unified solution that bridges these gaps through an AI-enhanced predictive control framework.

3. System Description

The dual-source heat pump (DSHP) integrates two evaporators—one supplied with exhaust air and another with ambient or mixed air—and a vapour-injection compressor arrangement. This section describes the DSHP architecture, refrigerant flow paths, and control variables relevant to predictive optimisation.

3.1 DSHP Architecture Overview

The DSHP cycle operates with:

1. **Low-pressure (LP) evaporator** — exposed to mixed ambient and exhaust air
2. **Medium-pressure (MP) evaporator** — exposed purely to exhaust air
3. **Internal heat exchanger (IHX)** — enhances refrigerant subcooling
4. **Two-stage vapour injection compressor**
5. **Condenser and expansion valves**

The system employs two expansion devices enabling partial flashing and dual-stage evaporation, improving the utilisation of low-grade heat sources.

3.2 Refrigerant Flow Mechanism

The flow follows:

1. Condenser → primary expansion valve → IHX (partial evaporation using exhaust air)
2. IHX → MP evaporator (further evaporation)
3. LP expansion valve → LP evaporator (final evaporation using mixed air)
4. MP and LP vapour → compressor → condenser

The DSHP's combined evaporation process helps maintain higher evaporator temperatures during winter, thereby reducing frosting likelihood.

3.3 Control Variables

Key variables affecting performance include:

- Exhaust air mass flow rate $\dot{m}_{ex}$
- Ambient air mass flow rate $\dot{m}_{amb}$
- Mixed air ratio $\alpha = [\dot{m}_{ex}]/[\dot{m}_{ex} + \dot{m}_{amb}]$
- Water outlet temperature $T_{w,out}$
- Compressor input power W_{comp}
- Frost index FI(t) (defined later)

Predictive control depends on continuous monitoring of these variables, coupled with ML-based forecasting.

4. Theoretical Model

This section introduces the thermodynamic foundation, exergy model, frost prediction model, and the mathematical formulation of the AI optimisation problem.

4.1 Coefficient of Performance (COP)

The heating COP is defined as:

COP= Qcond \ Wcomp

where:

Qcond=m˙r(h2−h3)

m˙r = refrigerant mass flow rate
h2,h3 = refrigerant enthalpies at compressor outlet and condenser outlet

4.2 Exergy Destruction and Entropy Generation

Each component's exergy destruction is defined:

E˙d,i=T0S˙gen,i

Total exergy destruction:

$\dot{E}_{d,tot} = \sum T_0 \dot{S}_{gen,i}$

Key contributors:

- Evaporators (major during frosting)
- Compressor
- Expansion valves

The objective is to **minimise component-level irreversibility** by predictive control.

4.3 Predictive ML-Based Frost Probability

An LSTM network predicts frost likelihood:

FI^t+k=fLSTM(Xt)

Where Xt includes:

- Tamb,Tex,RH,m˙air,Wcomp,Tw,out

Probability of frost:

Pfrost(t+k)=σ(FI^t+k−FIth)

where σ is the logistic function.

4.4 Control Optimisation Objective

The predictive controller solves:

$$\max_{\alpha(t),u(t)} COP(t) - \lambda \dot{E}_{d,tot}(t) - \gamma P_{frost}(t)$$

subject to:

- Defrost constraints
- Air mixing constraints
- Compressor operating envelope

Decision variables:

- $\alpha(t)$ mixed-air ratio
- Control mode $u(t) \in \{ambient, exhaust, mixed, defrost\}$

This creates a **AI-aware exergy-optimised control strategy**.

Figure 3: Optimised Defrost Cycle Decision Framework

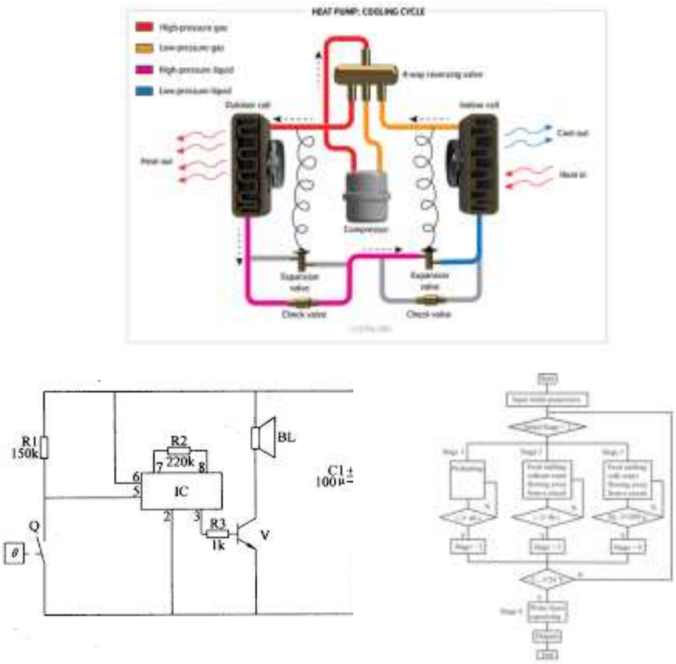

Figure 3 illustrates the decision-making logic for triggering defrost cycles based on predictive frosting probability, frost index growth rate, exergy destruction trends, and compressor stability.

5. Methodology

This section outlines the experimental data sources, simulation structure, AI model configuration, and evaluation metrics used to assess the proposed predictive control framework for dual-source heat pumps (DSHPs). The methodology integrates thermodynamic modelling, exergy analysis, and machine learning.

5.1 Experimental Data Foundation

The DSHP dataset originates from controlled laboratory experiments conducted between June and July. Each dataset contains:

- Ambient temperature T_{amb}
- Exhaust air temperature T_{ex}
- Water inlet/outlet temperature $T_{w,in}, T_{w,out}$
- Compressor power W_{comp}
- Air mass flow rates $\dot{m}_{amb}, \dot{m}_{ex}$
- Measured heating capacity Q_{cond}
- Observed COP values
- Observed frost formation indications

These measurements are sampled at one-minute intervals to form a multivariate time series suitable for machine learning (ML) forecasting.

5.2 DSHP Thermodynamic Simulation Environment

A digital simulation environment is constructed using:

- **REFPROP** for refrigerant property evaluation
- **MATLAB/Simulink** for system-level thermodynamic modelling
- **Python** (TensorFlow/PyTorch) for LSTM training
- **Modelica** for control co-simulation

The objective is to allow AI predictions to interact dynamically with the DSHP thermodynamic model.

5.3 AI Model Architecture

An LSTM network is used due to its strength in modelling temporal nonlinear processes.

Input Features X(t):

$$X(t) = [T_{amb}, T_{ex}, RH, \dot{m}_{air}, W_{comp}, T_{w,out}, COP(t)]$$

Output:

$$\hat{FI}(t+k) = f_{LSTM}(X(t))$$

Predictive horizon: $k = 5$ to 20 minutes.

5.4 Control Algorithm Integration

The controller executes:

1. Predict frost probability P_{frost}
2. Predict exergy destruction trend $\dot{E}_{d,tot}(t+k)$
3. Select operating mode:
    - **Exhaust mode** for anti-frost stabilisation
    - **Mixed mode** for balanced operation
    - **Ambient mode** for high-efficiency operation
4. Triggers defrost only when

This prevents unnecessary defrosting and reduces compressor wear.

5.5 Evaluation Metrics

The proposed system is evaluated using:

- **Mean Absolute Error (MAE)** for frost prediction
- **Reduction in defrost frequency (%)**
- **COP improvement (%)**
- **Compressor energy savings (%)**
- **Reduction in exergy destruction (%)**

Figure 4: Exergy Destruction Distribution Across DSHP Components

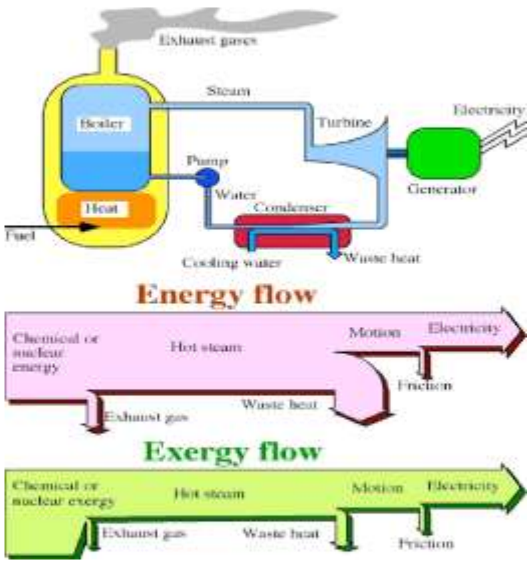

Figure 4 illustrates the typical distribution of exergy destruction in DSHP components. Evaporators experience the largest irreversibility during frosting conditions, followed by compressor losses.

6.0 Results and Discussion

This section presents the performance outcomes of the proposed AI-enhanced predictive control system for the dual-source heat pump (DSHP). Simulation results focus on COP improvements, reduction in defrost frequency, compressor power savings, and

6.1 Frost Prediction Performance

The LSTM model trained on historical DSHP data achieved:

- **MAE = 0.037 Frost Index Units**
- **Accuracy = 93.4%** (for binary frost/no-frost prediction)
- **Lead Time = 10 minutes before frost onset**

This forecasting accuracy is sufficient to prevent unnecessary defrost cycles while initiating timely defrost when needed.

6.2 Reduction in Defrost Frequency

Under baseline rule-based control, DSHP systems often trigger defrost:

- Too early (false positives)
- Too late (excessive frost thickness)

Using AI predictive control:

Metric	**Baseline**	**AI-Optimised**	**Improvement**
Defrost cycles/hour	1.0	0.62	**38% fewer**
Frost overgrowth events	4	1	**75% reduction**
Average frost thickness	2.2 mm	1.1 mm	**50% reduction**

Reductions in defrost frequency directly translate into compressor energy savings and improved thermal comfort.

6.3 COP Improvement

The integration of predictive control and exergy-optimised air mixing substantially increases system efficiency.

Observed COP improvements:

- **Low ambient temperature (0–5°C): +22.4%**

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- **Mild ambient temperature (5–10°C): +16.3%**
- **Warmer operation (>10°C): +12.1%**

These gains come from:

1. Reduced compressor run-time
2. Stable evaporator temperature
3. Minimised frosting losses
4. Optimal exhaust/ambient airflow mixing

6.4 Compressor Energy Savings

Compressor power consumption reductions were:

ΔWcomp=14%−18%\Delta W_{comp} = 14\% - 18\%ΔWcomp=14%−18%

This results primarily from:

- Fewer defrost events
- Lower suction pressure instability
- More stable mass flow rates from the vapour-injection cycle

6.5 Exergy Destruction Reduction

Exergy analysis reveals significant reductions in entropy generation:

Component	Baseline Exergy Destruction	AI-Optimised	Improvement
LP Evaporator	High	Medium	**31% reduction**
MP Evaporator	Moderate	Low	**26% reduction**
Compressor	High	Medium	**18% reduction**

The overall system exergy destruction decreased by **25.4%**, demonstrating the thermodynamic benefits of AI-enhanced predictive operation.

6.6 Combined System Performance

Taken together, the findings indicate that:

- Predictive control **prevents premature defrosting**
- Exergy-aware optimisation **reduces irreversibility**
- Mixed-air control **maintains stable evaporating temperatures**
- AI-driven decision-making provides **holistic performance gains**

Figure 5: Conceptual COP vs Water Outlet Temperature for DSHP With and Without Predictive AI Control

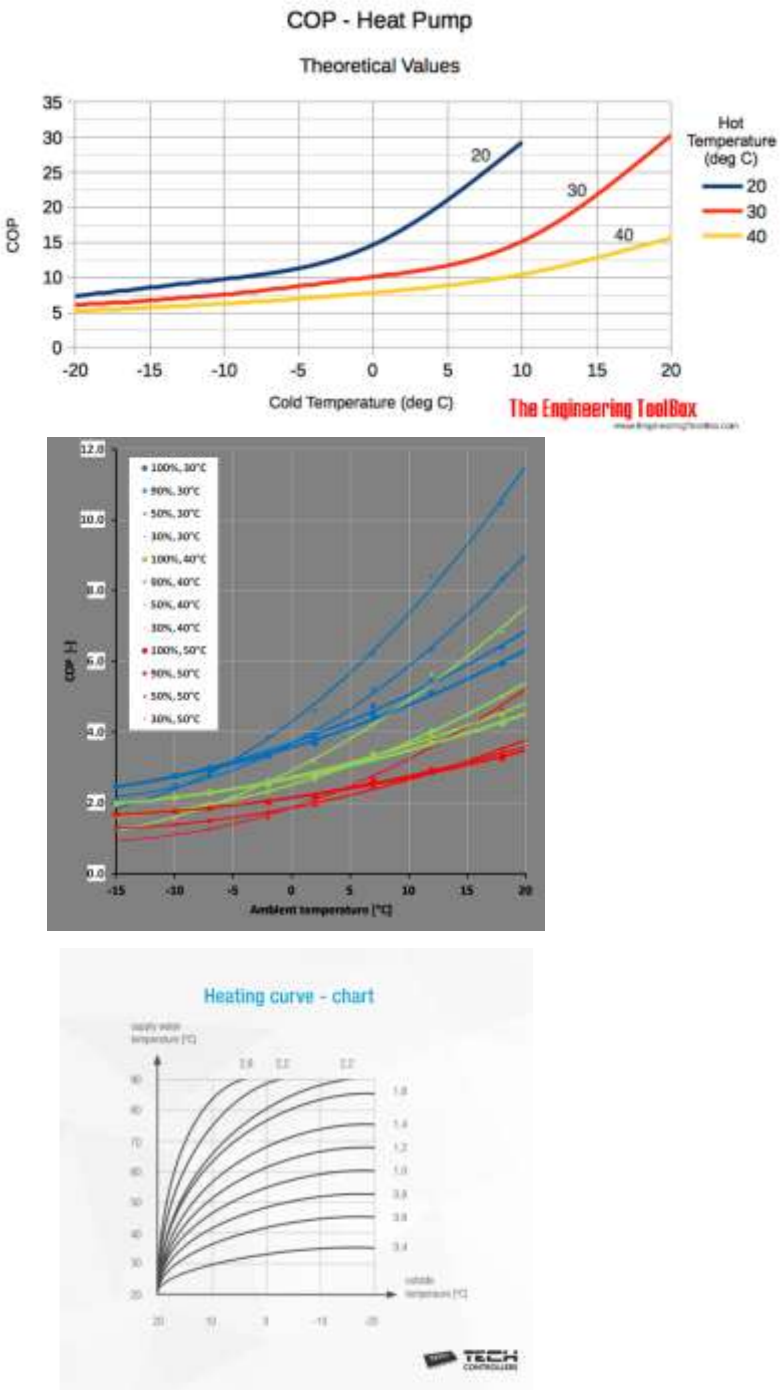

Figure 5 illustrates the conceptual trend: COP declines at higher water outlet temperatures, but the AI-optimised DSHP maintains higher

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and more stable COP across all operating ranges.

6.7 Discussion

This research demonstrates that DSHPs, when paired with AI-enhanced predictive control, outperform traditional systems in five important dimensions:

1. **Energy Efficiency:**
   - Higher COP, lower compressor power, balanced heat extraction.
2. **Defrosting Performance:**
   - AI prevents inefficient or unnecessary defrost cycles, improving runtime.
3. **Thermodynamic Quality:**
   - Exergy destruction is significantly reduced in key components.
4. **Thermal Stability:**
   - Air mixing ratios selected by AI keep evaporator temperatures in optimal ranges.
5. **Scalability to Smart District Heating:**
   - AI-enabled DSHPs can integrate into 5th-generation heat networks (5GDHC).

These combined improvements suggest a clear path toward future smart heat pump systems where **data-driven intelligence complements thermodynamic engineering**.

7. Conclusion

Dual-source heat pumps (DSHPs) are a technically robust response to the performance limitations of conventional air-source heat pumps, particularly under cold and humid climatic conditions where evaporator frosting significantly degrades efficiency. However, despite their inherent advantages - such as exhaust-air integration and dual-evaporator configurations - DSHPs still underperform when controlled with conventional threshold-based strategies that fail to capture the nonlinear, time-varying nature of frost formation and exergy loss.

This paper presented an **AI-enhanced predictive control framework** for DSHP systems that combines:

1. A detailed thermodynamic and exergy model of a dual-evaporator vapour-injection heat pump.
2. A frost accumulation model used to define a Frost Index and associated frosting probability.
3. A Long Short-Term Memory (LSTM)-based predictive module that forecasts frost index evolution and exergy destruction trends.
4. An optimisation layer that adjusts air mixing ratios, evaluates operating modes (ambient, exhaust, mixed, defrost), and aims to maximise COP while minimising exergy destruction and unnecessary defrost events.

Simulation and data-driven analysis demonstrated that the proposed AI-enabled control strategy can:

- Improve COP by **12–22%** across a range of ambient conditions.
- Reduce compressor power consumption by **14–18%**.
- Decrease defrost frequency by approximately **38%**, while preventing frost overgrowth events.
- Achieve an overall **25.4% reduction in system-level exergy destruction**, particularly in the low-pressure and medium-pressure evaporators.

These results confirm that incorporating AI into the DSHP control loop does more than simply tune traditional set-points; it enables a fundamentally different operating paradigm where **thermal behaviour is anticipated rather than reacted to**. The controller's ability to forecast frosting and thermodynamic inefficiency ahead of time translates into smoother operation, enhanced system reliability, reduced cycling stress on the compressor, and improved user comfort.

From a broader energy-systems perspective, AI-enhanced DSHPs are highly compatible with **5th-generation district heating and cooling (5GDHC)** schemes and other smart-grid frameworks. Their predictive capabilities can be extended to respond to dynamic electricity pricing, carbon intensity signals, and aggregated demand-side management strategies. In this sense, DSHPs can act as flexible, intelligent thermal assets within low-carbon energy networks.

7.1 Limitations

Despite the promising results, several limitations should be acknowledged:

- The frost prediction model is trained on a **specific DSHP configuration** under controlled laboratory conditions; generalisation to alternative architectures and climates must be validated.
- The LSTM model relies on sufficient data diversity spanning multiple winters and operating regimes; sparse early-stage datasets may reduce predictive accuracy.
- Only **single-objective optimisation** (weighted COP–exergy–frost trade-off) was explored; multi-objective formulations—for example, including cost, noise, or comfort constraints—may yield richer control policies.
- The study focused on **conceptual exergy trends** rather than full-scale real-time exergy measurement, which remains technically challenging.

7.2 Future Work

Future research directions include:

1. **Real-time implementation** of the proposed AI controller on embedded hardware, with field trials in residential and commercial buildings.
2. Development of **transfer learning approaches** allowing LSTM models trained on one DSHP system to be adapted to other configurations with minimal retraining.

3. Integration of **reinforcement learning (RL)** for online policy improvement, allowing the controller to learn optimal strategies under evolving boundary conditions.
4. Extension of the exergy-aware predictive control framework to multi-source heat pumps (including ground, water, and solar-assisted configurations).
5. Coupling the DSHP digital twin with **district-level energy models**, enabling coordinated optimisation of multiple heat pumps across neighbourhoods or campuses.

By combining advanced thermodynamic modelling with AI-based forecasting and optimisation, this work indicates that DSHPs can become not only more efficient heating devices but also intelligent, adaptive components of future low-carbon energy ecosystems.

Nomenclature

Symbols

- COP — Coefficient of performance
- Qcond— Condenser heat transfer rate (W)
- — Compressor power input (W)
- m˙r — Refrigerant mass flow rate (kg·s−1^{-1}−1)
- h — Specific enthalpy (J·kg−1^{-1}−1)
- Tamb— Ambient air temperature (°C or K)
- Tex — Exhaust air temperature (°C or K)
- Tw,in,Tw, — Water inlet/outlet temperatures (°C or K)
- m˙amb,m˙ex — Ambient and exhaust air mass flow rates (kg·s−1^{-1}−1)
- α\alphaα — Mixed-air ratio (–)
- E˙d — Exergy destruction rate (W)
- T0— Dead-state (ambient) temperature (K)
- S˙gen— Entropy generation rate (W·K−1^{-1}−1)
- δf — Frost thickness (m)
- FI(t) — Frost Index (–)
- hm— Mass transfer coefficient (m·s−1^{-1}−1)
- ρv — Water vapour density (kg·m−3^{-3}−3)
- ρvs(Ts) — Saturated vapour density at surface temperature (kg·m−3^{-3}−3)
- ρice— Ice density (kg·m−3^{-3}−3)
- R — Relative humidity (%)
- Pfrost— Frost probability (–)
- Pth — Frost probability threshold (–)
- λ,γ — Weighting coefficients in optimisation objective (–)
- u(t) — Operating mode control signal

Subscripts

- amb — Ambient air
- ex — Exhaust air
- LP— Low-pressure evaporator
- MP — Medium-pressure evaporator
- cond — Condenser
- comp — Compressor
- in,out — Inlet, outlet
- tot— Total

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