

Identification of principal factors for low-carbon electric vehicle batteries by using a life cycle assessment model-based sensitivity analysis

Sung-Hoon Kim, Sang-Ho Park, Seong-Rin Lim^{*}

Department of Environmental Engineering, College of Engineering, Kangwon National University, Chuncheon, Gangwon 24341, South Korea

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ABSTRACT

The electric vehicle battery industry has gone to great lengths to reduce the carbon footprint of batteries, so that they can contribute more to mitigating climate change. Previous life cycle assessment (LCA)-based studies have addressed that fossil-derived electricity and energy should be reduced in battery materials-related processes to develop low-carbon batteries; however, they have not examined the effect of battery performance on the carbon footprint. Thus, this study identifies the most principal factors to be focused on to develop low-carbon batteries based on an LCA model formulating the effect of battery performance and on a sensitivity analysis using the Monte Carlo simulation. By contrast to previous studies, the results of this study show that battery performance metrics (i.e., the number of cycles for charge and discharge, energy capacity, energy efficiency) are more principal factors than the electricity and energy consumption in battery production processes, because these performances lead to comprehensive reductions in the materials and energy used for the life cycle of battery. Therefore, this study can contribute to providing valuable information necessary for battery manufacturers to develop low-carbon batteries.

Introduction

Since climate change is a crucial threat to human society and ecosystems, electric vehicles are globally disseminated to displace internal combustion engine (ICE) vehicles and reduce CO₂ emissions in the transportation sector [1,2]. Electric vehicles have less carbon footprint than ICE vehicles due to the high efficiency of overall energy conversion for well-to-wheel vehicle life cycle [3–6]. Since many countries have been recently establishing various policies (for instance, carbon border adjustment mechanism (CBAM) in European Union [7] to globally direct manufacturers to produce low-carbon products, electric vehicle industry needs to reduce the carbon footprint of automotive electric batteries [1] and subsequently would drive battery industry to reduce CO₂ emissions from the production of battery materials such as cathode, anode, housing, and conductors [8], in order to comply with the EU battery regulation [9] and the US Inflation Reduction Act (IRA) [10] and furthermore to proactively prepare for new policies related with CO₂ reduction.

To help develop low-carbon batteries, previous life cycle assessment (LCA)-based studies have showed what processes and materials need to be improved with priority to effectively reduce the battery-associated

CO₂ emissions. The common findings from the studies were that the most significant contributors to CO₂ emissions were fossil-derived energy consumptions in the mining, refining, and materials production stages and that, subsequently, energy should be displaced by renewable energy in the materials-related processes [11–14]. Specifically, carbon-intensive materials were found to be nickel and cobalt for cathode active material, graphite for anode active material, and wrought aluminum for battery housing [15–19]. Carbon-intensive processes were found to be calcination for cathode material production and drying for battery cell production [3]. Also, the recycling of end-of-life batteries has been shown to contribute to reducing energy consumption and CO₂ emissions by avoiding the mining and refining of fresh ores [20–24]. However, these previous studies have not examined whether and how much the carbon footprint of batteries is affected by battery performances such as the number of the cycles for charge and discharge, energy capacity for electricity storage, and energy efficiencies for electricity charging and storage. Also, the effect of battery performances cannot be examined by using the European Commission's Product Environmental Footprint Category Rules (PEFCR) for rechargeable batteries [25], because these rules were inherently designed to quantitatively evaluate the footprints of products.

^{*} Corresponding author.

E-mail address: srlim@kangwon.ac.kr (S.-R. Lim).

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Battery performances should be taken into account in LCA to comprehensively examine how to reduce CO₂ emissions associated with batteries because the reference flow used to account for the functional unit is affected by battery performances. Since the functional unit is defined as a unit quantity of the energy delivered to the powertrain of an electric vehicle in the use stage, the quantity of the reference flow (for instance, battery weight required to supply the functional unit) would be decreased if battery performances are improved to extend the lifetime of the battery. This implies that a decrease in battery weight can lead to a reduction in CO₂ emissions associated with materials production and battery manufacturing (i.e., mining, refining, and processing for the materials of battery constituents, and battery manufacturing for cell, module, and pack) in the cradle-to-gate system boundary [26]. As other examples, in case the number of battery cycles is increased or battery energy capacity for electricity storage is increased, the reference flow (i.e., battery weight) for the functional unit is decreased because of an increase in the total amount of the energy delivered to electric vehicle during the lifetime of the battery. Thus, the effect of battery performances on CO₂ emissions indirectly associated with the production and use stages should be examined to determine whether battery performances are more significant contributors to CO₂ emissions than energy consumptions in the cradle-to-gate system boundary, which have been identified as the most significant contributor to CO₂ emissions by the previous studies that have not taken into account the effect of battery performances.

Thus, the objective of this study is to identify the most principal factors to be improved with priority to effectively reduce CO₂ emissions associated with automotive electric batteries based on an LCA model-based sensitivity analysis by taking into account the effect of battery performances on CO₂ emissions in the cradle-to-gate system boundary including battery recycling stage. An LCA is first conducted and then the sensitivity analysis is performed based on an LCA model developed by modifying Argonne National Laboratory's Greenhouse gases, Regulated Emissions, and Energy use in Technologies (GREET) model [27] in order to focus on the life cycle of battery rather than for electric vehicle. The feature of the modified model is to formulate the effect of battery performances on the reference flow for the LCA. The LCA results are analyzed to identify principal contributors to CO₂ emissions associated with the battery. As another approach to finding out the principal contributors, a sensitivity analysis is conducted to figure out what materials- and energy-related factors significantly affect CO₂ emissions. The respective principal contributors from the two approaches are compared with each other to see whether they are identical and whether the best solution for low-carbon battery production is to reduce fossil-derived electricity and energy consumed in the life cycle as addressed in the previous LCA studies. This study can provide automotive battery manufacturers with valuable information on what factors should be targeted and improved technologically to effectively reduce the carbon footprint of electric vehicle batteries.

Methods

Life cycle CO₂ assessment

An LCA was carried out to evaluate CO₂ emissions in the cradle-to-gate system boundary of an NMC622-based lithium-ion battery by taking into account the supply chains of the batteries produced in South Korea. The NMC622 battery was selected for this study because this type of batteries currently has the highest market shares for electric vehicle industry, as presented in Table S1 in the Supplementary Material. The energy capacity of the battery was set at 75.4 kWh, which represents the average capacity of the batteries installed in the electric vehicles currently selling in the market of South Korea. Table 1 shows the principal specifications related with the performance of the electric vehicle battery selected for the LCA study. The LCA procedure was in accordance with the ISO 14040 series of standards [28].

Table 1

Principal specifications related with the performance of the electric vehicle battery selected for this study.

Specifications	Quality or Quantity
Type of Battery Cathode	NMC622
Battery Cycle for Charge and Discharge (cycles)	1000
Battery Weight (kg)	457
Battery Energy Capacity (kWh)	75.4
Energy Efficiency of Electricity Storage (%)	96.0
Energy Efficiency of Electricity Charging (%)	95.0

Goal and system definition

The goal of this LCA was set to be the same as the objective of this study. The functional unit and reference flow were defined based on the European Commission's PEFCE for high specific energy rechargeable batteries for mobile applications [25] because a PEFCE for electric vehicle batteries is not currently available but similar with that for mobile applications due to the same function of the two types of batteries. In this study the function of the battery is to supply electrical current to electric vehicles at a desired voltage, and thus the functional unit was defined as 1 kWh of the energy delivered to the powertrain of the vehicle during the lifetime of the battery, expressed in 1 kWh D. The reference flow was defined as the mass (in kg) of the battery needed to supply 1 kWh D (i.e., the functional unit) to the vehicle because reference flow is the amount of a product required to fulfill the functional unit [29,30]. Thus, the reference flow was calculated as follows:

$$RF = \frac{M_B}{MC_E N_C F_{EEC}} \quad (1)$$

where RF is a reference flow (kg/kWh); M_B is a mass of the battery (kg); MC_E is a maximum energy storage capacity of the battery per cycle (kWh); N_C is a number of the cycles during the battery lifetime; and F_{EEC} is a fraction of the energy capacity that is effectively used on average during battery lifetime. Eq. (1) was integrated into the GREET model to investigate into the effect of battery performances (i.e., energy capacity, the number of total cycles, and the effective fraction of the battery energy capacity) on CO₂ emissions from the battery. It should be noted that this modification of the existing GREET model enables this study to be differentiated from the previous studies that could not take into account the effect of battery performances, even though they have conducted sensitivity analysis in their LCAs.

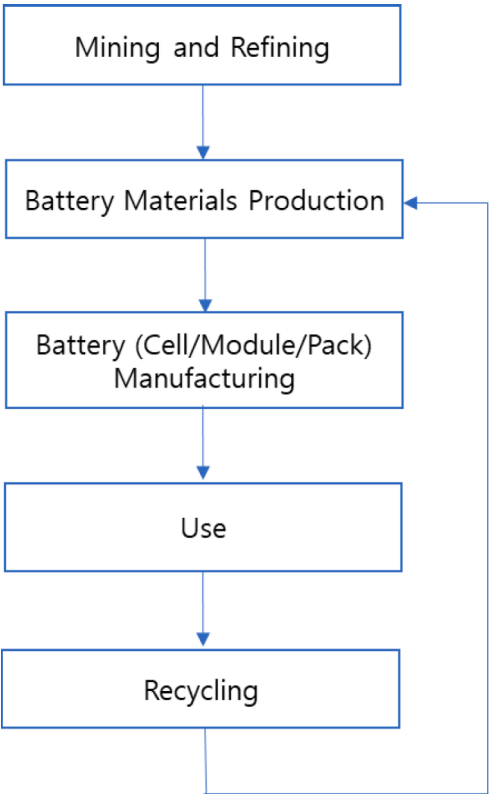
The system boundary (Fig. 1(a)) was defined by including the upstream and downstream of the battery product from the cradle-to-gate perspective: mining and refining, materials production, battery manufacturing for cell, module, and pack, use, and inorganic acid leaching-based closed-loop recycling. Fig. 1(b) shows the battery materials taken into account in the materials production and battery manufacturing stages: more details are presented in Fig. S2 in the Supplementary Material. To reflect the supply chains of the batteries produced in South Korea, the cathode materials were assumed to be imported by China, and the anode material and aluminum were assumed to be produced in South Korea, even though some fraction of these materials are supplied from other countries. Also, the battery cell, module, and pack were assumed to be manufactured in South Korea.

For the battery use stage, the GREET model was additionally modified to take into account the energy efficiencies related with the energy loss incurred during electricity charging and storage, because the model does not include CO₂ emissions from these energy losses. The energy efficiencies for charging and storage were set at 96 % and 95 %, respectively [25].

Life cycle inventory

The bill of material (BOM) for the reference flow was obtained by using the material compositions from Argonne National Laboratory's Battery Performance and Cost (BatPaC) model [31] and the average

(a)



(b)

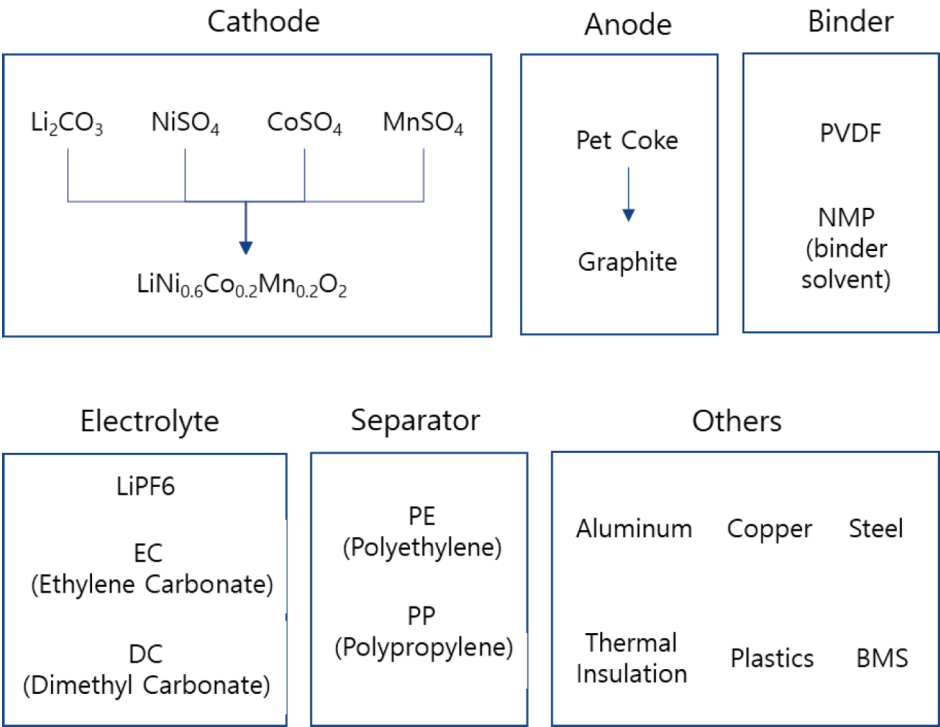


Fig. 1. System boundary of the life cycle assessment: (a) cradle-to-cradle life cycle stages; and (b) battery materials taken into account in the materials production and battery manufacturing stages. More details are presented in Fig. S2 in Supplementary Materials.

energy density (0.165 kWh/kg) from the GREET model. The data for energy and electricity mix in the respective countries for the supply chain were from the United States' Energy Information Administration (EIA) [32]. The statistics data for international trade were used to reflect the real situations of material flows in the supply chains of the batteries produced in South Korea. The inventory data for the principal contributors to CO₂ emissions are presented in Tables S2 to S5 in the Supplementary Material.

Life cycle impact assessment

The CO₂ emissions associated with the materials and processes in the life cycle of the battery were evaluated by using the modified GREET model. The amounts of greenhouse gases (i.e., CO₂, N₂O, and CH₄) were aggregated in CO₂-equivalent by using the global warming potentials with a time horizon of 100 years (GWP100) presented in the Sixth Assessment Report (AR6) of Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) [33]: the GWPs of N₂O and CH₄ are 29.8 and 273, respectively. All the CO₂ emissions in the life cycle were summed to calculate the amount of the CO₂ emissions incurred to fulfill the functional unit of the battery.

Life cycle interpretation

Based on the life cycle impact assessment results, the principal contributors to the CO₂ emissions of the battery were identified. Also, the input data affecting the principal contributors were reviewed and updated to improve the representativeness, temporal and spatial appropriateness, and completeness of the data and thus increase the confidence of the LCA results.

Sensitivity analysis

A Monte-Carlo simulation was performed to identify what factors (for instance, materials, processes, and battery performances) sensitively affect the CO₂ emissions of the battery. The simulation was applied to the LCA model developed in this study by modifying the GREET model. The input data were assumed to be normally distributed because the type of data distribution could not be examined and identified due to insufficient data availability (note that this assumption was unavoidable, even though the type of the distribution of actual data could affect sensitivity analysis). The mean and standard deviation of the normal distribution function were assumed to be the value of the input data and 10 % of that mean, respectively. The simulation was performed in 100,000 trials by using the Crystal Ball software [34]. The sensitivity analysis results were analyzed to identify principal contributors to the CO₂ emissions of the battery, which were compared to the principal contributors identified based on the LCA results. To verify the sensitivity analysis results, this study quantified how much the 10 % changes of the principal contributors affect the changes in the CO₂ emissions of the battery on the basis of the functional unit.

Results and discussion

Life cycle assessment results

The CO₂ emissions for the functional unit were significantly incurred from the mining and refining stage, as shown in Fig. 2. This result was identical with the previous studies because the mining and refining stage consumes a significant amount of electricity, natural gas, and coal (see Fig. 3); specifically, the aluminum production accounted for the highest CO₂ emissions due to the high consumptions of electricity. In the cradle-to-gate system boundary the materials-related stages (i.e., mining/refining and battery materials production) had higher CO₂ emissions than the battery manufacturing stage. For instance, cathode material processing as a single process had the second highest CO₂ emissions. However, these LCA results did not show the effect of battery performance on CO₂ emissions as not in the previous studies and the European

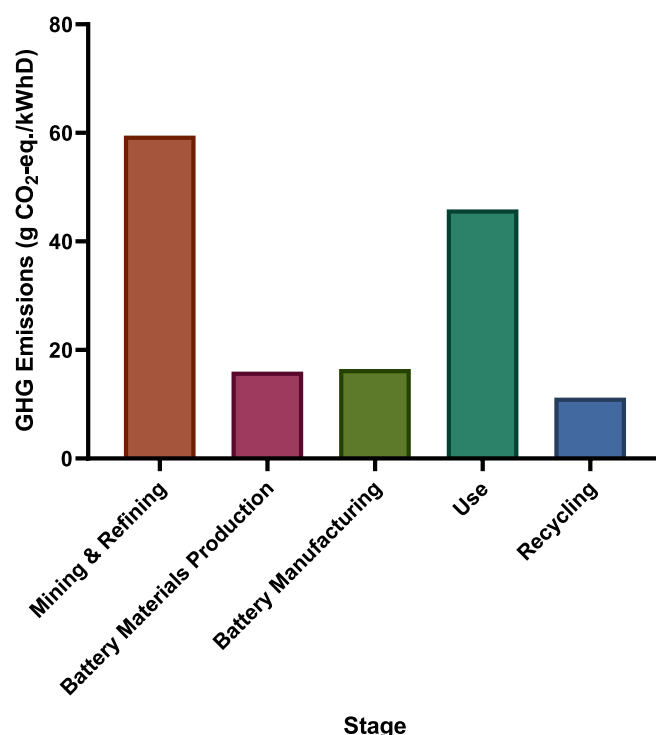


Fig. 2. CO₂ emissions from the respective life cycle stages of the battery on a basis of the functional unit.

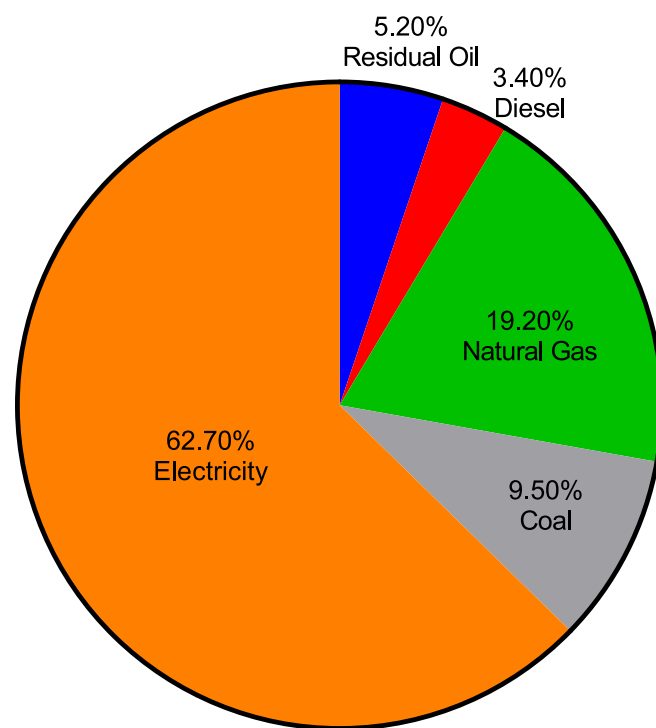


Fig. 3. Shares of the energy used in the stages of mining, refining, materials processing, and battery manufacturing.

Commission's PEFCR.

The battery use stage exhibited the second highest and more significant CO₂ emissions than the battery manufacturing and recycling stages (see Fig. 2). The CO₂ emissions in the use stage were incurred from the energy loss related with the energy efficiencies for electricity storage

and charging. This was interesting because the use stage was not taken into account in most of the previous LCA studies, which have focused on the cradle-to-gate system boundary to reduce the CO₂ emitted in the upstream supply chains of battery products. Even in case the use stage was taken into account in the LCA, the CO₂ emissions from the energy loss have been neglected because the electricity loss was small compared to the electricity used to operate the electric vehicle during a long lifetime of the battery. This study clearly showed that the energy efficiencies of batteries should be improved to develop low-carbon batteries.

The battery manufacturing stage exhibited the third highest CO₂ emissions, and the recycling stage exhibited the lowest CO₂ emissions (see Fig. 2). For the manufacturing stage, CO₂ emissions were incurred primarily from cell production process due to the high consumption of energy in drying process. CO₂ emissions from the recycling stage were significantly less than for the mining and refining stage. Thus, closed-loop materials recycling systems need to be established to significantly reduce the carbon footprint of battery products.

Sensitivity analysis results

Different from the LCA results, the sensitivity analysis results (Fig. 4) showed that all of the top 5 principal contributors to the CO₂ emissions for the functional unit were battery performances and weight rather than energy consumed in the stages of the mining, refining, materials processing, and battery manufacturing. Thus, this study found out that battery performance improvements are more important factors for low-carbon batteries than energy reductions in the supply chains of batteries. The highest principal contributor was the number of the battery cycles for charge and discharge because the battery cycle directly affects the lifetime of the battery. In other words, an increase in the number of cycles leads to an increase in the total energy delivered to the electric vehicle during its extended lifetime, and subsequently results in a decrease in the reference flow (i.e., battery weight implying the quantities of battery materials) for the LCA, as shown in eq. (1). Consequently, this entails a decrease in CO₂ emissions associated with the battery materials-related processes including refining and materials

production. The second and third highest contributors were the energy capacity and weight of the battery, which affected the CO₂ emissions for the functional unit in the same way as the battery cycle did. The fourth and fifth principal contributors were the energy efficiencies of the battery, which affect energy loss incurred from electricity charging and storage. This energy loss incurred a significant amount of CO₂ emissions due to the long time of the battery use stage. The next contributors except the recycling ratio of nickel sulfate were directly related with energy consumptions for the production of battery materials (i.e., aluminum, anode, and cathode) and for battery manufacturing. This energy consumption has been identified as the most significant contributors to the CO₂ emissions in the previous LCA studies.

The results of the sensitivity analysis showed a new finding that battery manufacturers should prioritize the improvement of battery performance and the reduction of battery weight to develop low-carbon electric vehicle batteries. This strategy would be necessary in parallel with increasing the supply of renewable energy because renewable energy is not currently sufficient to significantly displace the fossil-derived electricity and energy used in the mining, refining, and materials processing stages.

Table 2 shows the effect of the 10 % changes of the principal contributors identified by the sensitivity analysis on the CO₂ emissions for the functional unit. An increase in the number of battery cycles leads to a 6.3 % decrease in the CO₂ emissions, which was the highest reduction. Lower battery weight and higher energy capacity reduce emissions by 5.8 % and 5.3 %, respectively. Higher energy efficiencies of electricity charging and storage reduce the CO₂ emissions by 2.1 % and 1.7 %, respectively. In case these five battery performances are improved at the same time, a 19.5 % reduction could be obtained. In the same context, Fig. 5 (a) and (b) shows the effect of the 10 % changes of the principal contributors on the CO₂ emissions in the life cycle stages and for the major materials, respectively. The battery performance improvement and a reduction in the amount of materials used had the highest potentials to significantly reduce the CO₂ emissions incurred in all the life cycle stages and from the productions of the materials.

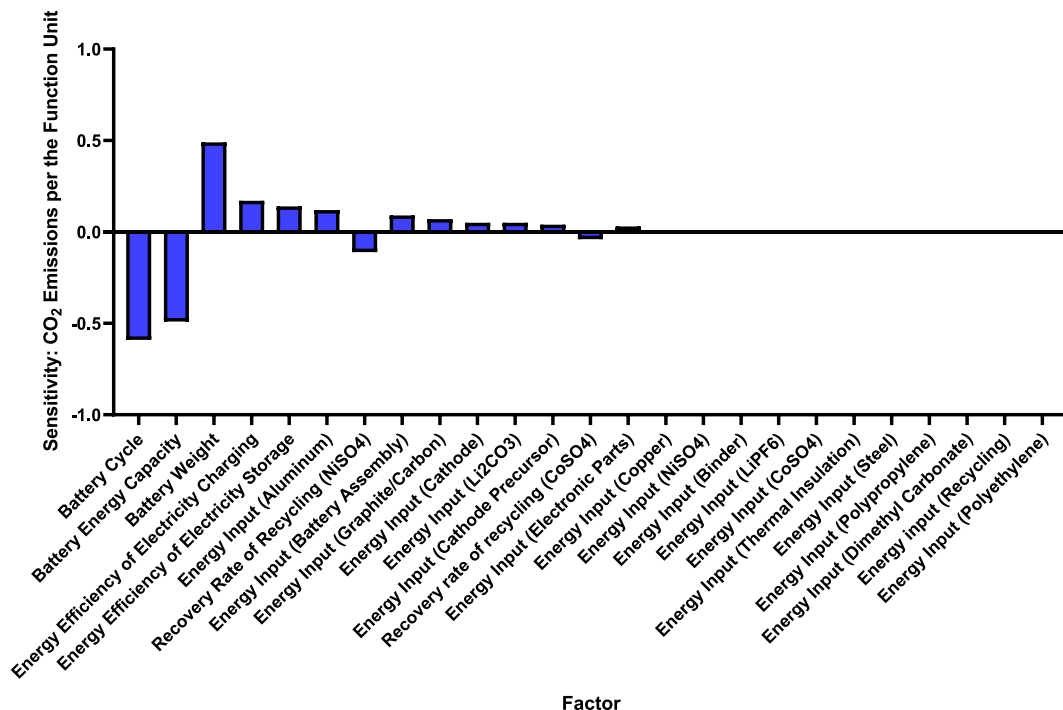


Fig. 4. Sensitivity analysis results for the life cycle assessment of the battery.

Table 2
Effect of the 10% changes of the top 5 principal contributors identified by the sensitivity analysis on the CO₂ emissions for the functional unit of the LCA.

	LCA result (Baseline)	Battery performance improvement and dematerialization					All of these five measures
		Battery cycle (+10 %)	Battery weight (-10 %)	Battery energy capacity (+10 %)	Energy efficiency of electricity charging (+10 %)	Energy efficiency of electricity storage (+10 %)	
CO ₂ Emissions for the Functional Unit (g CO ₂ -eq./ kWh D)	149.1	139.8	140.5	141.3	146.1	146.7	120.1
Reduction ratio (%)	–	6.3 %	5.8 %	5.3 %	2.1 %	1.7 %	19.5 %

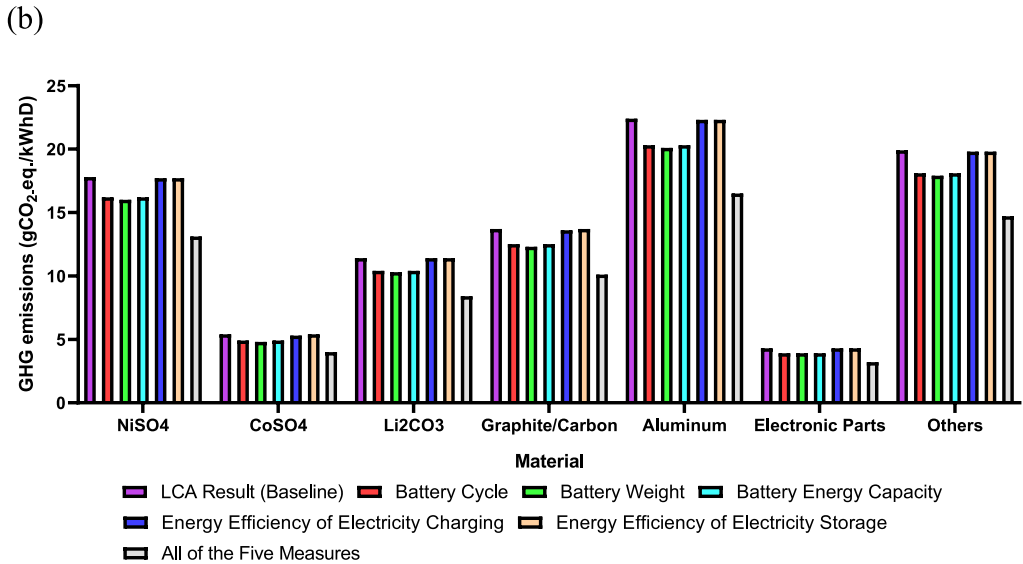
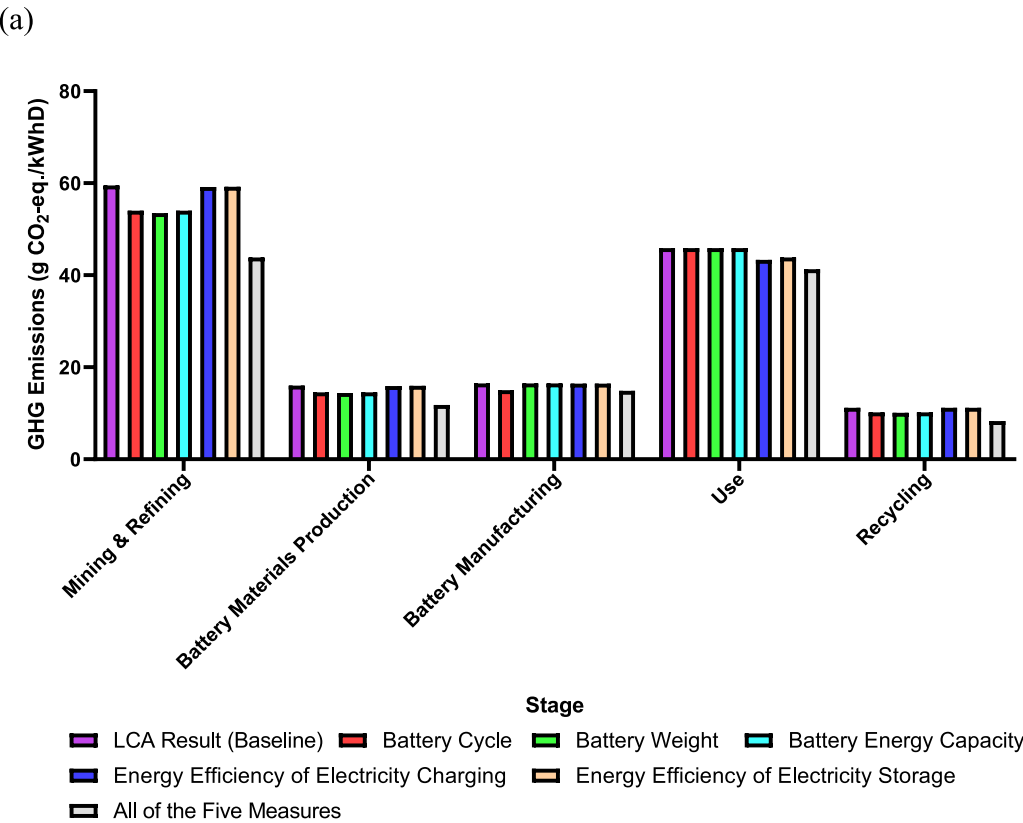


Fig. 5. Effect of the 10% changes of the principal contributors on the CO₂ emissions for the life cycle stages and major materials: (a) life cycle stages; and (b) materials.

Conclusions

The results of the sensitivity analysis showed that the CO₂ emissions of the battery were more significantly affected by battery performance (i.e., number of charge–discharge cycles, energy capacity, and energy efficiencies for charging and storage) and battery weight than by electricity and energy consumption in the materials- and manufacturing-related processes. This is a new finding different from the previous studies that have been based on the LCA that did not take into account the effect of battery performances on the CO₂ emissions of batteries. The previous studies have suggested that renewable energy should be applied to battery supply chains to reduce fossil-derived electricity and energy; however, this way would not be currently realistic due to the low availability of renewable energy. By contrast, this study suggests that battery performance improvement and a reduction in the amount of materials used in batteries are effective directions to the development of low-carbon electric batteries; thus, the development of battery technology should be accompanied by the effort to increase the supply of renewable energy. The findings of this study would be worthwhile to consider in order to reduce the carbon footprint of other types of battery products such as uninterruptible power supply (UPS) and energy storage system (ESS). Therefore, this study can contribute to providing valuable information for battery manufacturers to develop more environmentally friendly batteries for climate change mitigation.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Sung-Hoon Kim: Investigation, Methodology, Software, Visualization, Writing – original draft. **Sang-Ho Park:** Investigation, Software. **Seong-Rin Lim:** Conceptualization, Data curation, Formal analysis, Funding acquisition, Investigation, Methodology, Project administration, Resources, Software, Supervision, Validation, Visualization, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

Data will be made available on request.

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Appendix A. Supplementary data

Supplementary data to this article can be found online at <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.seta.2024.103683>.

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