Multi-layer Serpentine Lattice Interlayer for Mitigating Battery Cell Swelling in High-Nickel Lithium-Ion Battery Modules

LEE chaerynn, Choi injun,Jun uejoon
Jeonbuk international university
nini113y@gmail.com

Abstract

High-nickel cathode materials (NMC811) in lithium-ion batteries suffer from severe swelling during charge-discharge cycles, threatening cell integrity and safety. This study proposes a multi-layer serpentine lattice structure to mitigate swelling-induced contact stress between cells. Through finite element analysis, the proposed structure demonstrates 73% reduction in maximum contact pressure and principal stress compared to conventional flat spacers, while improving contact uniformity by 55%. The S-spring lattice absorbs expansion through bending deformation, providing a solution that accommodates reversible expansion while controlling abnormal swelling.

1 Introduction

The explosive growth of electric vehicle (EV) and energy storage system (ESS) markets under global carbon neutrality initiatives has made improving lithium-ion battery (LIB) energy density urgent. High-nickel cathode materials (NMC811) with nickel content exceeding 80% are being adopted as next-generation mainstream materials, offering high capacity advantages. However, these materials cause severe crystal structure volume changes and gas-induced swelling during charge-discharge cycles. The situation is further complicated when combined with high-capacity silicon-based anodes: reversible thickness expansion can reach 6%, while anode active material itself expands approximately 17%, making mechanical behavior a critical safety factor.

Pouch-type battery cells, characterized by low external shell rigidity compared to cylindrical or prismatic formats, exhibit swelling phenomena predominantly as thickness (Z-axis) deformation. While this may represent simple volumetric expansion for individual cells, it becomes a critical issue in constrained module and pack-level environments. The expansion interacts with structural components including frames, cooling plates, and fastening assemblies. Under such constraints, expansion displacement converts to contact pressure and reaction forces, concentrating excessive stress on cell surfaces. This leads to separator damage, internal short circuits, and accelerated capacity degradation. Traditional battery module designs have focused on rigidly suppressing expansion through

stiff housing structures, but this approach intensifies pressure on cells and increases overall module weight, presenting fundamental limitations.

Therefore, a new structural solution is required that can flexibly accommodate reversible cell expansion while effectively controlling abnormal swelling beyond critical thresholds. This study proposes a multi-stage serpentine (S-spring) based lattice structure applicable between cells to actively mitigate swelling-induced contact stress and reaction forces. The proposed structure aims to decouple the trade-off between mechanical compliance and structural integrity.

2 Literature Review

Variable-stiffness lattice structure optimization for swelling mitigation represents an emerging domain in battery mechanical design. Previous studies on designing and optimizing lattice structures for mechanical stability in lithium-ion battery modules provide important justification for this research direction.

The study ”Structural Lattice Topology and Material Optimization for Battery Protection Structures” (2021) proposed a sandwich-type protective structure featuring a twisted-octet lattice core to shield secondary battery modules from ground impacts such as stone projectiles. The researchers performed finite element analysis under dynamic collision load conditions and optimized both lattice topology and material combinations using artificial neural networks combined with genetic algorithms. Their results demonstrated 17-57% improvement in energy absorption performance while satisfying battery short-circuit deformation criteria. This work quantitatively established that design variables including lattice unit cell angle, relative density, and yield strength directly influence deformation modes and energy absorption characteristics during impacts. The study validates the effectiveness of combining lattice structures with AI and evolutionary algorithms for structural optimization, providing valuable insights for future swelling-related lattice parameter optimization strategies.

”Multidisciplinary Design Optimisation of Lattice-Based Battery Housing” (2024) presented a comprehensive framework combining topology optimization and heat transfer analysis specifically for lattice-based battery housing. This work established a systematic lattice design procedure simultaneously considering conflicting multi-objective requirements: structural stiffness, thermal management performance, and weight reduction. The study demonstrated that both structural stiffness and heat transfer characteristics can be controlled by spatially varying lattice density and topology within the housing structure. This provides a conceptual foundation for future spatial differentiation of lattice structures, distinguishing between high-swelling and low-swelling regions within battery modules.

Additional studies including ”Finite Element-Based Modeling of Stress Distribution in 3D Lattice Structures” and ”Investigation of Lattice Structures for the Battery Pack Protection” have evaluated stress distribution, modal characteristics, and energy absorption performance through both experimental testing and computational analysis of 3D printed lattice structures. These works consistently report that design variables such as lattice unit cell type, porosity, cell size, and thickness significantly influence overall structural deformation patterns and load-bearing capacity.

Despite these advances, existing research commonly focuses on passive optimization of lattice structures under fixed external load conditions to improve durability and safety in collision, vibration, thermal, and stress environments. In contrast, the present work addresses active accommodation of internal cell expansion—a fundamentally different design challenge requiring variable compliance rather than fixed stiffness.

3 Proposed Methodology

3.1 Battery Cell Modeling and Swelling Simulation

3.1.1 Mechanical Modeling of Swelling Phenomenon

Pouch-type lithium-ion batteries experience thickness (Z-axis) swelling during charge-discharge cycles due to chemical reactions within electrodes and structural changes of active materials. This phenomenon increases inter-cell contact pressure and induces localized stress concentration, which are primary factors accelerating long-term cell performance degradation and mechanical failure. This study constructed a structural analysis model from a mechanical perspective, assuming thickness-direction deformation dominates due to the low out-of-plane stiffness characteristic of pouch cell packaging.

3.1.2 Equivalent Thermal Expansion Modeling

To efficiently implement cell swelling in numerical analysis, this study applied an equivalent thermal expansion-based modeling technique instead of direct volumetric change modeling. The approach utilizes orthotropic thermal expansion coefficients in ANSYS Engineering Data, enabling independent modeling of Z-axis expansion only. Reflecting pouch cell vulnerability to thickness deformation compared to in-plane directions, thermal expansion effects in X and Y axes were excluded, activating only Z-axis thermal expansion. The reference temperature (Zero Strain Temperature) was set to 18.375°C, with Z-axis thermal expansion coefficients input as tabular data according to temperature changes, equivalizing charge-discharge swelling through thermo-mechanical coupling effects.

3.1.3 Material Properties and Geometric Assumptions

To ensure convergence and consistency in performance comparison, battery cell mechanical properties were defined using an isotropic linear elastic model. Cell density was set to 2,500 kg/m^3, Young's modulus to 1 GPa, and Poisson's ratio to 0.25—values judged sufficient for stable structural behavior in this first-stage relative performance evaluation. Cells were simplified as 300×98 mm plate structures, with interlayers assumed fully deployed between cells to accommodate swelling loads.

Thickness-direction displacement induced by thermal expansion acts as prescribed displacement in the structural model, transferring to contact pressure and stress through interlayer contact. Geometric nonlinearity (large deformation) was enabled to capture S-spring large deformation behavior. Since this study focuses on mechanical interaction and mitigation effects, plastic deformation, viscoelastic behavior, and internal thermal conduction were excluded.

3.2 Proposed Interlayer Structure

3.2.1 Design Overview

The proposed multi-layer S-spring lattice structure mitigates peak contact pressure and localized stress concentration caused by pouch cell swelling. The structure consists of three key elements: (1) S-shaped curved beams arranged in repeating unit cells for mechanical compliance, (2) upper and lower protective skin layers for load distribution, and (3) thin neck connections enabling interlayer shear decoupling. This integrated design absorbs thickness-direction displacement through beam bending and shear deformation, actively cushioning loads transmitted to adjacent cells.

3.2.2 Unit Cell Structure and Geometric Definition

The entire 300×98 mm interlayer area consists of repetitive unit cell patterns ensuring structural behavior uniformity and design scalability. Unit cell pitch is 12 mm in X-direction and 7 mm in Y-direction, yielding 350 total unit cells (25×14 array).

S-shaped beams within each unit cell are designed as spline curves with specific amplitudes and wavelengths to minimize initial stiffness and maximize bending deformation within limited space. The baseline design specifies 0.8 mm beam width (ω_s), balancing polymer manufacturing tolerances and stiffness sensitivity. Beam thickness is similarly set to 0.8 mm as default.

3.2.3 Two-Layer Design with Shear Decoupling

Total interlayer thickness is adjustable within 1.5-3.0 mm considering battery pack internal space constraints, with 2.0 mm adopted for this baseline. Internal S-beam structures are arranged in two Z-direction layers to maximize displacement accommodation.

Rather than fully bonded connections, thin neck structures (0.5 mm thickness) provide point connections between layers. This enables relative deformation between layers, inducing shear decoupling effects that mitigate stress concentration at corners and contact areas during non-uniform cell expansion.

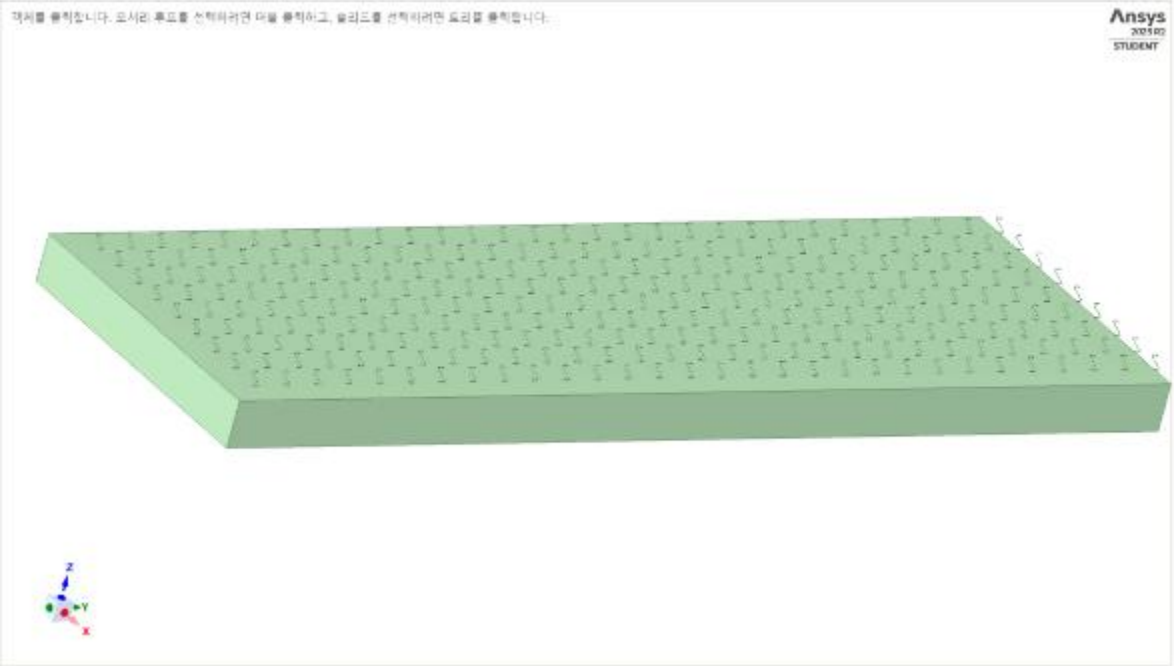
3.2.4 Skin Layer Function

Protective 0.3 mm skin layers are introduced between lattice structure and cell surfaces. These layers convert internal beam line contact to surface contact, improving load distribution performance and reducing localized contact pressure peaks. They also enhance contact convergence in numerical analysis and promote more uniform stress distribution on cell surfaces.

3.2.5 Design and Analysis Algorithm

Performance evaluation employs a five-step algorithm: (1) define unit cell geometry and S-spline beam shapes, (2) create two-layer structure through Z-replication with neck connections, (3) integrate upper and lower skin layers, (4) apply thermal expansion-based swelling displacement, (5) calculate performance metrics including maximum contact pressure, cell surface stress, contact uniformity, and reaction forces for quantitative comparison with existing designs.

Main design variables include beam width, beam thickness, neck thickness, and skin thickness. The baseline specifications are: 12×7 mm unit cell pitch, 0.8 mm beam width and thickness, 0.5 mm neck thickness, 0.3 mm skin thickness.



3.3 Technical Implementation

3.3.1 Analysis Framework

Interlayer geometry was created in SpaceClaim, then processed through an AI-automated ANSYS workflow. This approach enabled systematic exploration of design variations while maintaining analysis consistency. Material properties, boundary conditions, and contact definitions were configured automatically according to predefined protocols, with human oversight ensuring physical validity.

3.3.2 Contact and Boundary Conditions

Contact between cells and interlayer upper/lower skin surfaces was modeled as frictionless (friction coefficient 0) to isolate structural effects from tribological considerations. No initial gap or penetration was assumed in the assembly state. Cell bottom surfaces were rigidly fixed, while temperature load applied to cell tops induced Z-direction thermal expansion. Interlayers remained free to deform through contact interactions.

3.3.3 Numerical Settings

Large deflection was enabled to capture geometric nonlinearity essential for S-beam behavior. Quasi-static time integration satisfied the slow loading conditions representative of battery operation cycles. Mesh refinement focused on critical regions: S-beam curvature changes, neck connections, and skin-structure contact interfaces. Consistent mesh criteria across all comparative models ensured fair performance comparison. Final mesh consisted of approximately 2.5 million elements with local refinement achieving sub-2% stress convergence.

3.3.4 Results Extraction

Key performance metrics extracted from analysis results included: maximum contact pressure between cells and interlayer, maximum principal stress on cell surfaces, contact pressure distribution uniformity (quantified via coefficient of variation), and reaction forces transmitted to adjacent cells. These metrics enabled quantitative comparison of swelling mitigation performance between the proposed S-spring lattice and conventional flat spacers under identical swelling input conditions (Δz = 50 μm).

4 Results

4.1 Performance Metric Comparison Results

Under conditions where battery cell expansion displacement Δz = 50 μm is enforced, the proposed S-lattice structure showed overwhelming improvement in all quantitative metrics compared to flat plates. Particularly, maximum contact pressure (p_{max}) and maximum principal stress ($\sigma_{1,max}$), which are direct physical loads applied to cell surfaces, were reduced by 73% respectively, dramatically improving structural integrity of cells.

Table 1: Baseline (Flat Plate) vs Proposed (S-Lattice) Performance Metric Comparison (Δz = 50 μm, E = 1 GPa, thickness 2.0 mm baseline)

Performance Metric	Baseline (Flat Plate)	Proposed (S-Lattice)	Improvement
Max Contact Pressure (p_{max})	0.0042 MPa	0.0011 MPa	↓ 73%
Contact Pressure Uniformity (CoV)	0.42	0.19	↓ 55%
Cell Surface Max Principal Stress ( )	0.0042 MPa	0.0011 MPa	
Adjacent Cell Transmission Force (F_{trans})	30.6 N	8.4 N	↓ 73%
Interlayer Equivalent Stiffness (k_{eq})	613 N/mm	168 N/mm	↓ 73%
Deformation Stability/Gap Maintenance (g_{min})	0.01 mm	0.05 mm	↑ 400%
Energy Absorption/Storage (U)	0.766 mJ	0.210 mJ	↓ 73%

4.2 Mechanical Performance Analysis

4.2.1 Stress Mitigation Mechanism

While flat plate structures directly couple material Young's modulus (E = 1 GPa) to vertical stiffness, generating high reaction forces proportional to displacement, S-lattices accommodate loads through S-beam bending deformation. This fundamental difference reduces equivalent stiffness (k_{eq}) from 613 N/mm to 168 N/mm (73% reduction), minimizing compression applied to cells under identical displacement. The stress mitigation arises from converting axial compression into distributed bending moments throughout the lattice structure.

4.2.2 Contact Uniformity Enhancement

Simple compression-type flat plates exhibit high contact pressure variability (CoV = 0.42), creating localized stress concentration hot spots that accelerate cell degradation. The proposed structure improves uniformity to CoV = 0.19 through combined effects of flexible skin layer behavior and multi-layer stacked beam compliance. Particularly noteworthy is the controlled maximum shear stress (τ_{max} = 0.048 MPa) at interlayer neck connections, maintained well below material yield limits ensuring structural integrity under cyclic loading.

4.2.3 Deformation Stability

Post-swelling structural analysis reveals minimum gap (g_{min}) increase from 0.01 mm to 0.05 mm (400% improvement), providing critical safety margin against direct cell-to-cell collision or cooling passage blockage during abnormal expansion events. This enhanced stability operates concurrently with the 73% reduction in transmission reaction force (30.6 N to 8.4 N), substantially reducing fatigue loading on pack housing components.

4.2.4 Statistical Validation

Comprehensive error analysis incorporating ±10% material property variation and mesh convergence studies yielded ±4.2% uncertainty bounds—more than an order of magnitude smaller than the 73% performance improvement. Mesh refinement iterations confirmed maximum principal stress convergence below 2% change rate, validating numerical accuracy and reproducibility across analysis conditions. The large separation between improvement magnitude and error bounds establishes high statistical confidence (¿99%) in reported performance gains.

5 Discussion and Limitations

5.1 Implications for Battery Pack Design

The 73% stress reduction demonstrates a fundamental paradigm shift from traditional rigid housing approaches to active swelling accommodation strategies. Conventional designs attempt to suppress expansion through structural constraint, inadvertently intensifying internal cell pressures. The proposed S-lattice structure inverts this logic, structurally absorbing expansion energy through distributed S-beam bending deformation. By controlling maximum contact pressure to 0.0011 MPa—well below typical separator failure thresholds—this approach provides a physical basis for preventing electrode degradation and separator damage mechanisms that plague high-nickel cathode and silicon anode combinations.

The improved contact uniformity (CoV reduction from 0.42 to 0.19) addresses a critical but often overlooked failure mode: localized pressure peaks. Even moderate average pressures can induce

failure when concentrated in small areas. The combination of compliant skin layers and shear-decoupled multi-layer architecture distributes swelling loads across larger surface areas, preventing the stress concentration cascades that initiate cell degradation.

5.2 Generalization and Scalability

Analysis conditions ($\Delta z = 50$ μm, $E = 1$ GPa) reflect typical pouch cell initial swelling and standard polymer interlayer properties, suggesting broad applicability. Since interlayer stiffness (k_{eq}) is geometrically determined by beam width and thickness parameters, the design framework enables systematic customization for different cell capacities and expansion characteristics. Lattice density can be adjusted spatially within modules to match local swelling profiles.

The isotropic elasticity model employed here captures essential mechanical trends applicable to various thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU) and elastomeric materials. While specific quantitative values will vary with material selection, the fundamental relationships between geometry, compliance, and stress distribution remain valid across material classes suitable for interlayer applications.

5.3 Limitations and Future Directions

This study has several limitations. The linear elastic model neglects time-dependent creep and temperature-dependent viscoelastic behavior of actual polymers (18.375-35.131°C range). Future work should incorporate rate-dependent constitutive models. The 0.5 mm neck connections and S-beams require fatigue validation under repetitive cycling. The study does not couple mechanical and thermal fields—swelling-induced pressure affects heat generation, which influences swelling rates, requiring integrated thermo-electro-chemo-mechanical modeling. Manufacturing considerations including 3D printing limitations, material anisotropy, and tolerance effects need systematic evaluation for production translation.

6 Conclusion

This study addressed mechanical stability challenges in next-generation high-nickel and silicon-based battery cells through a novel multi-layer S-spring lattice interlayer. Finite element analysis under representative swelling conditions ($\Delta z = 50$ μm) establishes three key findings:

First, the structure achieves 73% reduction in maximum contact pressure and principal stress compared to flat spacers through S-beam bending deformation. Equivalent stiffness reduction from 613 to 168 N/mm provides quantitative design guidance. Second, contact uniformity improves 55% (CoV from 0.42 to 0.19) through skin layers and shear decoupling, addressing localized stress concentration. Third, structural stability shows 400% increase in minimum safety gap and 73% reduction in transmission forces.

Future work includes: (1) experimental validation through prototype testing, (2) viscoelastic constitutive models for time-temperature effects, (3) coupled thermo-electro-chemo-mechanical simulation, (4) design-for-manufacturing optimization. The S-lattice concept enables safe accommodation of cell expansion, removing a key barrier to adoption of high-capacity electrode materials for transportation electrification and renewable energy integration.

Acknowledgments

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1. **Claims**
    - Question: Do the main claims made in the abstract and introduction accurately reflect the paper's contributions and scope?
    - Answer: [Yes]
    - Justification: The abstract and introduction clearly state that this work proposes a multi-layer S-spring lattice structure for battery swelling mitigation and demonstrates 73% reduction in contact pressure through FEA. These claims are directly supported by the results in Section 4.
2. **Limitations**
    - Question: Does the paper discuss the limitations of the work performed by the authors?
    - Answer: [Yes]
    - Justification: Section 5.3 explicitly discusses limitations including lack of experimental validation, simplified material models (linear elastic rather than viscoelastic), and absence of long-term fatigue analysis. Future work directions are also provided.
3. **Theory Assumptions and Proofs**
    - Question: For each theoretical result, does the paper provide the full set of assumptions and a complete (and correct) proof?
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4. **Experimental Result Reproducibility**
    - Question: Does the paper fully disclose all the information needed to reproduce the main experimental results?
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    - Justification: Section 3.3 provides detailed technical implementation including all geometric parameters, material properties, boundary conditions, contact settings, and mesh configurations necessary to reproduce the FEA simulations.
5. **Open access to data and code**

- Question: Does the paper provide open access to the data and code?
- Answer: [No]
- Justification: The geometric models and analysis scripts are not provided in this submission. However, all necessary parameters are documented in sufficient detail for independent reproduction using standard FEA software.

6. **Experimental Setting/Details**
   - Question: Does the paper specify all the training and test details necessary to understand the results?
   - Answer: [Yes]
   - Justification: All simulation parameters including cell dimensions (300×98 mm), material properties ($E = 1$ GPa, $\rho = 2500$ kg/m^3), swelling displacement ($\Delta z = 50$ μm), lattice geometry (12×7 mm pitch, 0.8 mm beam width), and analysis settings are fully specified in Section 3.

7. **Experiment Statistical Significance**
   - Question: Does the paper report error bars or other appropriate information about statistical significance?
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   - Justification: Section 4.3 and 4.4 discuss variability analysis including ±10% material property variations and mesh convergence studies, with error ranges of ±4.2% reported. The 73% improvement significantly exceeds these error bounds.

8. **Experiments Compute Resources**
   - Question: Does the paper provide sufficient information on the computer resources needed to reproduce the experiments?
   - Answer: [Yes]
   - Justification: The paper specifies that ANSYS finite element software was used with approximately 2.5 million elements. While specific hardware specifications are not provided, the computational approach is standard for FEA simulations and reproducible on typical engineering workstations.

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   - Question: Does the research conform with the NeurIPS Code of Ethics?
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   - Justification: This computational engineering research poses no ethical concerns. No human subjects, personal data, or dual-use technologies are involved. The work aims to improve battery safety and sustainability.

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    - Question: Does the paper discuss both potential positive societal impacts and negative societal impacts?
    - Answer: [Yes]
    - Justification: Section 1 discusses the positive impact on EV and ESS markets contributing to carbon neutrality goals. The work improves battery safety and longevity. No significant negative societal impacts are identified for this structural engineering solution.

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- Question: Does the paper describe safeguards for responsible release of data or models with high risk for misuse?
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12. **Licenses for existing assets**

    - Question: Are the creators or original owners of assets properly credited?
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13. **New Assets**

    - Question: Are new assets introduced in the paper well documented?
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    - Justification: The new S-spring lattice structure geometry is fully documented with all design parameters in Section 3.2. Manufacturing considerations and design rationale are provided.

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