

Thermal properties of nanofibrillated cellulose/PMMA/MMA/benzoyl peroxide-reinforced transparent epoxy nanocomposites

Nanofibril selüloz/PMMA/MMA/benzoil peroksit takviyeli şeffaf epoksi nanokompozitlerin termal özellikleri

Mert YILDIRIM*^{1,2} 

¹ Istanbul Gelisim University, Faculty of Engineering and Architecture, Department of Industrial Engineering, Istanbul, Türkiye

² Istanbul Gelisim University, New Generation Entrepreneurship and Innovation Application and Research Center, Istanbul, Türkiye

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Sorumlu yazar/Corresponding author

Mert YILDIRIM

e-mail: meryildirim@gelisim.edu.tr

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Abstract

This study presents the synergistic effects of nanofibrillated cellulose (NFC), polymethyl methacrylate (PMMA), methyl methacrylate (MMA), and benzoyl peroxide (BPO) additives on the thermal properties of nanocomposites. The nanocomposites were fabricated by the casting method through the incorporation of 1%, 3%, and 5% NFC, 0.05% PMMA and MMA, and 0.005% BPO into epoxy resin. The results of the thermal analysis indicate that the thermal stability, residue content, storage modulus (E'), loss modulus (E''), and tan delta ($\tan \delta$) values of all reinforced nanocomposites significantly increased compared to the neat epoxy samples. The findings demonstrate that the nanocomposites containing 3% NFC, 0.05% PMMA and MMA, and 0.005% BPO exhibited superior thermal resistance and stability, along with the highest storage modulus, loss modulus, and tan delta values. Based on the obtained results, it was determined that a 3% NFC loading is the most optimal ratio for enhancing the thermal properties of sustainable transparent nanocomposites, making these materials suitable for advanced material applications.

Özet

Bu çalışma, nanofibril selüloz (NFC), polimetil metakrilat (PMMA), metil metakrilat (MMA) ve benzoil peroksit (BPO) katkı maddelerinin nanokompozitlerin termal özellikleri üzerindeki sinerjik etkilerini sunmaktadır. Nanokompozitler, epoksi reçine içerisine %1, %3 ve %5 oranında NFC ilavesi, %0.05 oranında PMMA ve MMA ilavesi ve %0.005 oranında BPO ilavesi katılarak döküm yöntemiyle üretilmiştir. Yapılan termal analizin sonuçları, tüm takviyeli nanokompozitlerin termal kararlılığının, kalıntı içeriğinin, depolama modülünün (E'), kayıp modülünün (E'') ve tan delta ($\tan \delta$) değerlerinin saf epoksili örneklerle kıyasla önemli ölçüde arttığını göstermektedir. Bulgular, %3 NFC, %0.05 PMMA ve MMA ile %0.005 BPO içeren nanokompozitlerin üstün termal direnç ve kararlılık sergilediğini ve bu nanokompozitlerin en yüksek depolama modülü, kayıp modülü ve tan delta değerlerine sahip olduğunu göstermektedir. Elde edilen sonuçlara göre, sürdürülebilir şeffaf nanokompozitlerin termal özelliklerini iyileştirmek amacıyla özellikle %3 NFC yüklemesinin en uygun oran olduğu belirlenmiş ve yüklemenin bu malzemeleri ileri düzey malzeme uygulamaları için uygun hale getirdiği sonucuna varılmıştır.

INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, the efficient utilization of biologically sourced raw materials and the production of various products from these sources have become a major focus of interest. Due to their relatively availability, sustainability, and renewability, lignocellulosic biomass resources stand out. Lignocellulosic biomass is composed of cellulose, lignin, and hemicellulose. It has attracted attention as a potential alternative to fossil-derived products such as fuels and chemicals and is recognized as a valuable renewable resource for the production of bio-based polymers and materials. The global production of

lignocellulosic biomass is estimated to reach approximately 181.5 billion tons per year (Lee et al. 2023). Cellulose is the most plentiful lignocellulosic biomaterial in nature (Dufresne 2017). In contrast, nanocellulose is a bionanomaterial with exceptional characteristics, produced by breaking down cellulose fibers into nanoscale dimensions (Candan et al. 2022). Due to its unique characteristics, nanocellulose has become increasingly popular in various industries in recent years (Yildirim et al. 2024a).

In recent years, various transparent polymers, especially poly(methyl methacrylate) (PMMA), have become more

popular because of their outstanding optical clarity and low density (Kumari et al. 2024). PMMA is extensively used in various industries due to its transparency, high transmittance, and lightweight (Chen et al. 2018, Radhi et al. 2021, Saxena and Shukla 2022). However, despite its significant potential, PMMA has some limitations, including suboptimal mechanical and dynamic properties, which limit its use in engineering applications (Liu et al. 2010). To address these challenges, the incorporation of nano-fillers as reinforcement has been suggested (Nussbaumer et al. 2003, Chen et al. 2009, Tang and Weder 2010).

Thermal analysis methods provide comprehensive data about a material's thermal properties, stability, and reactions to temperature changes (Gill et al. 2010, Gabr et al. 2014, Saba et al. 2016, Saba et al. 2017). Thermal analysis are vital in materials science as they offer valuable insights into the thermal behavior and stability of materials, which is essential for evaluating and enhancing their performance under different conditions (Yildirim et al. 2024b). This information is crucial for choosing materials in industries like aerospace, automotive, and electronics.

Many studies in recent years have focused on the thermal analysis of epoxy nanocomposites reinforced with nanocellulose derived from various cellulosic sources (Gan et al. 2020, Subbotina et al. 2022, Barra et al. 2023, Kumar et al. 2024, Manimaran et al. 2024, Yusuf et al. 2024). Nonetheless, these composites have limited applicability in advanced material areas.

In our previous study, we investigated the synergistic effects of nanofibrillated cellulose/PMMA-MMA-BPO on the mechanical and self healing properties of nanocomposites (Yildirim and Candan 2024). This study aims to assess the combined effects of incorporating NFC, PMMA, MMA, and BPO into epoxy at various concentrations to improve thermal stability, char yield, glass transition temperature, as well as the elastic, viscous, and compliance properties of the composites.

MATERIAL AND METHOD

Material

The epoxy resin and hardener were sourced from Armor Chemical. The NFCs obtained from wood pulp using the 2,2,6,6,6-tetramethylpiperidin-1-yl-oxy (TEMPO) method were used. The NFCs have a diameter of 20 nm and a length of 1 micron. PMMA (with the linear formula $[\text{CH}_2\text{C}(\text{CH}_3)(\text{CO}_2\text{CH}_3)]_n$), MMA (with the linear formula $\text{CH}_2=\text{C}(\text{CH}_3)\text{COOCH}_3$), and BPO (with the empirical formula $\text{C}_{14}\text{H}_{10}\text{O}_4$) were purchased from Sigma-Aldrich.

Method

The epoxy and hardener were mixed in a 2:1 weight ratio. The NFC was added to the resin at weight ratios of 1%, 3%, and 5% relative to the prepared epoxy solution, and mixed using an ultrasonic homogenizer at 2000 rpm for 5 minutes.

In a cardboard cup, 0.005% BPO and 0.05% PMMA, by weight of the epoxy mixture, were mixed. In a cardboard cup, 0.005% MMA and 0.05% PMMA, both based on the weight of the epoxy mixture, were mixed. Half of the epoxy solution containing NFC was added to the cup with BPO, and the other half was added to the cup with MMA. Each mixture was separately mixed in an ultrasonic homogenizer at 2000 rpm for 5 minutes to obtain a homogenous consistency. The three mixtures were then combined into a single container, and the final polymer solution was prepared by mixing in the sonicator at 2000 rpm for 5 minutes until fully homogeneous. The mixture was poured to a PTFE panel and left to cure for 72 hours at room temperature. A comparable method was employed to prepare control samples made of pure composites with no additives.

Table 1 presents the experimental design for both the unreinforced and reinforced samples.

Table 1. Experimental design of this study

Sample ID	NFC (%)	PMMA (%)	MMA (%)	BPO (%)
Control	0	0	0	0
D	1	0.05	0.05	0.005
E	3	0.05	0.05	0.005
F	5	0.05	0.05	0.005

Thermal Analyses of Nanocomposites

Thermogravimetric Analysis

The TGA analysis was performed using a Hitachi (Japan) TG/DTA analyzer located in the Nanotechnology and Thermal Analysis Laboratory at Istanbul University-Cerrahpasa. 5 mg of the sample was heated from room temperature to 800°C at a heating rate of 10°C/min. Nitrogen gas (N₂) was used as an inert purge gas to prevent unwanted oxidation of the materials. Additionally, the rate of weight loss as a function of time was determined using derivative thermogravimetric (DTG) curves.

Differential Scanning Calorimetry

The DSC analysis was also conducted using a Hitachi (Japan) DSC analyzer in the same laboratory. 5 mg of each sample was placed in an aluminum pan and heated from 30°C to 200°C at a rate of 10°C/min. The gas flow rate was set to 30 ml/min.

Dynamic Mechanical Thermal Analysis

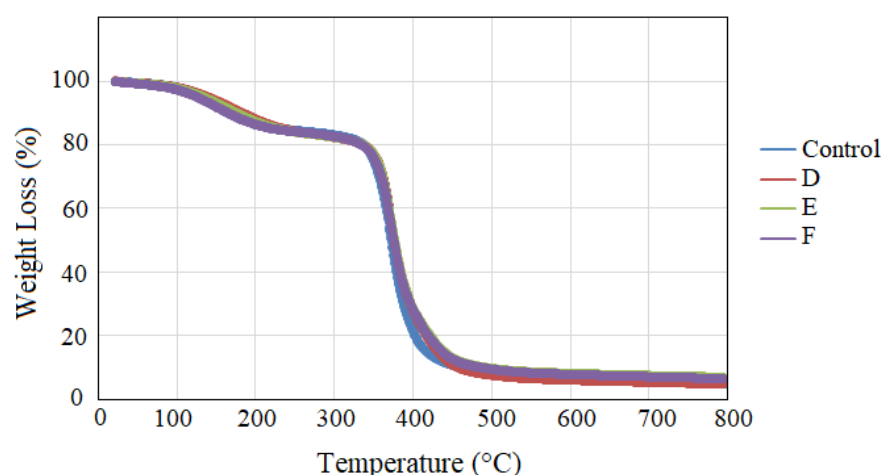
Within the scope of DMTA analysis, the storage modulus (E'), loss modulus (E''), and tan delta (δ) were analyzed. The DMTA analysis was carried out using a Hitachi (Japan) DMTA analyzer, also located in the same laboratory. The sample dimensions were 50 mm × 10 mm × 3 mm, and all samples were tested at a frequency of 1 Hz. The temperature was increased from -50°C to 200°C at a heating rate of 5°C/min.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Thermogravimetry Analysis

The thermal degradation curve for both unreinforced and reinforced samples as the temperature increases is shown in Figure 1.

As shown in Figure 1, the X-axis shows the temperature to which the material was exposed during the TGA analysis, while the Y-axis shows the percentage of mass remaining as the temperature increases.

**Figure 1.** TGA curves for both unreinforced and reinforced samples

Both the control and reinforced groups showed similar thermal behavior at low temperatures. There was a minimum weight loss of about 2-5% up to about 100°C.

This can be attributed to the first degradation observed below 150°C, which is primarily due to the evaporation of surface-adsorbed moisture, volatile components within

the composites, and the dehydration of alcohol groups present in the epoxy. A significant weight loss occurred between 300°C and ~500°C. The weight loss in this area has reached approximately 70–80%. This is where the bulk of the decomposition occurs, indicating that a significant thermal event, such as the breakdown of organic components or volatilization of certain compounds, occurs in this temperature range.

The second decomposition occurring at 300°C is related to three factors. The first is the simultaneous decomposition of glycosidic bonds in cellulose, the second is the degradation of aromatic groups in epoxy, and the third is the degradation of aliphatic amine groups in curing compounds (Sen and Kumar 2010, Lee et al. 2012, Wu et al. 2015). After 500°C, the curves stabilized. No significant weight loss occurred beyond this temperature. This suggests that the majority of the volatile components have already vanished. Beyond 400°C, degradation continued gradually up to 800°C with only small decreases in weight. At 800°C, the residual weight of all groups stabilized around 0-10%. The residual

content at 800°C was measured from the TG analysis and expressed as a percentage. The control group had a 4% residue, while group D showed 5%, group E had 7%, and group F observed 6%.

In comparison to the control samples, the reinforced samples generally show noticeably higher degradation temperatures and better thermal stability. Especially, groups D, E, and F displayed reduced thermal degradation, as evidenced by the shift of the temperature at which maximum weight loss occurs to a higher value, moving further along the temperature scale.

Similar trends have been reported by other researchers (Qua et al. 2009, Saba et al. 2017, Pandurangan and Kanny 2020).

Derivative Thermogravimetry

Figure 2 presents the DTG curves for both unreinforced and reinforced samples as the temperature increases, the derivative of mass loss per unit temperature.

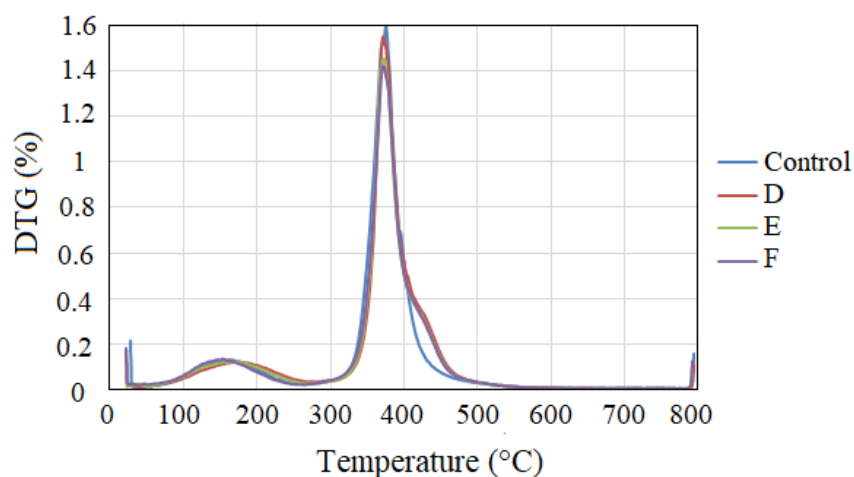


Figure 2. DTG curves for both unreinforced and reinforced samples

As illustrated in Figure 2, all groups showed a similar thermal degradation pattern. The most prominent degradation event occurred between 350°C and 400°C, where a major peak was evident for each group. Slight changes in peak intensity were observed, particularly around 375°C. Samples D, E, and F showed slightly lower peak heights compared to the control group. This reduction is likely due to a small decrease in the mass loss rate, indicating improved thermal stabilization. The

control group's highest point was 1.59, while groups B, C, and A recorded peak heights of 1.55, 1.45, and 1.42, respectively. All the reinforced groups exhibited slower degradation rates compared to the control.

Differential Scanning Calorimetry

Figure 3 presents the DSC curves for both unreinforced and reinforced samples as the temperature increases.

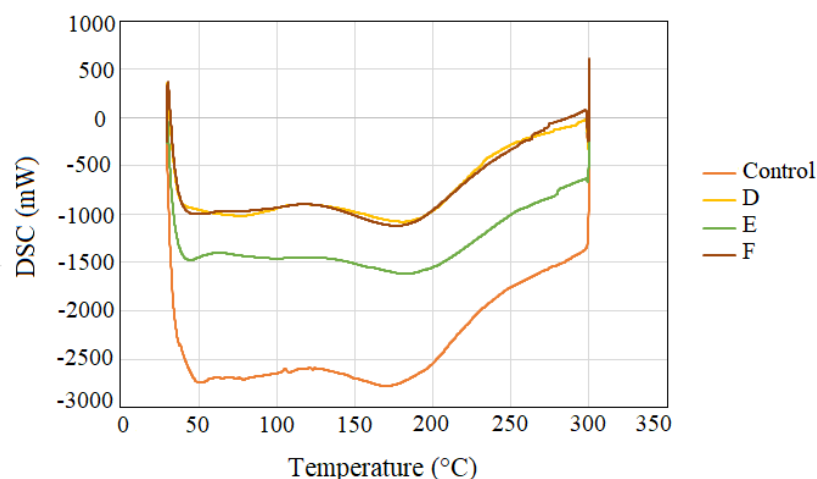


Figure 3. DSC curves for both unreinforced and reinforced samples

As demonstrated in Figure 3, the control group exhibited a clear endothermic peak around 50°C, followed by a relatively stable heat flow until about 200°C. The endothermic change that occurs between 150°C and 230°C is connected with the removal of water owing to dehydration of the secondary alcohol group (Saba et al. 2017). Between 200°C and 300°C, the control group displayed a gradual increase in heat flow, indicating thermal degradation or another exothermic event occurring above 300°C. Epoxy resins are endothermic up to 250°C before becoming exothermic (Saba et al. 2017). Other studies have reported similar results (Xu et al. 2013).

Group D shows a similar pattern to the control group. However, it has slightly lower endothermic values in the initial region below 100°C. The heat flow profile between 100°C and 300°C shows a gradual upward shift compared to the control group. This indicates that Group D exhibits improved thermal stability compared to the control group.

Group E showed a similar endothermic transition near 50°C. However, the magnitude of the heat flux was lower compared to the control group and Group D. Between 100°C and 250°C, the heat flow remains more consistent. This indicates a higher thermal stability. Above 250°C, there is a slight increase in heat flow, but it is lower than in the control group. This indicates lower thermal degradation.

Group F showed the lowest endothermic heat flow of all samples below 100°C. Group F showed a consistent heat flow profile from 100°C to 300°C, slightly lower than the other samples, indicating the highest thermal stability. After 300°C, there is a noticeable increase in heat flow. This indicates delayed or reduced thermal degradation compared to the control group.

In general, groups D, E, and F showed lower endothermic heat flux in the initial stages compared to the control group. Group F in particular shows the most significant shift towards improved thermal stability, as evidenced by relatively lower heat flux and delayed degradation across the temperature range. This indicates potential improvements in thermal resistance or changes in the polymeric structure leading to slower degradation. The incorporation of NFC into epoxy enhances the T_g value of the epoxy resin by limiting the movement of polymer chains through physical or chemical interactions. The T_g values of the reinforced samples increased compared to the control group. This is because adding reinforcing material to a polymer matrix decreases chain mobility within the composite material (Saba et al. 2017, Hamou et al. 2018).

Storage Modulus

Figure 4 presents the storage modulus (E') curves for both unreinforced and reinforced samples.

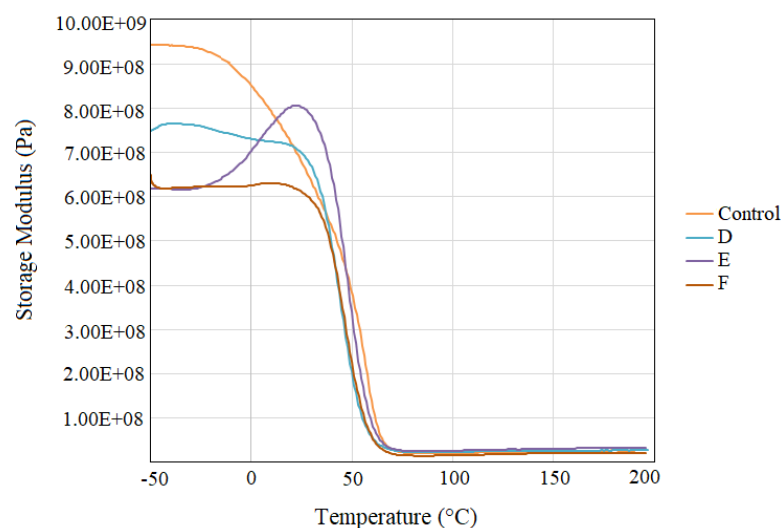


Figure 4. E' curves for both unreinforced and reinforced samples

As can be seen in Figure 4, the E' value decreases sharply as the temperature increases toward the glass transition temperature (T_g). This decrease was observed for all samples between approximately 50°C and 100°C. This decrease is related to the transition from the glassy to the rubbery state, where the polymer chain mobility increases, leading to a decrease in material stiffness.

The control group shows a sharp decrease of the E' after the glass transition, from a value of about 7.0×10^8 Pa in the glassy state to below 1.0×10^8 Pa in the rubbery state. Group D followed a similar trend with the control group. However, it showed a slightly higher modulus in the glassy region, peaking at about 7.5×10^8 Pa before

decreasing in the rubbery region. Group E exhibited a notable peak in storage modulus around the glassy transition, reaching a maximum value above 8.0×10^8 Pa, attributed to a possible reinforcement effect or increased crosslinking compared to the control group. The modulus then decreased after T_g . Group F followed a trend closer to the control group with a storage modulus around 7.0×10^8 Pa at low temperatures. However, it showed a more gradual decrease after T_g . It maintained higher modulus values in the rubbery region compared to the control and other groups.

Table 2 presents the E' results of the samples at different temperatures.

Table 2. E' results for both unreinforced and reinforced samples.

Sample ID	30°C Pascal (Pa)	50°C Pascal (Pa)	100°C Pascal (Pa)	150°C Pascal (Pa)	200°C Pascal (Pa)
Control	6.30E + 08	3.77E + 08	2.13E + 07	2.48E + 07	2.60E + 07
D	6.68E+08	2.05E+08	2.40E + 07	2.61E + 07	2.70E + 07
E	7.81E+08	3.16E+08	2.64E + 07	3.03E + 07	3.37E + 07
F	5.90E+08	2.10E+08	1.58E+07	2.04E+07	2.14E+07

The control group demonstrates a significant reduction in storage modulus from 30°C to 100°C, as epoxy provides a low level of stiffness (Abdul Khalil et al. 2013). This suggests a considerable decline in hardness at elevated temperatures. However, beyond 100°C, the change becomes less pronounced. Group D behaves similarly to the control group but shows slightly better performance at higher temperatures, particularly at 200°C. Group E starts with the highest storage modulus and exhibits the

smallest decrease at higher temperatures, indicating it maintains the highest storage modulus among the groups. Group F experiences a faster decline in modulus with rising temperature compared to the other groups, especially at temperatures above 100°C, suggesting it has poorer thermal stability. Increasing NFC loading to 5% significantly enhances the molecular/segmental movement and rotational motion of epoxy, leading to the deposition of filler particles and the creation of many

empty spaces and voids in the polymer network (Putz et al. 2008, Saba et al. 2017). As a result, both E' and T_g values decrease.

Other researchers reported relatively similar trends and agreements (Chen et al. 2009, Ocando et al. 2010, Kiziltas

et al. 2011, Kowalczyk et al. 2011, Erbas Kiziltas et al. 2015).

Loss Modulus

Loss Modulus (E'') curves were recorded as a function of temperature ($^{\circ}\text{C}$), and the results are shown in Figure 5.

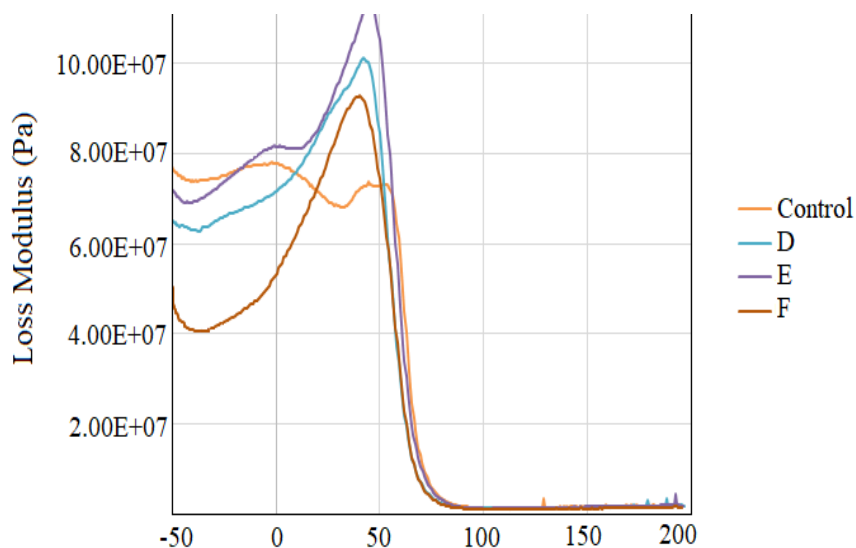


Figure 5. E'' curves for both unreinforced and reinforced samples

According to Figure 5, the control group showed a maximum loss modulus of approximately 55°C, indicating the polymer matrix's typical T_g . A similar peak was seen in group D, although the maximum loss modulus was significantly lower, with a T_g close to the control at roughly 55°C. The general form of the curve implies modest changes in the polymer's dissipative behavior, which could be attributable to the filler's nature or alteration. Group E showed the highest peak in loss modulus, indicating the most energy dissipation during the glass transition. The T_g for this sample was near 60°C, somewhat higher than the control, indicating an increase in stiffness or cross-link density inside the polymer network. The loss modulus peak for group F was lower

than that of the control, occurring at roughly 50°C. The drop in both the peak value and T_g could indicate a plasticizing impact, resulting in lower energy dissipation and an earlier commencement of the glass transition.

Across all samples, the loss modulus drops significantly after T_g , as expected, due to the transition to the rubbery state of the material at higher temperatures. Minimal deviations in the post-transition regions indicate consistent behavior at elevated temperatures for all samples.

Table 3 presents results to the E'' of samples across various temperature ranges.

Table 3. E'' values for both unreinforced and reinforced samples

Sample ID	30°C Pascal (Pa)	50°C Pascal (Pa)	100°C Pascal (Pa)	150°C Pascal (Pa)	200°C Pascal (Pa)
Control	6.30E+08	3.77E+08	2.13E+07	2.48E+07	2.60E+07
D	9.24E+07	8.10E+07	1.32E+06	1.49E+06	1.84E+06
E	9.59E+07	1.03E+08	1.22E+06	1.58E+06	1.85E+06
F	8.56E+07	7.21E+07	1.05E+06	1.20E+06	1.35E+06

As can be seen in Table 3, all groups showed a significant decrease in storage modulus between 30°C and 100°C, followed by a slight increase from 100°C to 200°C. This reflects the common behavior of many materials, where higher temperatures lead to reduced energy dissipation and lower viscous resistance. The control group shows a significantly higher loss modulus across all temperatures compared to groups D, E, and F. This indicates that the

modifications applied to D, E, and F reduce the composites ability to dissipate energy through viscous forces.

Tan Delta

Figure 6 presents the $\tan \delta$ curves for both the unreinforced and reinforced samples.

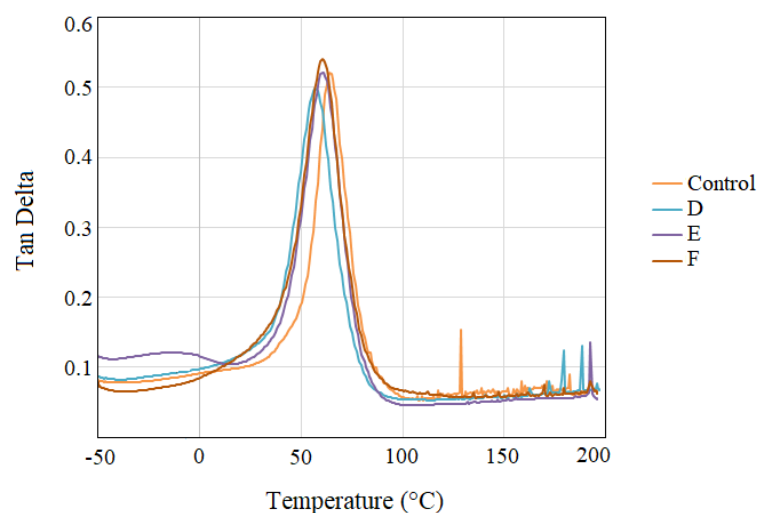


Figure 6. $\tan \delta$ curves for both unreinforced and reinforced samples

A peak in $\tan \delta$ signifies the glass transition temperature (T_g). As shown in Figure 6, all samples exhibit a clear peak within the range of 50°C to 70°C, corresponding to their individual T_g values. The peak positions vary slightly across each group, indicating that the type of additives and their concentrations influence the glass transition temperatures of the materials.

Table 4 presents the T_g values for both unreinforced and reinforced samples.

Table 4. T_g results from $\tan \delta$ for both unreinforced and reinforced samples.

Sample ID	T_g (°C)
Control	64.1
D	58.1
E	61.9
F	61.2

The magnitude of the $\tan \delta$ peak gives information about the damping properties of the material. The peak of the $\tan \delta$ corresponds to the T_g value of each sample. For the

control group, T_g was observed at 64.1°C, as indicated by the sharp rise in $\tan \delta$. According to Table 4, T_g values were recorded at 58.1°C in group D, 61.9°C in group E, and 61.2°C in group F.

The control group achieved a higher peak height compared to the reinforced groups. This difference may result from two factors: epoxy possesses greater molecular mobility, and the reinforcing materials reduce epoxy's viscoelastic damping factor (Yildirim et al. 2024b). This also indicates that the unreinforced sample has a greater ability to dissipate energy in the glass transition region. The smaller peaks for the reinforced samples are likely a result of changes in molecular mobility or interactions, possibly due to crosslinking. The broader peaks in groups D, E, and F indicate a more gradual transition, in contrast to the sharper transition observed in the control group. The slight shift in T_g and the reduction in $\tan \delta$ values for the reinforced samples point

to alterations in the viscoelastic properties of the polymer matrix.

Increased NFC level from 1% to 3% resulted in higher T_g values. However, at a 5% loading level, T_g was slightly decreased. At 5% and greater loadings, the strength of tan δ peaks decreases due to slower agglomeration and energy dissipation with NFC (Chen et al. 2008, Saba et al. 2017, Yildirim et al. 2024b).

CONCLUSION

The results clearly demonstrate that the addition of NFC/PMMA/MMA/BPO additives substantially enhances the thermal stability and dynamic mechanical properties of the nanocomposites compared to the control group. The results indicate that even at low loading levels of NFC, PMMA, MMA, and BPO, enhanced thermal properties can be achieved.

Group E showed the highest degradation temperatures and the greatest improvement in thermal stability, along with superior storage modulus (E') and loss modulus (E'') across the entire temperature range relative to the other reinforced groups. Overall, nanocomposites containing 3% NFC, 0.05% PMMA, 0.05% MMA, and 0.005% BPO fillers showed the most favorable combination of thermal stability and viscoelastic performance. However, when the NFC content exceeds 5%, a marked decrease in both thermal stability and dynamic mechanical properties is observed.

From an industrial perspective, the enhanced thermal stability makes these transparent nanocomposites suitable candidates for aerospace structures and automotive components. Due to their transparency, improved thermal stability, these materials may serve in substrates for electronic circuits, LED encapsulations, and sensor applications.

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