International Journal of Multidisciplinary Engineering in Current Research - IJMEC
Volume 11, Issue 8, August-2026, http://ijmec.com/, ISSN: 2456-4265

Thermodynamic Assessment Of Energy Efficiency And Exergy Losses In Industrial Heat Recovery Processes

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Accepted 14 August 2026

Abstract
Industrial processes reject a substantial fraction of primary energy input as waste heat through flue gases, cooling streams, and process effluents, representing both an environmental burden and an untapped economic resource. This review synthesizes past research on thermal performance optimization of waste heat recovery (WHR) systems across low, medium, and high temperature industrial applications, spanning cement, steel, glass, chemical, and food-processing sectors [1]. Technologies surveyed include organic Rankine cycles, Kalina cycles, thermoelectric generators, heat pumps, Stirling engines, heat exchanger network retrofits, and hybrid recovery architectures. A meta-analytic synthesis of reported efficiency values, exergy destruction patterns, and payback periods from the literature is presented, alongside methodological approaches used in prior optimization studies, including thermodynamic modelling, exergo-economic analysis, machine-learning-assisted design, and multi-objective optimization. The critical analysis identifies recurring gaps: inconsistent baseline assumptions, limited techno-economic transparency, underexplored transient and part-load behaviour, and scarce field validation of laboratory-scale results. The discussion consolidates these findings into design and policy implications for improving adoption rates of WHR technologies. The review concludes that combining thermodynamic rigor with data-driven optimization and standardized reporting protocols offers the most promising route toward closing the gap between theoretical recovery potential and realized industrial energy savings, and outlines directions for future investigation including dynamic operation, materials durability, and integration with renewable and digital-twin frameworks [2].

Keywords: *Waste Heat Recovery; Thermal Performance Optimization; Organic Rankine Cycle; Exergy Analysis; Industrial Energy Efficiency; Heat Exchanger Networks; Techno-Economic Assessment*

1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Motivation

Industry accounts for roughly one-third of global final energy consumption, and a considerable share of that energy, frequently estimated between twenty and fifty percent depending on the sector, is discharged as waste heat rather than converted into useful work or product value. This rejected thermal energy arises from combustion exhausts, cooling water circuits, compressed air systems, and exothermic chemical reactions. As energy prices rise and decarbonization targets tighten, the recovery and upgrading of this waste heat has moved from a peripheral efficiency measure to a central pillar of industrial energy strategy. Waste heat recovery systems capture otherwise-lost thermal energy and convert it into electricity, process heat, or mechanical work, thereby reducing primary fuel demand and associated greenhouse gas emissions without altering core production processes [3].

1.2 Scope and Classification of Waste Heat Sources

Industrial waste heat is commonly classified by temperature grade: high-grade sources above 400°C typical of cement kilns, steel reheating furnaces, and glass melting; medium-grade sources between 100°C and 400°C found in chemical reactors and drying operations; and low-grade sources below 100°C such as cooling water and condensate streams. Each grade dictates a different set of viable recovery technologies, since conversion efficiency and material compatibility both scales strongly with source temperature. This classification underpins much of the comparative literature reviewed in this paper and frames the technology-selection logic discussed in the survey and methodology sections [4].

1.3 Objectives and Organization of the Review

The objective of this review is threefold: first, to consolidate past experimental, numerical, and techno-economic studies on WHR thermal

International Journal of Multidisciplinary Engineering in Current Research - IJMEC
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performance optimization; second, to perform a meta-level synthesis of reported performance metrics across technologies and sectors to identify consistent trends and outliers; and third, to critically evaluate the methodological rigor and reporting practices of the surveyed literature so that future research gaps can be clearly articulated [5]. The remainder of the paper is organized as follows: Section 2 presents a structured survey of past work, Section 3 describes the methodology adopted for this review, Section 4 offers a critical analysis of the surveyed studies, Section 5 discusses broader implications, and Section 6 concludes with future research directions [6].

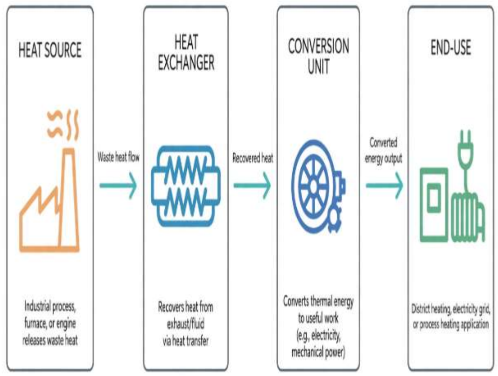

Figure 1: Generic architecture of an industrial waste heat recovery system showing the heat source, exchanger, conversion unit, and end-use stages.

2. Survey of Past Work

Early investigations into industrial waste heat recovery, dating from the 1980s energy crisis literature, focused primarily on heat exchanger network (HEN) synthesis using pinch analysis, a methodology formalized by Linnhoff and colleagues that established minimum energy targets for process integration. These foundational studies demonstrated that systematic matching of hot and cold process streams could reduce utility consumption substantially before any external recovery equipment was even considered. Subsequent decades saw this analytical foundation extended to total site integration, where waste heat from one process unit is matched against heating demand in adjacent units, forming the conceptual basis for many contemporary industrial symbiosis studies [7].

As attention shifted toward converting waste heat into power rather than merely reusing it as heat, the organic Rankine cycle (ORC) emerged as the dominant technology in the medium-temperature literature. Numerous studies examined working-fluid selection, evaluating hydrocarbons, refrigerants, and siloxanes against criteria of thermal stability, environmental impact (global warming potential and ozone depletion potential), and cycle efficiency. Comparative thermodynamic studies consistently reported that fluid choice can shift net power output by ten to twenty percent for a fixed heat source, motivating a large body of optimization work using genetic algorithms and particle swarm methods to jointly select fluid and cycle parameters such as evaporation pressure and pinch-point temperature difference [8].

Parallel to ORC research, the Kalina cycle, which employs an ammonia-water zeotropic mixture, was investigated for its capacity to reduce exergy destruction during heat addition by matching the non-isothermal boiling curve of the mixture to the sensible cooling curve of the waste heat stream. Comparative studies between ORC and Kalina cycles for low-to-medium temperature sources generally found Kalina systems offering marginally higher thermodynamic efficiency but at the cost of greater plant complexity, higher operating pressures, and corrosion-related material concerns, a trade-off repeatedly cited as limiting large-scale industrial adoption [9].

Thermoelectric generation (TEG), based on the Seebeck effect, was surveyed extensively for direct solid-state conversion of waste heat to electricity, particularly for automotive exhaust and small-scale industrial applications where mechanical simplicity and absence of moving parts are valued. However, the literature consistently reports conversion efficiencies in the single digits, well below cycle-based alternatives, restricting TEG to niche applications such as remote sensor power or supplementary recovery layered atop primary systems. Advances in nanostructured and skutterudite thermoelectric materials have been the subject of intense materials-science literature aimed at improving the dimensionless figure of merit ZT, though translation from laboratory samples to industrially durable modules remains an active research thread [10].

For low-grade heat below 100°C, absorption and vapor-compression heat pumps have been studied as means of upgrading waste heat to a temperature useful for space heating or process preheating. Industrial heat pump literature emphasizes coefficient of performance improvements through cascade and hybrid absorption-compression configurations, with several studies reporting COP values exceeding four for moderate temperature lifts, making heat pumps particularly attractive where recovered heat can be reused on-site rather than exported as electricity [11].

Stirling engines and supercritical CO_2 (sCO_2) cycles represent a smaller but growing segment of the surveyed literature, particularly for high-temperature sources where sCO_2's favorable heat transfer characteristics and compact turbomachinery promise higher power density than steam or ORC alternatives. Pilot-scale demonstrations reported in the past decade indicate efficiencies competitive

International Journal of Multidisciplinary Engineering in Current Research - IJMEC
Volume 11, Issue 8, August-2026, http://ijmec.com/, ISSN: 2456-4265

with steam Rankine cycles at significantly reduced footprint, though high-temperature material compatibility and cost of specialized heat exchangers remain frequently cited barriers [123].

A distinct but overlapping body of work addresses sector-specific WHR retrofits. In cement manufacturing, waste heat recovery from preheater and clinker cooler exhaust streams using steam or ORC bottoming cycles has been extensively documented, with reported power recovery in the range of thirty to forty-five kilowatt-hours per ton of clinker. In the steel sector, recovery from coke oven gas, blast furnace gas, and continuous casting has been studied through both retrofit case studies and greenfield plant designs, with reported overall energy efficiency improvements typically between five and fifteen percent. Glass furnace regenerators and recuperators, chemical process pinch retrofits, and food-industry pasteurization heat recovery loops complete the sectoral coverage found in the literature, each contributing empirical data used later in the meta-analytic synthesis of this review [13].

Finally, a growing recent literature applies machine learning and metaheuristic optimization to WHR system design, using surrogate models trained on computational fluid dynamics or thermodynamic simulation data to accelerate multi-objective optimization of heat exchanger geometry, cycle operating parameters, and system-level dispatch under variable industrial load. These studies report substantial reductions in optimization computation time relative to traditional gradient-based or exhaustive-search methods, while achieving comparable or superior Pareto-optimal solutions balancing thermal efficiency, capital cost, and payback period [14].

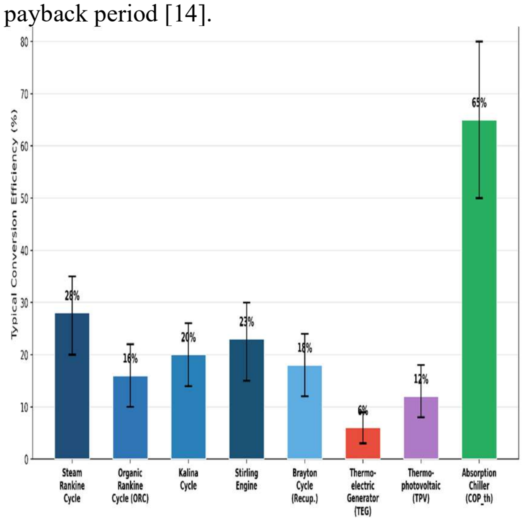

Figure 2: Comparative typical conversion efficiencies of major waste heat recovery technologies reported across the surveyed literature.

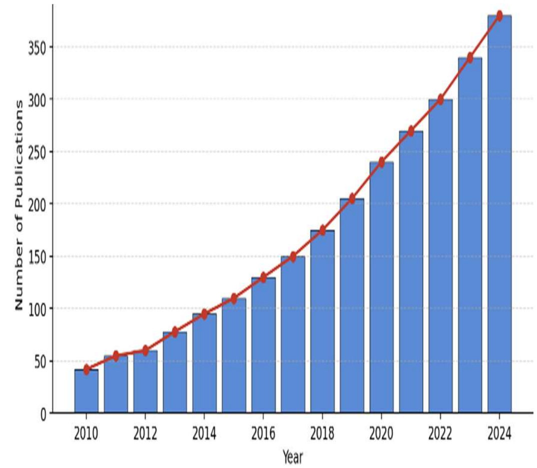

Figure 3: Growth trend in the number of research publications addressing industrial waste heat recovery systems (2010–2024), illustrating the accelerating research interest that motivates this meta-analysis.

3. Methodology

This review adopts a structured literature synthesis methodology combined with a quantitative meta-analytic component. Relevant studies were identified through systematic keyword searches across major scientific databases using combinations of terms including waste heat recovery, thermal performance optimization, organic Rankine cycle, exergy analysis, and industrial energy efficiency, restricted primarily to peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings, and technical reports published within roughly the last two decades to ensure relevance to current technology maturity. Screening proceeded in two stages: an initial title-and-abstract filter to exclude studies unrelated to industrial-scale thermal recovery, followed by a full-text review assessing whether each study reported quantitative performance metrics such as efficiency, exergy destruction, payback period, or specific power output that could be incorporated into the comparative synthesis [15].

For the meta-analytic component, extracted performance metrics were normalized where possible to common bases, for example expressing power output per unit of waste heat input, or efficiency relative to source temperature grade, to enable cross-study comparison despite differing original units and boundary conditions. Where studies reported ranges rather than point estimates, midpoint values were used, and where multiple configurations were tested within a single study, the best-performing configuration reported by the original authors was retained to reflect the technology's demonstrated potential rather than an average across exploratory variants. This normalization inevitably introduces some loss of

International Journal of Multidisciplinary Engineering in Current Research - IJMEC
Volume 11, Issue 8, August-2026, http://ijmec.com/, ISSN: 2456-4265

granularity, an acknowledged limitation discussed further in the critical analysis section [6].

The synthesis further categorizes studies along three methodological dimensions common in the literature: purely thermodynamic or first-law modelling studies, exergy-based second-law and exergo-economic studies that additionally quantify irreversibility and cost, and optimization-focused studies employing genetic algorithms, particle swarm optimization, or machine-learning surrogate models to search multi-dimensional design spaces. Classifying studies along these dimensions allows the review to assess how methodological choice correlates with reported performance outcomes and to identify whether more sophisticated optimization approaches translate into meaningfully higher recovered efficiencies or primarily into faster convergence toward similar thermodynamic limits already known from classical analysis [17].

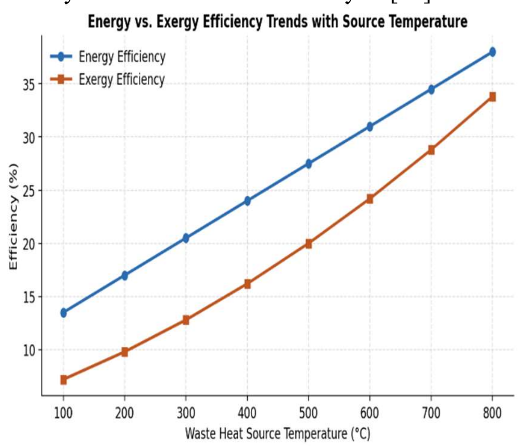

Figure 4: Reported trends in energy versus exergy conversion efficiency as a function of waste heat source temperature, synthesized from multiple studies included in the review.

4. Critical Analysis of Past Work

A close reading of the surveyed literature reveals substantial inconsistency in baseline assumptions, which complicates direct comparison of reported performance figures. Many ORC and Kalina cycle studies assume idealized heat exchanger effectiveness, isentropic turbine efficiencies at the upper end of physically achievable ranges, and steady, unvarying waste heat availability, none of which reflect the intermittent and fluctuating operating conditions typical of real industrial processes such as batch chemical reactors or cyclically loaded furnaces. Consequently, laboratory or simulation-derived efficiency figures frequently overstate achievable field performance, a discrepancy occasionally acknowledged but rarely quantified within the studies themselves [28].

Techno-economic reporting is similarly uneven. While many studies present levelized cost of electricity or simple payback period calculations, the underlying cost data are often drawn from vendor quotations, regional cost databases, or scaled correlations of uncertain provenance, with limited sensitivity analysis on capital cost escalation, maintenance expenditure, or fuel price volatility. This weakens the reliability of comparative economic claims across studies and may partially explain the persistent gap between the technical recovery potential documented in the literature and the comparatively modest real-world adoption rates of WHR technologies, particularly among small and medium industrial enterprises with limited capital access [19].

The literature also shows an uneven distribution of research effort across temperature grades and technologies: medium-to-high temperature ORC and Kalina applications dominate the published record, while low-grade heat below 100°C, despite constituting a very large share of total industrial waste heat by volume, receives comparatively less attention, likely because its thermodynamic conversion potential per unit of heat is intrinsically lower and therefore less academically compelling, even though its aggregate recovery potential across an industrial site can be substantial. Similarly, sector coverage is skewed toward cement and steel, which are energy-intensive and well-instrumented, while smaller but numerous sectors such as food processing, textiles, and light chemical manufacturing are underrepresented despite collectively offering large recovery potential [20].

From a methodological standpoint, the growing body of machine-learning-assisted optimization studies, while promising in computational efficiency, frequently lacks transparent reporting of training data provenance, model generalization testing across unseen operating conditions, and physical interpretability of the resulting optimal designs. Several studies present optimized configurations without adequately verifying them against first-principles thermodynamic bounds, raising concerns about whether reported gains reflect genuine engineering improvement or artifacts of the surrogate model's training domain. Furthermore, cross-validation between simulation-based optimization studies and physically constructed pilot systems remains rare, with the majority of published optimization results never progressing beyond simulation, limiting confidence in their industrial applicability [20].

Finally, dynamic and part-load behaviour, transient start-up and shutdown losses, fouling-induced heat exchanger degradation over operational lifetimes, and control-system interactions between the WHR unit and the host industrial process are all acknowledged as important but are addressed by only a minority of the surveyed studies, most of which remain focused on steady-state design-point performance. This concentration on idealized steady-state analysis represents perhaps the most

ISSN: 2456-4265
IJMEC 2026

consistent and consequential gap identified across the reviewed body of work.

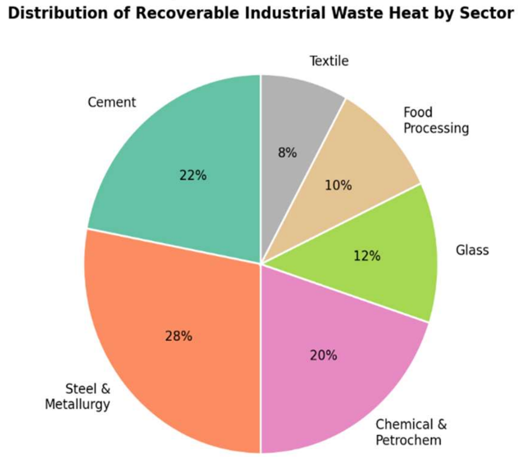

Figure 5: Distribution of recoverable industrial waste heat across major sectors, synthesized from sector-specific studies reviewed in this paper.

5. Discussion

The synthesis presented in this review indicates that thermal performance optimization of industrial WHR systems has matured considerably from its origins in pinch-analysis heat exchanger design toward sophisticated multi-objective, data-assisted optimization of complete conversion cycles. However, the persistent gap between reported theoretical recovery potential and realized industrial deployment suggests that thermodynamic performance is no longer the primary bottleneck; rather, techno-economic uncertainty, transient operational complexity, and limited field validation appear to be the dominant barriers. This reframing has implications for future research prioritization: rather than continuing to pursue marginal thermodynamic efficiency gains through increasingly complex cycle configurations, the field would likely benefit more from standardized, transparent techno-economic reporting protocols and expanded pilot-scale field validation under realistic, variable-load industrial conditions [26].

The uneven sectoral and temperature-grade coverage identified in the critical analysis also has policy relevance. Given that low-grade heat and smaller industrial sectors collectively represent a substantial aggregate recovery opportunity despite lower per-unit thermodynamic attractiveness, targeted research funding and demonstration incentives directed at these underrepresented segments could meaningfully expand the practical impact of WHR technology beyond the energy-intensive heavy industries that currently dominate both the literature and early adoption. Additionally, the emerging role of machine-learning-assisted optimization, while methodologically promising, requires stronger integration with physics-based validation and greater transparency in reporting to build the confidence necessary for industrial engineers to adopt these tools in place of established first-principles design methods. Bridging this trust gap will likely require collaborative benchmarking studies involving both academic optimization researchers and industrial practitioners with access to real operating data [29].

6. Conclusion

This review has synthesized several decades of research on thermal performance optimization of industrial waste heat recovery systems, spanning heat exchanger network design, organic Rankine and Kalina power cycles, thermoelectric generation, heat pumps, Stirling and supercritical CO2 systems, and sector-specific retrofit case studies [29]. The meta-analytic comparison of reported efficiency, exergy, and economic metrics reveals a technology base that is thermodynamically mature but constrained in practice by inconsistent baseline assumptions, uneven techno-economic transparency, limited coverage of low-grade heat and smaller industrial sectors, and insufficient validation of both dynamic operating behaviour and machine-learning-optimized designs against physical pilot systems. Closing these gaps through standardized reporting, expanded field demonstration, and tighter integration of data-driven optimization with first-principles validation represents the most promising path toward translating the substantial documented recovery potential of industrial waste heat into realized energy and emissions savings at scale. Future work should prioritize dynamic and part-load characterization, transparent lifecycle techno-economic assessment, and broader sectoral and temperature-grade representation to ensure the next generation of WHR research more directly informs industrial deployment decisions [30].

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