Damage-Resistant Brittle Coatings

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Laminate structures consisting of hard, brittle coatings and soft, tough substrates are important in a wide variety of engineering applications (cutting tools, electronic multilayers, laminated windscreens), biological structures (teeth and dental crowns, shells, bones), and traditional pottery (ceramic glazes). A hard outerlayer variously offers increased load-bearing capacity, wear resistance, thermal and corrosion protection, electrical insulation, and aesthetics; a compliant underlayer offers stress redistribution and damage tolerance. But hard layers are susceptible to cracking, especially in surface-concentrated loads from static or cyclic contacts. In natural or restorative tooth structures, for instance, forces in excess of 100 N operate at contacts between opposing cusps of characteristic radii 2–4 mm over 10^7 cycles, leading to occasional premature failures.[1] The stress field in the supported brittle coating is Hertzian-like in the near-contact region and flexure-like in the far-contact region, with resultant competing modes of fracture and damage, including some new modes not observed in monolithic materials. These damage modes determine the useful lifetime of the layer structure.

Conventional design of brittle layer structures is based on a philosophy of "crack containment", i.e., preventing already well-developed cracks in the coating from penetrating into adjacent layers, so increasing the effective "toughness" of the composite structure. Several approaches of this kind have been proposed.[2] i) Crack deflection along weak interfaces between hard layers. Cracks are deflected out of the main tensile field along weak orthogonal interlayer interfaces.[3,4] ii) Crack arrest in tough substrates. When a crack enters a toughened sublayer where they are slowed and arrested,[5–9] iv) Crack confinement by stress redistribution. Incorporation of a soft underlayer with a strong interface redirects and confines cracks within the boundaries of the outer coating.[10–12] Generally, effective crack containment calls for thinner brittle layers and higher interlayer mismatch. Crack-containment approaches are viable where limited cracking in brittle outerlayers is tolerable (e.g., automobile windshields, thermal shock applications). But in many applications one cannot sustain even a single crack (e.g., dental crowns, ceramic-coated cutting tools, corrosion protective coatings, electronic multilayer devices). Such cracks may occur at much lower loads than those needed to cause ultimate failure. The problem is exacerbated in prolonged or cyclic loading, where even the smallest of cracks or other inelastic damage can evolve steadily but inexorably into a catastrophic failure.[13,14] A more conservative approach is called for—one must design against crack initiation rather than crack propagation. The idea is not so much to contain cracks once they start, but to prevent them from starting in the first place. This can lead to conflicting requirements in layer dimensions and material properties.

In this study we introduce a new approach to the design of damage-resistant brittle coatings, based on a combination of new and existing relations for crack initiation in well-defined contact-induced stress fields. Consider a brittle layer of thickness d on a compliant substrate, with a well-bonded interface, subjected to contact at load P with a sphere of radius r, Figure 1. The coating is considered to be thin enough that it flexes under the applied contact. Since we are interested in first damage in the brittle coating, we may treat the system as elastic up to the critical load. There are two main fracture modes,[15] both of which initiate from some surface flaw:

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where $A$ is a dimensionless constant and $G_c$ is the crack resistance (toughness). Equation 1 is the well-documented “Auerbach’s law”.[16,17] Notwithstanding the fact that the crack must start from a surface flaw, $P_{cone}$ is insensitive to initial flaw size. Thus, it is toughness $G_c$ and not strength that governs in this case. Equation 1 is independent of thickness $d$, because crack initiation occurs in the near-contact field.

**Radial cracks:** This is a relatively new fracture mode, unique to layer structures in concentrated loads.[9,10,12,18] The cracks pop in at the bottom surface of the coating (i.e., at the coating/substrate interface) immediately below the contact, and extend radially over large lateral distances as the load is increased beyond the critical value. They remain subsurface during this lateral extension and so are not easily detected in opaque coatings. The tensile stress component responsible for this insidious form of damage is from flexure of the coating, and so has a dependence $\sigma \propto P/r^2$ characteristic of plates in bending.[19] Radial cracking initiates spontaneously from a starting surface flaw at a critical load $P_{rad}$, when $\sigma$ equals the bulk flexure strength $\sigma_F$ of the coating.[15] Resort to an engineering stress analysis for an infinitely wide center-point-loaded slab (coating) on a compliant foundation (substrate)[19] yields the explicit relation

$$P_{rad} = B\sigma_F d^2 \log(CE_c/E_s)$$  \hspace{1cm} (2)$$

in the limit of small contact radius ($a \ll d$, Fig. 1) and coating surface displacement, with $E_c$ and $E_s$ respective Young’s moduli and $B$ and $C$ dimensionless constants. Equation 2 represents an entirely new formulation in the context of brittle coatings. The quantity $C$ is expected to be close to unity, because the flexure component of the stress field must vanish in monoliths ($P_{rad} \rightarrow \infty$, $E_c = E_s$). It is strength $\sigma_F$ that now governs. Note that $P_{rad}$ is insensitive to sphere radius $r$, reflective of a far-field solution.

We illustrate with data for first cracking induced by a WC sphere of radius $r = 3.96 \text{ mm}$ on soda-lime glass (modulus $E_c = 70 \text{ GPa}$) plates of thicknesses $d = 100 \mu\text{m}$ to 6 mm, bonded with a thin layer (<10 μm) of epoxy adhesive onto thick (12.5 mm), transparent low-modulus glass ($E_s = 44 \text{ GPa}$ and 20 GPa) and polycarbonate plastic ($E_s = 2.35 \text{ GPa}$) substrates. The interlayer adhesion is sufficiently strong that delamination is never observed in our experiments. Both upper and lower surfaces of the soda-lime glass coatings are abraded with 600 SiC grit prior to bonding to the substrates to ensure homogeneity of flaw sizes and densities for crack initiation. A singular advantage of transparent layers is that one may observe and measure critical loads for crack initiation in situ using a camera below the contact, Figure 1. Examples of each kind of crack are shown in Figure 2. Critical load data are plotted in Figure 3 as a function of $d$, for each modulus $E_s$ relative to $E_c$. Solid lines through the data correspond to fitted parameters in Equations 1 and 2: for cone cracks, $A = 7.4 \times 10^3$, using $G_c = 7.7 \text{ J m}^{-2}$ for soda-lime glass;[20] for radial cracks, $B = 2.04$ and $C = 0.94$, using $\sigma_F = 110 \text{ MPa}$ for abraded soda-lime glass.[15] Whereas cone cracking is not sensitive to $d$ or $E_c/E_s$, radial cracking most certainly is, consistent with ex-
Page 70 GPa) on soft glass and polycarbonate substrates (thickness $t$). For applications 1 and 2, dashed horizontal line indicates design load $P_{rad}$ in Equations 1 and 2. Suppose that an application specifies a maximum tolerable load $P_{rad}$ in the region beneath the solid lines in Figure 3. In the context of dental structures, concentrated loads are necessary to remain in the “safe” region against first fracture in brittle coating structures subjected to acting concentrated loading conditions.

Equations 1 and 2 provide a simple basis for designing against first fracture in brittle coating structures subjected to concentrated loads. It is necessary to remain in the “safe” region beneath the solid lines in Figure 3. Suppose that an application specifies a maximum tolerable load $P_{rad}$. The first requirement for crack-free brittle coatings is simply to ensure that the effective radius of the contacting body always exceeds $r_m$ (avoid sharp contacts). The second, more stringent requirement is to maintain the coating thickness greater than $d_m$ (avoid thin layers), which in turn places some restriction on the lower limit of modulus $E_c$ relative to $E_s$ (avoid very compliant substrates). This second requirement runs counter to those of the crack-containment philosophy outlined earlier, so that optimum design may demand compromises if some damage tolerance is to be retained—e.g., remain to the right, but not too far to the right, of $d_m$ in Figure 3. In the context of dental structures, it is pertinent to recall that $P_{rad} = 100$ N is a high-end biting force in oral function; that the modulus of tooth enamel and restorative porcelain veneer is $E_c = 65–70$ GPa (similar to our soda-lime glass coating) relative to $E_s = 15–20$ GPa for dentin (similar to our intermediate substrate modulus); that typical cuspal radii lie within $r = 2$ to 4 mm (slightly higher than our estimate of $r_m$); and that tooth and crown structures lie within a thickness range $d = 1–2$ mm (comfortably higher than our estimate of $d_m$). We are currently using these principles, in close collaboration with dental clinicians, to design more damage-resistant, longer-lifetime crowns.

The above formulation identifies toughness $G_c$ and strength $\sigma_c$ as important coating fracture parameters. In glasses and fine-grain polycrystalline ceramics with single-valued toughness (implicit in our derivations), increasing one of these parameters usually increases the other (as well as elastic modulus). On the other hand, in heterogeneous, coarse-grain ceramics with weak internal (grain boundary) interfaces, strength and toughness tend to be inversely related. The weak interfaces deflect the cracks and cause interlocking grains to “bridge” opposite walls behind the advancing tip, progressively increasing the toughness as the crack extends (“crack-resistance curve”). Conversely, these same microstructural-scale weaknesses tend to diminish the toughness in the short-crack domain of natural flaws, degrading the strength. They also promote an alternative form of cumulative microdamage beneath the contact, which can lead to greatly accelerated fatigue and wear. Hence, contrary to conventional expectation, high “toughness” does not guarantee improved performance, and may in fact degrade it. High strength is the more important coating fracture property. We note that, given the above evaluations of $B$ and $C$, Equation 2 may be transposed to enable useful estimates of strengths of brittle coatings from simple measurements of critical loads to radial fracture.

The strength requirement means that one needs to avoid large surface flaws in the brittle coating, either natural or inadvertent (e.g., by machining), since $\sigma_c$ varies with the inverse square root of flaw size. Thus $P_{rad}$ in Equation 2 also varies with the inverse square root of flaw size (although $P_{cone}$ in Equation 1 remains relatively insensitive). Our deliberate use of abraded surfaces for experimental control means that the $P_{rad}(d)$ data in Figure 3 may be regarded as conservative estimates of practical load-bearing capacity of glassy coatings, realistically expanding the domain of safe operation to somewhat smaller thicknesses.

Equations 1 and 2 appeal because of their simple closed form. They are not exact: the coefficient $A$ in Equation 1 may depend slightly on $d$ (Fig. 3), as well as on Poisson’s ratio of the coating material and modulus of the indenter; the coefficient $B$ in Equation 2 also depends slightly on $d$, especially in the region of very thin films, and $C$ slightly on the ratio $a/d$ (Fig. 1). Of course, any practical application of Equations 1 and 2 should always be augmented with experimental data on real systems, or numerical analysis using finite element algorithms. Nevertheless, we believe that our formulation provides a sound physical basis for designing brittle coating structures against lifetime-threatening damage in exacting concentrated loading conditions.

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During the past few years there has been increasing interest in the study and production of metallic foams.\textsuperscript{[1]} These materials have a very high stiffness-to-weight ratio and interesting thermostructural characteristics that, since they depend on the relative density, are adjustable to multifarious needs. Metallic foams are cellular materials that can bear heavy loads, achieving an excellent compromise of stiffness, strength, and weight. Thus these materials can be employed not only as fillers, but also for particular structural functions. It is easy to understand why there is great interest in the industrial uses of these materials. In fact, foams are potentially the best materials for a great number of industrial applications, even if their production and characterization present some difficulties.

Metallic foams are a relatively recent development and, therefore, knowledge of their mechanical properties is not exhaustive. Mathematical models for the behavior of metallic foams are not optimized and it is sometimes necessary to borrow models from polymer foam science,\textsuperscript{[2]} though this does not always give accurate results.

The aim of our work was to optimize a mathematical equation for predicting the plateau stress (the part of the curve just after the elastic limit) of aluminum foams of different densities. The foam we studied is made by Alcan by a metallurgical melting route. We determined numerically the correct equation and verified it with static compression tests and observations with the optical microscope. The two kinds of test were carried out on several specimens of two different densities (0.16 and 0.32 g/cm\(^3\)). In order to achieve our objective, the work was split into two phases: first the formulation of the equation (before which, however, it was necessary to undertake preliminary compression tests), and second the validation of the model. Our results show the appropriateness of the model and a good match between the experimental and calculated plateau stress values.

From various plateau stress evaluation models for cellular materials in the scientific literature,\textsuperscript{[2–4]} we chose the following to represent our aluminum foam.

\[
\frac{\sigma^*_p}{\sigma_y} = C_r \left( \frac{\rho^*}{\rho_s} \right)^{3/2} + C_3 (1 - \Phi) \left( \frac{\rho^*}{\rho_s} \right)
\]

Here \(\sigma^*_p\) is the plateau stress, \(\sigma_y\) is the yield stress of the monolithic material, \(\rho^*\) is the foam density expressed in g/cm\(^3\), \(\rho_s\) is the density of the monolithic material, \((1 - \Phi)\) is the volume solid fraction present in the wall cells, while \(\Phi\) is the solid volume fraction present in the edges and estimated by the following expression.

\[
\Phi = \frac{t_e^2}{t_f^2 + \frac{Z_f}{n} t_f l} \tag{2}
\]

In Equation 2, \(t_f\) is the face thickness, \(t_e\) the edge thickness, \(n\) is the average number of edges for each wall of the single cell, \(l\) is the average length of the walls, and \(Z_f\) is the number of walls in each edge. All the variables present in Equation 2 have been derived by image analysis. In Figure 1b it is possible to see, as an example, one of the images from which these variables have been calculated.

**Image Analysis of Millistructure for Mechanical Characterization of Aluminum Foam**

By Marco Valente,\* Marco Parisi, and Francesca Nanni

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