Predicting the Mechanical Behavior of Fiber-Reinforced Polymer Composites Through Data-Driven Multiscale Modeling

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Abstract

Fiber-reinforced polymer composites exhibit mechanical behavior that emerges from coupled mechanisms across fiber, matrix, interface, and laminate scales. Computational homogenization can represent these mechanisms, but repeated fine-scale simulations are too expensive for design exploration, inverse identification, and uncertainty propagation. This manuscript develops a data-driven multiscale modeling framework for predicting effective elastic and failure-relevant response of fiber-reinforced polymer composites with quantified uncertainty. The framework combines representative volume element analyses, microstructure descriptors that encode fiber volume fraction, orientation, aspect ratio, spatial clustering, and interface-sensitive quantities, and a physics-constrained surrogate that maps descriptors to homogenized properties. A Gaussian-process component supplies nonparametric regression and predictive variance, while a physics-informed residual term enforces equilibrium-consistent trends and monotonic constraints derived from micromechanics. Multifidelity correction links inexpensive lower-fidelity estimates to higher-fidelity homogenization data, and Bayesian calibration treats uncertain model parameters and manufacturing-induced variability explicitly. The central contribution is an integrated formulation that connects microstructural descriptors, surrogate inference, physics constraints, multifidelity correction, and uncertainty propagation in one predictive chain. The analysis clarifies where data-driven acceleration is defensible, how descriptor choice affects extrapolation, and why calibration must separate parameter uncertainty from model discrepancy. The resulting framework provides a technically grounded route for predicting composite mechanical behavior without treating machine learning as a black-box substitute for mechanics.

Keywords

fiber-reinforced polymer composites; multiscale modeling; data-driven surrogate; computational homogenization; uncertainty quantification; physics-informed learning

1. Introduction

Fiber-reinforced polymer composites are used where stiffness, strength, and low mass must be combined, but their mechanical response is difficult to predict from constituent properties alone. Fiber orientation, volume fraction, waviness, clustering, interface quality, and matrix nonlinearity interact across scales. Classical micromechanical estimates provide useful bounds and closed-form approximations for effective elastic constants [1], while more

general effective-field and homogenization treatments clarify how phase geometry and contrast enter the overall response [2]. These methods remain valuable for screening, yet they cannot by themselves resolve local fields, damage initiation, or process-induced heterogeneity in realistic microstructures.

Computational multiscale modeling addresses this limitation by solving a microscale boundary-value problem and passing homogenized quantities to a macroscale model. Adaptive model control and practical multiscaling strategies establish when fine-scale resolution is necessary and how scale coupling can be managed [3], [4]. Computational homogenization provides a systematic route from representative volume elements to effective constitutive response [5], and nonlinear multiscale theories extend the idea to history-dependent and damaging material behavior [6]. The cost of repeated micro-problems remains the central obstacle, especially when many candidate microstructures, loading paths, or uncertain parameters must be examined.

Data-driven materials modeling has emerged as a way to amortize this cost. Surrogate construction, reduced-order representation, and uncertainty-aware design have been proposed to replace repeated fine-scale solves with learned mappings [7]. Reduced-order homogenization and clustering methods further reduce the number of microstructural degrees of freedom by grouping similar local states or constructing eigendeformation-based approximations [8], [9]. These developments make accelerated prediction plausible, but they also expose a methodological risk: a surrogate trained only to minimize interpolation error can violate micromechanical constraints, extrapolate poorly outside its descriptor domain, and obscure the difference between parameter uncertainty and model-form error.

The knowledge gap addressed here is the absence of a coherent predictive chain that treats microstructure description, surrogate inference, physics constraints, multifidelity correction, and calibration as linked decisions rather than separate modules. The central contribution is a data-driven multiscale formulation for fiber-reinforced polymer composites in which homogenized mechanical response is predicted from interpretable microstructural descriptors, a Gaussian-process surrogate supplies predictive uncertainty, physics-informed terms restrict inadmissible response surfaces, multifidelity correction accounts for cheaper approximations, and Bayesian calibration separates uncertain parameters from discrepancy. The framework is analytical and methodological; it specifies how the components should be defined and related, and it identifies the conditions under which the resulting predictions can be trusted.

2. Multiscale Problem Formulation

Consider a composite body whose macroscale response is to be predicted from a microscale representative volume element. The macroscale stress and strain are volume averages of their microscale fields. For a representative domain Ω, the effective response can be written as

$$\langle \sigma \rangle = (1/|\Omega|) \int_\Omega \sigma(x)\, dx = C_eff : \langle \varepsilon \rangle$$

where ⟨ σ⟩ is the macroscopic stress, ⟨ ε⟩ is the macroscopic strain, σ(x) and ε(x) are local fields, C_eff is the effective elasticity tensor, and |Ω| is the domain measure. This relation defines the homogenization target and makes clear that the surrogate ultimately predicts a tensor-valued or scalar-valued function of microstructural descriptors, not a collection of arbitrary features.

At the microscale, the fields must satisfy equilibrium and constitutive relations. With periodic boundary conditions and prescribed macroscopic strain, the cell problem can be posed as

$$\nabla \cdot \sigma(x) = 0, \sigma(x) = C(x) : \varepsilon(x), \varepsilon(x) = \langle \varepsilon \rangle + \nabla_s \, u\sim(x)$$

where C(x) is the local stiffness tensor, u~(x) is the periodic displacement fluctuation, and ∇_s denotes the symmetric gradient. The boundary conditions remove rigid-body modes and impose the macroscopic strain. In a fiber-reinforced polymer composite, C(x) takes distinct values in fiber, matrix, and interphase regions; interface debonding or matrix yielding requires a nonlinear version of the same cell problem. The finite-element squared or FE2 strategy solves such cell problems at each macroscopic integration point [10], which is accurate but computationally demanding when many evaluations are needed.

Two assumptions delimit the present formulation. First, scale separation is assumed sufficient for a representative volume element to exist over the loading range of interest. Second, the microscale geometry is treated as statistically characterized rather than known exactly at every material point. These assumptions do not remove the need for local verification; they define the domain in which a descriptor-to-property surrogate is meaningful. The surrogate is therefore not a replacement for homogenization theory. It is an approximation to the homogenization map, designed to preserve the mechanical structure of that map.

3. Microstructural Descriptors and Data Generation

The predictive quality of a multiscale surrogate depends strongly on descriptor choice. A descriptor vector should retain the microstructural features that control the target response while remaining low-dimensional enough for efficient regression. Microstructure characterization and reconstruction methods provide a basis for selecting such features from images, statistical functions, or generated geometries [11]. Random heterogeneous material theory further clarifies how volume fraction, inclusion shape, spatial correlation, and interface statistics affect effective properties [12].

For the present framework, each microstructure realization I is represented by

$$\phi(I) = \left[f_f, A_f, \lambda_1, \lambda_2, d_f, \chi \right]^T$$

where f_f is fiber volume fraction, A_f is a fiber aspect-ratio measure, λ_1 and λ_2 are principal orientation parameters, d_f is a dispersion or clustering index, and χ is an interface-quality or void-content indicator. The vector can be extended for waviness, laminate stacking sequence, or process-induced porosity when those features are relevant. The descriptors are not arbitrary statistical summaries; each is chosen because it has a plausible mechanical pathway to stiffness, anisotropy, or failure initiation.

Data generation for the surrogate should combine designed sampling with physically admissible geometry generation. Low-discrepancy sampling over the descriptor domain improves coverage, while reconstruction or virtual generation produces representative volume elements consistent with each descriptor vector. Homogenization then supplies effective stiffness components, strength proxies, or damage-onset indicators. The resulting training set maps ϕ to a response vector y. Because the response may be tensor-valued, the implementation should either predict independent components with symmetry constraints or use an invariant representation that respects material symmetry. The latter is preferable for

anisotropic fiber composites, where an unconstrained component-wise fit can produce thermodynamically inconsistent stiffness tensors.

A critical design choice concerns the sampling domain. A surrogate trained only on narrow, process-specific ranges may interpolate accurately but fail under changes in fiber volume fraction, orientation dispersion, or interface quality. The descriptor space should therefore be bounded by admissible manufacturing and micromechanical ranges, and the boundary should be documented together with the training distribution. Extrapolation beyond that domain is not a routine prediction problem; it is a model-selection problem that requires additional homogenization data or explicit conservative bounds.

4. Data-Driven Surrogate and Physics Constraints

The surrogate used here has two components. The first is a Gaussian-process regressor, which provides nonparametric interpolation and a predictive variance from a covariance kernel [13]. For a descriptor vector ϕ, the predicted response can be expressed as

$$y(\phi *) \approx \mu_0 + \sum_{i=1}^{N} \alpha_i k(\phi *, \phi_i) + f_p(\phi *)$$

where μ_0 is a mean function, k is a positive-definite covariance kernel, α_i are weights determined by the training data, N is the number of training points, and f_p is a physics-informed correction. The kernel controls smoothness and correlation length in descriptor space. A squared-exponential kernel implies strong smoothness, whereas a Matérn kernel allows less smooth response surfaces that may be more appropriate near damage thresholds. The Gaussian-process term is valuable because it supplies both a mean prediction and a variance, which can be propagated rather than discarded.

The physics-informed term prevents the surrogate from fitting mechanically inadmissible trends. Physics-informed neural networks demonstrate how differential-equation residuals can be embedded in a learning objective [14], and theory-guided data science argues for combining domain knowledge with data-driven inference rather than treating them as alternatives [15]. In the present setting, the residual can penalize violations of equilibrium-consistent monotonicity, positive definiteness of the effective stiffness tensor, or known bounds on effective moduli. A composite loss can be written as

$$L = (1/N_d)\sum_\{i = 1\}\^\{N_d\} ||y_i - \hat{y}_i||^2 + \lambda_r ||R(\hat{y})||^2 + \lambda_s ||\nabla_\phi \hat{y}||^2$$

where y_i and ŷ_i are observed and predicted responses, N_d is the number of data points, R(ŷ) is a vector of physics residuals, ∇_ϕ ŷ is the descriptor gradient, and λ_r and λ_s are regularization weights. The first term enforces data fidelity, the second penalizes violation of micromechanical constraints, and the third controls sensitivity to descriptor perturbations. The weights are not merely tuning parameters; they express a trade-off between fitting the available homogenization data and preserving known response structure.

Manufacturing variability must enter the descriptor set when it changes the mechanics. Robotic fiber-reinforced polymer winding for large customizable formwork illustrates how deposition path, tension, and winding sequence can create orientation and void patterns that differ from idealized laminates [16]. The present framework does not attempt to model the winding process directly. It treats measurable or reconstructable process signatures as descriptors, so that their effect on effective stiffness or failure initiation can be learned from homogenization of representative process-affected volumes.

A second acceleration layer is multifidelity correction. Lower-fidelity models, such as mean-field estimates or coarse-mesh homogenization, are cheap but biased. A higher-fidelity homogenization result can be related to a lower-fidelity prediction through

$$y_H(\phi) = \rho y_L(\phi) + \delta(\phi)$$

where y_H and y_L are high- and low-fidelity responses, ρ is a scaling factor, and δ(ϕ) is a discrepancy function. Multifidelity methods provide a systematic framework for uncertainty propagation, inference, and optimization when simulations of different cost and accuracy are available [17]. In the present context, ρ and δ can be learned from a limited number of high-fidelity runs, while the low-fidelity model supplies broad coverage. The correction is especially useful when the high-fidelity data are expensive but the descriptor space is large.

The combination of Gaussian-process regression, physics residuals, and multifidelity correction is appropriate because each component addresses a different failure mode of purely data-driven prediction. The Gaussian process handles interpolation and uncertainty; the physics residual reduces implausible extrapolation; the multifidelity term controls bias from cheap approximations. A single neural network trained on raw homogenization outputs could fit the same data, but it would not naturally provide calibrated variance, would require more data for stable training, and would offer weaker guarantees near descriptor boundaries.

5. Uncertainty Quantification and Calibration

Prediction without uncertainty is of limited use in composite design because many quantities are uncertain: constituent properties, interface parameters, fiber orientation statistics, and model-form assumptions. The described surrogate produces a predictive distribution rather than a point estimate. If θ denotes uncertain model parameters and ϕ denotes uncertain descriptors, the predictive distribution for a new response y given data D is

$$p(y*|D) = \int\int p(y*|\theta,\phi)\, p(\theta|D)\, p(\phi)\, d\theta\, d\phi$$

where p(θ|D) is the posterior over parameters and p(ϕ) is the distribution of descriptors induced by manufacturing or sampling uncertainty. This integral makes the separation between parameter uncertainty and descriptor uncertainty explicit. In practice, the integral can be evaluated by Monte Carlo sampling from the posterior and descriptor distribution, or by deterministic quadrature when the dimension is low. The surrogate variance enters through p(y|θ, ϕ), while the descriptor distribution controls how uncertainty in microstructure propagates to effective response.

Calibration is necessary when the surrogate is compared with physical measurements or higher-fidelity simulations. Bayesian calibration of computer models provides a principled formulation that includes parameter uncertainty and model discrepancy [18]. A calibration relation can be written as

$$z_i = \eta(\phi_i;\theta) + \delta(\phi_i) + \epsilon_i$$

where z_i is an observed or reference response, η(ϕ_i; θ) is the simulator or surrogate prediction at descriptor vector ϕ_i, δ(ϕ_i) is a discrepancy function, and ϵ_i is observation or numerical error. The discrepancy term is not a nuisance. It represents structural error caused by missing physics, unresolved microscale features, or incorrect boundary conditions. Failing to include it forces parameter estimates to absorb model error and produces overconfident predictions.

Several calibration decisions follow from this formulation. The discrepancy function should be smooth in descriptor space unless there is evidence for abrupt model changes. The error model should reflect the source of the reference data, including numerical discretization error when the reference is a simulation. Priors on θ should be bounded by physically admissible constituent properties. Finally, calibration and validation should be separated: calibration data inform the posterior, while independent data test whether the posterior predictive distribution is adequate. The framework therefore treats uncertainty quantification as part of the multiscale model, not as a post-processing step.

6. Technical Discussion

The proposed framework is technically appropriate for fiber-reinforced polymer composites because it preserves the mechanical interpretation of the prediction target. Effective stiffness, anisotropy, and damage-onset indicators are not arbitrary labels; they are consequences of volume fraction, orientation, phase contrast, and interface behavior. Descriptors such as f_f, λ_1, λ_2, d_f, and χ retain that interpretation. This matters for extrapolation. A surrogate trained on physically meaningful descriptors can be constrained near known limits, whereas a raw image-to-property model may learn correlations that do not survive changes in manufacturing route or fiber sizing chemistry.

The Gaussian-process component also imposes a useful discipline on data collection. Predictive variance increases where training data are sparse, which helps identify regions of descriptor space that require additional homogenization runs. In contrast, a deterministic neural surrogate may produce confident predictions in unsupported regions. The physics-informed residual further reduces the risk of nonphysical response surfaces, but it does not eliminate the need for verification. A stiffness tensor predicted by the surrogate should still be checked for positive definiteness and symmetry, and failure-related predictions should be checked against known limiting cases.

The multifidelity correction introduces a trade-off between coverage and bias. If the low-fidelity model is systematically biased in a way that the discrepancy function cannot capture, correction may create misleading confidence. The discrepancy model should therefore be validated on held-out high-fidelity data, and its complexity should be matched to the number of high-fidelity runs. This is a practical constraint rather than a conceptual objection. Multifidelity correction is most defensible when the low-fidelity model has the correct qualitative dependence on the descriptors and the bias is smooth over the domain.

The calibration formulation also separates two questions that are often conflated: what parameter values are consistent with the data, and how wrong is the model? The discrepancy term $\delta(\phi)$ addresses the second question. This separation is essential in multiscale composites because missing interface physics can mimic a change in matrix modulus, and unresolved fiber waviness can mimic a change in anisotropy. Without a discrepancy term, calibration may produce precise but physically distorted parameters. With it, the posterior can represent both parameter uncertainty and structural model error.

The framework has clear boundary conditions. It assumes that a representative volume element exists and that the descriptor set captures the dominant mechanisms. It does not resolve discrete damage events below the representative volume element scale, nor does it replace fracture-mechanics analysis when crack propagation dominates. It also requires a training distribution that covers the intended operating domain. These are not minor caveats; they define the conditions under which the surrogate is a predictive model rather than a

sophisticated interpolant. Within those conditions, the combination of homogenization, descriptor-based regression, physics constraints, multifidelity correction, and Bayesian calibration provides a coherent route from microstructure to mechanical prediction.

7. Conclusion

This manuscript has formulated a data-driven multiscale modeling framework for predicting the mechanical behavior of fiber-reinforced polymer composites. The framework treats the homogenized response as the target of a descriptor-based surrogate, uses a Gaussian process to provide nonparametric regression and predictive variance, incorporates physics-informed residuals to restrict inadmissible response surfaces, applies multifidelity correction to combine cheap and expensive models, and uses Bayesian calibration to separate parameter uncertainty from model discrepancy. The contribution is not a claim that machine learning replaces micromechanics. It is a specification of how data-driven inference can be embedded within a micromechanical prediction chain while preserving interpretability and uncertainty.

The analysis supports three conclusions. First, descriptor choice is a mechanical modeling decision, not merely a feature-engineering step; descriptors should reflect fiber volume fraction, orientation, dispersion, and interface quality because those features control effective response. Second, predictive uncertainty must be propagated through the descriptor distribution and the calibrated model, otherwise point predictions can appear more reliable than the underlying evidence warrants. Third, model discrepancy must be represented explicitly, because multiscale surrogates are necessarily incomplete representations of the microscale physics. The resulting framework provides a technically substantive basis for accelerated prediction, uncertainty-aware design, and targeted data acquisition in fiber-reinforced polymer composites.

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