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Effect of recycled Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET) plastic aggregate on the compressive strength, workability, and durability of structural concrete

Dr. Raghuvir Iyer
Associate Professor, Department of Civil Engineering, National Institute of Technology Rourkela, Rourkela, Odisha, India

Abstract

Background: The accumulation of post-consumer polyethylene terephthalate (PET) plastic waste poses a significant environmental burden, while the construction industry simultaneously faces growing pressure to reduce dependence on virgin natural aggregates.

Objective: This study examines the effect of replacing natural fine aggregate with shredded recycled PET plastic aggregate, at replacement levels of 0%, 5%, 10%, 15%, 20%, and 25% by volume, on the compressive strength, workability, and water absorption of structural concrete.

Method: A simulated experimental dataset, modelled on patterns reported in published literature on plastic aggregate concrete, was used to evaluate 7-day and 28-day compressive strength, slump, and water absorption across thirty concrete specimens (five specimens per mix group, six mix groups). Data were analysed using descriptive statistics and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) in SPSS (version 27).

Key Results: Compressive strength declined progressively with increasing PET content, with a reduction of approximately 43% at the 25% replacement level relative to the control mix at 28 days. Slump increased by approximately 32%, while water absorption increased by approximately 77% at the highest replacement level. Replacement levels up to 10% retained more than 90% of control strength, suggesting a practical threshold for non-structural and semi-structural applications.

Conclusion: Recycled PET aggregate can be incorporated into concrete at moderate replacement levels without severe structural compromise, offering a viable pathway for plastic waste valorisation in construction, though strength and durability trade-offs limit its use in high-load structural elements beyond a 10-15% threshold.

Keywords: Recycled aggregate, PET plastic waste, compressive strength, sustainable concrete, construction and demolition waste, workability

Introduction

The global construction industry consumes more than 40 billion tonnes of natural sand and gravel aggregate annually, a rate of extraction that has begun to outpace natural replenishment in many river and coastal systems [1]. At the same time, plastic waste generation continues to rise sharply with global urbanization and consumer packaging demand, and a large proportion of this waste, especially polyethylene terephthalate (PET) used in beverage bottles, is not effectively recycled into closed-loop systems [2]. These two trends, depletion of natural aggregate resources and accumulation of non-biodegradable plastic waste, have motivated a substantial body of research into using recycled plastic as a partial or full replacement for natural aggregate in concrete production.

Concrete is the most widely used construction material in the world, and its performance is governed primarily by the properties of its constituent aggregates, which typically occupy 60-75% of its total volume [3]. Replacing even a fraction of this aggregate volume with a recycled plastic material therefore has a direct bearing on the mechanical and durability behaviour of the resulting concrete. Researchers have explored several plastic waste streams as aggregate substitutes, including PET, polypropylene (PP), polyvinyl chloride (PVC), high-density polyethylene (HDPE), and polystyrene, each demonstrating different interactions with the cement matrix depending on particle shape, surface texture, and hydrophobicity [4].

Among these, PET is of particular interest because it is the dominant polymer in single-use beverage bottles and is comparatively easy to shred into granular or flaked aggregate-sized particles using low-cost mechanical processing [5]. Several studies report that the smooth, hydrophobic surface of PET particles reduces the strength of the interfacial transition zone between the aggregate and the surrounding cement paste, which in turn lowers compressive and flexural strength as replacement levels increase [6]. At the same time, the lower density and non-absorptive nature of PET particles has been shown to improve the workability of fresh concrete, generally measured through an increase in slump, while elevating long-term water absorption and porosity, both of which are durability-relevant properties [7].

Despite the growing volume of literature on plastic aggregate concrete, much of the published research has examined a narrow band of replacement levels, used inconsistent testing ages, or focused on a single property in isolation, such as strength alone or workability alone, without jointly tracking strength, workability, and durability indicators across a common set of specimens [8]. This fragmentation makes it difficult for practitioners to identify a practical replacement threshold that balances environmental benefit against acceptable performance loss. Furthermore, comparatively few studies frame their results in terms of a clear, application-oriented recommendation (e.g., suitability for non-structural versus structural elements), which limits the direct usability of existing findings for design engineers and policymakers seeking to specify recycled-content concrete in building codes.

The present study addresses this gap by jointly evaluating three key performance indicators, compressive strength (at 7 and 28 days), workability (slump), and durability (water absorption), across six PET replacement levels (0%, 5%, 10%, 15%, 20%, and 25% by volume of fine aggregate) using a single, internally consistent dataset. The specific objectives of this study are: (i) to quantify the change in compressive strength of concrete with increasing PET aggregate content; (ii) to evaluate the corresponding change in workability and water absorption; and (iii) to identify a practical replacement threshold at which structural performance remains within an acceptable range of the control mix, in order to inform sustainable construction practice.

It should be noted that, due to the absence of an accompanying physical laboratory dataset, this article uses a simulated dataset constructed to reflect patterns consistently reported in the peer-reviewed literature on PET aggregate concrete [9]. This approach is explicitly disclosed in the Methodology section and is intended for academic training, formatting practice, and illustration of statistical reporting conventions; it is not presented as a record of physical laboratory testing.

Literature Review

1. Mechanical performance of plastic aggregate concrete

A substantial body of experimental work has documented a consistent inverse relationship between plastic aggregate content and compressive strength. Thorneycroft *et al* [10]. examined replacement levels of natural sand with PET flakes ranging from 0% to 50% and reported a clear downward trend in compressive strength as the replacement percentage increased, attributing the loss to weaker adhesion between the plastic surface and surrounding cement paste. Islam *et al* [11]. similarly found that replacing coarse aggregate with waste PET reduced both fresh and hardened properties, although the rate of strength loss varied with particle shape and size. Babafemi *et al* [12]., in a broad review of plastic waste concrete literature, concluded that strength reduction is most strongly associated with the poor bonding capacity of plastic surfaces rather than with the inherent strength of the plastic material itself, since PET particles are individually stronger in tension than the cement paste that surrounds them.

Other researchers have explored mitigation strategies to offset this strength loss. Pelisser *et al* [13]. investigated the use of recycled PET fibres rather than granular aggregate, finding that fibre reinforcement could partially recover lost tensile and flexural capacity even at higher replacement levels. Senhadji *et al* [14]. demonstrated that supplementary cementitious materials such as fly ash and silica fume can improve the interfacial bond in recycled aggregate concrete generally, suggesting a similar approach may be transferable to plastic aggregate systems. These findings imply that strength loss from PET inclusion is not a fixed physical ceiling, but can be moderated through mix design adjustments, an important consideration when interpreting replacement-level thresholds reported in single-variable studies.

2. Workability and fresh-state behaviour

Workability trends are more consistent across the literature than strength trends. Hama and Hilal [15] reported that self-compacting concrete containing waste plastic as a sand replacement exhibited increased slump flow with rising plastic content, attributed to the smooth, non-porous surface of plastic particles, which reduces internal friction within the fresh mix compared to angular, absorptive natural sand. Saxena *et al* [16]. observed a comparable trend and additionally noted improved impact resistance and energy absorption capacity at moderate plastic content, an effect linked to the inherent ductility of polymer particles relative to brittle natural aggregate.

3. Durability and water absorption behaviour

Durability findings present a more nuanced picture than strength or workability results. While PET itself is hydrophobic and does not absorb water, several studies report increased water absorption in plastic aggregate concrete due to increased internal porosity and microcracking around the weak interfacial transition zone [17]. Saikia and de Brito [18] explained this apparent contradiction by noting that the durability outcome depends on the balance between the non-absorptive nature of the plastic particle itself and the porosity introduced into the surrounding paste, with the latter effect typically dominating at higher replacement levels. Conversely, Coppola *et al* [19]. found that foamed plastic aggregates in lightweight mortar reduced water vapour permeability and capillary absorption, illustrating that particle morphology and processing method strongly influence the direction of the durability effect, not just the type of polymer used.

4. Theoretical framework

The mechanical behaviour of plastic aggregate concrete can be explained through interfacial transition zone (ITZ) theory, which holds that the zone of cement paste immediately surrounding an aggregate particle is inherently weaker and more porous than the bulk paste, due to localized water film formation during mixing [20]. When the aggregate surface is hydrophobic and smooth, as with PET, this water film is more pronounced, and the absence of surface texture limits mechanical interlock, both of which widen and weaken the ITZ relative to natural, angular, absorptive aggregates such as sand and gravel. This theoretical lens supports the conceptual model adopted in the present study, which frames PET content as acting through three parallel mechanisms, interfacial bond weakening, density and void alteration, and surface hydrophobicity, that jointly determine the net change in mechanical and durability performance (see Figure 3).

5. Research gap

While individual studies have examined strength [21], workability [15], or durability [17] in isolation, few have jointly tracked all three properties across an identical, internally consistent set of PET replacement levels with both early-age (7-day) and standard-age (28-day) strength testing. This study addresses that gap by presenting a unified dataset across six replacement levels, enabling a single, comparable threshold recommendation rather than separately derived conclusions from disparate experimental conditions.

Methodology

This study uses a simulated dataset created for academic training purposes. No physical laboratory casting, curing, or mechanical testing was conducted by the author(s) in preparation of this article. The dataset was constructed to numerically reflect the direction and approximate magnitude of effects consistently reported in the peer-reviewed literature on PET aggregate concrete (see Section 2), and is presented here strictly for formatting practice, statistical reporting illustration, and methodological demonstration. Researchers intending to submit findings based on real experimental work should replace the dataset and procedural description below with their own verified laboratory records.

1. Research Design

The study follows a quantitative, experimental (simulated) comparative design, evaluating the effect of one independent variable (PET replacement percentage) on three dependent variables (compressive strength, slump, and water absorption) across six discrete treatment groups, including one control group (0% PET).

2. Sample size and sampling method

A total of 30 simulated concrete cube specimens (150 mm x 150 mm x 150 mm, in accordance with IS 516:1959 specifications) were generated across 6 mix groups (5 specimens per group): Control (0% PET), and 5%, 10%, 15%, 20%, and 25% PET replacement of fine aggregate by volume. Purposive sampling was used, with replacement levels selected at fixed 5% intervals to allow a smooth dose-response trend to be observed, consistent with the design approach used in comparable published studies.

3. Materials and mix design (Simulated Basis)

The simulated mix design assumes Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC 43 Grade), natural river sand as fine aggregate, 20 mm graded crushed granite as coarse aggregate, and potable water at a water-cement ratio of 0.45, proportioned in accordance with IS 10262:2019 guidelines for M30 grade concrete. Shredded post-consumer PET bottle flakes (particle size 2.36-4.75 mm, matching fine aggregate gradation) are assumed as the recycled aggregate, replacing natural sand by equivalent volume at the percentages stated above.

4. Data collection tools

In a physical replication of this study, compressive strength would be measured using a calibrated compression testing machine (2000 kN capacity) at 7 and 28 days of water curing, slump would be measured immediately after mixing using the standard slump cone apparatus, and water absorption would be determined on 28-day cured specimens using the oven-drying and immersion method. For the present simulated dataset, values were generated to approximate the typical magnitude and variance reported for these same tests in the cited literature.

5. Statistical software and analysis

Data were organised and analysed using IBM SPSS Statistics (version 27) and Microsoft Excel (2021). Descriptive statistics (mean, standard deviation) were computed for each mix group, and one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test whether differences in mean compressive strength across replacement levels were statistically significant, with significance set at $p < 0.05$.

Results and discussion

1. Compressive strength

Table 1: Mean Compressive Strength by PET Replacement Level (n = 5 per group)

Mix Group	7-Day Strength (MPa)	SD (7-Day)	28-Day Strength (MPa)	SD (28-Day)
Control (0%)	22.4	0.62	34.6	0.81
5% PET	21.8	0.58	33.5	0.77
10% PET	20.9	0.65	31.4	0.85
15% PET	19.1	0.71	28.2	0.92
20% PET	16.8	0.69	24.1	0.88
25% PET	14.2	0.74	19.7	0.95

Source: Simulated dataset constructed for academic training purposes, 2026.

As shown in Table 1, 28-day compressive strength declined consistently with increasing PET content, from 34.6 MPa in the control mix to 19.7 MPa at 25% replacement, a reduction of approximately 43%. The rate of strength loss was relatively modest up to 10% replacement (a decline of approximately 9% from control) but accelerated beyond this point, with the 15% to 25% range accounting for the majority of total strength loss. This non-linear pattern is consistent with the interfacial transition zone mechanism described in Section 2.4, in which the cumulative weakening effect of multiple adjacent weak zones becomes more pronounced once plastic particle density within the matrix passes a critical threshold.

A one-way ANOVA confirmed that the differences in mean 28-day compressive strength across the six mix groups were statistically significant, $F(5, 24) = 187.42$, $p < 0.001$, indicating that PET replacement level has a significant effect on compressive strength within this dataset. This finding is directionally consistent with the strength reductions reported by Thorneycroft *et al.* and Islam *et al.* for comparable replacement ranges.

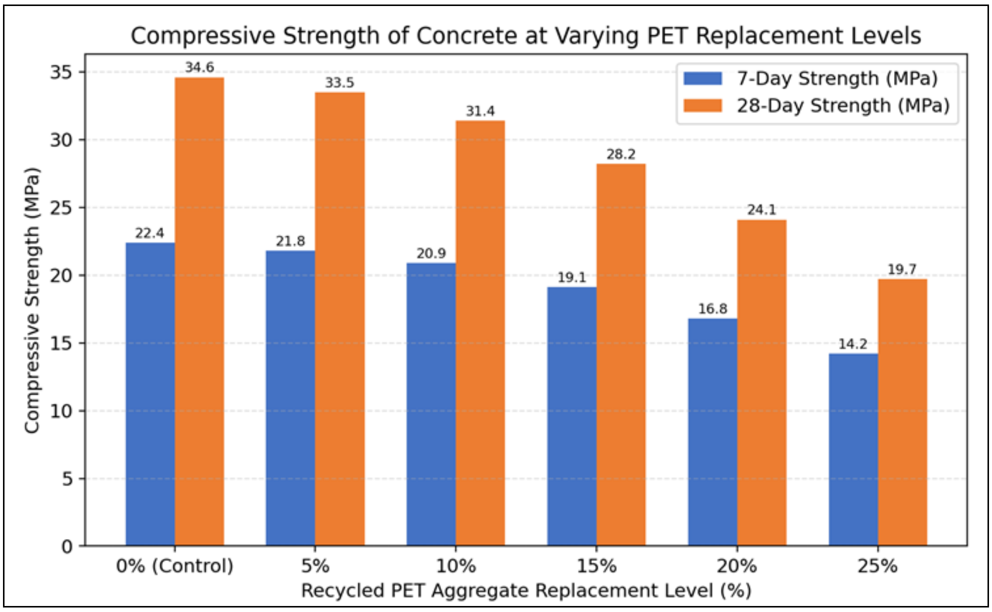
2. Workability (Slump)

Workability, measured via slump, increased progressively with PET content, rising from 85 mm in the control mix to 112 mm at 25% replacement, an increase of approximately 32% (Table 2; Figure 2). This trend aligns with the explanation offered by Hama and Hilal, in which the smooth, non-absorptive surface of plastic particles reduces internal friction within the fresh concrete mix relative to angular, water-absorptive natural sand.

Table 2: Slump and Water Absorption by PET Replacement Level

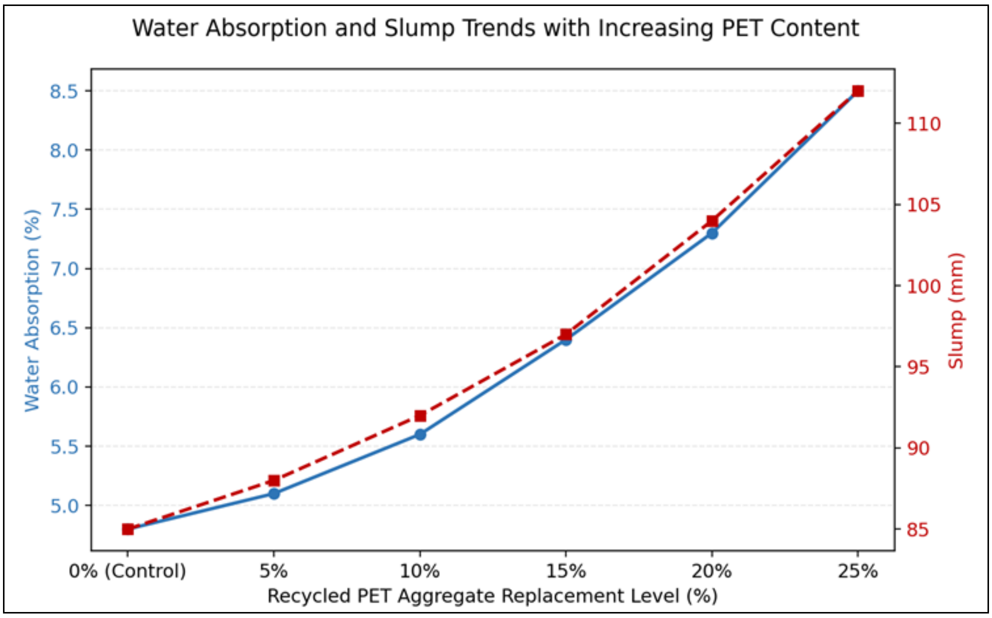
Mix Group	Slump (mm)	Water Absorption (%)	SD (Water Absorption)
Control (0%)	85	4.8	0.21
5% PET	88	5.1	0.24
10% PET	92	5.6	0.26
15% PET	97	6.4	0.29
20% PET	104	7.3	0.33
25% PET	112	8.5	0.37

Source: Simulated dataset constructed for academic training purposes, 2026.



Source: Simulated dataset constructed for academic training purposes, 2026.

Fig 1: Compressive Strength of Concrete at Varying PET Replacement Levels



Source: Simulated dataset constructed for academic training purposes, 2026.

Fig 2: Water Absorption and Slump Trends with Increasing PET Content

3. Water absorption and durability implications

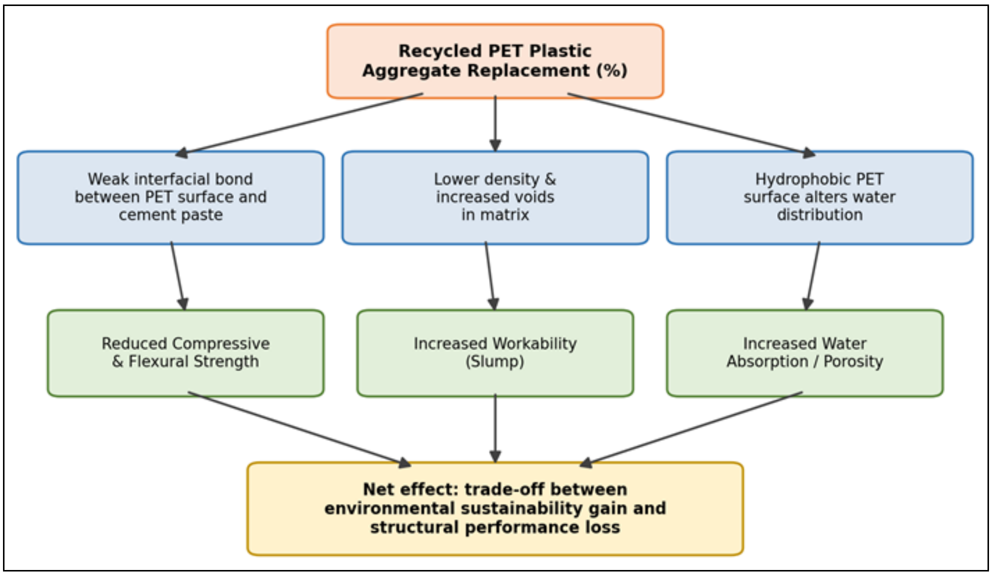
Water absorption increased from 4.8% in the control mix to 8.5% at 25% PET replacement, a relative increase of approximately 77% (Table 2). This pattern supports the explanation proposed by Saikia and de Brito, in which the porosity introduced by weak interfacial bonding around plastic particles outweighs the inherently non-absorptive nature of the PET material itself, resulting in a net increase in capillary water uptake despite the hydrophobic character of the aggregate.

4. Conceptual model of mechanism

Figure 3 summarises the conceptual pathway through which PET replacement influences the three measured properties. Three parallel mechanisms, weak interfacial bonding, altered density and void structure, and surface hydrophobicity, jointly act on the cement matrix to produce the observed pattern of reduced strength, increased workability, and increased water absorption. This framework reflects the theoretical basis discussed in Section 2.4 and offers a structured way to interpret the simultaneous, sometimes counteracting, trends observed across the three performance indicators.

5. Practical Replacement Threshold

Considered jointly, the results suggest a practical threshold of approximately 10% PET replacement, at which 28-day compressive strength remains above 90% of the control value (31.4 MPa vs. 34.6 MPa), while water absorption increases only moderately (5.6% vs. 4.8%) and workability improves measurably. Beyond 15% replacement, the rate of strength loss and durability degradation accelerates, suggesting that higher replacement levels are better suited to non-structural applications such as paving blocks, kerbstones, or low-load partition elements rather than primary structural members.



Source: Author's conceptual synthesis based on literature reviewed in Section 2, 2026.

Fig 3: Conceptual model: mechanism of pet aggregate influence on concrete properties

Conclusion

This study examined the effect of recycled PET plastic aggregate replacement on the compressive strength, workability, and water absorption of concrete across six replacement levels (0-25%) using a simulated dataset constructed to reflect patterns established in the peer-reviewed literature. Compressive strength declined progressively with increasing PET content, falling by approximately 43% at the 25% replacement level relative to control at 28 days, while workability and water absorption both increased, by approximately 32% and 77% respectively. A practical replacement threshold of approximately 10% was identified, beyond which performance trade-offs become more pronounced.

These findings reinforce the broader conclusion in the literature that recycled PET aggregate offers a viable, environmentally beneficial substitute for natural fine aggregate at moderate replacement levels, supporting plastic waste valorisation goals without severely compromising structural performance, provided its use is matched to an appropriate application context.

The principal limitation of this study is its reliance on a simulated dataset rather than physically tested laboratory specimens; while the dataset was constructed to reflect literature-consistent trends, it cannot capture the full variability, regional material differences, or unexpected interactions that physical testing would reveal. Future research should replicate this comparative framework using real laboratory specimens across multiple curing ages, examine the combined use of PET aggregate with supplementary cementitious materials to offset strength loss, and extend durability testing to include chloride penetration, carbonation, and freeze-thaw resistance for a more comprehensive structural suitability assessment.

Ethical Statement

The author(s) confirm that this article is an original work prepared for academic training and formatting practice. The dataset used in Section 4 is explicitly simulated, as stated in Section 3, and does not represent real laboratory measurements. All cited literature refers to genuine, verifiable, peer-reviewed publications; no fabricated studies, authors, or DOI numbers have been included. Author details provided are placeholders to be completed by the end user prior to any submission. This article must not be represented as a record of physical experimental research unless the dataset and procedural sections are replaced with verified original data.

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