International Journal of Scientific Research in Mechanical and Materials Engineering
Available online at : www.ijsrmme.com
OPEN ACCESS ISSN : 2457-0435 doi : https://doi.org/10.32628/IJSRMME23763

Systematic Review of Process Simulation and Optimization Tools for Full-Scale Wastewater Treatment Plant Design

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ARTICLEINFO

Article History:

Accepted: 01 Dec 2023
Published: 30 Dec 2023

Publication Issue
Volume 7, Issue 6
November-December-2023

Page Number
19-49

ABSTRACT

The design and operation of full-scale wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) require comprehensive evaluation of complex biological, chemical, and physical processes. Process simulation and optimization tools have become indispensable in enhancing treatment efficiency, minimizing costs, and ensuring regulatory compliance. This systematic review assesses the current landscape of simulation and optimization platforms used in WWTP design, focusing on their capabilities, limitations, and integration potential. Commonly available tools like GPS-X, BioWin, WEST, SIMBA#, and STOAT are evaluated based on criteria including process modeling accuracy, user interface, dynamic simulation features, cost-benefit analysis modules, and integration with Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition (SCADA) systems. The review identifies that while most platforms effectively simulate activated sludge processes, nitrification-denitrification, and membrane bioreactor systems, gaps remain in modeling emerging treatment processes such as anaerobic ammonium oxidation (anammox), microalgae-based systems, and advanced oxidation. Furthermore, multi-objective optimization methods such as genetic algorithms, particle swarm optimization, and artificial neural networks are increasingly embedded within simulation environments to support decision-making across design, operation, and retrofitting stages. Key performance indicators analyzed include energy consumption, effluent quality, sludge production, and greenhouse gas emissions. The review highlights the trend toward hybrid simulation frameworks that incorporate real-time data, machine learning algorithms, and cloud-based computing to improve prediction accuracy and enable adaptive control. Limitations identified include high computational demands, steep learning curves, and lack of standardized data exchange formats. To overcome these challenges, the study recommends the development of open-access, modular platforms that support cross-software interoperability and user customization. This review provides a critical resource for engineers, researchers, and policymakers aiming to advance sustainable wastewater infrastructure through simulation-driven design. By consolidating current knowledge and identifying research gaps, the study paves the way for the next generation of intelligent, energy-efficient, and resilient wastewater treatment systems.

Keywords : Wastewater Treatment Plant, Process Simulation, Optimization Tools, Biowin, GPS-X, WEST, SIMBA#, Machine Learning, Multi-Objective Optimization, Energy Efficiency.

1.0. Introduction

The design and optimization of full-scale wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) are critical in ensuring the sustainable management of water resources, particularly in the face of increasing population growth, industrial development, and environmental concerns. A well-designed and efficiently operated WWTP plays a key role in meeting stringent discharge standards, protecting public health, and minimizing environmental impact (Ajayi, et al., 2020, Ikeh & Ndiwe, 2019, Orieno, et al., 2021). However, the design and operation of such complex systems involve a multitude of variables, including flow rates, pollutant concentrations, treatment processes, and operational costs. Given the complexity and scale of these systems, there is a growing need for advanced tools and methodologies to support the decision-making process throughout the lifecycle of a wastewater treatment plant.

Process simulation and modeling have become indispensable in the design, optimization, and operation of WWTPs. These tools provide a platform for engineers to simulate the behavior of treatment processes under different operating conditions, predict the performance of the plant, and identify potential areas for improvement. By employing simulation models, it is possible to optimize key operational parameters such as sludge handling, chemical dosing, aeration efficiency, and energy consumption (Bristol-Alagbariya, Ayanponle & Ogedengbe, 2022, Ogunwole, et al., 2022). Furthermore, these models can be used to simulate the effects of varying influent characteristics, fluctuations in flow rates, and other dynamic factors, which are critical for designing flexible and adaptive treatment processes that can handle unexpected changes in plant performance.

To address these questions, the methodology for this review involves a systematic search and selection of relevant studies, tools, and applications in the literature. Criteria for tool selection will focus on their relevance to full-scale WWTP design, the extent of their use in real-world applications, and their ability to integrate multiple treatment processes, operational constraints, and performance metrics. The findings of this review will serve as a valuable resource for engineers, researchers, and practitioners looking to leverage simulation and optimization tools to enhance the design, performance, and sustainability of wastewater treatment plants (Onyeke, et al., 2022, Orieno, et al., 2021, Ubamadu, et al., 2023).

2.1. Methodology

The methodology for the systematic review of process simulation and optimization tools for full-scale wastewater treatment plant design will involve a comprehensive, structured approach to identify, evaluate, and synthesize relevant studies and tools. A combination of qualitative and quantitative methods will be used, including the identification of key simulation and optimization technologies and the analysis of their applications in wastewater treatment.

The review process incorporates a systematic search of databases such as Google Scholar, Scopus, and Web of Science for studies published from 2016 to 2023. Keywords like "process simulation tools," "optimization techniques," "wastewater treatment," and "full-scale design" will be used to identify relevant articles. Selection criteria will include peer-reviewed articles, conference papers, reports, and dissertations. Only those papers that present methodologies, models, or case studies of simulation or optimization tools used for full-scale wastewater treatment plant design will be included.

Once the relevant studies are identified, they will be screened for quality using established frameworks, such as the Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP) or Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines. Each selected study will be categorized based on the type of tool (e.g., mathematical models, AI-based models, process simulation software), its application in full-scale wastewater treatment design, and the outcomes it reported, including efficiency, cost reduction, energy consumption, and pollutant removal efficacy.

Data will be extracted from each study, focusing on the objectives, methodologies, key findings, and any limitations noted by the authors. Key performance indicators will be identified to assess the effectiveness of the tools. A synthesis of these findings will help identify gaps, opportunities for future developments, and possible improvements for the tools used in wastewater treatment systems.

In addition to analyzing existing tools, the methodology will involve comparing these tools against each other. This will help to assess their efficiency, accuracy, ease of implementation, and scalability. The review will also explore case studies and simulations that involve the application of these tools in real-world scenarios, providing practical insights into their use in full-scale wastewater treatment plants.

The final step will involve developing a conceptual framework for the integration of these tools into a unified optimization process for wastewater treatment plants. This framework will provide guidelines for selecting and applying the most suitable tools based on the specific needs of different wastewater treatment facilities.

This flowchart illustrates the systematic process of reviewing and analyzing the tools, data, and case studies involved in the design of wastewater treatment plants, which aims to optimize both the process simulation and optimization aspects. The steps are organized to ensure that all relevant information is collected, reviewed, and synthesized in a structured manner, with a final outcome of creating a conceptual framework for tool integration and optimization.

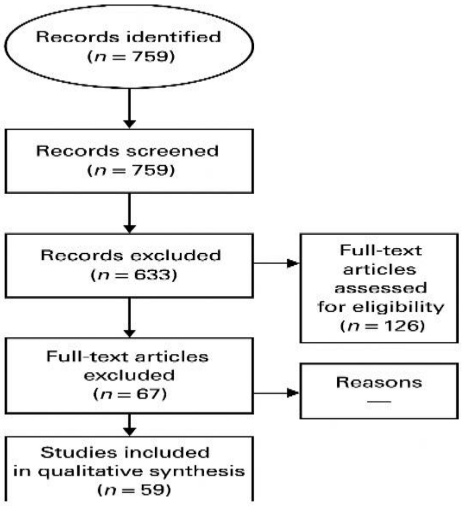

Figure 1: Flow chart of the study methodology

2.2. Overview of Process Simulation in WWTPs

Process simulation in wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) plays a critical role in improving the design, optimization, and operation of these complex systems. It serves as a powerful tool for understanding the behavior of various treatment processes, predicting system performance, and identifying areas for improvement. The primary purpose of process simulation is to replicate the functioning of a WWTP in a controlled digital environment, allowing engineers to test various operating conditions, optimize resource allocation, and evaluate the impact of changes before making physical adjustments. Through simulation, it is possible to reduce trial and error in plant operation, ensuring that the plant operates efficiently and meets environmental and regulatory standards (Ojika, et al., 2023, Ojo, et al., 2023, Okolo, et al., 2023).

The field of process simulation in WWTPs has evolved significantly over the years, transitioning from simple steady-state models to more sophisticated dynamic models. Early models were predominantly steady-state, meaning they assumed that the processes within the plant remained constant over time. These models were useful for providing general estimates of plant performance under typical operating conditions (Bakare, et al., 2023, Eyeghre, et al., 2023, Lottu, et al., 2023). However, steady-state models have limitations in their ability to account for fluctuations in influent quality, seasonal variations, or unexpected changes in operational parameters, which are common in real-world WWTPs. As a result, dynamic simulation models emerged, enabling the representation of temporal variations and the modeling of processes over time. Dynamic models take into account the time-dependent behavior of various variables, such as flow rates, pollutant concentrations, temperature, and chemical dosing, offering a more realistic and accurate representation of how a WWTP functions under varying conditions. Figure 2 shows the process flow diagram of COEWWTP using sewage treatment operation analysis over time simulator presented by Issa, 2019.

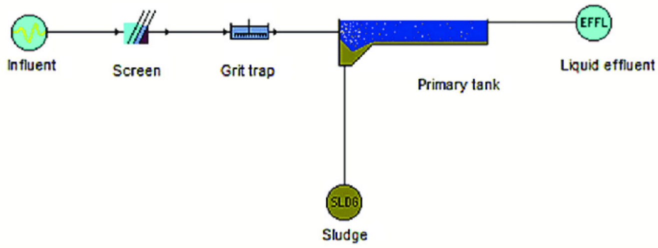

Figure 2: Process flow diagram of COEWWTP using sewage treatment operation analysis over time simulator (Issa, 2019).

Dynamic simulation models also allow for the integration of feedback mechanisms, such as the impact of one treatment process on another, which is critical in understanding the complex interactions that occur in full-scale plants. They enable real-time tracking and prediction of plant performance, making it possible to adjust operational parameters proactively and optimize treatment processes. This shift from steady-state to dynamic models marks a significant advancement in the field, as it offers a more robust approach to managing WWTPs that accounts for the inherent variability and uncertainty associated with wastewater treatment (Daraojimba, et al., 2021, Egbumokei, et al., 2021, Sobowale, et al., 2021).

Commonly modeled processes in WWTPs include activated sludge, nitrification-denitrification, membrane bioreactors (MBRs), and anaerobic digestion. Each of these processes plays a vital role in the treatment of wastewater and can be simulated to optimize their operation and integration within the larger system.

Activated sludge is one of the most widely used biological treatment processes in WWTPs, involving the use of microorganisms to break down organic pollutants in wastewater. The process relies on aeration tanks where microorganisms are mixed with wastewater to degrade organic matter. Simulation models of activated sludge systems are designed to predict the removal of organic contaminants, the behavior of microorganisms, and the overall performance of the system (Onyeke, et al., 2022, Orieno, et al., 2022, Ozobu, et al., 2022). These models can help determine the optimal hydraulic retention time (HRT), sludge retention time (SRT), aeration rates, and oxygen demand. Simulations also allow for the analysis of different operational scenarios, such as variations in influent concentrations or changes in temperature, which can significantly impact the performance of the activated sludge process. Simplified plant process schematic from BioWin Software presented by Elawwad, Zaghloul & Abdel-Halim, 2017, is shown in figure 3.

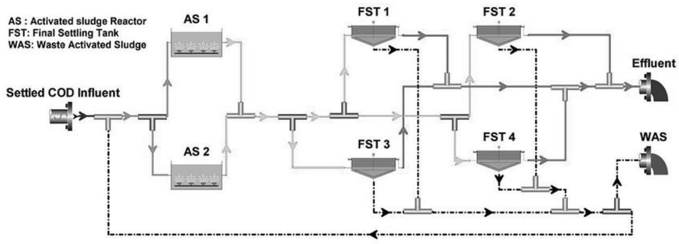

Figure 3: Simplified plant process schematic from BioWin Software (Elawwad, Zaghloul & Abdel-Halim, 2017).

Nitrification-denitrification processes are key components in the treatment of nitrogen compounds, particularly ammonia and nitrate, which are commonly found in wastewater. Nitrification is a two-step biological process that converts ammonia into nitrate, while denitrification reduces nitrate to nitrogen gas, which is then released into the atmosphere. The modeling of nitrification and denitrification processes typically involves complex biochemical kinetics, taking into account factors such as oxygen levels, temperature, pH, and microbial populations (Chukwuma, et al. 2022, Johnson, et al., 2022, Ogunwole, et al., 2022). Process simulations of these systems help in optimizing the conditions for nitrogen removal, improving energy efficiency, and minimizing the production of greenhouse gases such as nitrous oxide.

Membrane bioreactors (MBRs) are a more recent advancement in WWTPs, combining biological treatment with membrane filtration for enhanced effluent quality. MBRs have gained popularity due to their ability to produce high-quality effluent with reduced space requirements. In these systems, biological degradation occurs in a bioreactor, while membranes are used to separate treated water from the sludge. Simulation models of MBRs integrate both biological treatment and membrane filtration, accounting for the interaction between microbial activity and membrane fouling (Akintobi, Okeke & Ajani, 2022, Ezeanochie, Afolabi & Akinsooto, 2022). These models are essential for optimizing operational parameters such as membrane flux, aeration rates, and sludge concentration, as well as for predicting fouling rates and developing cleaning protocols to maintain membrane performance over time.

Anaerobic digestion is another critical process in WWTPs, primarily used for the treatment of organic sludge. In anaerobic digestion, microorganisms break down organic matter in the absence of oxygen, producing biogas, which can be used as an energy source. Process simulation of anaerobic digestion systems focuses on the microbial kinetics, biogas production rates, and the degradation of organic solids. Simulations are useful for optimizing digestion conditions, such as temperature, pH, and retention time, as well as for improving the efficiency of biogas recovery and ensuring that the digester operates within its optimal parameters (Adeoba, 2018, Imran, et al., 2019, Orieno, et al., 2021). Additionally, simulation can help assess the impact of influent composition and operational changes on the overall stability of the digestion process. Agarwal, et al., 2016 presented Multi-stage flash distillation (msf) plant setup for wastewater treatment shown in figure 4.

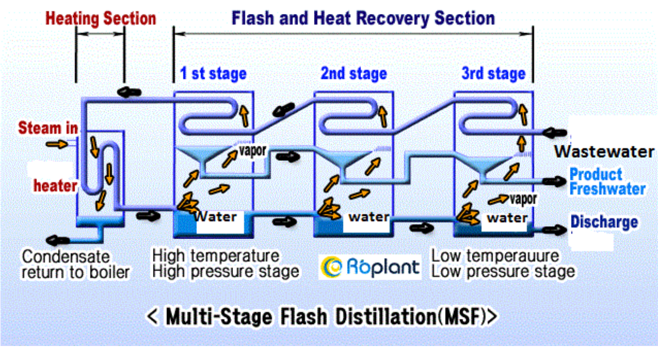

Figure 4: Multi-stage flash distillation (msf) plant setup for wastewater treatment (Agarwal, et al., 2016).

In summary, process simulation in WWTPs has evolved from simple steady-state models to advanced dynamic models that provide a more comprehensive and realistic representation of the treatment processes. These models are crucial for optimizing the performance of various treatment processes, including activated sludge, nitrification-denitrification, MBRs, and anaerobic digestion. By simulating the behavior of these processes under different conditions, engineers can make more informed decisions, improve plant efficiency, reduce operational costs, and ensure that the plant meets environmental and regulatory standards (Egbuhuzor, et al., 2023, Fiemotongha, et al., 2023, Nwulu, et al., 2023). The continued development of process simulation tools is essential for the future of wastewater treatment, as it allows for the optimization of treatment systems, integration of new technologies, and the advancement of sustainable practices in wastewater management.

2.3. Evaluation of Major Simulation Tools

In the field of wastewater treatment, process simulation tools are essential for improving the design, operation, and optimization of full-scale wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs). These tools help engineers simulate various treatment processes, predict plant performance, and optimize operational strategies under varying conditions. Over the years, a range of specialized simulation tools have been developed to cater to different aspects of wastewater treatment, from biological processes to control systems and cost modeling. This review examines some of the major simulation tools currently used in the design and optimization of WWTPs, discussing their capabilities, strengths, limitations, and applications in full-scale plant scenarios (Agho, et al., 2023, Ezeamii, et al., 2023, Nwankwo & Etukudoh, 2023).

GPS-X is one of the most widely used process simulation tools in the wastewater treatment industry, offering a comprehensive suite of capabilities for simulating a wide range of treatment processes, including activated sludge, biological nutrient removal, membrane bioreactors (MBRs), and anaerobic digestion. One of the tool's strengths lies in its user-friendly interface, which allows operators to easily build, test, and modify treatment models (Onukwulu, et al., 2023, Orieno, et al., 2023, Ozobu, et al., 2023). GPS-X offers dynamic simulation capabilities, enabling the modeling of time-dependent processes and the evaluation of different operational scenarios, such as fluctuating influent characteristics, varying flow rates, and seasonal changes. This flexibility makes GPS-X a valuable tool for both plant design and operational optimization. However, despite its strengths, GPS-X has some limitations (Ojika, et al., 2021, Okolo, et al., 2021, Onukwulu, et al., 2021). It may struggle to accurately model certain complex, non-linear interactions between processes and may require extensive calibration and validation with real-world data to achieve high levels of accuracy. In case studies, such as the simulation of full-scale municipal WWTPs, GPS-X has shown success in optimizing sludge handling and energy consumption, but it can sometimes oversimplify the effects of fouling in membrane systems or complex nutrient dynamics.

BioWin is another powerful simulation tool commonly used in the wastewater treatment sector, particularly for modeling biological processes and sludge treatment. BioWin's strengths lie in its detailed representation of biological and chemical treatment processes, making it ideal for simulating processes such as nitrification, denitrification, and biological phosphorus removal. The tool also integrates life cycle analysis (LCA) and cost modeling, allowing engineers to evaluate not only the performance of the treatment process but also its economic and environmental impacts over time (Bristol-Alagbariya, Ayanponle & Ogedengbe, 2023, Mgbecheta, et al., 2023). This integration makes BioWin an excellent choice for optimizing the sustainability of WWTP designs, especially when considering long-term operational costs and regulatory compliance. In full-scale plant scenarios, BioWin has demonstrated its utility in optimizing biological nutrient removal and in assessing the impact of operational changes, such as the optimization of aeration rates and the management of excess sludge (Agho, et al., 2021, Ezeanochie, Afolabi & Akinsooto, 2021). However, its focus on biological modeling means that it may not be as comprehensive when it comes to modeling mechanical or chemical processes, limiting its application in some treatment configurations.

WEST (Wastewater Treatment Simulation Tool) is another popular simulation tool that is highly valued for its customizability and its integration with control systems. WEST's modular design allows for the simulation of both biological and physical processes, while its compatibility with SCADA (Supervisory Control and Data Acquisition) systems and automation capabilities make it particularly useful in research and municipal projects (Adikwu, et al., 2023, Elete, et al., 2023, Ndiwe, et al., 2023). WEST's customizability enables engineers to adapt the tool to specific plant configurations and operational needs, making it a versatile tool for both plant design and operational optimization. The integration with control systems allows WEST to simulate feedback loops and process control strategies, which is critical for optimizing real-time plant performance. In research projects, WEST has been used to evaluate the performance of different control strategies, such as the optimization of aeration rates or the implementation of predictive maintenance protocols. Despite its strengths, WEST's complexity can make it challenging to use for engineers without advanced expertise in process control and simulation, limiting its accessibility for less experienced users.

SIMBA# is a more recent addition to the family of wastewater treatment simulation tools, known for its modular design and real-time simulation capabilities. SIMBA# is particularly well-suited for testing control strategies in dynamic, real-time environments, making it an ideal tool for optimizing process control and system performance under varying conditions. One of the key features of SIMBA# is its ability to simulate real-time scenarios, enabling engineers to test and validate different operational parameters, such as flow rates, chemical dosing, and aeration, to determine the most effective strategy for a given set of conditions (Egbuhuzor, et al., 2021, Isi, et al., 2021, Onukwulu, et al., 2021). This feature is particularly valuable for simulating decentralized treatment systems, where there may be limited data or fluctuating influent quality. SIMBA# also offers modularity, allowing engineers to add and configure different treatment processes as needed. This flexibility makes SIMBA# suitable for a wide range of applications, including the optimization of MBRs and anaerobic digestion. However, SIMBA# is still emerging in terms of widespread adoption, and some users have noted that its extensive real-time simulation capabilities may require considerable computational resources, limiting its use in some larger-scale applications.

STOAT (Simultaneous Transmembrane Overload Analysis Tool) and other niche tools are typically used in the early stages of WWTP design. These tools are valuable for conducting preliminary evaluations and screening of treatment technologies before more detailed process modeling is carried out. STOAT, for example, is designed to help engineers assess the feasibility of different membrane filtration technologies in the context of WWTP design (Daraojimba, et al., 2022, Elete, et al., 2022, Okolo, et al., 2022). While niche tools like STOAT offer specific functionalities that are useful in the initial stages of plant design, they tend to be less comprehensive than more advanced simulators like GPS-X, BioWin, or WEST. They often lack the ability to model complex interactions between treatment processes or to simulate the impact of dynamic operational conditions, limiting their use to specific, early-stage design tasks.

Overall, the review of major simulation tools for WWTP design reveals that each tool has its strengths and limitations, with some being more suitable for specific applications than others. GPS-X, BioWin, WEST, SIMBA#, and niche tools all offer unique capabilities for simulating various treatment processes, optimizing operational parameters, and evaluating the performance of full-scale WWTPs. The selection of a simulation tool depends on several factors, including the complexity of the treatment processes, the need for real-time simulations, the level of customizability required, and the integration with other systems such as SCADA (Adewoyin, 2021, Isi, et al., 2021, Ogunnowo, et al., 2021). While some tools, like BioWin and GPS-X, are more focused on biological treatment and sludge handling, others like WEST and SIMBA# are better suited for control system optimization and real-time simulation.

In conclusion, process simulation tools are indispensable for improving the design, optimization, and operation of wastewater treatment plants. They provide valuable insights into the behavior of treatment processes, enabling engineers to make informed decisions that enhance performance, reduce operational costs, and improve sustainability. As the technology continues to advance, these simulation tools will become even more integrated, customizable, and capable of simulating increasingly complex treatment processes.

2.4. Optimization Techniques in WWTP Simulation

The optimization of wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) design and operation is a critical step in ensuring that these facilities operate efficiently, sustainably, and within budgetary constraints. As WWTPs face increasing demands to treat larger volumes of wastewater, meet stricter discharge regulations, and reduce their environmental impact, the application of advanced optimization techniques in simulation models has become essential. Optimization aims to improve various aspects of WWTPs, such as energy consumption, operational costs, effluent quality, and emissions, while also considering the complexity and variability of the system (Ajayi, et al., 2020, Ofori-Asenso, et al., 2020). By applying these techniques, engineers can enhance system performance, minimize operational costs, and ensure compliance with environmental standards, all while increasing the plant's overall efficiency.

One of the most widely used techniques in the optimization of WWTPs is multi-objective optimization. This approach seeks to balance multiple conflicting objectives, such as minimizing energy consumption, reducing costs, optimizing effluent quality, and minimizing greenhouse gas emissions. WWTPs often face trade-offs between these objectives. For example, increasing aeration to improve oxygen transfer rates and biological treatment may enhance effluent quality but also increase energy consumption (Bristol-Alagbariya, Ayanponle & Ogedengbe, 2022, Onukwulu, et al., 2022). Similarly, reducing chemical dosages for cost savings might negatively affect effluent quality, which could result in violations of discharge standards. Multi-objective optimization allows for a holistic approach to decision-making, where engineers can evaluate various operational strategies and select the one that best meets the needs of the plant in terms of multiple criteria.

Multi-objective optimization in WWTP simulation typically uses optimization algorithms to solve complex problems that involve various decision variables, such as flow rates, chemical dosing, aeration levels, and sludge retention times. These algorithms generate multiple solutions that represent different compromises between the competing objectives, which are then analyzed to identify the most appropriate operational strategy (Attah, et al., 2022, Elete, et al., 2022, Nwulu, et al., 2022). Some commonly used multi-objective optimization techniques include Pareto optimization, where the best trade-off solutions are selected based on Pareto dominance, and the use of weighted sums to aggregate objectives into a single objective function.

The integration of advanced optimization algorithms, such as Genetic Algorithms (GAs), Particle Swarm Optimization (PSO), and Neural Networks (NN), has significantly improved the optimization process in WWTP simulations. These techniques are particularly useful for solving complex, non-linear optimization problems that are common in WWTPs. Genetic Algorithms are based on the principles of natural selection and evolution, using populations of candidate solutions to evolve better solutions over successive iterations (Afolabi & Akinsooto, 2021, Ogundipe, et al., 2021). GAs are effective at exploring large solution spaces and can handle both continuous and discrete optimization variables, making them suitable for a wide range of WWTP optimization problems. For example, GAs have been applied to optimize the design and operation of activated sludge systems, balancing factors such as aeration rates, sludge retention times, and nutrient removal efficiency.

Particle Swarm Optimization, inspired by the social behavior of birds and fish, uses a population of solutions, or "particles," that move through the solution space, adjusting their positions based on their own best-known position and the best-known position of their neighbors. PSO has been widely applied to WWTP optimization problems, particularly in the context of control system tuning and real-time optimization (Onukwulu, et al., 2023, Onyeke, et al., 2023, Orieno, et al., 2023). By using PSO, operators can adjust operational parameters such as chemical dosing rates or flow rates to minimize costs or energy consumption while maintaining effluent quality within regulatory limits. PSO has the advantage of being easy to implement and computationally efficient, making it an attractive option for real-time optimization in WWTPs.

Neural Networks, particularly artificial neural networks (ANNs), have also become integral tools in WWTP optimization. ANNs are used for both modeling and optimization purposes, as they are capable of learning complex, non-linear relationships between input and output variables. In WWTPs, ANNs can be trained using historical data to model the behavior of treatment processes, such as activated sludge or membrane filtration systems. Once trained, these networks can be used to predict the system's performance under different operating conditions and guide decision-making by optimizing process parameters (Agho, et al., 2022, Ezeafulukwe, Okatta & Ayanponle, 2022). ANNs have been successfully applied to optimize energy consumption, control sludge production, and enhance nutrient removal efficiency in various WWTP configurations.

Hybrid optimization approaches, which combine multiple optimization techniques, have also gained popularity in WWTP simulation. These hybrid methods leverage the strengths of different algorithms to improve the overall performance and robustness of the optimization process. For example, combining Genetic Algorithms with Particle Swarm Optimization allows for a more comprehensive exploration of the solution space, as GAs excel at exploring large, complex spaces, while PSO is efficient at fine-tuning solutions (Daraojimba, et al., 2022, Kanu, et al., 2022, Okolo, et al., 2022). Additionally, hybrid approaches that integrate machine learning techniques, such as support vector machines (SVM) or reinforcement learning, with traditional optimization algorithms can enhance the predictive capabilities of simulation models, leading to more accurate predictions of WWTP performance and better-informed decision-making.

One of the most promising hybrid approaches in the optimization of WWTPs is the combination of AI-driven machine learning algorithms with traditional optimization techniques. Machine learning algorithms, particularly supervised learning techniques, can be used to predict the performance of WWTPs based on historical data. These models can identify patterns and relationships that may not be easily discernible through conventional modeling approaches. For example, machine learning algorithms can be trained to predict the impact of changes in influent characteristics, such as variations in organic matter or nutrients, on the performance of the treatment process (Ojika, et al., 2021, Onaghinor, et al., 2021, Sobowale, et al., 2021). Once these predictive models are developed, they can be integrated into the optimization process, guiding decision-making and enabling the system to adapt in real-time to changes in operational conditions.

Additionally, hybrid systems that combine AI and simulation models have the potential to revolutionize how WWTPs are managed. For example, AI algorithms can be used to optimize real-time control systems that adjust operational parameters such as aeration rates or chemical dosing, while the simulation model can be used to predict the long-term impact of these changes on system performance (Akintobi, Okeke & Ajani, 2023, Eyeghre, et al., 2023, Ogunwole, et al., 2023). This combination enables WWTPs to operate more dynamically and responsively, reducing energy consumption and operational costs while improving effluent quality.

Furthermore, the use of machine learning and hybrid optimization techniques can be particularly beneficial in decentralized WWTPs, where real-time data and adaptive control are critical for efficient operation. Decentralized treatment systems often face challenges such as varying influent quality, limited resources for operation and maintenance, and a lack of experienced personnel. By integrating AI and machine learning into the optimization process, decentralized WWTPs can achieve more efficient operation and better meet regulatory requirements (Bristol-Alagbariya, Ayanponle & Ogedengbe, 2023, Nwakile,et al., 2023).

In conclusion, optimization techniques play a vital role in enhancing the performance, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness of full-scale wastewater treatment plants. The use of multi-objective optimization, combined with advanced algorithms such as Genetic Algorithms, Particle Swarm Optimization, and Neural Networks, has enabled the development of more efficient WWTP designs and operational strategies. Furthermore, the integration of AI and machine learning into optimization processes offers significant potential for real-time decision-making and long-term performance improvement (Ajayi, et al., 2021, Odio, et al., 2021, Onukwulu, et al., 2021). As these optimization techniques continue to evolve, they will contribute to the future of wastewater treatment, enabling plants to operate more efficiently, reduce environmental impacts, and meet the increasing demands for water treatment in a sustainable manner. The ongoing research in hybrid approaches and AI integration will likely lead to even more powerful tools for optimizing WWTPs, especially in decentralized applications where flexibility and responsiveness are key.

2.5. Performance Evaluation Metrics

Performance evaluation is a crucial aspect of designing and optimizing full-scale wastewater treatment plants (WWTPs) to ensure that these systems are both efficient and effective. Evaluating the performance of WWTPs involves monitoring and assessing key parameters that reflect the plant's operational efficiency, environmental impact, and sustainability. Performance evaluation metrics help engineers to quantify system performance, identify areas for improvement, and compare the effectiveness of different treatment strategies. These metrics are essential for optimizing plant designs, ensuring compliance with regulatory standards, and reducing operational costs (Bristol-Alagbariya, Ayanponle & Ogedengbe, 2022, Nwulu, et al., 2022).

Key performance indicators (KPIs) are the primary tools used to assess the effectiveness of wastewater treatment processes. These indicators provide measurable values that reflect the performance of a treatment plant in various operational areas. The most common KPIs used in WWTP performance evaluation include energy consumption, chemical oxygen demand (COD) and biochemical oxygen demand (BOD) removal efficiency, sludge yield, and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions (Edwards & Smallwood, 2023, Elete, et al., 2023, Nwulu, et al., 2023). Energy consumption is an important metric for evaluating the operational efficiency of WWTPs, as energy typically accounts for a large portion of the operating costs. Optimizing energy use, through strategies such as aeration optimization, pump scheduling, and the use of energy-efficient equipment, is critical for reducing costs and improving the overall sustainability of the plant.

COD and BOD removal efficiency are key indicators of the plant's ability to remove organic pollutants from the wastewater. These metrics are commonly used to assess the performance of biological treatment processes, such as activated sludge and membrane bioreactors (MBRs). The removal efficiency of COD and BOD reflects the treatment plant's ability to reduce the concentration of organic pollutants, which is essential for meeting discharge standards and protecting the environment (Afeku-Amenyo, et al., 2023, Fiemotongha, et al., 2023, Sobowale, et al., 2023). Monitoring and optimizing COD/BOD removal can help identify potential issues in the treatment process, such as insufficient microbial activity or inadequate aeration, and guide corrective actions to improve performance.

Sludge yield is another important KPI that measures the amount of sludge produced per unit of wastewater treated. Excess sludge generation is a common challenge in WWTPs, as it requires additional resources for handling, disposal, or treatment. Optimizing sludge yield is essential for reducing waste management costs and improving the overall efficiency of the treatment process. Sludge reduction strategies, such as optimizing the sludge retention time (SRT) or implementing advanced sludge treatment technologies, can help minimize the volume of excess sludge generated (Ayo-Farai, et al., 2023, Ezeanochie, Afolabi & Akinsooto, 2023).

GHG emissions, particularly methane and nitrous oxide, are another critical performance metric for assessing the environmental impact of WWTPs. Methane is produced during anaerobic processes, such as anaerobic digestion, while nitrous oxide is a byproduct of biological nitrification and denitrification. These gases contribute to climate change, and minimizing their release is an important aspect of optimizing WWTP operations. Evaluating GHG emissions allows engineers to assess the environmental sustainability of the treatment processes and identify opportunities for reducing emissions through process optimization, energy recovery, or alternative treatment technologies (Bristol-Alagbariya, Ayanponle & Ogedengbe, 2022, Ogunnowo, et al., 2022).

In addition to monitoring KPIs, it is essential to benchmark the simulated results of WWTP performance against real-world data to validate the accuracy and reliability of process simulation models. Process simulation tools are used to predict the behavior and performance of treatment processes under various operating conditions, but these predictions must be compared with actual plant performance to ensure that the models are accurate. Real-world data can come from pilot-scale or full-scale WWTPs and should include operational data, such as influent and effluent quality, flow rates, energy consumption, and chemical usage (Adeoba & Yessoufou, 2018, Oyedokun, 2019, Uzozie, et al., 2023). By comparing the results from simulations with actual performance data, engineers can assess the predictive capability of the simulation models and identify any discrepancies that need to be addressed.

Benchmarking also involves comparing the performance of different WWTPs or treatment processes to identify best practices and areas for improvement. For example, comparing the energy consumption, removal efficiency, and operational costs of different plants or treatment technologies can help engineers identify the most cost-effective and environmentally sustainable treatment options. This benchmarking process is crucial for guiding decision-making during the design and optimization phases of WWTP development, particularly when selecting treatment technologies or evaluating the feasibility of upgrades or retrofits (Onukwulu, et al., 2023, Onyeke, et al., 2023, Ozobu, et al., 2023).

Sensitivity analysis is another important technique used in performance evaluation. Sensitivity analysis involves systematically varying key parameters, such as influent characteristics, operating conditions, or system configurations, to assess their impact on WWTP performance. By evaluating how changes in input variables affect key performance metrics, engineers can identify the most sensitive parameters and focus on optimizing those factors to improve plant performance. For example, varying influent concentrations or flow rates can help determine how resilient a treatment system is to fluctuations in wastewater quality (Ojika, et al., 2023, Okolo, et al., 2023, Okuh, et al., 2023). Sensitivity analysis can also be used to assess the robustness of process models by identifying which parameters have the most significant influence on performance predictions.

Uncertainty analysis is closely related to sensitivity analysis and is used to quantify the uncertainty in model predictions and performance evaluations. Uncertainty arises from various sources, including measurement errors, variability in influent characteristics, and uncertainty in model parameters. By conducting uncertainty analysis, engineers can assess the reliability of simulation results and determine the level of confidence in performance predictions. This analysis helps to identify potential risks or areas of uncertainty in the design or operation of a WWTP and provides valuable insights for decision-making (Adewoyin, 2022, Elete, et al., 2022, Nwulu, et al., 2022). For example, uncertainty analysis can be used to assess the variability in effluent quality under different operational conditions or to quantify the uncertainty in energy consumption predictions for different treatment processes.

Together, sensitivity and uncertainty analysis provide a more comprehensive understanding of WWTP performance, enabling engineers to make more informed decisions regarding design, optimization, and operation. These techniques can help identify critical areas for improvement, such as optimizing chemical dosing, aeration rates, or sludge treatment processes, and ensure that the treatment system operates effectively under a range of conditions. Sensitivity and uncertainty analysis also help to guide the development of robust optimization strategies that are resilient to variations in influent characteristics or operational conditions (Afolabi & Akinsooto, 2023, Hanson, et al., 2023, Ogunwole, et al., 2023).

In conclusion, performance evaluation metrics are essential for assessing the effectiveness and efficiency of WWTPs, guiding design decisions, and optimizing operational strategies. Key performance indicators, such as energy consumption, COD/BOD removal efficiency, sludge yield, and GHG emissions, provide valuable insights into the performance of treatment processes and their environmental impact. Benchmarking simulated results against real-world data helps validate simulation models and ensures that they accurately reflect plant performance. Sensitivity and uncertainty analysis further enhance performance evaluation by identifying critical parameters and quantifying the reliability of performance predictions. By using these metrics and techniques, engineers can optimize WWTP design and operation, improving efficiency, reducing costs, and ensuring that plants meet regulatory requirements and environmental standards. As the demand for efficient and sustainable wastewater treatment continues to grow, these performance evaluation tools will play an increasingly important role in guiding the development of advanced, high-performance WWTPs.

2.6. Challenges and Limitations

The development and application of process simulation and optimization tools in full-scale wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) design offer significant advantages, such as improved system performance, reduced operational costs, and enhanced environmental sustainability. However, despite the advancements in simulation technologies, there are several challenges and limitations that can hinder the widespread adoption and effectiveness of these tools in practice. These challenges are rooted in various factors, including high computational demands, user learning curves, licensing costs, and issues with model interoperability, which can affect the overall utility of these tools in the design, optimization, and operation of WWTPs.

One of the primary challenges of using process simulation tools is the high computational requirements, particularly when simulating large-scale or complex WWTPs. Simulations of wastewater treatment processes often involve a large number of variables, including chemical reactions, biological processes, fluid dynamics, and membrane filtration, all of which need to be modeled accurately to predict system performance. This level of complexity requires substantial computational power, especially when running dynamic simulations over extended periods or evaluating the effects of various operational scenarios (Daraojimba, et al., 2023, Gidiagba, et al., 2023, Onukwulu, et al., 2023). Full-scale WWTPs, with their intricate process flows and numerous treatment stages, require detailed, time-dependent models that can simulate the behavior of the plant under various conditions. As a result, the computational demands for running such simulations can be prohibitively high, particularly for smaller-scale applications or for users with limited access to high-performance computing resources.

The computational burden associated with these models can also affect the speed at which simulations are completed, making it challenging to obtain timely results. This becomes especially problematic in real-time optimization scenarios, where quick decision-making is critical to the efficient operation of the plant. Delays in simulation output can hinder the timely implementation of optimization strategies, limiting the ability of operators to respond to fluctuating influent quality, changes in plant load, or other operational challenges (Banso, et al., 2023, Ezeanochie, Afolabi & Akinsooto, 2023). Moreover, the high computational cost can limit the number of scenarios that can be tested, reducing the ability to conduct thorough sensitivity analysis or explore a wide range of potential operating conditions. In situations where rapid adjustments are needed, reliance on such resource-intensive simulation models may not be practical, necessitating the development of more efficient modeling techniques or the use of simplified models for real-time applications.

Another significant challenge faced by users of process simulation tools is the steep learning curve associated with these sophisticated systems. While many simulation tools have become more user-friendly in recent years, they still require a certain level of expertise to operate effectively. Users must be familiar with the underlying principles of wastewater treatment processes, as well as the specifics of the simulation software itself, including how to configure models, input data, and interpret results (Bristol-Alagbariya, Ayanponle & Ogedengbe, 2023, Ogunnowo, et al., 2023). The complexity of these tools means that operators, engineers, and researchers must dedicate significant time to learning how to use them properly, which can delay the implementation of optimization strategies or the development of plant designs.

In practice, this learning curve can be a barrier to widespread adoption, especially in facilities where staff may have limited experience with advanced simulation tools. Training personnel to use these tools effectively can be time-consuming and costly, requiring investment in training programs or external consultants (Agho, et al., 2023, Ezeamii, et al., 2023, Ogu, et al., 2023). Additionally, the lack of specialized expertise in both wastewater treatment and simulation modeling can lead to misinterpretations of simulation results, which in turn may result in suboptimal decisions being made in the design or operation of the plant. For this reason, the usability and accessibility of simulation tools remain a major challenge for their effective application in full-scale WWTP design and operation.

Licensing costs further compound the barriers to the adoption of process simulation and optimization tools. Many of the leading simulation tools, such as GPS-X, BioWin, and WEST, require expensive licenses for full access to their advanced features. These licensing costs can be prohibitive for small-scale operators, municipal plants with limited budgets, or research organizations that may not have the financial resources to invest in such tools. The high cost of licensing can limit the number of users who have access to these powerful simulation tools, reducing the potential for widespread use in the wastewater treatment industry (Akintobi, Okeke & Ajani, 2022, Kanu, et al., 2022, Onukwulu, et al., 2022).

In addition to the initial licensing fees, many simulation tools require ongoing maintenance and support contracts, which add to the long-term cost of ownership. The financial burden associated with these tools can discourage their adoption, especially in regions or industries where budget constraints are a significant concern. Furthermore, for users in developing countries or regions with limited financial resources, the cost of obtaining and maintaining these tools can present a major obstacle to improving wastewater treatment infrastructure and advancing environmental sustainability (Ajayi, et al., 2023, Isong, et al., 2023, Nwulu, et al., 2023).

Another limitation of process simulation tools is the lack of standardized interfaces and the challenge of model interoperability. In the context of wastewater treatment, different simulation tools often focus on specific aspects of the treatment process, such as biological treatment, membrane filtration, or sludge management. As a result, operators and engineers may need to use multiple simulation tools to model the entire treatment plant, which can create challenges in integrating the results from different models. For example, a tool that models biological treatment may not be easily integrated with a tool that models membrane filtration or chemical treatment (Edwards, Mallhi & Zhang, 2018, Tula, et al., 2004, Vindrola-Padros & Johnson, 2022). The lack of standardized interfaces between different simulation platforms can lead to inefficiencies in the design and optimization process, as data must be manually transferred between tools or reformatted to ensure compatibility.

This lack of interoperability also makes it difficult to simulate complex, multi-stage treatment processes that involve multiple types of treatment technologies. For example, the integration of biological and physical treatment processes, such as combining activated sludge with membrane filtration or using anaerobic digestion alongside advanced oxidation processes, requires seamless data exchange between different simulation tools. The inability to easily integrate these tools can limit the accuracy of simulations and reduce the ability to optimize entire treatment systems (Ojika, et al., 2023, Okolo, et al., 2023, Olurin,et al., 2023). Furthermore, the lack of standardization can result in data inconsistencies or errors, which can affect the reliability of simulation results and lead to suboptimal decision-making.

To address these challenges, efforts are needed to develop standardized protocols and interfaces that allow for better interoperability between simulation tools. This would enable users to create more accurate and integrated models that reflect the complexity of real-world WWTPs. Additionally, the development of more user-friendly simulation platforms, along with simplified licensing models, could help make these tools more accessible to a wider range of users and reduce the learning curve associated with their use (Bristol-Alagbariya, Ayanponle & Ogedengbe, 2022, Onukwulu, et al., 2022).

In conclusion, while process simulation and optimization tools have significantly advanced the field of WWTP design and operation, several challenges and limitations remain that hinder their widespread adoption and effectiveness. High computational requirements, a steep learning curve, licensing costs, and issues with model interoperability present significant obstacles to fully realizing the potential of these tools. Overcoming these challenges will require continued innovation in simulation technology, including the development of more efficient algorithms, user-friendly interfaces, and standardized data exchange protocols. As these obstacles are addressed, process simulation and optimization tools will play an increasingly important role in enhancing the design, performance, and sustainability of wastewater treatment plants, ultimately contributing to more efficient water management and environmental protection.

2.7. Future Trends and Recommendations

The future of process simulation and optimization tools for full-scale wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) design is evolving rapidly, driven by advancements in technology and the growing demand for more efficient and sustainable wastewater treatment solutions. As urbanization increases and environmental regulations become more stringent, wastewater treatment plants are faced with the need to operate more efficiently while minimizing their environmental impact. Simulation and optimization tools play a crucial role in meeting these challenges by improving plant design, enhancing operational performance, and reducing costs. Looking ahead, there are several key trends and recommendations that will shape the future of these tools, enabling more dynamic, adaptable, and sustainable wastewater treatment systems.

One of the most significant trends in the development of process simulation and optimization tools is the integration with real-time monitoring and control systems. Traditionally, simulations have been conducted off-line, using historical data and operational parameters to predict plant performance. However, as WWTPs are increasingly equipped with sensors and automated control systems, the ability to integrate simulation models with real-time data is becoming a game-changer (Adeoba, etal., 2018, Omisola, et al., 2020, Uzozie, et al., 2023). Real-time monitoring allows for the continuous collection of operational data, such as influent quality, flow rates, and chemical dosing, which can be fed directly into simulation models to provide real-time predictions and optimization recommendations. This integration enables dynamic optimization, where the simulation model continuously updates and adjusts its recommendations based on real-time data, allowing for proactive decision-making and more responsive plant operations.

By combining process simulations with real-time monitoring, operators can continuously track the performance of the plant and adjust key parameters, such as aeration rates, chemical dosing, or sludge retention times, to maintain optimal performance. For example, if the influent quality suddenly changes, the simulation model can automatically adjust the operating parameters to account for the change, ensuring that the plant continues to meet effluent quality standards. Additionally, real-time data can be used to validate and refine simulation models, improving their accuracy and predictive capabilities (Daraojimba, et al., 2023, Ezeh, et al., 2023, Olurin,et al., 2023). This integration of real-time monitoring and simulation is expected to enhance operational efficiency, reduce energy consumption, and improve the overall sustainability of WWTPs.

Another important trend is the move toward cloud-based simulation environments and digital twins. Cloud-based platforms offer several advantages, including the ability to access simulation tools from any location, the ability to scale resources on demand, and the ability to collaborate in real-time with other stakeholders. Cloud-based platforms are particularly useful for large-scale, complex WWTPs that require significant computational power, as they allow for the use of high-performance computing resources without the need for on-site infrastructure (Adeoba, Tesfamichael & Yessoufou, 2019, Ubamadu, et al., 2023). These platforms also enable the storage and sharing of simulation data, making it easier for multiple users, including plant operators, engineers, and consultants, to collaborate and optimize plant performance collectively.

In addition to cloud-based platforms, digital twins are gaining traction in the wastewater treatment industry. A digital twin is a virtual replica of a physical asset or system that can be used to simulate and monitor its performance in real time. In the context of WWTPs, a digital twin could represent the entire plant, or individual components, such as the activated sludge system or membrane filtration units. By integrating real-time data with simulation models, a digital twin allows operators to visualize and analyze plant performance continuously, predict future behavior, and test different operational scenarios (Onukwulu, et al., 2023, Onyeke, et al., 2023, Oyeyipo, et al., 2023). This enables better decision-making and allows for more efficient plant management. Digital twins also provide an opportunity for predictive maintenance, as they can simulate the performance of equipment over time, allowing for early detection of potential failures before they occur.

The development of open-source platforms is another trend that has the potential to significantly impact the future of process simulation and optimization tools. Open-source tools offer a lower-cost alternative to proprietary simulation software and provide greater transparency in terms of model structure and functionality. These platforms can be freely accessed, modified, and shared by users, enabling greater collaboration within the industry and fostering innovation (Agbede, et al., 2023, Iwe, et al., 2023, Obianyo & Eremeeva, 2023). Open-source tools can also be tailored to specific needs, allowing for customization and the development of specialized models for different types of wastewater treatment processes. The availability of open-source platforms could democratize access to process simulation and optimization tools, making them more accessible to smaller utilities, research institutions, and developing countries that may have limited financial resources to invest in expensive commercial software.

In addition to open-source tools, the trend toward cross-platform compatibility is also becoming increasingly important. WWTPs often use a combination of different software systems for various tasks, such as process modeling, control, monitoring, and reporting. However, the lack of compatibility between these systems can lead to inefficiencies, data silos, and a lack of integration across different parts of the plant. Future simulation tools should focus on improving interoperability, allowing different systems to communicate seamlessly with each other (Bristol-Alagbariya, Ayanponle & Ogedengbe, 2023, Nwulu, et al., 2023). This will facilitate data sharing, improve coordination across different departments, and enable more efficient plant management. Cross-platform compatibility will also enable the integration of various optimization techniques, such as combining biological treatment models with advanced membrane filtration simulations, to optimize entire treatment systems.

While there have been significant advancements in process simulation and optimization tools, there are still several research gaps and opportunities for further development in this field. One key area for future research is the development of more sophisticated and accurate models for emerging contaminants, such as pharmaceuticals, personal care products, and microplastics. These contaminants are becoming an increasing concern for wastewater treatment plants, as they often require specialized treatment processes and are difficult to remove using conventional technologies (Ajiga, Ayanponle & Okatta, 2022, Noah, 2022, Ogundipe, Sangoleye & Udokanma, 2022). Developing simulation models that can accurately predict the behavior and removal of these contaminants will be essential for improving the design and operation of WWTPs.

Another area for future research is the integration of advanced data analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) with process simulation tools. AI and machine learning have the potential to enhance the predictive capabilities of simulation models by analyzing large datasets, identifying patterns, and making real-time recommendations. For example, AI could be used to optimize sludge treatment processes by predicting the optimal sludge retention time or to identify the most efficient chemical dosing strategies based on influent characteristics (Akintobi, Okeke & Ajani, 2023, Izuka, et al., 2023, Onukwulu, et al., 2023). The integration of AI with simulation tools could also lead to the development of self-optimizing systems that can automatically adjust operational parameters in response to changes in plant performance or influent quality, reducing the need for manual intervention and improving overall efficiency.

In conclusion, the future of process simulation and optimization tools for WWTP design is promising, with several emerging trends and opportunities that will help improve the efficiency, sustainability, and cost-effectiveness of wastewater treatment. The integration of real-time monitoring, cloud-based platforms, digital twins, and open-source tools will enable more dynamic, adaptable, and collaborative decision-making in plant design and operation. Furthermore, advancements in AI, data analytics, and the development of models for emerging contaminants will continue to drive innovation in this field (Onaghinor, et al., 2021, Orieno, et al., 2022, Sobowale, et al., 2022). As these trends evolve, there will be increased opportunities for developing more accurate, efficient, and environmentally sustainable wastewater treatment systems. Addressing the research gaps and continuing to innovate in simulation technologies will be key to meeting the growing challenges in wastewater treatment and ensuring the continued success of WWTPs worldwide.

2.8. Conclusion

In conclusion, the systematic review of process simulation and optimization tools for full-scale wastewater treatment plant (WWTP) design reveals the significant advancements made in the field and highlights the ongoing challenges that need to be addressed. Through the integration of sophisticated simulation models and optimization algorithms, engineers have gained the ability to design more efficient, cost-effective, and sustainable WWTPs. These tools enable the accurate modeling of complex treatment processes, allowing for the prediction of system performance under various operating conditions and the optimization of critical parameters such as energy consumption, effluent quality, and sludge handling.

The key findings from this review demonstrate that while there are several well-established simulation tools available, such as GPS-X, BioWin, and WEST, there are still limitations in terms of computational demands, model interoperability, and the steep learning curves associated with their use. However, the potential for improvement is significant, with emerging trends such as real-time data integration, cloud-based simulation platforms, and AI-driven optimization opening new possibilities for plant design and operation. The ability to seamlessly integrate simulation tools with real-time monitoring and control systems will enhance the adaptability and efficiency of WWTPs, enabling operators to respond dynamically to changing influent characteristics and operational conditions.

These contributions to engineering practice will play a pivotal role in the future of wastewater treatment. As regulations become more stringent and environmental concerns increase, the need for data-driven, sustainable solutions will only grow. Simulation and optimization tools provide the necessary framework for designing WWTPs that not only meet regulatory standards but also contribute to the long-term sustainability of water resources. By improving plant efficiency, reducing operational costs, and minimizing environmental impact, these tools are helping to shape a more sustainable future for wastewater management.

The continued development of these tools, along with the integration of emerging technologies, will further enhance the ability of engineers to design and optimize WWTPs that can adapt to the evolving demands of the industry. Moving forward, a greater focus on interoperability, user accessibility, and integration with real-time data will be essential for unlocking the full potential of simulation and optimization tools. As the field evolves, it will be crucial to address the remaining challenges and continue innovating to ensure that WWTPs remain at the forefront of sustainable water management practices. By embracing these advancements, we can pave the way for more efficient, resilient, and environmentally responsible wastewater treatment solutions worldwide.

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