

Selective Laser Melting of AlSi10Mg: Corrosion Behavior

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Abstract

Additive Manufacturing (AM) processes can theoretically fabricate materials with any complex structures with added functionality at low costs. However, the properties of components developed by AM should not lose to the properties observed in components fabricated through conventional manufacturing methods. In this study, the corrosion resistance of AlSi10Mg alloy processed through Selective Laser Melting (SLM) in contrast to its traditional counterpart, Sand-Casting (SC) was investigated. Potentiodynamic polarization tests were performed to study the electrochemical behaviour in a 3.5% NaCl solution. It was observed that the corrosion resistance of the SLM material is relatively better than the SC alloy under similar test conditions. It may be concluded that the unique solidification conditions existing during the SLM process may lead to marginally improved corrosion resistance in the alloy considered.

Keywords: Additive Manufacturing, AlSi10Mg Alloy, Corrosion, Selective Laser Melting

1.0 Introduction

Additive Manufacturing (AM) has become the potential technology to fabricate components with intricates using almost all varieties of engineering materials^{1,2}, including crystalline materials (Al-, Ag-, Co-, Cu-, Fe-, Ni-, Ti-, etc.)³⁻²⁵, amorphous materials (bulk metallic glasses)^{11,26,27}, quasicrystalline materials²⁸, high entropy alloys²⁹⁻³¹, and composites³²⁻³⁶. Among the different AM processes, Selective Laser Melting (SLM) also known as the Laser Powder-Bed Fusion Process (LPBF) is the most progressing and widely used technology in which the components are manufactured layer-by-layer where the powder-

bed is scanned by a high-power laser beam (source) as governed by a CAD model³⁷⁻³⁹. The corrosion behaviour of SLM-fabricated alloy significantly influences the parts in their service conditions, especially in the aerospace, automobile, marine, oil, and pipeline industries, etc., It is vital to study the effect of various metallurgical features present in the microstructure, especially in the point of view of corrosion properties⁴⁰. AlSi10Mg alloy^{41,42} and AlSi12 alloy⁴³⁻⁴⁵ are the most widely fabricated Al-based alloys using the SLM process. Al-based alloys containing Si (which imparts fluidity) are extensively utilized because of their low melting point/solidification range, low shrinkage, and good castability^{46,47}. AlSi10Mg

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alloys (particularly hypoeutectic) are used in above mentioned industries because of their low coefficient of thermal expansion, low density, and high specific strength⁴⁸.

The microstructure of AlSi10Mg alloy consists of an α -phase containing Al, a β -phase like Mg_2Si , and a eutectic Al-Si mixture. Previous studies show that the presence of coarse and acicular eutectic Si particles deteriorates the mechanical properties of AlSi10Mg alloy⁴⁹⁻⁵¹. Hence, the mechanical properties of AlSi10Mg alloy can be improved by modifying its microstructure (especially the morphology of the Si particles)⁵¹. A finer microstructure with homogenized eutectic Si particles in the Al matrix could be obtained through a rapid solidification process like SLM^{52,53}. On the contrary, the cooling rate in conventional casting is much less when compared to the SLM process⁵⁴. So, a finer microstructure with homogenized eutectic Si particles in the Al matrix could be obtained through SLM⁵⁵. The commercial applications of SLM-processed materials depend also on their corrosion properties⁵⁶. Earlier investigations reveal that the corrosion resistance of additive-manufactured Al-based alloys is higher than its conventional cast counterpart⁵⁷ due to homogenized microstructure and the absence of Fe-based intermetallics⁵⁶. On the other hand, some other researchers have observed poor corrosion resistance because of passive layer malfunctioning^{56,58}. The friction stir processing of SLM-fabricated AlSi10Mg results in a change in pitting potential and a reduction in corrosion rate and corrosion current density thereby enhancing its corrosion properties⁵⁹. Some other researchers have also reported similar corrosion resistance for the AlSi10Mg alloy produced by both conventional casting and SLM⁶⁰. Some researchers have demonstrated that the corrosion properties of the SLM-fabricated AlSi10Mg alloy could be improved through a suitable heat treatment process

by removing any internal stresses formed during rapid solidification and achieving uniform distribution of eutectic Si particles in the Al matrix⁶¹. However, Kubacki *et al.*⁶² and Gu *et al.*⁶³ observed a reduced corrosion performance in heat-treated AlSi10Mg alloys fabricated by SLM.

The reports on the corrosion behaviour of AlSi10Mg fabricated by SLM are mixed in nature, where some researchers have shown improved corrosion properties as compared to their cast counterparts and others demonstrated either similar or inferior properties for SLM-processed material^{41,42,61,64}. Hence, the present work is of utmost significance as it discusses the corrosion behaviour of SLM-processed AlSi10Mg alloy by potentiodynamic polarization tests and the results are compared with their counterpart (sand-cast AlSi10Mg alloy). It is hypothesized in this work that the corrosion resistance of SLM-processed AlSi10Mg alloy will be better than its cast counterpart due to its refined microstructure.

2.0 Materials and Methods

2.1 Sample Preparation

The AlSi10Mg samples were fabricated by SLM using the EOSINT M280 system with the standard process parameters: 200 W laser power, 500 mm/s scanning speed, 30 μ m layer thickness, and 0.125 mm hatch spacing. Both cylindrical specimens and rectangular specimens were fabricated according to the ISO/ASTM 52921-13 standard. Metallic powders were used as feedstock material with a particle size of \sim 50 μ m under a pure argon gas protective atmosphere. The SLM-processed samples were stress-relieved using annealing heat treatment at 300°C for 2 h in a muffle furnace (Delta Power/2019). The cast counterparts were produced by remelting Al alloy

Table 1. Chemical composition of the Selective Laser Melted (SLM) and Sand-Cast (SC) AlSi10Mg alloys evaluated by optical emission spectrometer

Alloy(wt.%)	Si	Mg	Mn	Fe	Cu	Sn	Ni	Zn	Ti	Pb	Al
SLM	10.16	0.41	0.01	0.31	0.01	0.01	0.19	0.01	0.03	0.01	Bal.
SC	10.82	0.27	0.03	0.34	0.07	0.01	0.02	0.01	0.01	0.01	Bal.

at 680°C in an induction furnace with inherent stirring. Ingots were cast using a sand-casting process employing a rectangular iron die of (100 x 10 x 10) mm³. The central portion of the ingot was used to prepare test specimens. The chemical composition of the SLM and sand-cast sample are shown in Table 1.

2.2 Microstructural Characterization

The microstructure of the samples was examined by optical microscopy (LEICA DMI8C, Germany) coupled with image analyzer software (ENVISION 6.0) and Scanning Electron Microscopy (SEM) with a GEMINI 300 CARL ZEISS (CARL ZEISS, Germany) provided with spot chemical analysis using an Energy Dispersive Spectroscopy (EDS) detector. SiC emery papers (280, 320, 400, 800) were used to rough grind the sample surfaces. Then the samples were subjected to diamond polishing with a particle size of 5 µm, 3 µm, and 1 µm, respectively. Kallings reagent (33-50 % Ethanol, ~2% Cupric chloride dihydrate, 33-50 % hydrochloric acid, and 0-33% water) was used to etch the samples for microstructural analysis. Samples were exposed to etching reagent for 10 seconds to reveal the microstructures

2.3 Phase Analysis

The internal phases present in the AlSi10Mg samples were identified using X-ray diffractometer ULTIMA IV, RIGAKU (RIGAKU, Tokyo, Japan) with Cu-K_α radiation using the following parameters: 40 kV voltage, 30 mA current, spot size 5 x 5 mm and 2°/min scanning rate. X'pertHighscore Plus software was used to analyze the diffraction peaks.

2.4 Mechanical Testing

The microhardness of the AlSi10Mg samples was measured using the Vickers microhardness tester. Vickers microhardness of the sample was calculated on the longitudinal section of the as-built parts using an Indentec 5030KV microhardness testing machine with a 0.5 kg load and a 10 s dwell time. 3 tests were conducted and the mean value is reported.

2.5 Electrochemical Characterization

The corrosion behaviour was investigated using electrochemical characterization in the form of Potentiodynamic Polarization (PDP) analysis as well as by weight loss tests. The corrosion tests were conducted using a 3.5% NaCl solution with an electrolyte containing naturally dissolved oxygen. The PDP analysis was done with BIOLOGIC SP-150 incorporated with Ec-Lab software V10.44. The tests were conducted using a standard three-electrode cell with a Saturated Calomel Electrode (SCE) as a reference electrode and using 0.5 mV/s scanning rate from -2 V to -0.6 V. This PDP is a preliminary and qualitative method to evaluate the sample.

3.0 Results and Discussion

3.1 Microstructural Analysis

The optical images along the cross-section of the SC and SLM fabricated AlSi10Mg samples are shown in Figure 1 (a)-(c) respectively. The microstructure of the SC AlSi10Mg alloy consists of pro-eutectic Al-dendrites

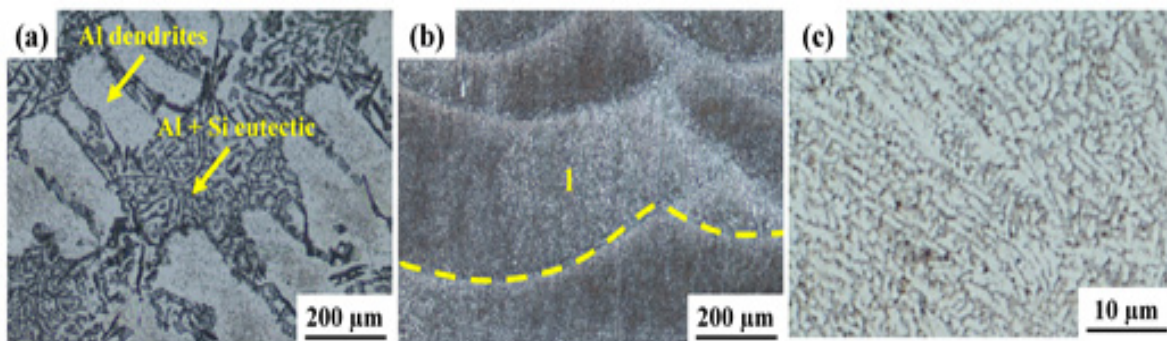


Figure 1. Optical microscopy images of the (a) sand-cast and selective laser melting processed AlSi10Mg alloy at (b) lower magnification and (c) higher magnification.

along with Al-Si eutectics and some porosity. The observed microstructure in Figure 1 (a) is typical for any hypoeutectic composition. It was observed that the solidification rate of SLM-processed AlSi10Mg is comparatively higher than that of its SC counterpart and hence a very fine microstructure is obtained at the same scale. However, the microstructure is difficult to resolve at the length scale considered (Figure 1 (b)). Only features like the laser melting tracks are visible under the length scale considered as highlighted in Figure 1(b). A higher magnification optical image of SLM-fabricated AlSi10Mg is shown in Figure 1(c). The microstructure shows the dendritic features at an excellent scale (in a sub-micron regime) where neither eutectic morphology nor the presence of Si platelets is observed, unlike the cast condition. In short, it may be summarized that the SLM-processed samples do not show a typical hypo-eutectic-like microstructure but a unique morphology. The present results illustrate that the high cooling rates observed during the SLM process lead to refined microstructure features^{65,66}. In addition, the unique solidification conditions existing during SLM

fabrication lead to variations in the morphology of the microstructure⁵⁴.

SEM images of the SC and SLM fabricated AlSi10Mg samples are shown in Figure 2. The microstructure of the SC AlSi10Mg alloy (Figure 2(a)) shows the presence of hypo-eutectic Al dendrites distributed all over the sample. In addition, eutectic Al-Si and some minor precipitates of Fe-Mn are also observed. The magnified images (Figure 2 (b), (c)) show the presence of Si platelets with the presence of some defects like micro-cracks within the Si platelets. In addition, the SC materials show typical casting defects like porosity. In the SLM fabricated samples (Figure 2 (d)-(f)), the melt pool features along with the overlaps present due to successive laser scanning which remelts some parts of the previously solidified layers. The stacking of the melt pool features results due to successive melting and solidification of different layers during the SLM process. The microstructure of the SLM-processed AlSi10Mg alloy (Figure 2 (e), (f)) primarily consists of a cellular microstructure with Al in the core of the cells and Si along the cell boundaries⁵². The Si is not present in the form of particles/platelets but as a

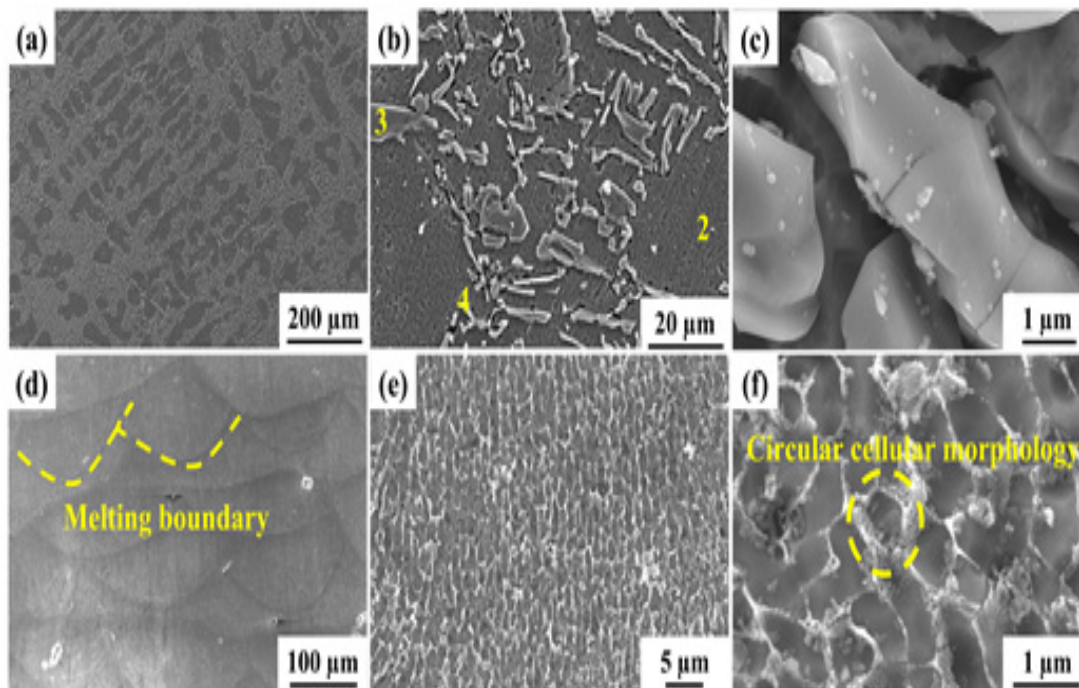


Figure 2. Scanning electron microscopy images of the AlSi10Mg samples fabricated by (a-c) sand cast, and (d-f) selective laser melting.

continuous phase. It was also observed that the porosity present in the SLM samples is mostly accumulated at the melt pool boundaries, which is typical for the SLM process⁶⁷. The significant differences observed in the microstructures of the AlSi10Mg fabricated by both SC and SLM along the different length scales for the basis for the differences in the different properties observed in these samples including corrosion properties.

3.2 Phase Identification

Figure 3 shows the XRD patterns of both SC and SLM-processed AlSi10Mg alloy. Both the samples show the presence of Al and Si phases, as expected. The intensity for the Al peaks has reversed between (111) and (022) in the SLM condition suggesting the presence of crystallographic texture in the material, which is absent in the SC counterpart. On the other hand, the SC material shows some small traces of the Fe-Mn phase, which is not the case in the SLM condition. Such minor differences in the phase might be due to the minor variations in the trace elements concentration present in these samples that come from the feed-stock material. The peaks are found to be broadened for the SLM samples as compared to the SC counterparts because of the following reasons: (1) high degree of internal stresses, (2) Supersaturation of Si in the Al matrix, (3) fine crystallite sizes, and (3) high

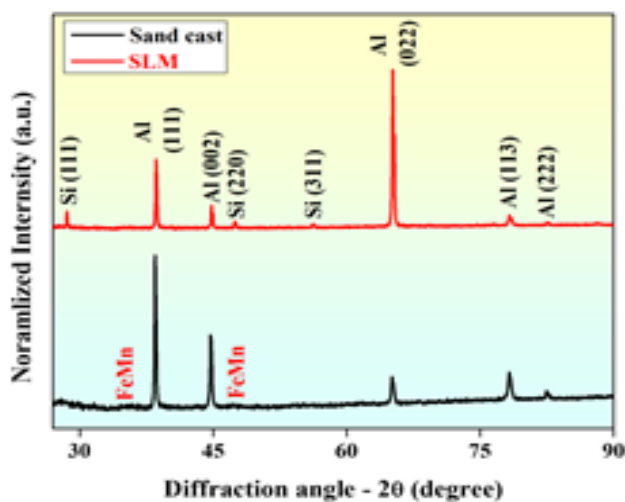


Figure 3. The X-ray diffraction patterns for the AlSi10Mg alloy fabricated through the sand-casting and selective laser melting routes.

degree of defect concentration, especially dislocation density, and stacking faults. The dislocation density of the AlSi10Mg sample processed by SLM ($3 \times 10^{15} \text{ m}^2/\text{m}^3$) is three orders of magnitude higher than the SC AlSi10Mg alloy ($6 \times 10^{12} \text{ m}^2/\text{m}^3$), which is typical for SLM-processed materials^{8,68}. The crystallite size of Al is observed to be 122 nm and 268 nm for the AlSi10Mg fabricated by SLM and SC, respectively. At the same time, the lattice parameters for Al in the Al10SiMg alloy fabricated by SC and SLM routes are found to be 0.40521 nm and 0.40513 nm respectively, which also gives information about the peak positioning that comes from the supersaturation levels observed in the Al lattice^{44,68}.

3.3 Mechanical Properties

The mechanical properties of the AlSi10Mg samples are tested using a Vickers hardness tester. The SC sample shows a hardness of 35 HV, whereas the SLM samples show a hardness of 135 HV, which is to the published literature^{44,69}. Such huge differences in the mechanical properties (like hardness) between the SLM and the SC alloy may be attributed to the following: (1) The presence of a fine microstructure in the SLM samples as compared to the SC counterpart, (2) the presence of a supersaturated solid solution in the SLM processed AlSi10Mg sample, (3) presence of a high degree of internal defects like dislocations in the SLM-fabricated AlSi10Mg, (4) presence of unique microstructural distribution in the SLM-processed samples as compared to the SC ones, and (5) the morphology of Si present along with their length scale.

3.4 Corrosion Properties

Figure 4 and Table 2 show the electrochemical analysis of the AlSi10Mg fabricated by both SC and SLM in the form of PDP curves and Tafel extrapolation plots respectively. The findings of this work from PDP analysis show that the corrosion resistance of both the SLM-fabricated and the SC counterparts are almost similar. From the Tafel plot, it may be observed that the corrosion potential (E_{corr}) for the SLM-fabricated AlSi10Mg alloy is 20 mV more than that of the SC counterpart. A positive rise in E_{corr} (an indicator of corrosion susceptibility) reveals that the specimens fabricated by SLM show relatively

Table 2. Corrosion parameters evaluated from PDP curves and Tafel extrapolation

Specimen	E_{corr} (V)	I_{corr} ($\mu\text{A}/\text{cm}^2$)	CR (mpy)
SLM	-0.76	0.50	0.21
Sand Cast	-0.74	0.63	0.27

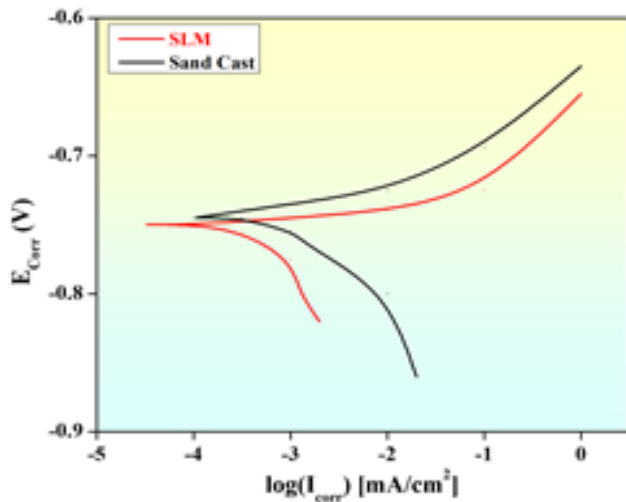


Figure 4. Potentiodynamic polarization curves were observed for the AlSi10Mg samples in 3.5% NaCl solution fabricated by sand-casting and selective laser melting process.

improved corrosion resistance than the SC samples. The relatively better corrosion performance of the additively manufactured alloy could be credited significantly to the rapid solidification rate prevalent during the SLM process. The rapid solidification rates observed during SLM help in refining the microstructure, especially the morphology and distribution of the Si. The significant increase in applied voltage results in a rapid rise in the anodic current showing a pitting corrosion behavior, which is more prevalent in the SC AlSi10Mg alloy than in the SLM-fabricated sample, as seen in the anodic side of the Tafel plot in Figure 4. From the PDP curves, it was noted that the SC AlSi10Mg shows higher current densities than the SLM-fabricated alloys, which indicates lower corrosion resistance. This behaviour was also validated from Tafel extrapolation measurements, which show that the corrosion rate of the SLM processed alloy

was found to be 0.21 mpy as compared to the SC samples, which is 0.27 mpy. The present results demonstrate that the SLM-processed Al10SiMg shows better corrosion resistance than the SC counterpart when tested in 3.5% NaCl medium unlike most of the published results where mixed properties can be seen.

4. Conclusions

The corrosion properties of the AlSi10Mg samples fabricated by both SC and SLM are evaluated and compared. It has been observed that the corrosion properties of the SLM-fabricated AlSi10Mg alloy show slightly improved resistance as compared to its sand-cast counterpart. The distinct contrasts in the microstructural features namely (1) fine microstructural morphology with unique distribution of phases in the SLM samples as compared to the SC counterpart, (2) the presence of a supersaturated solid solution in the SLM processed AlSi10Mg sample, (3) the presence of a high degree of internal defects like dislocations in the SLM-fabricated AlSi10Mg, etc. lead to such difference in the corrosion properties. In addition, the SLM samples also show relatively high hardness as compared to their cast counterpart, suggesting that the SLM process not only produced samples with complex shapes and added functionalities but also can produce samples with improved properties than their cast counterparts.

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