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A study on conventional vs. dual-field assisted ultra-precision diamond cutting of high-entropy alloys

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Abstract
Ultra-precision diamond cutting of high-entropy alloys (HEAs) presents significant challenges due to the unique material properties of these alloys, such as high hardness, brittleness, and complex microstructures. This study provides a comparative analysis of conventional diamond cutting and dual-field assisted ultra-precision diamond cutting, where both magnetic and ultrasonic vibrations are applied to improve machining performance. The primary objective of this paper is to evaluate the differences in surface finish, tool wear, material removal rate, and residual stresses in HEAs under both machining methods. The results indicate that the dual-field assisted cutting method significantly improves surface quality, reduces tool wear, and enhances material removal rates, thereby making it a viable option for machining high-entropy alloys in ultra-precision applications.

Keywords: Ultra-precision diamond cutting, high-entropy alloys (HEAs), dual-field assisted machining, surface finish and tool wear, material removal rate in HEAs

Introduction
High-entropy alloys (HEAs) have emerged as advanced materials with unique properties such as high strength, superior thermal stability, and corrosion resistance. These alloys are composed of five or more principal elements, resulting in complex microstructures that offer enhanced mechanical properties. However, these same properties also make HEAs difficult to machine using conventional techniques, particularly in ultra-precision diamond cutting, where tool wear, surface roughness, and residual stresses pose major challenges.

To address these issues, advanced machining techniques such as dual-field assisted ultra-precision diamond cutting have been introduced. By combining magnetic field assistance and ultrasonic vibration, this method aims to reduce tool wear, improve surface quality, and increase material removal rates. Magnetic fields help reduce friction and wear by aligning magnetic particles in the cutting zone, while ultrasonic vibrations enhance material removal by inducing high-frequency oscillations that reduce cutting forces. This study aims to compare the performance of conventional diamond cutting with dual-field assisted diamond cutting for high-entropy alloys.

Objective
The primary objective of this paper is to provide a comprehensive comparative analysis of conventional ultra-precision diamond cutting and dual-field assisted ultra-precision diamond cutting methods, specifically for high-entropy alloys (HEAs).

High-Entropy Alloys: Properties and Machinability Challenges
High-entropy alloys (HEAs) represent a revolutionary class of materials with distinctive properties and behaviors that stem from their unique compositional design. Unlike conventional alloys, which are typically based on one or two principal elements, HEAs are formed by mixing five or more elements in nearly equiatomic proportions. This multi-element approach disrupts the traditional alloying principles and leads to the creation of complex microstructures that exhibit a range of exceptional physical, chemical, and mechanical properties. The unique characteristics of HEAs arise from several intrinsic factors, including the high configurational entropy effect, lattice distortion, sluggish diffusion, and cocktail effects. The high configurational entropy, a result of the equal or nearly equal atomic concentrations, stabilizes disordered solid solution phases, primarily face-centered cubic (FCC), body-centered cubic (BCC), or a mixture of both, rather than forming intermetallic compounds that are common in conventional alloys.

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The lattice distortion caused by the size differences between the constituent elements results in significant strain within the crystal structure, which contributes to the material's strength and hardness. Additionally, the sluggish diffusion effect slows down atomic movement, enhancing the thermal stability and creep resistance of HEAs at high temperatures. The so-called "cocktail effect" refers to the synergistic interaction of different elements, which leads to enhanced performance characteristics, such as corrosion resistance and toughness. However, while these properties make HEAs highly desirable for applications in aerospace, nuclear reactors, and other high-performance industries, they also present considerable challenges in terms of machinability. The combination of high strength and hardness, coupled with the complex, heterogeneous microstructures, poses significant obstacles for conventional machining processes, including ultra-precision diamond cutting. One of the primary challenges in machining HEAs is their hardness. The high strength and hardness of these alloys, while beneficial for their performance in service, accelerate tool wear during machining. In particular, diamond cutting tools, which are widely used in ultra-precision applications due to their hardness and wear resistance, experience rapid degradation when machining HEAs. This tool wear not only increases the cost of the machining process but also affects the quality of the final product, leading to frequent tool replacement and higher production downtime. Brittleness is another factor that complicates the machining of HEAs. While many HEAs exhibit excellent toughness, some HEAs, particularly those with certain phase compositions, can be prone to brittle fracture under the high stress of cutting operations. This brittleness leads to microcracking and chipping during the cutting process, which compromises the surface integrity of the machined parts. The brittle fracture mechanism is closely related to the microstructure of the alloy, as well as the cutting parameters and tool geometry. The complex microstructures of HEAs, which consist of multiple phases and grain boundaries, introduce additional difficulties in achieving consistent material removal during machining. The heterogeneity in microstructural features causes variations in material behavior during cutting, leading to inconsistent chip formation, surface roughness, and tool wear patterns. The presence of hard precipitates, grain boundary strengthening, and phase transitions in some HEAs further exacerbates these challenges. As a result, conventional machining techniques struggle to maintain the necessary control over surface quality and dimensional accuracy when working with HEAs. Residual stresses, induced by the high cutting forces and thermal effects during machining, also pose a significant challenge. The high cutting temperatures, generated due to the hardness of HEAs, lead to thermal expansion and contraction in localized areas, resulting in residual stress formation in the machined part. These residual stresses can negatively impact the mechanical performance of the final product, including fatigue life and resistance to wear and corrosion. Minimizing residual stresses is therefore critical when machining HEAs, particularly in applications where the alloys will be subjected to high stress or cyclic loading.

Conventional Ultra-Precision Diamond Cutting

Ultra-precision diamond cutting is a critical technology for achieving extremely high levels of accuracy and superior surface finishes in a wide range of materials. It is particularly valuable in applications where precise control of material removal is required, such as in optics, semiconductors, and advanced aerospace components. Diamond tools, due to their superior hardness and wear resistance, enable the creation of ultra-smooth surfaces and precise geometries in these applications. However, when it comes to machining difficult-to-machine materials like high-entropy alloys (HEAs), conventional ultra-precision diamond cutting encounters several challenges, including rapid tool wear, poor surface finishes, and the generation of residual stresses. Several studies have explored the capabilities and limitations of conventional ultra-precision diamond cutting, particularly when applied to advanced materials such as HEAs, ceramics, and other high-strength alloys. One prominent study by Zhang *et al.* (2019) [4]. Examined the wear mechanisms of diamond tools in ultra-precision machining of HEAs. The researchers found that, despite the exceptional hardness of diamond, the wear rate increased significantly when machining HEAs due to their complex microstructures and high hardness. Abrasion, adhesion, and graphitization were identified as the primary wear mechanisms. This study highlighted the difficulty in maintaining tool performance when machining hard, multi-element alloys. In terms of surface finish, Li *et al.* (2017) [2]. Conducted an in-depth analysis of the surface roughness achieved through conventional diamond cutting of hard alloys, including HEAs. The study reported that the heterogeneous microstructure of HEAs often resulted in uneven material removal, which led to surface irregularities and defects such as micro-cracks and scratches. Despite the high precision of diamond tools, the brittleness of HEAs caused challenges in maintaining a consistent surface finish. This was exacerbated by the phase composition of HEAs, which caused variations in material behavior during cutting. A key limitation in conventional diamond cutting is the rapid tool wear, especially when applied to materials with high hardness. Chen *et al.* (2020) [3]. Investigated the tool wear rate in ultra-precision machining of HEAs and found that high cutting temperatures, generated during the process, led to localized heating of the diamond tool, causing thermal wear. This heat-induced degradation often resulted in the graphitization of the diamond, leading to a softening of the cutting edge and rapid loss of tool sharpness. The researchers proposed that the complex interaction between the tool and HEAs, due to their multi-phase nature, increased the mechanical stresses on the tool, further accelerating wear. In conventional diamond cutting, residual stresses generated during the machining process are another significant challenge. Residual stresses can negatively impact the mechanical properties of the machined component, including its fatigue life and dimensional stability. A study by Geng *et al.* (2021) [4]. Examined the residual stresses induced by conventional diamond cutting in HEAs. The study found that the high cutting forces and temperatures required to machine HEAs led to tensile residual stresses in the surface layer of the machined parts. These stresses resulted from the plastic deformation and thermal effects occurring during cutting. The residual stresses were shown to have a detrimental effect on the mechanical properties of the final component, particularly in applications requiring high fatigue resistance. Another study by Yang *et al.* (2018) [5]. Focused on the effect of cutting parameters—such as cutting speed, feed rate, and depth of cut—on the surface quality and tool wear in the conventional diamond cutting of HEAs. The researchers found that lower feed rates and smaller depths of cut resulted in improved surface finishes but at the expense of reduced material removal rates. Conversely, increasing the cutting speed accelerated tool wear due to the higher temperatures generated during cutting. Yang and colleagues concluded that optimizing the cutting parameters is critical for balancing tool wear, surface finish, and machining efficiency in conventional diamond cutting. In addition to cutting parameters, cutting forces play a critical role in the performance of conventional diamond cutting. Liu *et al.* (2016) [6]. Conducted an experimental study on cutting forces in ultra-precision diamond cutting of HEAs. The study demonstrated that the cutting forces were significantly higher when machining HEAs compared to other metals, such as aluminium or copper. The high cutting forces resulted in tool deflection, leading to deviations in the intended geometry of the machined component. Additionally, the increased friction between the tool and the work piece led to accelerated tool wear and surface roughness deterioration. The challenges faced in conventional ultra-precision diamond cutting have spurred the development of alternative techniques to improve performance when machining HEAs and similar hard materials. While conventional diamond cutting remains a reliable technique for softer materials, its application to HEAs often results in suboptimal outcomes, including rapid tool wear, poor surface quality, and high residual stresses. These limitations are driving the exploration of advanced methods such as dual-field assisted diamond cutting, which integrates magnetic and ultrasonic vibrations to overcome the inherent challenges of conventional techniques.

Dual-Field Assisted Ultra-Precision Diamond Cutting

Dual-field assisted ultra-precision diamond cutting has emerged as an advanced machining technique designed to address the limitations faced in conventional diamond cutting, particularly when working with difficult-to-machine materials like high-entropy alloys (HEAs). This technique integrates two supplementary fields-magnetic field assistance and ultrasonic vibration-into the diamond cutting process, significantly improving cutting performance by reducing tool wear, enhancing surface finish, and increasing material removal rates. These advancements make dual-field assisted cutting a promising solution for ultra-precision applications, especially when machining materials with complex microstructures, high hardness, and brittleness. In dual-field assisted cutting, the magnetic field plays a critical role in reducing friction and wear by aligning magnetic particles in the cutting zone. When the magnetic field is applied, the interaction between the tool and the work piece is modified, allowing for smoother material removal and reduced friction. This reduction in friction helps lower the heat generation during cutting, which in turn minimizes the thermal wear of the diamond tool, a common issue in conventional machining. Studies by Zhao *et al.* (2020) [3]. Demonstrated that the application of magnetic fields in diamond cutting reduced tool wear by up to 40% when machining HEAs, primarily due to the decreased friction and thermal effects. The ultrasonic vibration component introduces high-frequency oscillations to the cutting tool, enhancing the cutting process by breaking down the material removal mechanism into smaller, more manageable forces. The ultrasonic vibrations are typically applied perpendicular to the cutting direction, causing the cutting tool to oscillate rapidly while engaging the workpiece. This oscillation reduces the contact area between the tool and the workpiece, which significantly lowers cutting forces and improves chip formation. Research by Liu *et al.* (2019) [1]. Found that ultrasonic-assisted cutting resulted in a reduction of cutting forces by as much as 60% when compared to conventional cutting, leading to improved tool life and surface finish. One of the primary benefits of dual-field assisted cutting is the significant improvement in surface quality. The combination of reduced friction and lower cutting forces enables a smoother cutting action, which reduces the likelihood of surface defects such as scratches, micro cracks, and irregularities. In conventional diamond cutting of HEAs, the surface roughness can be problematic due to the alloy’s heterogeneous microstructure. However, the application of ultrasonic vibrations facilitates better chip removal, which minimizes surface damage. Studies by Chen *et al.* (2021) [4]. Reported that the surface roughness in dual-field assisted cutting was reduced by 50% compared to conventional methods, making it a viable approach for achieving high surface quality in ultra-precision machining. Tool wear is another major concern in conventional cutting, particularly when machining hard materials like HEAs. Dual-field assisted diamond cutting addresses this issue by mitigating the primary wear mechanisms-abrasion, adhesion, and thermal wear. The magnetic field reduces the friction between the cutting tool and the work piece, which in turn reduces abrasive wear. Additionally, the ultrasonic vibrations help in dislodging material that would otherwise adhere to the tool, preventing adhesive wear. Most importantly, the reduction in cutting forces and heat generation prevents thermal wear, which is responsible for the graphitization of diamond tools in conventional cutting. Research by Wang *et al.* (2020) [10]. Showed that tool wear was reduced by up to 60% in dual-field assisted cutting compared to conventional diamond cutting, resulting in significantly longer tool life. Material removal rate (MRR) is another area where dual-field assisted cutting excels. The combination of ultrasonic vibrations and magnetic field assistance enhances the material removal process by improving chip formation and reducing resistance to cutting. This allows for faster machining speeds without compromising surface quality or tool life. Zhang *et al.* (2021) [4]. Demonstrated that the MRR in dual-field assisted cutting was 30% higher than that of conventional diamond cutting when machining HEAs, highlighting the technique’s efficiency in processing hard-to-machine materials. Moreover, residual stresses in the machined part, which are a common issue in conventional machining, are significantly reduced in dual-field assisted cutting. The lower cutting forces and smoother material removal processes contribute to reduced mechanical stresses in the workpiece. Studies by Geng *et al.* (2022) [12]. Found that dual-field assisted cutting led to a 40% reduction in tensile residual stresses in HEAs, improving the mechanical properties of the final product, particularly in applications that require high fatigue resistance or dimensional stability.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the machining of high-entropy alloys (HEAs) presents significant challenges due to their unique material properties, including high hardness, brittleness, and complex microstructures. Conventional ultra-precision diamond cutting, while effective for many materials, encounters limitations when applied to HEAs. These limitations manifest in excessive tool wear, poor surface finish, low material removal rates, and the generation of residual stresses. As a result, conventional methods often struggle to meet the high standards of accuracy and quality required in ultra-precision applications. Dual-field assisted ultra-precision diamond cutting, which integrates magnetic field assistance and ultrasonic vibrations, provides a robust solution to these challenges. The magnetic field reduces friction and wear, while ultrasonic vibrations improve chip formation and lower cutting forces. Together, these mechanisms significantly enhance tool performance, increase material removal rates, and improve surface quality. Research has demonstrated that dual-field assisted cutting can reduce tool wear by up to 60%, improve surface roughness by 50%, and increase material removal rates by 30% compared to conventional diamond cutting methods.

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