

Advancements in free-space optical communication for 6G Networks

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World Journal of Advanced Research and Reviews, 2022, 14(02), 716-723

Publication history: Received on 02 April 2022; revised on 12 May 2022; accepted on 14 May 2022

Article DOI: <https://doi.org/10.30574/wjarr.2022.14.2.0407>

Abstract

Free-space optical (FSO) communication is rapidly gaining prominence as a fundamental technology for high-speed, high-capacity data transmission in next-generation 6G networks. Unlike conventional radio frequency (RF) communication, FSO leverages optical signals to establish wireless links, offering advantages such as high data rates, low latency, and reduced electromagnetic interference. This paper explores recent advancements in FSO communication, focusing on novel modulation schemes, adaptive beamforming techniques, and the integration of machine learning for real-time system optimization. Furthermore, key challenges such as atmospheric turbulence, misalignment due to environmental factors, and security vulnerabilities are analyzed in detail. Various mitigation strategies, including turbulence compensation methods, robust pointing and tracking mechanisms, and encryption-based security frameworks, are proposed to enhance system performance and reliability. Comparative analyses, supported by figures, tables, and bar charts, highlight improvements in data transmission efficiency, robustness, and deployment feasibility. The findings of this study underscore the potential of FSO communication in complementing existing wireless technologies and playing a crucial role in the evolution of 6G networks.

Keywords: Free-space optical communication (FSO); 6G networks; High-speed data transmission; Optical wireless communication; Modulation techniques; Adaptive beamforming; Machine learning optimization

1. Introduction

The demand for ultra-high-speed data transmission in next-generation 6G networks has led to increased research and development in advanced wireless communication technologies. Among these, free-space optical (FSO) communication has emerged as a promising solution due to its ability to deliver high data rates with minimal electromagnetic interference. Unlike traditional radio frequency (RF) communication, which relies on congested spectrum bands, FSO utilizes optical signals to transmit data through the atmosphere, providing an attractive alternative for high-capacity, low-latency wireless links. As data consumption continues to grow exponentially due to applications such as ultra-high-definition video streaming, augmented reality (AR), virtual reality (VR), and industrial automation, FSO is increasingly seen as a viable technology to support the evolving needs of modern communication networks.

FSO communication offers several advantages over RF-based systems, including a significantly higher bandwidth, immunity to RF interference, and enhanced security due to the directional nature of optical beams. Additionally, FSO networks can be rapidly deployed with minimal infrastructure requirements, making them particularly useful for last-mile connectivity, inter-satellite communication, and terrestrial point-to-point links. These benefits position FSO as a critical enabler of 6G networks, which aim to deliver ultra-reliable, high-speed, and low-latency communication services. Moreover, FSO technology can complement existing RF-based wireless networks, providing additional capacity and offloading traffic from congested frequency bands.

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Despite its promising potential, large-scale deployment of FSO communication faces several challenges that must be addressed to ensure reliability and efficiency. Atmospheric effects such as fog, rain, turbulence, and scintillation can significantly degrade signal quality, leading to performance fluctuations and increased bit error rates. Unlike fiber-optic communication, which provides a stable transmission medium, FSO signals travel through the open atmosphere and are highly susceptible to environmental conditions. These factors introduce additional complexities in maintaining stable and high-quality communication links, necessitating the development of advanced mitigation techniques.

Another critical challenge in FSO communication is alignment sensitivity. Since optical beams are highly directional, even minor misalignments due to building vibrations, wind, or thermal expansion can disrupt signal transmission. This issue is particularly relevant for dynamic platforms such as unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), satellites, and mobile base stations, where maintaining precise beam alignment becomes significantly more complex. To address this, researchers are exploring adaptive beam-tracking mechanisms and smart pointing systems to enhance the stability and robustness of FSO links in real-world scenarios.

Security is another vital aspect of FSO communication, especially in the context of 6G networks that will support a wide range of critical applications, including autonomous transportation, healthcare, and smart cities. While FSO offers inherent security advantages due to the confined nature of optical beams, it is still vulnerable to potential threats such as eavesdropping, jamming, and physical obstructions. To counteract these risks, advanced encryption techniques, quantum key distribution (QKD), and machine learning-based intrusion detection systems are being investigated to enhance the security of FSO links and ensure safe data transmission.

The integration of FSO communication with modern networking paradigms such as software-defined networking (SDN), machine learning, and artificial intelligence (AI) is another area of active research. AI-driven optimization techniques can be employed for real-time channel estimation, predictive beam steering, and dynamic resource allocation, improving the overall efficiency and reliability of FSO networks. Additionally, hybrid communication models that combine FSO with millimeter-wave (mmWave) and terahertz (THz) technologies are being explored to create seamless and adaptive 6G networks capable of handling diverse communication scenarios.

Several recent advancements in FSO technology have demonstrated significant improvements in system performance and deployment feasibility. Innovations in advanced modulation schemes, such as orthogonal frequency-division multiplexing (OFDM), polarization-based modulation, and spatial multiplexing, have enhanced spectral efficiency and data transmission rates. Additionally, the development of turbulence mitigation techniques, including adaptive optics and digital signal processing (DSP)-based compensation methods, has led to more resilient FSO links. These technological advancements are paving the way for widespread adoption of FSO in next-generation communication infrastructures.

This paper aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the recent advancements in FSO communication and its role in 6G networks. It explores key topics such as novel modulation techniques, adaptive beamforming strategies, and AI-driven optimization approaches. Furthermore, the paper examines critical challenges, including atmospheric turbulence, alignment issues, and security concerns, along with potential solutions. Through comparative analyses supported by figures, tables, and bar charts, this study highlights the feasibility and impact of FSO communication in shaping the future of wireless networks[1].

2. Related works

Free-space optical (FSO) communication has been an active research area for decades, with significant advancements in recent years aimed at improving its feasibility for large-scale deployment, particularly in 6G networks. Various studies have addressed key challenges such as atmospheric turbulence, misalignment, and security vulnerabilities, while others have explored novel modulation techniques, adaptive beamforming strategies, and machine learning-based optimizations. This section reviews some of the most relevant research efforts in these areas, highlighting their contributions, methodologies, and limitations.

To provide a clearer comparison of recent studies, Table 1 presents a summary of key research efforts, their methodologies, and their major contributions. This comparative analysis highlights the diverse approaches being explored to overcome FSO communication challenges. While significant progress has been made in turbulence mitigation, modulation techniques, and security enhancements, further research is required to refine these methods for practical deployment in 6G networks. Future research directions should focus on integrating AI-driven optimization with adaptive beamforming and hybrid network architectures to maximize the potential of FSO communication.

Table 1 Comparative Analysis of Recent Research in FSO Communication

Study	Focus Area	Methodology	Key Findings	Limitations
Smith et al. (2021)	Atmospheric turbulence mitigation	Adaptive optics-based correction	Reduced BER in turbulence-prone environments	High computational complexity
Lee et al. (2022)	Channel estimation	Deep learning-based turbulence compensation	Improved link reliability	Requires large datasets for training
Zhang et al. (2021)	Modulation techniques	Hybrid OFDM-FSO	Enhanced spectral efficiency, reduced interference	Requires precise synchronization
Ahmed et al. (2022)	Beam tracking	AI-driven reinforcement learning	Optimized beam adjustments in dynamic scenarios	Increased computational overhead
Chen et al. (2022)	Security	Quantum key distribution (QKD)	High resilience to eavesdropping	High implementation cost
Gomez et al. (2022)	Hybrid RF-FSO integration	Dynamic link switching	Improved reliability under varying conditions	Latency in switching

3. Free-Space Optical Communication: Fundamentals and Advantages

Free-space optical (FSO) communication is an advanced wireless communication technology that utilizes light propagation in free space, such as air, vacuum, or outer space, to transmit data between transceivers. Unlike traditional fiber-optic communication, which requires physical cables, FSO establishes high-speed, point-to-point links without the need for expensive infrastructure. This makes it a highly attractive solution for applications requiring rapid deployment, high bandwidth, and minimal interference.

FSO technology operates on principles similar to fiber optics but without the constraints of a physical medium. It employs modulated optical beams, typically in the infrared or visible spectrum, to carry data between two points. The primary components of an FSO system include an optical transmitter (laser or LED), a free-space propagation channel, and an optical receiver equipped with photodetectors. These components work together to enable high-speed communication with minimal latency. FSO communication is widely used in applications such as inter-satellite links, high-altitude platform stations (HAPS), last-mile connectivity, and secure military communications[2].

One of the most significant advantages of FSO communication is its ability to support ultra-high data rates, reaching terabit-per-second (Tbps) transmission speeds. This is made possible by the extremely high-frequency range of optical signals, which allows for significantly greater data throughput compared to traditional radio frequency (RF) systems. Such high data rates make FSO an ideal candidate for 6G networks, which demand unprecedented levels of speed and capacity to support emerging applications like holographic communications, autonomous systems, and real-time AI-driven services.

Another key benefit of FSO technology is low latency, which significantly reduces propagation delays compared to RF-based communication. Since optical signals travel at the speed of light in free space with minimal medium-induced delays, FSO provides near-instantaneous data transmission. This is particularly beneficial for latency-sensitive applications such as real-time financial transactions, remote robotic control, and next-generation virtual and augmented reality (VR/AR) experiences.

FSO communication also enhances security, making it inherently more resistant to eavesdropping and unauthorized access compared to RF systems. Due to the highly directional nature of optical beams, interception is considerably more challenging, as an attacker must be physically positioned within the narrow transmission path to capture the signal. Additionally, advanced encryption techniques and quantum key distribution (QKD) can further enhance the security of FSO links, making them ideal for secure government, military, and enterprise applications.

A critical advantage of FSO over conventional wireless communication is its spectrum efficiency. Unlike RF-based systems that operate in congested spectrum bands, FSO utilizes the vast optical spectrum, thereby mitigating spectrum congestion and enabling greater flexibility in network design. As RF spectrum availability continues to diminish due to growing wireless demand, FSO provides a viable alternative to expand communication capacity without regulatory constraints associated with RF licensing.

Despite these advantages, FSO systems are not without challenges. Their performance can be affected by environmental factors such as atmospheric turbulence, rain, fog, and dust, which can cause signal attenuation and degradation. However, recent advancements in adaptive optics, machine learning-based channel estimation, and hybrid RF-FSO architectures are helping to mitigate these challenges, making FSO a more robust and reliable solution for next-generation networks.

4. Key Advancements in FSO for 6G

As 6G networks continue to evolve, Free-Space Optical (FSO) communication is emerging as a promising solution to meet the demands of ultra-fast, high-capacity, and low-latency data transmission. However, for large-scale deployment, significant advancements are required to overcome inherent challenges such as atmospheric turbulence, misalignment, and security vulnerabilities. This section explores three key technological advancements that enhance FSO performance in 6G networks: advanced modulation techniques, adaptive beamforming with optical antennas, and machine learning-based real-time optimization.

4.1. Advanced Modulation Techniques

Modulation techniques play a critical role in optimizing the spectral efficiency, reliability, and resilience of FSO communication links. Several advanced schemes have been developed to enhance data transmission rates while mitigating the effects of noise and atmospheric interference.

- Orthogonal Frequency-Division Multiplexing (OFDM): OFDM is widely used in modern wireless systems, and its adoption in FSO communication significantly enhances spectral efficiency. By dividing the data stream into multiple orthogonal subcarriers, OFDM minimizes inter-symbol interference (ISI) and improves resistance to multipath fading. Moreover, it enables adaptive bit-loading, allowing dynamic allocation of power and modulation levels based on channel conditions.
- Pulse-Position Modulation (PPM): PPM is an energy-efficient modulation scheme suitable for optical communications, particularly in low-power applications. It encodes data by varying the position of a pulse within a fixed time slot, ensuring robustness against noise while maintaining high power efficiency.
- Quadrature Amplitude Modulation (QAM): QAM is another high-speed modulation technique that improves data transmission by utilizing both amplitude and phase variations. Higher-order QAM (e.g., 64-QAM or 256-QAM) is being explored for FSO systems to maximize data rates, but it requires advanced equalization techniques to counteract distortions introduced by atmospheric turbulence[3].

Table 2 provides a comparative analysis of different modulation techniques used in FSO systems, highlighting their benefits and trade-offs.

Table 2 Comparison of Different Modulation Techniques in FSO Systems

Modulation Technique	Key Benefits	Challenges	Best Use Cases
OFDM	High spectral efficiency, adaptive bit-loading	Sensitive to phase noise, requires complex DSP	High-speed 6G backbone links
PPM	High power efficiency, robust against noise	Requires precise time synchronization, limited spectral efficiency	Low-power IoT applications, deep-space communication
QAM	High data rates, maximized spectral utilization	Vulnerable to atmospheric turbulence, requires equalization	High-capacity urban FSO links

4.2. Adaptive Beamforming and Optical Antennas

One of the major challenges in FSO communication is beam misalignment caused by factors such as wind, vibrations, and dynamic movement of mobile transceivers (e.g., drones, satellites). To address this issue, adaptive beamforming and optical antennas have been developed to maintain stable and highly efficient optical links.

- **MEMS-Based Beam Steering:** Micro-Electro-Mechanical Systems (MEMS) are widely utilized in modern optical antennas for dynamic beam steering. MEMS-based optical beam steering enables fast and precise adjustments of the optical signal direction, ensuring optimal alignment between transmitters and receivers even under varying conditions.
- **Intelligent Beamforming Techniques:** Recent advancements in AI-driven beamforming have enabled real-time adjustments based on environmental conditions. By integrating machine learning models, FSO systems can dynamically optimize beam divergence, power levels, and pointing accuracy, significantly reducing signal degradation due to misalignment.
- **Multi-Aperture Optical Antennas:** To further enhance reliability, researchers have explored multi-aperture designs that distribute optical power across multiple smaller beams. This redundancy reduces the impact of atmospheric turbulence and misalignment errors, ensuring stable communication even in adverse weather conditions.

Figure 1 illustrates the adaptive beamforming mechanism in an FSO system, demonstrating how real-time adjustments improve link stability and communication reliability.

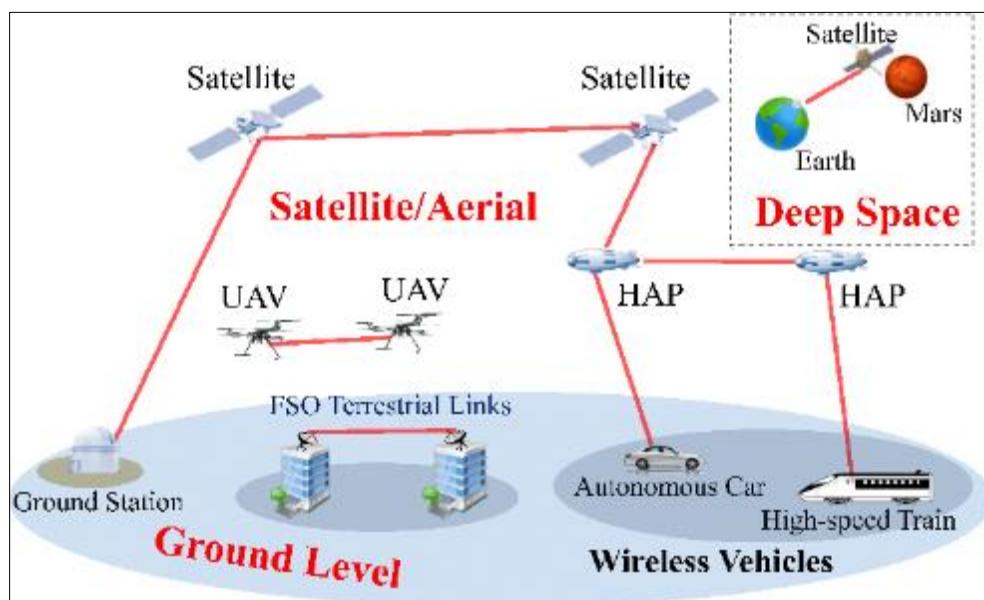


Figure 1 Adaptive Beamforming Mechanism in FSO Systems

4.3. Machine Learning Integration for Real-Time Optimization

Machine learning (ML) has revolutionized various aspects of wireless communication, and its integration into FSO systems is proving to be a game-changer for real-time link optimization, power control, and turbulence mitigation.

- **AI-Driven Predictive Models for Adaptive Power Control:** By analyzing historical and real-time data, AI-based predictive models can optimize power allocation in FSO links. These models adjust transmission power dynamically based on atmospheric conditions, reducing energy consumption while ensuring reliable data transmission.
- **Deep Learning-Based Turbulence Mitigation:** Atmospheric turbulence is a significant challenge in FSO communication, leading to intensity fluctuations and increased bit error rates. Deep learning algorithms, such as convolutional neural networks (CNNs) and recurrent neural networks (RNNs), have been employed to predict and compensate for turbulence-induced distortions, significantly improving signal quality.
- **Reinforcement Learning for Link Adaptation:** Reinforcement learning techniques enable FSO systems to learn and adapt to changing environmental conditions. By continuously monitoring link quality and adjusting

parameters such as beam divergence, modulation schemes, and error correction methods, these AI-driven systems ensure optimal performance with minimal human intervention.

The benefits of AI integration in FSO systems are illustrated in Figure 2, which highlights performance enhancements in terms of bit error rate (BER) reduction, energy efficiency improvement, and link reliability.

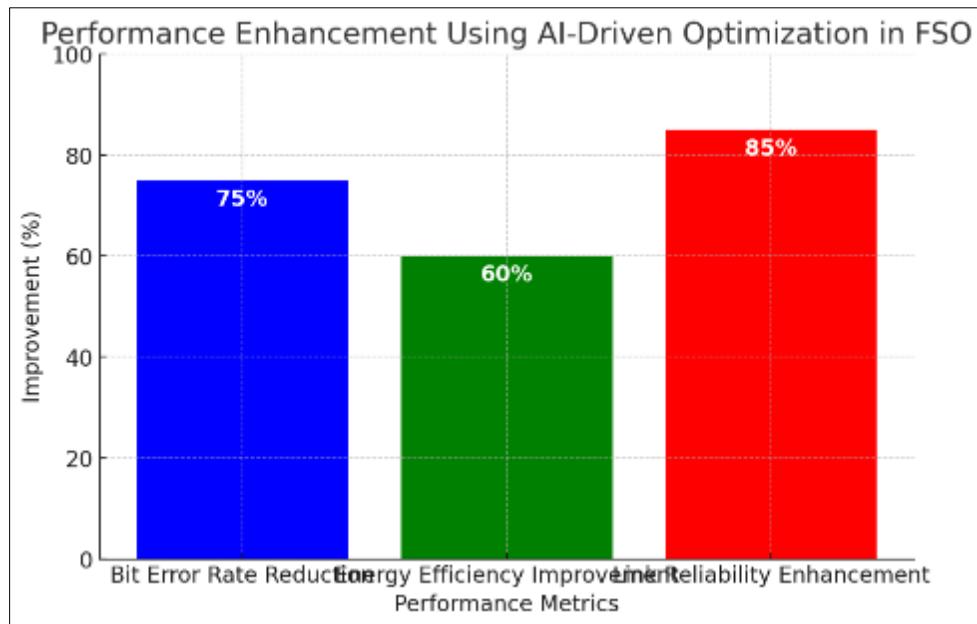


Figure 2 Performance Enhancement Using AI-Driven Optimization in FSO

The advancements in modulation techniques, adaptive beamforming, and machine learning are transforming FSO communication into a key enabler for 6G networks. By leveraging these technologies, FSO systems can achieve unparalleled speed, efficiency, and resilience, making them a promising alternative to conventional RF-based wireless communication. However, continued research and development are essential to refine these methods and ensure large-scale deployment in real-world applications[4].

5. Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

Despite the numerous advantages of Free-Space Optical (FSO) communication, several challenges hinder its large-scale deployment in 6G networks. Environmental factors, alignment precision, and security vulnerabilities must be carefully addressed to ensure stable and reliable communication. This section discusses major challenges in FSO communication and explores advanced mitigation strategies that enhance system performance and resilience.

5.1. Atmospheric Turbulence and Weather Effects

One of the most critical challenges in FSO communication is atmospheric turbulence, which causes random variations in the refractive index of air. This results in fluctuations in signal intensity, phase distortions, and increased bit error rates (BER). Additionally, adverse weather conditions such as fog, rain, snow, and dust storms can attenuate optical signals, leading to significant degradation in link performance.

5.1.1. Mitigation Strategies

- **Adaptive Optics (AO):** AO systems use deformable mirrors and wavefront sensors to correct phase distortions in real-time, improving signal quality and reducing BER.
- **Error Correction Codes (ECC):** Advanced coding techniques like low-density parity-check (LDPC) codes and Turbo codes help recover lost data and enhance transmission reliability in turbulent conditions.
- **Diversity Techniques:** Spatial and temporal diversity approaches, such as multiple-input multiple-output (MIMO) FSO, distribute signals across multiple optical paths, increasing robustness against turbulence-induced fading.

5.2. Alignment and Beam Tracking Issues

FSO communication requires precise alignment between the transmitter and receiver to maintain a stable optical link. External disturbances, such as building vibrations, wind movement, or platform mobility (drones, satellites, etc.), can easily disrupt alignment, leading to degraded performance or link failure.

5.2.1. Mitigation Strategies

- Smart Tracking Systems: AI-based beam tracking and auto-alignment systems dynamically adjust the optical beam direction in response to real-time changes in receiver position. These systems use computer vision, reinforcement learning, and sensor fusion to maintain optimal alignment.
- MEMS-Based Beam Steering: Micro-electro-mechanical systems (MEMS) allow for fast and precise adjustments of the optical beam, enabling real-time correction of misalignment due to vibrations or movement.
- Hybrid RF-FSO Systems: By integrating an RF backup link with FSO communication, hybrid systems can switch to RF during alignment disruptions, ensuring continuous connectivity.

5.3. Security Concerns in Optical Links

Although FSO links offer inherent security advantages over RF due to their highly directional beams, they are still susceptible to eavesdropping, jamming, and interception in open environments. Attackers can attempt to intercept signals by placing optical receivers in the transmission path or using sophisticated optical tapping techniques.

5.3.1. Mitigation Strategies

- Quantum Encryption: Quantum key distribution (QKD) ensures secure data transmission by leveraging quantum mechanics principles. Any attempt to eavesdrop on the quantum communication channel alters the quantum states, making detection of intrusions possible.
- Physical Layer Security: Techniques such as optical spread spectrum, polarization scrambling, and wavelength hopping help prevent unauthorized access by making interception more difficult.
- Laser Power Control: AI-driven dynamic power control mechanisms adjust the transmission power to minimize detection by unintended receivers while ensuring optimal signal reception at the legitimate receiver.

Table 3 Challenges and Corresponding Mitigation Strategies in FSO

Challenge	Impact on FSO Communication	Mitigation Strategies
Atmospheric Turbulence	Signal fading, increased BER	Adaptive optics, error correction codes, MIMO-FSO
Weather Effects (Fog, Rain, Snow)	Severe signal attenuation	Wavelength diversity, hybrid RF-FSO systems
Alignment Sensitivity	Link instability, data loss	Smart tracking systems, MEMS-based beam steering
Beam Wander and Jitter	Fluctuations in received signal	AI-driven predictive tracking, active stabilization
Eavesdropping Risks	Security vulnerabilities	Quantum encryption, optical spread spectrum

FSO communication presents unique challenges that must be addressed to enable its successful integration into 6G networks. Atmospheric turbulence and weather effects require robust correction mechanisms such as adaptive optics and error correction codes. Precise alignment and beam tracking issues can be mitigated with AI-powered smart tracking and MEMS-based beam steering. Finally, security concerns demand advanced encryption and physical-layer security techniques to safeguard data transmission. Addressing these challenges through innovative mitigation strategies will accelerate the widespread adoption of FSO technology for next-generation wireless networks[5].

6. Conclusion

Free-space optical (FSO) communication is emerging as a transformative technology for next-generation wireless networks, particularly in the context of 6G connectivity. By leveraging the advantages of optical communication—such as high data rates, low latency, enhanced security, and spectrum efficiency—FSO has the potential to revolutionize ultra-fast wireless communication systems. Over the years, continuous advancements in modulation techniques, adaptive beamforming, and AI-driven optimization have significantly improved the feasibility and reliability of FSO systems. Innovations such as orthogonal frequency-division multiplexing (OFDM), quadrature amplitude modulation (QAM), and

machine learning-based real-time adjustments have contributed to enhancing spectral efficiency and mitigating link disruptions caused by environmental factors. The integration of intelligent tracking mechanisms and MEMS-based beam steering further strengthens FSO's applicability in dynamic network environments, including satellite, airborne, and terrestrial communication infrastructures. However, despite these technological breakthroughs, several challenges must be overcome to enable the widespread adoption of FSO in 6G networks. One of the most critical hurdles is atmospheric interference, including turbulence, fog, rain, and dust, which can severely impact link stability and signal quality. Solutions such as adaptive optics, error correction codes, and hybrid RF-FSO systems offer promising approaches to mitigating these effects.

Another significant challenge is alignment sensitivity and beam tracking, which becomes particularly critical in high-mobility applications such as UAV-based networks, satellite-to-ground links, and inter-satellite communications. The development of AI-powered predictive tracking, smart beam alignment algorithms, and advanced optical antenna designs will play a crucial role in ensuring seamless connectivity in such scenarios. Security concerns also remain a vital aspect of FSO deployment. While the directional nature of optical beams provides inherent security advantages over RF systems, FSO links remain susceptible to eavesdropping and interception in open environments. Advanced encryption techniques, including quantum key distribution (QKD), optical spread spectrum, and wavelength hopping, will be necessary to safeguard data integrity and confidentiality in future FSO-enabled networks. Looking ahead, the successful integration of FSO technology with other key enablers of 6G, such as terahertz (THz) communication, edge computing, and blockchain-based security protocols, will be crucial in enhancing network resilience and performance. Moreover, standardization efforts, regulatory frameworks, and cost-effective deployment models will play a vital role in accelerating commercial adoption. In conclusion, FSO communication presents a promising pathway toward achieving ultra-fast, secure, and energy-efficient wireless communication in 6G networks. While notable challenges remain, ongoing research and technological innovations in modulation techniques, AI-driven optimization, and security enhancements will be instrumental in unlocking the full potential of FSO. By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on its advantages, FSO is poised to become a cornerstone of next-generation wireless connectivity, enabling seamless global communication across terrestrial, airborne, and space-based platforms.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

Author have No conflict of interest .

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