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Analyzing Data Centers' Impacts on the Environment and Pathways to Sustainability

Manisha Bharambe[1], Poonam Ponde[2], Harshita Vachhani[3], Smita Ghorpade[4], Dipita Dhande[5]

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Abstract: In the digital era, due to huge data generation across various sectors, there is a need to store and process a vast amount of data. Data centers play a crucial role in this demand to support everything from internet services to cloud computing and manage a huge amount of information. As demand rises globally, the need for data centers increases. However, Data centers have serious environmental consequences associated with their quick growth. Due to their ongoing operation and cooling requirements, data centers are energy-intensive, which raises carbon emissions and the need for electricity. The strain on the environment and natural resources increases with the size of the global digital footprint. Data centers have a significant environmental impact due to their high electricity consumption, substantial water usage, and the materials used in their construction. This research paper aims to investigate the ecological impacts of data centers, focusing on electricity consumption, carbon emissions, and resource utilization. This research focuses on analyzing the impact of data centers and finding the pathways to mitigate it. The tree plantation near to data centers and the geographical area should be consider while building the data centers.

Keywords: *Data centers, Environment, digital footprint, electricity consumption, digital footprint, Tree plantation, carbon emission*

1. Introduction

Environmentalists, regulators, and business stakeholders are all worried about data centers. Data centers can employ immersion cooling systems and more efficient energy systems to lessen their environmental impact. Additionally, they have the option of using recycled or reclaimed water in place of freshwater.

Renewable Energy: To lessen their carbon footprint, many data centers are switching to renewable energy sources like solar and wind power. The data centers of large corporations such as Google, Amazon, and Microsoft are now powered entirely by renewable energy.

Energy Efficiency: Improvements in cooling technologies (like liquid cooling and free-air cooling) and server optimization help lower the energy needed to operate data centers.

Green Data Centers: To lessen their environmental effect, some designs and employing businesses are implementing energy-efficient environmentally friendly technologies, such as using recycled water for cooling or situating data centers in colder regions to lower cooling requirements.

The backbone of contemporary digital infrastructure, data centers are crucial for processing, storing, and sharing massive volumes of data. Because of their massive energy use and dependence on non-renewable energy resources, their environmental impact has become a rising worry. Continuous operation of backup power, cooling systems, and servers consumes natural resources and produces massive carbon dioxide emissions. Understanding the environmental impact of data centers and investigating sustainable solutions is essential to reducing their ecological footprint and addressing climate change as digital demands increase worldwide.

Environmental impact Factors:

High energy requirements: To run servers, networks, and cooling equipment, data centers use a lot of electricity. It is thought that between 1-2% of the world's electricity is used by data centers worldwide, and this figure is even greater in certain areas. In 2023, U.S. data centers contributed over 105 million tons of CO_2e emissions, representing 2.18% of total U.S. emissions.

Water consumption: Data centers use a lot of water to keep their servers and other equipment cool. This water can come from potable water sources, which can be a valuable resource for local communities. The data centers have an average Water Use Efficiency (WUE) of 1.9 liters per kilowatt-hour(kWh).

Water Wastage: Even in regions with plenty of water, the overuse of water for cooling can still be harmful and have

11Associate Professor, Department of Computer Science, MES Abasaheb Garware College, Pune, India, Affiliated to SPPU

Email Id: mgb.agc@mespune.in

2Associate Professor, Department of Computer Science, Nowrosjee Wadia College, Pune, India

Email Id: poonamponde@nowrosjeewadiacollege.edu.in

3Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science, Pratibha College of Commerce and Computer Studies, Pune, India

Email Id: Profharshita@gmail.com

4Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science, K.R.T Arts, B. H. Commerce, A. M. Science College(K.T.H.M.), Nasik, India, Affiliated to SPPU

Email Id: smita.ghorpade@gmail.com

5Assistant Professor, Department of Computer Science, AEF's Ashoka Center for Bussiness and Computer Studies, Chandsi, Nasik, India

Email Id: dipitadhande10@gmail.com

Corresponding Author: Manisha Bharambe

Email Id: mgb.agc@mespune.in

negative consequences for local ecosystems like wetlands and rivers.

Carbon Footprint: The energy source is crucial. The majority of data centers rely on fossil fuels to generate electricity, which releases large amounts of carbon dioxide (CO2). Data centers are a part of the IT industry, which might account for up to 3.7% of all GHG emissions worldwide.

Increasing Demand: The energy needs of data centers are rising along with the expansion of big data, cloud services, streaming, and AI apps, which is making their environmental effect worse. Data centers in the United States used around 17 gigawatts (GW) of electricity in 2022, which rise to 176 terawatt hours in 2023, accounting for 4.4% of the country's total electricity consumption.

Destruction of natural habitat: Data centers require large areas of land to be cleared for construction.

Waste and disposal: The large amount of e-waste generated by data centers may include dangerous substances like lead and mercury, cadmium and other toxic chemicals. These materials can pollute the soil and water if they are not properly disposed of.

E-waste (electronic waste): The lifespan of the equipment is short: Due to upgrades and performance needs, the hardware in data centers, like servers and storage equipment, is frequently replaced every few years. As a result, there is a significant amount of e-waste, some of which contains hazardous chemicals like lead, mercury, and cadmium that can harmful for the environment, so they should recycled appropriately.

Obstacles to Recycling: Due to the intricacy of the materials, it is challenging to recycle many pieces of data center equipment, resulting in landfill buildup.

Production: The production of data center hardware, such as servers, routers, and cables, can result in pollution and habitat loss.

OBJECTIVE

I. Energy Consumption measure: To quantify the energy demands of data centers and their contribution to global electricity consumption and greenhouse gas emissions.

II. Evaluation of Sustainable Practices: To explore advanced cooling technologies, energy-efficient architectures, and the integration of renewable energy sources as methods to mitigate environmental impacts.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Daniel Ewim et al.(2018) [1]:The solution to the environmental challenges posed by data centres lies in improving energy efficiency and adopting sustainable practices. Key strategies include using advanced cooling technologies, designing energy-efficient architectures, sourcing renewable energy, and enhancing hardware efficiency. Policy measures and governance are also crucial to guide the industry toward greener practices. Collaborative efforts, investments in research, and a focus on renewable energy will help align data centre growth with environmental sustainability, ensuring a greener digital future.

Brien Posey et.al. (2022, April 29) [2]:The research focus on heat generated in data centres. To mitigate the environmental impact of data centres, waste heat recovery technology is considered a promising approach. Recovering and utilizing the waste heat from data centres for various energy uses, such as heating and electricity production, can improve energy efficiency, achieve energy and cost savings, and reduce the environmental impact caused by both carbon emissions and waste heat discharge. Optimizing the heating system, using heat pumps for temperature and grade upgrading, and adopting thermal energy storage systems can further enhance the efficiency and flexibility of waste heat recovery in data centres.

Charles Liang, et al. (2021, Feb) [3]: Data centres consume nearly 3% of the world's power production, with energy consumption expected to reach 8% as digital transformation increases. Factors like power usage effectiveness (PUE), server form factor, refresh cycles, e-waste planning, and use of renewable energy can impact a data canter's. Survey findings show IT managers are focused on improving server utilization, increasing power density, and advancing cooling technologies to make their data centers greener. Strategies to reduce power usage and move towards a greener data center, faster refresh cycles, server selection, consolidation through virtualization, and increasing inlet temperatures.

Dhanabalan Thangam et al.(2024, March) [4], The number of data centres worldwide has surged from 500,000 in 2012 to over 8 million, with energy consumption doubling every four years.The rise in internet penetration rates and the introduction of 5G technologies and IoT devices will further increase the demand for data processing, having environmental impact. The rapid growth and increasing reliance on data centers have had a significant impact on power consumption, climate change, and sustainability.

Beth Whitehead, Deborah Andrews, Graeme Maidment (2014, December) [5]: Data centres are high energy consumers, accounting for around a quarter of the ICT industry's emissions. The ICT industry as a whole, including data centres, is estimated to account for 10% of total UK electricity consumption and 2% of global anthropogenic CO2 emissions. The review concludes that a more holistic life cycle approach is needed to fully assess the environmental impact of data centres. While the industry has made efforts to improve operational efficiency, a more comprehensive life cycle assessment is needed to fully understand and address the broader environmental implications of data centre.

Ochuko Felix Orikpet, Daniel Ewim (Aug 2023) [6], Data centres have a significant impact on climate change due to their growing energy demands and greenhouse gas emissions. The paper reviews various energy-efficient strategies to mitigate the environmental impact of data centres, including: Improving energy efficiency through optimized hardware, software, and operational practices. Utilizing renewable energy sources to power data centres. Implementing innovative cooling technologies to reduce energy consumption. The growing energy demands of data centres and their significant contribution to greenhouse gas emissions are the key factors that impact the environment.

Hongyu Zhu et al. Feb 2023[7] : The paper mainly studied the management of data centers resources, use of clean energy in the data centers and building the storage-computing data centers. The paper focus on eliminating carbon emission produced by the data centers.

Veerendra Mulay (5June,2018) [8]: An important development in data center cooling technology that can significantlylessen the environmental effect of data centers the SPLC systemwhich was created by Facebook and Nortek Air Solutions. The SPLC system can cut the water usage by over 20% in hot and humid climates and up to 90% in cooler climates. This is achieved through the system's ability to operate in different modes to optimize water and power consumption based on outside temperature and humidity levels. This new cooling technology enables Facebook to build highly energy and water-efficient data centers in a wider range of environmental conditions where direct cooling is not feasible. Hence, the SPLC system is used in ssdata centers for cooling that can substantially reduce the water and energy consumption of these facilities, thereby mitigating their environmental impact.

Zhi-Ying-Cao ,2023[9]: Data centers can indeed be designed and operated to minimize their environmental impact through various

sustainable practices. Key factors influencing their sustainability include construction materials, energy efficiency technologies, and waste management strategies.

Guo C, et al [10]: This proposed solution is smart grid technology that can optimize consumption of energy. This study focuses on how to negotiate between the grid suppliers and the data center to minimize costs, not necessarily to reduce environmental harms.

3. Methodology

This research paper employees a mixed-methods approach to examine the environmental impacts of data centres, focusing on energy consumption, carbon emissions, and resource utilization.

Quantitative Analysis:

The quantitative analysis of the environmental impact of data centers from 2018 to 2021 highlights critical trends across several key areas. From 2018 to 2019, energy consumption surged due to increasing power demands, leading to higher operational costs and greater cooling requirements, which strained local water supplies and underscored the need for sustainable management practices. The subsequent growth in electronic waste from frequent hardware upgrades called for improved recycling and disposal strategies, while the rise in the carbon footprint emphasized the urgent need for greener technologies. This trend continued into 2020 and 2021, where rising energy consumption, driven by the demand for digital services, further escalated cooling needs and water consumption, intensifying the strain on resources. Collectively, these trends reflect the pressing challenges data centers face and the necessity for sustainable practices to mitigate their overall environmental impact.

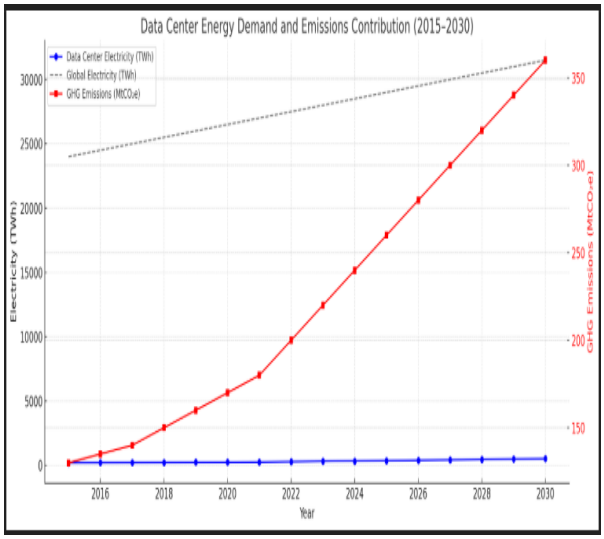

Fig 1: Data center energy demand and carbon emission

Data center electricity,global electricity, and GHG emission is represented in blue, red, gray lines in the graph respectively. The fig 1 shows the graph that quantifies the energy demands of data centers and their contribution to global electricity use and greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from 2015 to 2030. Total electricity consumption by data centers (TWh) is increasing, total global electricity use also grows, but at a slower rate and GHG emissions from data centers (in $MtCO_2e$) are climbing, closely tied to electricity demand.

Qualitative Assessments:

Existing studies will be reviewed to identify trends, challenges, and innovative practices for reducing data center impacts.

Interviews: Semi-structured interviews with industry experts will provide insights into practical challenges and successful sustainable practices.

Surveys: A survey targeting data center managers and IT professionals will quantify the adoption of energy efficiency measures and renewable energy usage.

4. DATA ANALYSIS:

The data center industry is only going to continue to grow, the best solution is to prioritize a comprehensive strategy that focuses on the sustainable construction, design, and maintenance of future data centers. Each of these aspects will help reduce the environmental implications of data centers.

We have considered **f**ive key environmental impact factors of data centers from **2019 to 2024**, and provide the mitigation plan to reduce the effect on environment.

a. **Electricity Consumption (TWh):** U.S. data center electricity usage has seen a notable increase from 58TWh to 176 TWh from year 2014 to 2023. Due to AI, IoT, and cloud growth**,** the electricity consumption is projected in 2030 is around 800–1,000 TWh globally. In India it is estimated to cross 40 TWh/year by 2030.

   Mitigation Plan:
   - Use High-Efficiency Servers & Storage
   - Use of Virtualization & Containerization needed less physical servers.
   - Solid-State Drives (SSD) are used rather than Hard Disk Drives.
   - Switch to renewable energy.

b. **Carbon Emissions (CO_2):** This effect heavily on the environment. It accelerates climate change, increases **urban heat islands** in tech-heavy cities, acidification of oceans due to CO_2 buildup.

   Mitigation Plan:
   - Use of solar, wind, hydro, and geothermal gives zero carbon emmision.
   - Having Green PPAs (Power Purchase Agreements) contracts.
   - Improve energy efficiency by using High-efficiency hardware.
   - Optimize cooling systems to reduce electricity demand and use AI for cooling control.

c. **Water Usage (Billion Liters)**: Data centers use millions of liters of water daily for cooling. Global water stress is increasing over 50% of the population faces some form of water scarcity. India, U.S., and parts of Europe host water-intensive cloud hubs near already-stressed regions.

   Mitigation Plan:
   - Use liquid Cooling, Direct-to-chip or immersion cooling reduces total water usage by improving heat transfer efficiency.
   - Closed-Loop Cooling system recirculates water instead of discharging it after one use.
   - AI--Driven Cooling Control dynamically adjusts fans, pumps, and cooling based on real-time data.
   - Predictive Analytics, anticipates heat zones and optimizes water use.

d. **Cooling Demand (TWh):** Higher cooling demand increases energy from fossil fuels (unless renewable-powered), Carbon footprint, Thermal pollution (when hot water is

discharged into local water bodies), Urban heat island effect in cities with dense data clusters.

Mitigation Plan:

Use AI-optimized cooling (e.g., Google DeepMind), liquid or immersion cooling, Free cooling **(**using outside air**),** thermal containment (hot/cold aisle isolation)

e. **E-waste Generation (Million Tons):** In 2023, the E-waste is approximately 7.5 million tons. The projected E waste in 2030 is ≥12 million tons globally.

Mitigation Plan: Hardware Refurbishing is required to extends the life of servers. Certified recycling is used to reduce the environmental harm. Cloud optimization reduces over-provisioning of hardware.

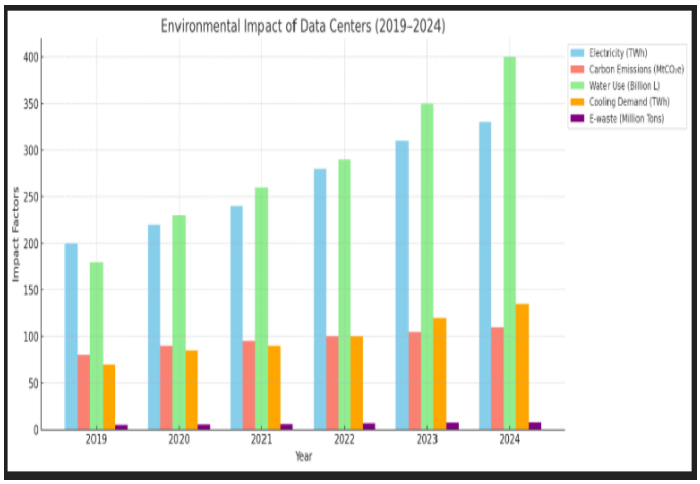

Fig 2: Environmental impact of data centers from 2019-2024

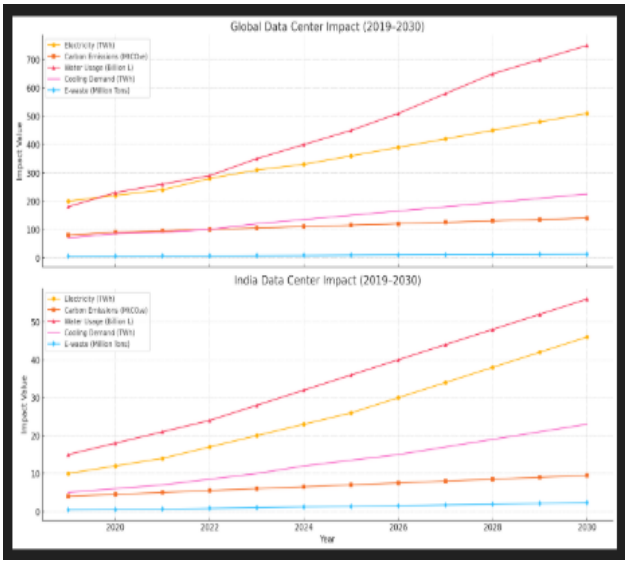

Fig 3: Global data center impact in future and India data center impact till 2030

Here are two line charts (one in global and second in India) showing the projected environmental impact of data centers from **2019 to 2030** with respect to above five factors.

Results:

The study highlights the significant environmental effects of data centers, focusing on important aspects such as trash production, water use, energy consumption, carbon emissions, and cooling needs. They currently account for 1% to 2% of the world's electricity consumption, but by 2030, that percentage might increase to 8%, and by 2040, they could account for 14% of greenhouse gas emissions. Additionally, data centers use a lot of water, which impacts nearby ecosystems, and they produce a lot of electronic garbage due to frequent hardware updates, which calls for improved recycling procedures. However, hopeful remedies are provided by developments in cooling technologies and a move toward renewable energy sources.

The study emphasis the substantial environmental effects of data centers, concentrating on crucial elements like waste generation, water use, energy consumption, carbon emissions, and cooling requirements. Although 1% to 2% share of global electricity consumption, by 2030 that number might rise to 8%, and by 2040, they might be responsible for 14% of greenhouse gas emissions. Data centers also generate a lot of electronic waste because of frequent hardware upgrades, which necessitate better recycling practices, and they require a lot of water, which affects the ecosystems in the area. However, advancements in cooling technologies and a shift to renewable energy sources provide promising solutions.

Tree plantation is the supportive mechanism to reduce the effect on the environment. Tree absorb carbon dioxide (CO2) from the atmosphere through photosynthesis and storing it in their biomass (trunks, branches, leaves, roots) and in the soil, called carbon sequestration, which plays a vital role in mitigating climate change. Trees which have common characterstics like Fast-growing (absorb more CO2), Long-lived (store carbon longer), Large biomass, Dense wood, Large leaves and wide crowns (maximum photosynthesis), Native species (support local biodiversity) are most effective in carbon sequestration. The trees such as Pongamia (Pongamia pinnata), Sal Tree (Shorea robusta), Indian Rosewood (Dalbergia latifolia), Mahogany (Swietenia macrophylla), Indian Teak (Tectona grandis), Peepal (Ficus religiosa), Bamboo (Bambusa balcooa), Matoa (Pometia pinnata) can reduce the effect on climate change.

CONCLUSION

Data centers must adopt sustainable practices to lower their environmental impact as they grow. By improving energy efficiency, integrating renewable energy sources, and using innovative technologies for cooling and waste reduction, the industry can curb its carbon footprint and resource use. Additionally, better e-waste recycling and sustainable water management can protect ecosystems and communities.

Collaborative efforts are essential, with policymakers, tech companies, and environmental organizations all playing key roles in setting eco-friendly standards. Through shared commitment to responsible resource management and sustainable practices, the data center industry can change to support a more sustainable digital and environmental future. Addressing these impacts requires a multi-faceted approach, including transitioning to renewable energy, implementing more efficient cooling technologies, and improving waste management practices. The tree plantation is necessary nearby data centers, to reduce emissions. Planting the right trees in suitable regions can contribute positively to carbon sequestration and local environmental benefits.

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