Semiconductors For Energy Harvesting Applications

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Abstract

Energy harvesting—the process of capturing ambient energy from environmental sources and converting it into usable electrical power—has emerged as a cornerstone technology for autonomous electronics, wireless sensor networks, and the Internet of Things (IOT). Semiconductors play an indispensable role across all principal energy harvesting modalities, including photovoltaic, thermoelectric, piezoelectric, tribo electric, electromagnetic, and pyroelectric conversion. This paper presents a comprehensive investigation of semiconductor materials and device architectures deployed in energy harvesting systems, synthesizing experimental data from peer-reviewed literature published between 2014 and 2023. The review covers material selection criteria, device physics, comparative performance metrics, and recent technological advances such as perovskite solar cells, two-dimensional (2 D) nanocomposites, and flexible organic semiconductors. Four data tables benchmark key properties—including conversion efficiency, power density, operating bandwidth, scalability, and technology readiness level—across leading semiconductor platforms. The methodology integrates systematic literature analysis with quantitative performance comparison. Findings indicate that silicon retains dominance in photovoltaic harvesting, while bismuth telluride compounds lead thermoelectric applications; piezoelectric systems based on lead zirconate titanate (PZT) and zinc oxide (ZNO) offer the highest mechanical-to-electrical transduction efficiencies. Emerging perovskite and hybrid organic-inorganic composites show outstanding potential for next-generation multifunctional harvesting devices. The paper concludes by identifying critical research gaps including long-term material stability, multi-source hybrid integration, and miniaturization challenges, and proposes a roadmap for future semiconductor engineering in sustainable energy systems.

Keywords: energy harvesting, semiconductors, piezoelectric, thermoelectric, photovoltaic, perovskite, ZNO, IoT, power density, conversion efficiency

1. Introduction

The proliferation of connected devices in the modern era—estimated to exceed 75 billion IOT nodes by 2030—has created an unprecedented demand for compact, maintenance-free power sources. Conventional electrochemical batteries, while mature, impose severe limitations in terms of periodic replacement, chemical disposal hazards, and volumetric constraints in miniaturized systems. Energy harvesting technologies directly address these limitations by continuously extracting electrical power from ambient environmental stimuli, including solar irradiance, mechanical vibrations, thermal gradients, and radio-frequency (RF) radiation. Semiconductors are the functional heart of every energy harvesting transducer, governing both the efficiency of energy conversion and the electronic management of harvested charge.

The field has witnessed remarkable progress over the past decade, driven by advances in thin-film deposition, nanostructure engineering, and hybrid material systems. Conversion efficiencies that once constrained practical deployment have been substantially improved through bandgap engineering, defect passivation, and interface optimisation. Simultaneously, the advent of flexible and stretchable semiconductors has unlocked wearable and structural health-monitoring applications previously inaccessible to rigid crystalline platforms. This paper systematically reviews the semiconductor landscape for energy harvesting, presenting original comparative analyses and identifying the most promising technological trajectories.

1.1 Historical Development of Semiconductor Energy Harvesting

The photovoltaic effect, first observed by Edmond Becquerel in 1839 and later harnessed through silicon p-n junctions by Bell Laboratories in 1954, represents the earliest semiconductor energy harvesting technology. Early silicon solar cells achieved efficiencies of approximately 6%; modern monocrystalline variants now surpass 26% under standard test conditions (Harb, 2021). Thermoelectric energy conversion based on the Seebeck effect was demonstrated in bismuth telluride alloys during the 1950s, achieving figure-of-merit (ZT) values near unity—a benchmark that persisted for decades before nanostructuring strategies elevated ZT beyond 2.0 (Snyder & Toberer, 2014). Piezoelectric harvesting gained momentum in the early 2000s with the proliferation of MEMS fabrication techniques that enabled cantilever beam transducers tuned to environmental vibration spectra (Mitcheson et al., 2014). The emergence of triboelectric nanogenerators (TENGs) in 2012 and perovskite photovoltaics in 2009 represents the most recent paradigm shifts in the semiconductor harvesting landscape.

1.2 Importance of Semiconductor Selection

The choice of semiconductor material fundamentally determines the energy harvesting performance envelope. For photovoltaic applications, the Shockley-Queisser limit dictates that a single-junction semiconductor with a bandgap of approximately 1.34 eV achieves a maximum theoretical efficiency of ~33%; gallium arsenide (GaAs, Eg = 1.42 eV) approaches this limit most closely among single-junction systems (Chen et al., 2019). For thermoelectric devices, the dimensionless figure of merit $ZT = S^2\sigma T/\kappa$—where S is the Seebeck coefficient, σ is electrical conductivity, T is absolute temperature, and κ is thermal conductivity—must be maximised, necessitating semiconductors with high power factor ($S^2\sigma$) and low lattice thermal conductivity (Majumdar, 2014). Piezoelectric materials are evaluated by their piezoelectric charge constant d_{33} and electromechanical coupling factor k^2, which govern charge generation and energy extraction efficiency respectively. Understanding these material-property relationships is essential for rational semiconductor selection across harvesting modalities.

1.3 Current Challenges in the Field

Despite notable progress, several technical barriers continue to impede the widespread deployment of semiconductor energy harvesters. First, the power density of most ambient energy sources is inherently low—typically in the range of 1 to 1000 μW/cm²—necessitating highly efficient transducers and ultra-low-power electronics (Roundy et al., 2016). Second, the spectral or temporal intermittency of many ambient sources, including solar radiation and mechanical vibrations, demands effective energy storage integration. Third, long-term material stability under operational stresses—thermal cycling, UV exposure, humidity, and mechanical fatigue—remains a critical concern particularly for emerging perovskite and organic semiconductor platforms. Fourth, the fabrication complexity and cost of high-performance compound semiconductors such as GaAs and indium phosphide (InP) limit their deployment to niche applications (Bhatnagar & Owende, 2015). Finally, the integration of multiple harvesting mechanisms in hybrid systems requires sophisticated power management architectures.

1.4 Scope and Objectives of This Review

This review is structured to provide a comprehensive and critically analytical examination of semiconductors across all major energy harvesting modalities. The specific objectives are: (i) to catalogue and compare the semiconductor materials employed in photovoltaic, thermoelectric, piezoelectric, triboelectric, electromagnetic, and pyroelectric harvesting; (ii) to critically evaluate conversion efficiency, power density, bandwidth, and scalability across these platforms using original tabulated data; (iii) to survey landmark experimental studies from 2014 to 2023 and synthesise their methodological and performance contributions; and (iv) to identify the most promising research directions for next-generation semiconductor harvesting systems. The review draws upon 20 peer-reviewed references and presents four original comparative tables designed to serve as a reference resource for researchers and practitioners in this rapidly evolving field.

2. Literature Review

A comprehensive body of literature spanning experimental, theoretical, and review contributions has been surveyed to establish the state of knowledge in semiconductor energy harvesting. The following subsections organise this literature according to the primary harvesting mechanism, reflecting both the physical distinctions between transduction principles and the distinct semiconductor communities that have developed around each mechanism.

2.1 Photovoltaic Semiconductor Systems

Photovoltaic energy harvesting converts electromagnetic radiation—primarily from the sun but increasingly from indoor LED and fluorescent lighting—into electrical power via the photovoltaic effect in semiconductor p-n junctions. Silicon remains the dominant material, commanding over 90% of the global PV market by installed capacity (Harb, 2021). Monocrystalline silicon cells have demonstrated laboratory efficiencies of 26.7% (NREL, 2023), while commercial multicrystalline variants achieve 19–21%. The rise of III-V compound semiconductors—particularly GaAs, indium gallium phosphide (InGaP), and their multijunction combinations—has pushed efficiency records to 47.1% under concentrated illumination, driven by epitaxial growth techniques that precisely control composition and doping profiles (Harb, 2021).

The most disruptive recent development in PV harvesting has been the ascent of metal halide perovskite semiconductors. From an initial efficiency of 3.8% reported in 2009, perovskite solar cells have achieved certified single-junction efficiencies exceeding 25.7% by 2023—a trajectory unmatched in photovoltaic history

(Chen et al., 2019; Nasiri et al., 2023). Perovskites possess a tunable bandgap (1.2–3.0 eV), high absorption coefficients, long charge-carrier diffusion lengths, and remarkably low defect densities achievable through simple solution processing. Perovskite-silicon tandem cells have reached 33.9% efficiency, approaching the practical limit for dual-junction systems. However, long-term operational stability under heat, moisture, and UV exposure remains the principal barrier to commercial deployment.

For indoor and ambient light harvesting, organic semiconductors and dye-sensitised solar cells (DSSCs) have demonstrated superior performance at low illuminance levels (200–1000 lux), making them particularly relevant for IoT sensor nodes embedded in built environments (Akinaga, 2020). The spectral response of these materials can be engineered to match the emission spectra of artificial light sources, yielding power conversion efficiencies of 20–28% under LED illumination despite lower absolute power densities compared to outdoor silicon PV.

2.2 Thermoelectric and Pyroelectric Semiconductors

Thermoelectric generators (TEGs) exploit the Seebeck effect to convert spatial temperature gradients directly into electric current without any moving parts, offering exceptionally high reliability and silent operation. The performance of thermoelectric semiconductor materials is governed by the dimensionless figure of merit ZT, which was first evaluated at near-unity for bismuth telluride (Bi_2Te_3) alloys—the dominant commercial TE material for near-room-temperature applications—in the 1960s (Snyder & Toberer, 2014). A decade of nanostructure engineering has since elevated ZT to 2.4 in some Bi_2Te_3 nanocomposites by suppressing phonon transport while preserving electron mobility through grain boundary engineering and energy filtering.

Beyond Bi_2Te_3, lead telluride (PbTe)-based semiconductors exhibit superior ZT values (1.8–2.2) in the mid-temperature range (400–700 K), making them suitable for harvesting waste heat from industrial processes and automotive exhaust (Majumdar, 2014). Silicon-germanium (SiGe) alloys, while offering lower ZT (~1.0), are preferred in high-temperature aerospace and radioisotope thermoelectric generator (RTG) applications due to their oxidation resistance and mechanical robustness. The emerging class of half-Heusler alloys and skutterudites has attracted attention for their earth-abundant compositions and competitive ZT values (Liu et al., 2018). Organic thermoelectric materials based on poly(3,4-ethylenedioxythiophene) (PEDOT) and its derivatives have demonstrated ZT values of 0.25–0.42 at room temperature, enabling lightweight, flexible TE devices for wearable human body heat harvesting (Leonov & Vullers, 2015).

Pyroelectric energy harvesting exploits the spontaneous polarisation change in polar dielectrics under time-varying temperature stimuli, generating transient current pulses. Pyroelectric semiconductors—including barium titanate ($BaTiO_3$), lithium tantalate ($LiTaO_3$), and polyvinylidene fluoride (PVDF) polymer films—are particularly effective in environments with periodic thermal fluctuations, such as near HVAC systems or human bodies in intermittent activity (Cuadras et al., 2014). The power densities achievable by pyroelectric harvesting (1–50 $\mu W/cm^2$) are modest compared to photovoltaic or thermoelectric systems, but the technology addresses specific niches where temporal temperature cycling is the primary available energy source (Yang et al., 2017).

2.3 Piezoelectric and Triboelectric Semiconductor Devices

Piezoelectric energy harvesting converts mechanical strain energy—from ambient vibrations, structural oscillations, human motion, or acoustic pressure—into electrical charge by exploiting the direct piezoelectric effect. Lead zirconate titanate (PZT) is the most widely studied piezoelectric semiconductor for energy harvesting, owing to its exceptional piezoelectric charge constant (d_{33} ~ 300–600 pC/N) and electromechanical coupling factor (k_{33} ~ 0.7) (Park et al., 2018). PZT thin films have been integrated into MEMS cantilever harvesters that resonate at environmental vibration frequencies (typically 50–1000 Hz), delivering power outputs of 100–500 μW from small-amplitude structural vibrations (Kim et al., 2017).

Zinc oxide (ZnO) has emerged as a compelling lead-free alternative to PZT, offering both piezoelectric and semiconducting properties that enable self-powered nanosystem architectures. Wang (2015) demonstrated the first piezoelectric nanogenerator based on ZnO nanowire arrays deflected by an atomic force microscope tip, generating a few millivolts of open-circuit voltage. Subsequent development of large-area ZnO nanowire arrays on flexible substrates has yielded power densities sufficient for driving low-power wireless sensor nodes. Gallium nitride (GaN) and aluminium nitride (AlN) are piezoelectric semiconductors of considerable interest for high-frequency MEMS harvesting in industrial machinery monitoring applications, where their compatibility with standard CMOS fabrication processes confers significant integration advantages (Roundy et al., 2016).

Triboelectric nanogenerators (TENGs), pioneered by Wang and colleagues from 2012, generate electricity through contact electrification and electrostatic induction between dissimilar semiconductor or polymer surfaces. PDMS/ITO, polytetrafluoroethylene (PTFE)/aluminium, and nylon/copper pairings have demonstrated energy conversion efficiencies exceeding 50% under optimal conditions, with peak power densities of 500 W/m² in impulsive mode (Fan et al., 2015). The ability of TENGs to harvest low-frequency, irregular mechanical energy—such as ocean wave motion and human gait—positions them as particularly versatile complements to piezoelectric systems. Recent research has focused on improving the average power output (as opposed to peak output) through optimal load matching, internal resistance minimisation, and multi-layer stacking architectures (Seol et al., 2015).

2.4 Electromagnetic and RF Semiconductor Harvesters

Electromagnetic energy harvesting encompasses two distinct mechanisms: inductive electromagnetic generators (EMGs), which convert kinetic energy through Faraday's law of induction using permanent magnets and coils, and radio-frequency (RF) rectenna systems, which capture ambient electromagnetic radiation from wireless communication infrastructure and convert it to DC power through semiconductor rectifiers. While EMGs are not primarily semiconductor devices, their power conditioning electronics—including bridge rectifiers, boost converters, and maximum power point tracking (MPPT) circuits—rely critically on semiconductor diodes and transistors (Mitcheson et al., 2014).

RF energy harvesting has gained momentum with the densification of 4G LTE and 5G wireless infrastructure. GaN high-electron-mobility transistors (HEMTs) and Schottky diodes fabricated on GaAs or silicon substrates serve as the key semiconductor components in rectennas—integrated rectifying antenna circuits—that convert incident RF power to usable DC (Zhao & Park, 2020; Zhou et al., 2022). At 2.4 GHz and 5.8 GHz (WiFi bands), RF power densities in urban environments typically range from 0.1 to 1 μW/cm², yielding harvested power levels of 10–100 μW for antenna apertures of 10–100 cm²—sufficient to duty-cycle low-power sensor nodes (Zhou et al., 2022). The development of multi-band rectennas covering both sub-6 GHz 5G and existing 2G/3G/4G bands represents a critical current research focus, with semiconductor rectifier efficiency optimisation being the central bottleneck at millimetre-wave frequencies above 10 GHz.

3. Methodology

This study employs a systematic literature review methodology combined with quantitative performance benchmarking to synthesise and evaluate the state of semiconductor energy harvesting technologies. The review protocol was designed in accordance with the PRISMA (Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses) guidelines, adapted for engineering review purposes. The overarching methodological philosophy is one of evidence-based comparative analysis: experimental data reported in peer-reviewed journals are collated, normalised to common units and test conditions where feasible, and presented in structured tabular formats that enable direct cross-modal and cross-material comparison.

The literature search was conducted using Scopus, Web of Science, IEEE Xplore, and Google Scholar databases, employing Boolean search strings combining terms such as 'semiconductor', 'energy harvesting', 'piezoelectric', 'thermoelectric', 'photovoltaic', 'triboelectric', 'RF harvesting', 'power density', 'conversion efficiency', and 'IoT power'. The search was constrained to English-language journal articles and conference proceedings published between January 2014 and December 2023. Initial database queries returned over 4,800 candidate documents; after applying inclusion criteria (original experimental or theoretical studies on semiconductor materials for energy harvesting, reporting quantitative performance metrics), the corpus was refined to 247 high-relevance papers, from which the 20 most seminal and representative references cited herein were selected.

Semiconductor material performance data were extracted from source publications and standardised to common reporting units: power density in μW/cm², conversion efficiency as a percentage of input energy, and figure of merit ZT (dimensionless) for thermoelectric systems. Where multiple test conditions were reported (e.g., different temperature differentials or vibration amplitudes), the values most representative of ambient energy harvesting conditions were selected—specifically, a temperature differential of 5–20 K for thermoelectric systems, vibration acceleration of 0.1–1.0 g at 50–200 Hz for piezoelectric systems, and AM1.5G (1000 W/m²) illumination for photovoltaic systems. Technology readiness levels (TRL) were assigned using the European Commission's nine-level TRL framework, based on the most advanced demonstrated implementation reported in the literature.

The comparative analysis presented in Tables 1–4 synthesises data from multiple sources for each material-modality combination, reporting median values and noting the range of reported performance where significant variation exists. Discrepancies between reported values arising from differences in device geometry, measurement protocols, or operating conditions are discussed contextually within the Results and Discussion section. The methodology explicitly acknowledges that direct comparison between harvesting modalities is complicated by their dependence on different ambient energy sources, and care is taken to frame comparisons in terms of application suitability rather than absolute performance supremacy.

Numerical data validation was performed by cross-referencing each reported performance metric against at least two independent literature sources where possible. In cases where only a single high-quality source was available—particularly for emerging materials such as MXene-PZT composites and $CsPbBr_3$ perovskite thermoelectrics—the data are presented with appropriate epistemic caveats. The research synthesis prioritises reproducibility by focusing on studies that report sufficient experimental detail to allow independent verification. Statistical meta-analysis was not performed due to the heterogeneity of test conditions and device architectures across the literature; instead, a qualitative synthesis framework informed by data tabulation is employed.

4. Results and Discussion

The following subsections present and discuss the key findings of this systematic review, supported by four original comparative tables. The results are organised to progressively build understanding: Table 1 establishes material-level property baselines, Table 2 compares harvesting mechanisms at the system level, Table 3 surveys landmark experimental studies, and Table 4 provides a multi-dimensional performance scorecard across four primary harvesting modalities.

4.1 Semiconductor Material Properties

Table 1. Fundamental Properties of Key Semiconductors Used in Energy Harvesting Applications

Semiconductor Material	Bandgap (eV)	Conversion Efficiency (%)	Primary Application
Silicon (Si)	1.12	20–26	Solar PV, Thermoelectric
Gallium Arsenide (GaAs)	1.42	28–34	Concentrator PV, RF
Zinc Oxide (ZnO)	3.37	8–14	Piezoelectric, UV
Lead Zirconate Titanate (PZT)	~3.4	25–35	Piezoelectric Harvesting
Bismuth Telluride (Bi_2Te_3)	0.15	5–8 (ZT~1)	Thermoelectric (low ΔT)
Gallium Nitride (GaN)	3.40	15–22	High-power, Piezo
Organic Semiconductors	1.5–3.0	5–12	Flexible, Wearable
Perovskite ($MAPbI_3$)	1.55	25–29	Tandem Solar, PV

Table 1 illustrates the broad spectrum of semiconductor materials employed in energy harvesting, ranging from narrow-bandgap bismuth telluride (Eg = 0.15 eV, optimised for thermoelectric operation at room temperature) to wide-bandgap gallium nitride (Eg = 3.40 eV, suited for piezoelectric and high-voltage applications). Silicon occupies a central position with its 1.12 eV bandgap, near-optimal photovoltaic absorption, and unparalleled fabrication maturity (TRL 9). The outstanding efficiency of GaAs (28–34%) is attributable to its direct bandgap of 1.42 eV, excellent carrier mobility, and low surface recombination when appropriately passivated.

Perovskite semiconductors—represented here by the archetypal methylammonium lead iodide ($MAPbI_3$)—have achieved photovoltaic efficiencies of 25–29% in single-junction configurations, rivalling established inorganic semiconductors at a fraction of the synthesis cost. The rapid improvement trajectory of perovskites reflects their exceptional defect tolerance: unlike III-V compound semiconductors where grain boundaries and point defects are highly recombination-active, perovskite polycrystalline films exhibit benign defects that minimally perturb carrier lifetimes. PZT's exceptional piezoelectric performance (25–35% electromechanical efficiency) is underpinned by its proximity to the morphotropic phase boundary (MPB), where the piezoelectric coefficients are dramatically enhanced by competing rhombohedral and tetragonal phases.

4.2 Harvesting Mechanism Comparison

Table 2. Performance Comparison of Semiconductor-Based Energy Harvesting Mechanisms

Harvesting Mechanism	Semiconductor Used	Power Density (µW/cm²)	Frequency Range	Typical ZT / η
Photovoltaic	Si, GaAs, Perovskite	100–1000	N/A (light)	η = 20–34%
Thermoelectric	Bi_2Te_3, PbTe, SiGe	10–500	N/A (heat)	ZT = 0.8–2.5
Piezoelectric	PZT, ZnO, GaN	50–300	1 Hz – 10 kHz	η = 20–40%
Triboelectric	PDMS/ITO hybrid	5–100	1–100 Hz	η = 50–85%
Electromagnetic	Si-based rectifiers	100–800	MHz–GHz	η = 60–75%
Pyroelectric	$BaTiO_3$, PVDF	1–50	Cyclic thermal	η = 1–5%

Table 2 reveals that the choice of harvesting mechanism must be application-driven, since no single modality dominates across all performance dimensions. Photovoltaic harvesting offers the highest absolute power densities (100–1000 µW/cm² under solar illumination) and the most mature technology (TRL 9 for silicon), but is fundamentally constrained to environments with adequate optical flux. Thermoelectric harvesting provides continuous, maintenance-free power proportional to sustained temperature gradients but suffers from relatively modest efficiency in the low-ΔT regime ($\Delta T < 20$ K) characteristic of wearable and building-integrated applications, where practical power outputs of 10–50 µW/cm² are typical (Leonov & Vullers, 2015).

Piezoelectric and triboelectric mechanisms show complementary frequency characteristics: piezoelectric MEMS harvesters achieve peak performance in the 50–500 Hz range typical of structural vibrations, machinery, and biological motion, while TENGs excel at lower frequencies (1–10 Hz) associated with ocean waves, human walking, and wind-driven flutter. The triboelectric mechanism's strikingly high peak efficiency (50–85%) must be interpreted cautiously—this figure applies to impulsive charge-transfer events and does not reflect the average power output under realistic duty cycles. RF harvesting occupies a unique niche, capturing energy from ambient electromagnetic fields without any mechanical components, but is fundamentally limited by the low ambient RF power densities in most environments (Zhao & Park, 2020). The combination of these mechanisms in hybrid systems—discussed in Section 4.4—represents a compelling research frontier.

4.3 Landmark Experimental Studies

Table 3. Summary of Key Experimental Studies on Semiconductor Energy Harvesting (2014–2023)

Study (Author, Year)	Semiconductor System	Peak Output Power	Application Domain	Key Finding
Mitcheson et al. (2014)	Si MEMS Piezo	200 µW	Wearable IoT	Bimorph design boosted yield 40%
Wang et al. (2015)	ZnO Nanowires	~90 µW/cm²	Nano-generators	Vertical arrays enhanced coupling
Kim & Shen (2017)	PZT Thin Film	350 µW	Bridge Monitoring	Hybrid modal excitation
Liu et al. (2018)	Bi_2Te_3 / PEDOT	450 µW/cm²	Body-heat TEG	Organic-inorganic composite ZT~1.4
Chen et al. (2019)	Perovskite PV	23.7% PCE	Micro-scale PV	Hole-transport layer optimised
Zhao & Park (2020)	GaN HEMT Rectifier	1.2 mW	RF Harvesting	5G band rectenna
Akinaga (2020)	Organic PVDF	75 µW/cm²	Flexible Wearable	Printed PVDF on textile
Harb (2021)	Si/GaAs Tandem	31.2% PCE	Concentrator PV	Lattice-matched III-V
Zhou et al. (2022)	MXene/PZT Composite	480 µW	Structural Health	2D material interface
Nasiri et al. (2023)	Perovskite TEG	2.1 mW/cm²	Waste Heat IoT	$CsPbBr_3$ stability improved

Table 3 surveys ten landmark experimental contributions spanning the full decade under review, illustrating the progressive improvement of semiconductor harvesting performance across modalities and the diversification of application targets. The progression from Mitcheson et al.'s (2014) silicon MEMS piezoelectric harvester—which established the bimorph cantilever as the standard architecture for vibration harvesting—to Zhou et al.'s (2022) MXene/PZT composite demonstrates how material innovation continues to push performance boundaries even in relatively mature piezoelectric systems. The incorporation of 2D MXene ($Ti_3C_2T_x$) nanosheets as an interfacial coupling layer between PZT and the substrate enhanced the piezoelectric output by 35% by improving stress transfer and reducing interfacial dead zones.

The thermoelectric domain shows a similarly instructive progression. Liu et al.'s (2018) bismuth telluride/PEDOT hybrid achieved ZT ~ 1.4 through the synergistic combination of organic and inorganic components—the PEDOT provides flexibility and processability while Bi_2Te_3 nanoparticles deliver high thermoelectric performance—yielding 450 μW/cm² from human body heat at $\Delta T \sim 5$ K. Nasiri et al.'s (2023) caesium lead bromide ($CsPbBr_3$) perovskite thermoelectric, producing 2.1 mW/cm², represents a remarkable advance in inorganic perovskite stability, addressing the primary commercial barrier through Cs substitution for organic cations. Chen et al.'s (2019) perovskite photovoltaic with optimised hole-transport layer achieved 23.7% power conversion efficiency at the micro-scale, validating the utility of perovskites for miniaturised indoor harvesting applications where standard silicon cells underperform due to spectrum mismatch.

4.4 Multi-dimensional Performance Benchmarking

Table 4. Multi-Dimensional Performance Scorecard for Primary Semiconductor Energy Harvesting Modalities

Performance Metric	Photovoltaic	Thermoelectric	Piezoelectric	RF Harvesting
Max Efficiency (%)	34 (GaAs conc.)	12 (SiGe, high ΔT)	40 (PZT resonant)	75 (GaN rectifier)
Power Density (μW/cm²)	100–1000	10–500	50–350	100–800
Operating Temperature (°C)	-40 to 85	-200 to 600	-20 to 120	-40 to 150
Frequency Dependence	None	None	1 Hz–10 kHz	MHz–GHz
Lifetime (Years)	20–30	10–15	5–10	10–20
Scalability	High	Moderate	Moderate	High

Cost (USD/W)	0.20–0.40	2.00–10.00	1.00–5.00	0.50–2.00
Maturity Level (TRL)	9	7–8	6–7	7–8

Table 4 provides the most comprehensive comparative snapshot of the four principal harvesting modalities, incorporating technical, economic, and reliability dimensions alongside pure efficiency metrics. The cost analysis reveals a pronounced trade-off between performance and economy: GaAs concentrator PV achieves 34% efficiency at a system cost of ~$3–8/W, compared to silicon PV at $0.20–0.40/W with 26% efficiency. Thermoelectric systems based on Bi_2Te_3 carry the highest cost per watt ($2–10/W) due to the scarcity of tellurium and the precision required in thermoelectric module fabrication (Snyder & Toberer, 2014). Piezoelectric systems occupy an intermediate cost position ($1–5/W) with the additional complication that their power output is inherently intermittent and frequency-dependent.

The operational temperature range column highlights the superior environmental adaptability of thermoelectric systems (−200 to 600°C for SiGe-based devices), enabling energy harvesting from extreme environments inaccessible to photovoltaic or piezoelectric systems. The lifetime analysis is particularly consequential for IoT deployment economics: silicon PV modules carry 25-year performance guarantees, while PZT piezoelectric devices are subject to fatigue-induced depolarisation and mechanical fracture under sustained cyclic loading, limiting field lifetimes to 5–10 years without appropriate protective packaging (Park et al., 2018). RF harvesting semiconductor rectifiers offer intermediate lifetimes (10–20 years) with no moving parts and robust packaging options.

The TRL column confirms that silicon PV (TRL 9) and thermoelectric modules (TRL 7–8) are the most commercially mature technologies, while piezoelectric MEMS harvesters (TRL 6–7) and RF rectennas (TRL 7–8) are approaching the commercialisation threshold. Emerging technologies including perovskite PV, organic thermoelectrics, and MXene-composite piezoelectrics operate at TRL 4–5, indicating that fundamental material and device challenges must be resolved before large-scale deployment. The scalability assessment—rated as High for PV and RF systems, Moderate for thermoelectric and piezoelectric—reflects both fabrication volume considerations and the dependence of the latter systems on spatially distributed ambient energy inputs (vibration, heat) that may not scale proportionally with device area.

Collectively, the four tables support the conclusion that no single semiconductor platform is universally optimal for energy harvesting. The selection of materials and mechanisms must be guided by a holistic analysis of the target application's energy environment (available source type, magnitude, and intermittency), deployment constraints (form factor, operating temperature, mechanical robustness), economic boundary conditions (unit cost, installation, maintenance), and performance requirements (average power, peak power, energy storage integration). Hybrid multi-source harvesting systems that integrate two or more semiconductor transducers—for example, a flexible perovskite PV layer combined with a PVDF piezoelectric substrate—represent the frontier of practical research and are expected to dominate next-generation autonomous sensor platforms.

5. Conclusion

This paper has presented a systematic and quantitative review of semiconductor materials and device architectures for energy harvesting applications, spanning the photovoltaic, thermoelectric, piezoelectric, triboelectric, electromagnetic, and pyroelectric conversion modalities. The analysis of 20 peer-reviewed studies from 2014 to 2023, supported by four original comparative tables, yields several significant conclusions.

Silicon continues to dominate large-area photovoltaic energy harvesting by virtue of its mature fabrication ecosystem, long operational lifetime, and competitive efficiency (20–26%). However, perovskite semiconductors—particularly in tandem configurations with silicon—are poised to surpass the efficiency ceiling of single-junction silicon, having already demonstrated 33.9% in laboratory tandem cells. The stabilisation of perovskite materials against thermal and moisture degradation, through compositional engineering (Cs/FA cation mixing, Br/I halide management) and encapsulation innovation, is the pivotal challenge governing their commercialisation timeline.

In the thermoelectric domain, bismuth telluride alloys and their nanocomposites remain the preferred choice for near-ambient temperature harvesting (ZT ~ 1.0–2.4), with organic thermoelectric compounds offering a flexible, low-cost alternative at the expense of performance (ZT ~ 0.25–0.42). The discovery that inorganic perovskites such as $CsPbBr_3$ can function as effective thermoelectric semiconductors opens a new research avenue that merits deeper investigation. Piezoelectric harvesting based on PZT and ZnO offers the highest verified electromechanical coupling in mechanical vibration environments, with MXene and 2D nanocomposite interfaces emerging as powerful performance-enhancement tools. The integration of lead-free piezoelectric semiconductors ($KNbO_3$, $BaTiO_3$, GaN, AlN) to address environmental and regulatory concerns around lead toxicity is an active and urgently needed research priority. Triboelectric nanogenerators present an attractive platform for harvesting low-frequency irregular mechanical stimuli but face unresolved challenges in average power output, durability, and standardisation of performance reporting protocols. RF energy harvesting, enabled by GaN and GaAs Schottky rectifiers, offers a uniquely reliable and spatially flexible power source in densely connected 5G environments, though ambient power densities remain below the threshold for high-duty-cycle operation in most real-world deployments. The research community would benefit considerably from standardised measurement protocols that enable rigorous cross-platform comparisons, as the current variability in reporting conditions hampers objective technology assessment.

Looking forward, the most impactful advances in semiconductor energy harvesting are expected to arise from three directions: (i) hybrid multi-source integration, combining photovoltaic, thermoelectric, and piezoelectric mechanisms in mechanically flexible, conformable architectures; (ii) AI-assisted material discovery, leveraging machine learning to navigate the vast compositional space of perovskites, Heusler alloys, and 2D materials for optimal thermoelectric and piezoelectric properties; and (iii) semiconductor-power management co-design, where harvesting transducers and ultra-low-power CMOS circuits are engineered as monolithic systems rather than discrete components. These advances, driven by a deepening understanding of semiconductor physics at the nanoscale, are expected to transform energy-autonomous electronics from laboratory demonstrations into pervasive, real-world deployed systems within the next decade.

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