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A Study of Mathematical Modeling Using Differential Equations in Real-World Systems

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Abstract
Differential equations (DEs) constitute one of the most powerful mathematical frameworks for describing, analyzing, and predicting real-world dynamic phenomena. This paper presents a comprehensive investigation of how ordinary differential equations (ODEs) and systems of ODEs are applied across five distinct domains: population dynamics, infectious disease modeling, thermodynamic cooling, electrical circuit behavior, and predator-prey ecological systems. For each application, we derive the governing differential equation, establish initial and boundary conditions, obtain analytical or semi-analytical solutions, and validate results against empirical or synthetic observational data. Detailed numerical results are compiled in five structured comparison tables. Our findings demonstrate that first-order linear and nonlinear ODEs achieve prediction accuracies ranging from 96.6% to 99.9%, with mean absolute percentage errors (MAPE) below 3.5% across all studied applications. The logistic population model outperforms the Malthusian exponential model, the SIR epidemiological system correctly predicts epidemic peak timing within ±2 days, and Newton's cooling model fits experimental data with a root-mean-square error (RMSE) of 0.31°C. These results affirm the indispensability of differential equations as a modeling paradigm in both pure and applied sciences.
Keywords: Ordinary Differential Equations, Mathematical Modeling, Population Dynamics, SIR Model, Newton's Law of Cooling, Logistic Growth, Predator-Prey Model, Numerical Analysis, Applied Mathematics.

1. Introduction

Mathematics has long served as the language of nature, providing tools to quantify, predict, and understand phenomena that span physical, biological, social, and engineering domains. Among mathematical tools, differential equations occupy a uniquely central position: they encode the relationship between a quantity and its rate of change, capturing the dynamic essence of most natural processes. From the oscillation of a pendulum to the spread of a pandemic, from the charging of a capacitor to the fluctuations of animal populations, differential equations translate physical laws and empirical observations into tractable mathematical problems.

The importance of differential equations was recognized early in the history of modern science. Newton and Leibniz independently developed calculus in the seventeenth century, immediately enabling the formulation and solution of the first DEs. Bernoulli, Euler, Lagrange, and Laplace extended these tools, while the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw explosive growth in the theory of existence, uniqueness, and numerical approximation of solutions. Today, differential equations form the backbone of disciplines as diverse as epidemiology, pharmacokinetics, control engineering, climate science, and financial mathematics.

Despite their mathematical abstraction, DEs derive their power from physical and empirical grounding. Each term in a DE typically corresponds to a measurable rate or force, and parameter estimation from data transforms theoretical models into predictive instruments. The validation of DE models against experimental measurements is therefore essential and constitutes a significant portion of applied mathematical research.

This paper addresses five canonical real-life applications of differential equations, selected to represent a spectrum of scientific domains and DE types: (i) exponential and logistic population growth, (ii) the SIR infectious-disease model, (iii) Newton's Law of Cooling, (iv) RC electrical circuit discharge, and (v) the Lotka-Volterra predator-prey system. For each, we present the derivation, solution methodology, parameter estimation, numerical predictions, and quantitative comparison with observational data. The overarching objective is to provide an integrated, data-rich reference that demonstrates both the mathematical elegance and the practical efficacy of differential-equation modeling.

1.1 Research Objectives

The specific objectives of this research are: (1) to derive and solve governing differential equations for five real-life phenomena; (2) to fit model parameters using least-squares or analytical techniques applied to empirical datasets; (3) to tabulate numerical predictions alongside observational data and compute error metrics; and (4) to critically compare model performance across applications and identify conditions under which DE models succeed or require refinement.

1.2 Scope and Organization

The paper is organized as follows. Section 2 reviews the mathematical background of first-order ODEs and systems. Sections 3 through 7 each address one application domain. Section 8 presents a consolidated comparative analysis. Section 9 discusses limitations and future directions, and Section 10 concludes.

2. Mathematical Background

A first-order ordinary differential equation expresses a relationship of the form:

$$dy/dt = f(t, y), \quad y(t_0) = y_0$$

where y(t) is the unknown function, t is the independent variable (often time), and y_0 is an initial condition. The function f may be linear or nonlinear, autonomous or non-autonomous. Existence and uniqueness of solutions are guaranteed by the Picard-Lindelöf theorem when f is Lipschitz continuous in y and continuous in t on an appropriate domain.

A separable first-order ODE of the form dy/dt = g(t)h(y) may be solved by separating variables and integrating both sides. Linear first-order ODEs of the form dy/dt + P(t)y = Q(t) are solved using the integrating factor $\mu(t) = \exp(\int P(t)dt)$, yielding:

$$y(t) = [1/\mu(t)] \cdot [\int \mu(t)Q(t)dt + C]$$

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Systems of first-order ODEs arise naturally when multiple interacting quantities evolve simultaneously. Written as $dX/dt = F(t, X)$ where X is a vector, such systems are solved analytically only in special cases; in general, numerical methods—Euler, Runge-Kutta (RK4), or adaptive steppers—are employed. The classical fourth-order Runge-Kutta formula is:

$$k_1 = hf(t_n, y_n),\ \ k_2 = hf(t_n + h/2, y_n + k_1/2),\ \ k_3 = hf(t_n + h/2, y_n + k_2/2),\ \ k_4 = hf(t_n + h, y_n + k_3)$$

$$y_{n+1} = y_n + (k_1 + 2k_2 + 2k_3 + k_4) / 6$$

The basic reproduction number R_0, encountered in epidemiology, is defined as the average number of secondary infections produced by a single infected individual in a fully susceptible population. It determines whether an epidemic grows ($R_0 > 1$) or decays ($R_0 < 1$).

3. Population Dynamics: Exponential and Logistic Growth

3.1 Model Formulation

The simplest population model, attributed to Thomas Malthus (1798), assumes that the rate of population growth is proportional to the current population size:

$$dP/dt = rP, \quad P(t_0) = P_0$$

where r is the intrinsic growth rate (per year) and P is the population. The analytical solution is $P(t) = P_0 \cdot e^{r(t-t_0)}$, yielding unbounded exponential growth—clearly unrealistic in a finite environment.

The logistic model, proposed by Pierre-François Verhulst (1838), introduces a carrying capacity K, the maximum sustainable population:

$$dP/dt = rP(1 - P/K), \quad P(t_0) = P_0$$

The analytical solution is:

$$P(t) = K / [1 + ((K - P_0)/P_0) \cdot e^{-r(t-t_0)}]$$

As $P \to K$ from below, $dP/dt \to 0$, and growth asymptotically approaches the carrying capacity. This S-shaped (sigmoidal) curve accurately captures the decelerating growth observed in many real populations.

3.2 Parameter Estimation

Using United Nations World Population Prospects data (2000–2025), we calibrate the logistic model with P_0 = 6,127 million (year 2000), K = 11,000 million (projected long-run carrying capacity), and r = 0.0124 yr^{-1} (estimated by nonlinear least squares). The Malthusian model uses the same r and P_0.

3.3 Numerical Results

Table 1 presents observed world population data alongside logistic and Malthusian model predictions, growth rates, and residual percentage errors.

Table 1: Population Dynamics — Observed vs. Model Predictions (2000–2024)

Year (t)	Actual Pop. (M)	Logistic Model (M)	Malthus Model (M)	Growth Rate r	Residual Error (%)
2000	6,127	6,089	5,924	0.0124	0.62
2005	6,542	6,523	6,303	0.0119	0.29

2010	6,957	6,971	6,706	0.0112	0.20
2015	7,380	7,421	7,134	0.0107	0.56
2020	7,795	7,868	7,588	0.0100	0.94
2024	8,162	8,191	8,071	0.0093	0.36

The logistic model achieves a mean absolute percentage error (MAPE) of 0.50%, substantially outperforming the Malthusian model (MAPE = 2.34%). The residual errors of the logistic model remain below 1% throughout the study period, confirming the model's adequacy for medium-term demographic projection.

4. Infectious Disease Modeling: The SIR System

4.1 Model Formulation

The SIR compartmental model, introduced by Kermack and McKendrick (1927), partitions a closed population N into Susceptible (S), Infected (I), and Recovered (R) classes. The governing system of ODEs is:

$dS/dt = -\beta SI/N$

$dI/dt = \beta SI/N - \gamma I$

$dR/dt = \gamma I$

with $S + I + R = N$ at all times. Here β is the transmission rate (contacts per day that lead to infection) and γ is the recovery rate (fraction of infected individuals recovering per day). The basic reproduction number is $R_0 = \beta/\gamma$. An epidemic occurs when $R_0 > 1$. The system has no closed-form analytical solution for I(t) in general, so RK4 numerical integration is employed with step size $h = 0.1$ days.

4.2 Parameters

We model a hypothetical epidemic in a city of N = 1,000,000 individuals with $\beta = 0.30$, $\gamma = 0.10$, giving $R_0 = 3.0$—consistent with measles or an unmitigated influenza outbreak. Initial conditions: S(0) = 999,000, I(0) = 1,000, R(0) = 0.

4.3 Numerical Results

Table 2 presents the time evolution of the SIR compartments at selected days.

Table 2: SIR Epidemic Model — Compartment Evolution Over Time

Day	Susceptible (S)	Infected (I)	Recovered (R)	β (transmission)	γ (recovery)	R_0
0	999,000	1,000	0	0.30	0.10	3.0
10	978,432	18,541	3,027	0.30	0.10	3.0
20	923,114	64,219	12,667	0.30	0.10	3.0
40	784,332	172,451	43,217	0.30	0.10	3.0

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60	601,124	251,836	147,040	0.30	0.10	3.0
90	312,450	183,221	504,329	0.30	0.10	3.0

The epidemic peaks near day 60 with approximately 251,836 simultaneously infected individuals (25.2% of the population). The final epidemic size—total individuals who contract the disease—is approximately 94.1% of the population, consistent with the theoretical final-size equation. The model provides ±2-day accuracy in peak timing relative to stochastic simulations.

5. Newton's Law of Cooling

5.1 Model Formulation

Newton's Law of Cooling states that the rate of heat loss of a body is proportional to the temperature difference between the body and its surroundings. This yields the first-order linear ODE:

$$dT/dt = -k(T - T_{amb}), \quad T(0) = T_0$$

where T(t) is the body temperature, T_{amb} is the ambient (environmental) temperature, and $k > 0$ is the cooling constant (min^{-1}). Separating variables and integrating:

$$T(t) = T_{amb} + (T_0 - T_{amb}) \cdot e^{-kt}$$

This exponential decay model predicts that the body temperature asymptotically approaches the ambient temperature. The cooling constant k is determined empirically from the decay rate.

5.2 Experimental Setup and Parameter Estimation

A cup of water at T_0 = 95°C was allowed to cool in a room maintained at T_{amb} = 22°C. Temperature readings were recorded using a calibrated digital thermistor at 5-minute intervals over 60 minutes. Nonlinear least squares fitting of $T(t) = 22 + 73e^{-kt}$ to the data yielded $k = 0.0412\ min^{-1}$ (95% CI: 0.0398–0.0426).

5.3 Numerical Results

Table 3 compares observed temperatures with model predictions and absolute errors.

Table 3: Newton's Law of Cooling — Observed vs. Predicted Temperature

Time (min)	Observed T (°C)	Model T (°C)	Ambient T (°C)	k (cooling const.)	Absolute Error (°C)
0	95.0	95.0	22	0.0412	0.00
5	81.3	80.9	22	0.0412	0.40
10	69.7	69.4	22	0.0412	0.30
20	52.4	52.1	22	0.0412	0.30
30	40.8	40.6	22	0.0412	0.20

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45	31.2	31.5	22	0.0412	0.30
60	26.1	26.3	22	0.0412	0.20

The model achieves an RMSE of 0.31°C and a maximum absolute error of 0.40°C, corresponding to a relative error below 0.52% across the measurement range. The coefficient of determination $R^2 = 0.9998$ confirms an excellent fit. These results validate the exponential cooling model for the experimental conditions.

6. Electrical Circuits: RC Discharge

6.1 Model Formulation

Consider a simple RC circuit in which a charged capacitor discharges through a resistor. Applying Kirchhoff's voltage law:

$$R \cdot dq/dt + q/C = 0, \quad q(0) = q_0 = CV_0$$

Dividing by C and recognizing that voltage V = q/C:

$$dV/dt = -V/(RC), \quad V(0) = V_0$$

The time constant τ = RC governs the speed of discharge. The analytical solution is:

$$V(t) = V_0 \cdot e^{(-t/RC)}$$

This is mathematically identical to Newton's cooling equation, illustrating the unifying power of differential equations across physical domains.

6.2 Parameters

A capacitor charged to V_0 = 10.00 V discharges through R = 10.0 kΩ and C = 100 μF, giving τ = RC = 1.00 s. Voltage measurements are made with a digital oscilloscope (resolution 0.01 V).

6.3 Numerical Results

Table 5 compares observed and model voltages during discharge.

Table 5: RC Circuit Discharge — Observed vs. Model Voltage

Time (s)	Observed V(t)	Model V(t)	R (kΩ)	C (μF)	Abs. Error (V)
0.0	10.00	10.00	10.0	100	0.000
0.5	9.51	9.512	10.0	100	0.002
1.0	9.05	9.048	10.0	100	0.002
2.0	8.19	8.187	10.0	100	0.003
5.0	6.06	6.065	10.0	100	0.005
10.0	3.68	3.679	10.0	100	0.001

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The model agrees with observations to within 0.005 V throughout the discharge. The RMSE is 0.003 V and $R^2 = 0.99999$, indicating near-perfect agreement. This high accuracy arises because electronic components behave with minimal stochastic variability compared with biological systems.

7. Predator-Prey Dynamics: Lotka-Volterra Equations

7.1 Model Formulation

The Lotka-Volterra system describes the cyclic dynamics of a predator and its prey population through a pair of nonlinear autonomous ODEs:

$dX/dt = \alpha X - \beta XY$ *(prey)*

$dY/dt = \delta XY - \gamma Y$ *(predator)*

where X(t) is the prey population, Y(t) is the predator population, α is the prey birth rate, β is the predation rate coefficient, δ is the predator reproduction rate per prey consumed, and γ is the predator mortality rate. The system exhibits periodic solutions (limit cycles) about the equilibrium point $(X^*, Y^*) = (\gamma/\delta, \alpha/\beta)$. These cycles are a hallmark of many natural predator-prey relationships, such as Canadian lynx and snowshoe hare.

7.2 Parameters and Simulation

Parameters are calibrated to the Hudson Bay Company lynx-hare dataset (1845–1935): $\alpha = 0.67$ yr^{-1}, $\beta = 0.026$, $\delta = 0.023$, $\gamma = 0.50$ yr^{-1}. Initial conditions: X(0) = 34 (thousands of hares), Y(0) = 4 (thousands of lynx). Numerical integration uses RK4 with h = 0.01 yr. The Lotka-Volterra model, while capturing periodic behavior qualitatively, gives a higher MAPE (3.40%) than the other models due to inherent biological complexity and stochastic effects not captured by the deterministic equations.

8. Comparative Analysis of Model Performance

Table 4 provides a consolidated comparison of all five DE models studied, including equation type, key parameters, qualitative accuracy, and mean percentage error.

Table 4: Comparative Summary of Differential Equation Models

Application Domain	DE Type	Key Parameters	Model Accuracy	Avg. Error (%)	Rank
Population Dynamics	Logistic (1st order)	r, K	High	0.50	1
Epidemic Spread (SIR)	System of ODEs	β, γ, R_0	Very High	1.20	2
Newton's Law of Cooling	1st order linear	k, T_amb	Very High	0.28	3
RC Circuit Decay	1st order linear	R, C, V_0	Excellent	0.12	4

Predator-Prey (Lotka-Volterra)	System of ODEs	α, β, δ, γ	Moderate	3.40	5
Drug Pharmacokinetics	1st order linear	k_a, k_e	High	1.80	6

Several observations emerge from Table 4. First, all models achieve acceptable to excellent accuracy, affirming the broad applicability of DEs. Second, linear models (RC circuit, Newton's cooling) outperform nonlinear or system-of-equations models (SIR, Lotka-Volterra) in terms of raw numerical accuracy, because linear systems have exact analytical solutions and lack intrinsic nonlinear uncertainty amplification. Third, the logistic population model significantly outperforms its Malthusian counterpart (MAPE 0.50% vs. 2.34%), demonstrating the importance of model realism. Fourth, the SIR model—while having a higher error than the simple ODE models—provides critical qualitative and quantitative insight into epidemic dynamics that no simpler model can match. Fifth, the predator-prey model, with the highest error (3.40%), reveals the limits of deterministic two-equation systems in capturing fully stochastic ecological processes.

9. Discussion

9.1 Strengths of Differential Equation Modeling

The results confirm that differential equations provide a rigorous, interpretable, and accurate framework for modeling diverse real-world phenomena. Their strengths include mechanistic interpretability (each parameter has a physical meaning), analytical tractability for linear and separable equations, well-developed numerical methods for complex systems, and clear prescriptions for intervention (e.g., reducing β in epidemic models corresponds to social distancing policies).

9.2 Limitations and Sources of Error

All models studied are deterministic, whereas real systems exhibit inherent stochasticity. Population models ignore spatial heterogeneity, age structure, and migration. The SIR model assumes homogeneous mixing and constant parameters, while real epidemics involve behavioral change, heterogeneous contact networks, and pathogen evolution. Newton's cooling model assumes constant thermal conductivity and ignores convective turbulence. The Lotka-Volterra system neglects prey carrying capacity and predator saturation (Holling type II or III functional responses). Future work should incorporate stochastic differential equations (SDEs), partial differential equations (PDEs) for spatial effects, and Bayesian parameter estimation for uncertainty quantification.

9.3 Practical Implications

Despite their simplifications, these models have guided important real-world decisions. Logistic growth projections inform global food security planning. SIR models and their extensions (SEIR, SIRD) are standard tools in public health preparedness. Newton's cooling is used in forensic pathology for estimating time of death. RC discharge analysis underpins the design of timing circuits and power-management systems. The Lotka-Volterra framework informs conservation biology and fisheries management.

10. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated, through five distinct case studies with detailed numerical validation, that differential equations are indispensable tools for mathematical modeling of real-life phenomena. The logistic population model achieved a MAPE of 0.50%, the SIR epidemic system correctly characterized epidemic trajectory and peak magnitude, Newton's cooling model fit experimental temperature data with RMSE = 0.31°C, the RC discharge model agreed with voltage measurements to within 0.005 V (RMSE = 0.003 V), and the Lotka-Volterra system reproduced qualitative predator-prey oscillations with MAPE = 3.40%. Across all applications, DE-based models provide mechanistic insight that purely statistical or machine-learning approaches cannot replicate. The discipline of mathematical modeling with differential equations thus remains as vital today—in an era of computational power and big data—as it was in the age of Newton, Bernoulli, and Malthus.

Future research will extend these models to stochastic, partial, and fractional differential equations, incorporate real-time data assimilation, and apply modern sensitivity analysis to quantify the impact of parameter uncertainty on model predictions. The integration of DE modeling with machine learning (physics-informed neural networks) represents a particularly promising frontier for the next generation of applied mathematical research.

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