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Live Tool Holders for CNC Lathes: A Review of Cooling, Modeling & Industry 4.0 Integration

Jishnu Patil*

Mechanical Design Engineer, Westland, MI, USA

Email: jishnup@umich.edu

Abstract

Live tooling has become essential for CNC lathes, enabling milling, drilling, and other operations in a single setup to improve productivity and geometric accuracy. However, emerging trends in advanced cooling (MQL, HPC, cryogenic, hybrid), finite-element modeling of cutting processes and machine structures, and Industry 4.0 connectivity are not systematically applied to live tool holder design. This review synthesizes these developments and analyzes their implications for driven tool internals: how high-pressure coolant demands new seal and passage architectures, how MQL requires optimized atomization channels, how FEM enables stiffness and thermal optimization, and how thermal growth affects gear trains and bearings. Critical industry gaps are highlighted, including the lack of live tool benchmarking standards, integrated multi-physics FEM frameworks, and hybrid cooling research for rotating heads. The paper proposes an integrated design workflow linking process models, machine dynamics, and holder optimization, and identifies smart sensor integration as a key Industry 4.0 opportunity. By connecting broader CNC advances to live tool holder requirements, this work provides a roadmap to enhance capability, reliability, and sustainability of driven tooling in advanced manufacturing.

Keywords: live tooling; driven tools; CNC lathe; high-pressure coolant; minimum quantity lubrication; finite element analysis; thermal modeling; machine tool stiffness; Industry 4.0; smart tooling; hybrid cooling; tool holder design; virtual machining; benchmarking standards.

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** Corresponding author.*

1. Introduction

Live tooling on CNC lathes has transformed turning centers into highly flexible machining platforms capable of milling, drilling, tapping, hobbing, and polygon machining in a single setup [1,2]. By performing secondary operations in-situ on the lathe, live tooling reduces workpiece handling, fixture changes, and cumulative setup errors, while improving throughput and geometric consistency between turned and milled features [1]. At the same time, the broader CNC landscape is rapidly evolving, driven by advanced cooling and lubrication techniques, finite-element-based virtual machining, optimized machine tool structures, and Industry 4.0 concepts such as cyber-physical systems, connectivity, and data-driven optimization [3,4].

1.1. Problem Statement and Scope

Many of these advances have been explored primarily at the level of cutting processes or whole machine tools, without being systematically translated into the design and application of live tool holders themselves. For example, minimum-quantity lubrication, high-pressure coolant, and cryogenic cooling are well-studied at the tool–chip interface, and finite element methods are widely used to model cutting forces, temperatures, and machine structures, yet there is little coordinated work on how these developments should reshape the internal architecture, sealing, stiffness, and thermal management of driven tool heads. Similarly, Industry 4.0 initiatives have focused more on machine- and factory-level connectivity than on smart, sensorized live tooling.

2. Live Tooling Technology

2.1. Concept and Role in CNC Lathes

Live tooling, often referred to as driven tooling, describes tool holders mounted on a CNC lathe turret that incorporate their own rotating spindles powered by the machine’s drive system [1,2]. These holders allow milling, drilling, tapping, and other rotating operations to be carried out while the workpiece remains clamped on the main or sub spindle. Typical turret interfaces include BMT and VDI systems, with live heads customized to the specific mechanical, drive, and coolant interfaces of each machine tool builder. The manufacturing motivation for live tooling is the ability to machine turned and milled features in a single setup, thereby reducing fixtures, handling, and work in process, while also improving geometric correlation between turned diameters and milled flats, slots, and holes.

2.2. Configurations and Output Interfaces

Standard live tool configurations can be broadly divided into straight (axial) heads, 90° (radial) heads, and more complex angular or adjustable heads [1]. Straight heads are used for drilling and end milling along or parallel to the spindle axis, whereas 90° heads are used for cross drilling, milling keyways and flats, and hobbing. Angular heads allow oblique features to be produced without re clamping the workpiece. On the output side, live tools employ a range of clamping interfaces, including ER type collet chucks, Weldon holders, arbors, HSK and Capto polygonal shanks, hydraulic chucks, whistle notch holders, CAT and ABS tapers, and various proprietary systems [2]. The selection of output interface has a direct impact on achievable runout, rigidity, ease of presetting, and compatibility with existing tool libraries.

Figure 1: Tool Output Interfaces

2.3. Internal Mechanics and Design Drivers

The internal mechanical design of live tools largely determines their performance. Bearing arrangements, typically involving combinations of angular contact and roller bearings, set spindle stiffness and concentricity, and therefore influence both tool life and achievable surface finish [1,2]. Gear trains, made up of hardened, ground, and lapped bevel and spur gears, transmit torque and set speed ratios, and their quality strongly affects noise, runout, and efficiency. The stiffness of the housing and its mounting interface to the turret define how much the live head deflects under load, which is especially important given the overhung nature of many live tools. Details such as using internal rather than external collet nuts, which seat the tool more deeply and reduce overhang, can significantly improve stiffness and chatter resistance in deep pocket or long reach operations. Finally, internal coolant passages and sealing strategies must be robust enough to handle modern cooling and lubrication techniques without compromising bearing and gear life.

3. Advanced Machining Techniques

3.1. Minimum Quantity Lubrication (MQL)

Minimum quantity lubrication has emerged as a key technique in sustainable machining and is particularly relevant for live tooling [5]. In MQL, very small lubricant flow rates, typically between 50 and 500 ml/h, are atomized using compressed air and delivered directly to the cutting zone. This reduces fluid consumption by orders of magnitude relative to conventional flood cooling, lowering costs associated with fluid purchase, handling, and disposal, while also reducing environmental impact. Numerous studies have shown that MQL can lead to lower tool wear, reduced cutting temperatures, and improved surface finishes compared with dry or even wet conditions in the machining of steels and superalloys. For live tooling, MQL is attractive because it can be routed through internal channels in the turret and driven spindle, providing lubrication in confined spaces such as cross holes and pockets where conventional flooding is ineffective. However, this benefit depends on careful design of internal passages and seals to prevent oil mist or droplets from entering bearings and gear cavities. In contrast to prior MQL studies that focus on the cutting zone and assume a rigid toolholder, the present review explicitly links MQL requirements to internal passage and seal design in live heads.

3.2. High Pressure Coolant (HPC)

High pressure coolant is another important trend in reshaping machining practice. HPC systems deliver coolant at significantly elevated pressures, often in the range of 10–20 MPa at the tool, compared with a few bar in traditional flood systems. In live tool holders, typical pressure ratings are on the order of about 2,000 psi for 90° heads and roughly 1,000 psi for straight heads. High pressure jets are highly effective at breaking chips, preventing built up edge, and cooling the cutting zone, especially in nickel-based superalloys, titanium alloys, and other difficult to cut materials. For driven tools, this means that internal coolant bores, manifolds, and seals must withstand repeated high pressure cycling without leaking into bearing compartments or to the outside. The orientation of coolant outlets in axial and radial tools must be engineered so that the coolant jet reaches the chip–tool interface, and the housing must be strong and stiff enough that internal pressure does not cause deformation or misalignment of gear trains and bearings.

3.3. Alternative and Hybrid Cooling Strategies

Beyond MQL and HPC, other advanced cooling and lubrication approaches such as vegetable oil-based fluids, cryogenic cooling, and hybrid modes also have implications for live tooling. Vegetable oil-based fluids, usually deployed in MQL format, offer high lubricity and favorable environmental characteristics but can suffer from oxidation and residue formation, which are problematic in the confined, high precision environment of a live head [6,7]. Cryogenic cooling with liquid nitrogen or carbon dioxide can drastically reduce tool temperatures in titanium and nickel-based alloys, enabling higher cutting speeds and better surface integrity; however, routing cryogens through a compact rotating housing raises concerns about insulation, condensation, and thermal shock Reference [8]. Hybrid cooling strategies that combine, for example, MQL with cryogenic fluid, or HPC with a small amount of oil, are increasingly discussed at the process level but have yet to be systematically explored in the context of live tool internal design and reliability. While existing cryogenic and hybrid lubrication studies demonstrate strong process-level benefits, they rarely address how such media should be implemented within compact, rotating live tool holders.

4. Modeling and Virtual Machining

4.1. Process Level Finite Element Simulation

Finite element simulation of machining processes has reached a level of maturity that makes it a practical tool for understanding and optimizing cutting operations. Process level FEM is routinely used to predict temperature fields in the chip, tool, and workpiece, to compute cutting force components and energy consumption, and to model different chip formation regimes such as continuous, segmented, or serrated chips. It is also used to estimate residual stresses in the machined surface and subsurface, to analyze deflection and deformation of thin-walled parts, and to model the evolution of tool wear. These simulations feed into virtual machining environments that allow engineers to investigate toolpaths, cutting parameters, and process stability in silico before committing to physical trials, thereby reducing time and cost in process development. Unlike most process-level FEM studies that treat the toolholder as rigid, this work emphasizes the need to integrate live head mechanics into the modeling chain.

4.2. Machine Level Structural and Thermal Modeling

At the machine level, FEM is applied to the structural components and thermal behavior of the machine tool Reference [4,9,10]. Bed and column stiffness, damping, and natural vibration modes are analyzed to ensure that the machine can resist cutting forces without excessive deflection or chatter. Thermal deformation of the bed, column, and spindle is simulated under realistic operating cycles to predict how the tool center point drifts as the machine warms up. Ball screw systems are modeled to evaluate stresses, deflections, and thermal growth, which directly influence positioning accuracy. Spindles and guideways are analyzed to characterize their dynamic response and to design them for high stiffness and favorable damping. These machine level models are frequently combined with error compensation strategies to improve dimensional accuracy in production. Whereas machine-level structural and thermal models have advanced significantly, they typically do not resolve the detailed mechanics and thermal behavior of live tool holders themselves.

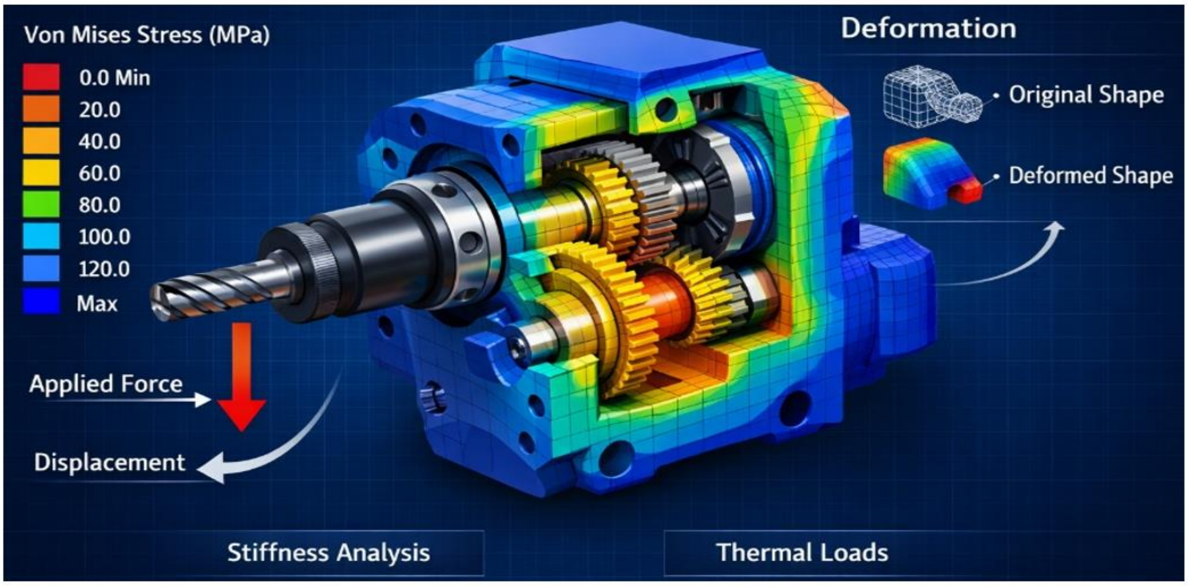

Figure 2: Structural Analysis of the tool holder

4.3. Integrated Models for Live Tools

However, there is a notable missing link, integrated models that explicitly include the internal mechanics of live tool holders. Existing FEM work tends to treat the driven tool as a rigid black box, focusing either on process physics or on the larger machine structure. There is almost no standardized framework that simultaneously models the housing, bearings, gears, and coolant channels of live heads, couples this with realistic cutting forces and temperatures from live tool operations and anchors the assembly in accurate boundary conditions from the turret and machine structure. This absence of integrated, multi physics modeling for driven tools is one of the strongest gaps in the current literature and a key opportunity for future research.

5. Machine Tool Structural Factors

5.1. Bed and Column Stiffness and Damping

The structural behavior of the host machine tool strongly influences the performance of live tooling. The bed and column provide the primary load path between the cutting zone and the foundation. Their stiffness and damping determine how much the turret, and thus the live head, moves under cutting forces. Any compliance here is amplified at the cutting edge due to the overhung nature of most live tools, leading to diameter and position errors on cross milled features, and modifying the engagement conditions in ways that can promote or suppress chatter [4,9,10]. Temperature gradients and long-term drift in the bed and column also cause quasi static shifts of the tool center point that affect dimensional accuracy in extended live tool cycles.

5.2. Ball Screws and Rotary Axes

Ball screw systems and rotary axes define the positional and angular accuracy of tool paths executed with live tooling. Linear C axis or Y axis motions that support milling paths on the lathe depend on ball screws whose elastic deformation and thermal expansion can cause tool center point drift during long operations. Rotary axes such as C and B determine the angular orientation of the workpiece or head, and their stiffness and thermal behavior influence the accuracy of interpolated drilling and milling. If these errors are not properly modeled and compensated, they can dominate any gains achieved from optimizing the design of the live tool holder itself.

5.3. Spindle and Turret Dynamics

The dynamics of the main spindle and turret also set crucial boundary conditions for the driven head. Axial, radial, and torsional compliance in the spindle and turret determine how cutting forces are transmitted back into the machine. Resonance frequencies of the turret may be coupled with live tool bending modes, leading to chatter at certain speeds and feed rates. Thermal drift in the spindle and turret, caused by motor heating and coolant flow, changes the relative position and orientation of the live head over time. Despite these influences, driven tool design is often performed without close integration with detailed machine dynamic models, which can result in unpredictable behavior when the holder is installed on different machines.

6. Impact of Emerging CNC Trends

6.1. High Pressure Coolant: Seals, Passages, and Housing Strength

High pressure coolants have immediate and profound consequences for the internal design of live tool holders. When coolant is delivered at pressures on the order of tens of megapascals, seals must be designed to withstand high differential pressures, fluctuating loads, and mixed media containing both coolant and abrasive fines. The geometry of internal passages must be optimized not only for flow and pressure distribution, but also for structural strength of the housing, so that cyclic internal pressure does not fatigue thin walls or distort bearing pockets and gear bores. The holder must maintain dimensional stability and alignment under these conditions, as any distortion can directly affect gear meshing and spindle runout. Despite the prevalence of HPC in modern CNC machining, there is currently no systematic, FEM based design guideline for internal coolant manifolds and seals in live heads, nor are there standardized test protocols that reflect the combined mechanical, hydraulic, and thermal loads encountered in service.

6.2. MQL and Internal Channel Architecture

Minimum quantity lubrication also imposes distinct design requirements on internal channels in driven tools Reference [4,5,8,11]. Unlike bulk coolant flow, MQL depends on preserving a particular air–oil mixture quality and droplet distribution between the coolant source and the cutting edge. Internal passages must be shaped to minimize separation of phases and deposition of droplets on internal surfaces, while still delivering the mixture to the tool interface at sufficient velocity. The coupling between the turret delivery system and the live head must be carefully managed to avoid degradation of atomization. At the same time, the housing must protect bearings and gears from exposure to oil mist, which can contaminate greases and change friction and wear behavior. Little work has been published on optimizing channel geometry and nozzle placement inside driven tools using fluid simulation, and there are no widely accepted metrics for comparing the effectiveness of “MQL capable” holders.

6.3. FEM Based Structural and Thermal Optimization of Holders

Finite element methods could enable much more systematic optimization of live tool holders than is currently practiced. Structural FEM can be used to maximize the bending stiffness of the housing and spindle within constraints on envelope size and mass, so that deflection under expected cutting loads is minimized. Modal analysis can be applied to ensure that the natural frequencies of the live head are separated from typical excitation frequencies on the host machine, reducing the risk of chatter. Coupled thermal–structural analyses can reveal how internal coolant temperature gradients distort bearing clearances, alter preload, and change gear contact patterns over realistic duty cycles. However, literature seldom treats the live tool holder as a primary object of FEM based design; instead, it is typically idealized as rigid. There are no common modeling standards, benchmark geometries, or shared material datasets for live head components, which inhibits cross vendor comparison and slows down methodological progress.

6.4. Thermal Growth and Gear/Bearing Behavior

Thermal growth within the live tool holder is another area where emerging cooling strategies demand new design thinking. As high-pressure coolant, cryogenic media, or hybrid cooling modes are introduced into compact housings, non-uniform temperature fields develop across gears, shafts, and the housing. These gradients can change gear backlash; shift contact patterns and increase noise and wear in ways that are not captured by static room temperature design. Similarly, differential expansion between housing and spindle can change bearing preload, potentially reducing life or increasing runout. Thermal cycling associated with intermittent operation and variable coolant use can lead to low cycle fatigue in critical components. Despite these realities, there is almost no published work on thermo mechanical analysis of live tool gear trains or on designing gear microgeometry and bearing arrangements explicitly for thermally dynamic environments.

6.5. Hybrid Cooling in Driven Tools

Combinations such as high-pressure coolant plus MQL, or cryogenic cooling plus a small amount of oil raises a set of design questions that currently have almost no systematic answers. Routing multiple media through a rotating body without cross contamination requires careful partitioning of channels and sealing strategies. The sequencing or mixing of media for different operations in the same tool implies the need for internal valves or switching mechanisms, whose reliability under rotation and high pressure is nontrivial. Managing thermal shocks and condensation at bearing and gear interfaces under hybrid cooling regimes is also challenging. While hybrid cooling is an active topic at the process level, almost all research ignores the constraints and opportunities of implementation inside live tool holders. The near absence of such studies is a striking research opportunity.

7. Integration with Live Tooling

7.1. Linking Process Models to Live Head Requirements

Fully exploiting emerging CNC trends within live tooling requires an integrated design and validation methodology that links process physics, machine behavior, and live head internals. At the process level, FEM simulations of cutting can be used to define envelopes of forces, temperatures, and chip characteristics across the range of operations that a given live tool is expected to perform. These envelopes should reflect the specific materials, tool geometries, and cooling strategies used in practice, and they form the load and thermal design cases for the live head.

7.2. Coupling Machine Level Behavior to Holder Boundary Conditions

At the machine level, structural and dynamic models of the bed, spindle, turret, and ball screws can be used to determine realistic boundary conditions at the live head mounting interface, including stiffness, damping, and thermal drift. These boundary conditions influence how process induced loads are transmitted to and from the live head, and they determine whether an internally optimized holder will perform as expected when installed on a specific machine platform.

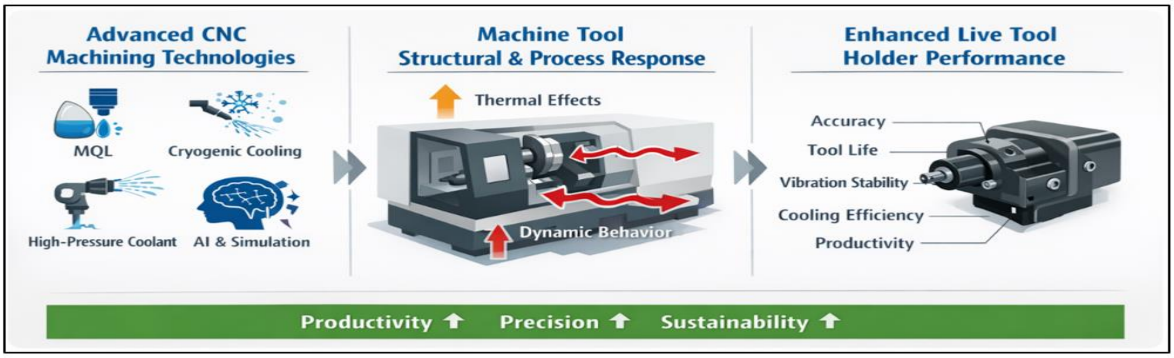

Figure 3: Integration of Advanced CNC Machining Trends

7.3. Design and Experimental Verification Workflow

Internal modeling of the live tool holder then becomes the bridge between process and machine models. Parametric FEM and, where necessary, fluid simulations can be used to analyze the housing, spindles, bearings, gears, and coolant channels under combined mechanical and thermal loads. Design variables such as cross section shapes, bearing types and locations, gear ratios and face widths, and channel diameters and routing can be systematically varied, while objectives such as stiffness per unit mass, minimal thermal sensitivity, low pressure loss, and robustness of seal design are optimized. The resulting designs can then be verified experimentally using duty cycles that mimic real cutting and coolant usage, with measurements of runout, temperature, vibration, and leakage used to validate and refine the models. At present, industry possesses most of the individual tools needed for such an integrated approach, but lacks a cohesive framework and, crucially, lacks standardized benchmarks for live tooling performance.

8. Industry 4.0 and Smart Tooling

8.1. Concept of Smart Live Tool Holders

Industry 4.0 emphasizes connectivity, comprehensive data acquisition, and intelligent decision making based on digital models and real time information. In the context of live tooling, this vision implies live heads that are not only mechanical devices, but also smart subsystems equipped with sensors, processing, and communication capabilities. Embedding accelerometers, acoustic emission sensors, temperature sensors, or even miniature torque and strain sensors within live heads could provide direct insight into cutting conditions, tool wear, bearing health, and coolant delivery quality. Data from these sensors could be transmitted wirelessly or via slip rings to the machine control or to edge computing devices for analysis.

8.2. Potential Benefits and Technical Challenges

Compared with existing smart tool holder research that focuses on stationary or spindle-integrated holders, this paper specifically targets sensorization and connectivity in turret-mounted live tools. The potential benefits of such smart live tooling include early detection of chatter and tool breakage, condition-based maintenance of bearings and gears, adaptive adjustment of cutting parameters and coolant modes, and improved traceability and process documentation. Combining sensor data with FEM based digital twins of the live head and the machining process could enable real time model updating and predictive control [12]. However, practical implementation faces challenges related to power supply for electronics in a rotating, fluid rich environment, robust data transmission within metal enclosed lathes, and the lack of standardized data models and interfaces between live heads and machine controls. Current research on smart tooling has focused more on stationary toolholders or machine structures than on driven heads, leaving another niche where substantial innovation is possible.

9. Results

This review indicates that live tool holders should be treated as multi-physics components whose structural, thermal, fluidic, and tribological behaviors are codesigned, rather than as rigid accessories. Prior work on MQL, HPC, cryogenic, and hybrid cooling clearly demonstrates benefits in tool life, surface integrity, and sustainability at the cutting zone, while process-level FEM and virtual machining routinely predict forces, temperatures, chip morphology, and residual stresses. However, these studies typically idealize the tool holder and concentrate on the tool–chip interface or on machine-level structures, so live heads usually appear only as simplified boundary conditions. Research on machine tool structures, ball screws, and various tool holder systems likewise confirms that holder dynamics strongly influence stiffness, chatter, and accuracy, yet there is no widely adopted methodology that explicitly models live head housings, spindles, bearings, gears, and internal coolant passages under combined mechanical and thermal loading. In parallel, Industry 4.0 and smart tooling developments have produced multi-sensory and intelligent tool holders with embedded sensing and connectivity, but almost all implementations focus on stationary or spindle-integrated holders rather than compact turret-mounted live heads with high-pressure or hybrid cooling. Against this background, the main contribution of the present work is to connect these separate streams by mapping cooling, modeling, and digital manufacturing trends onto specific internal design variables of live heads and by outlining an integrated workflow that starts from process envelopes and machine boundary conditions and drives holder optimization.

10. Limitations

Several limitations of this study should be acknowledged. First, the paper is a narrative, engineering-driven review rather than a systematic literature survey, so some relevant work—especially proprietary industrial studies or non-English publications—may not be captured. Second, the scope is restricted to turret-mounted live tools for CNC lathes and turning centers; although many concepts are applicable to milling centers, mill-turn configurations, and Swiss-type machines, those platforms are only briefly referenced where they directly inform driven tool design on lathes. Third, no new experimental data, standardized benchmark geometries, or quantitative test results are presented; metrics such as stiffness, runout stability, leakage, and thermal drift are discussed qualitatively to identify gaps and directions, but numerical targets and tolerances remain to be established in future work. Finally, the proposed FEM and digital-twin frameworks, as well as the use of hybrid cooling and fully sensorized live heads, are presented at a conceptual level; their practical realization will require detailed modeling choices, implementation studies, and validation on specific machine–tool–holder systems. These limitations mean that the design guidelines and roadmap articulated here should be viewed as a structured research agenda and a basis for future benchmarking efforts, rather than as finalized standards for live tool holder design.

11. Conclusion

CNC machining continues to evolve toward higher productivity, precision, and sustainability, driven by advances in cooling strategies, process modeling, and machine tool design. Live tooling has emerged as a critical enabling technology for CNC lathes, allowing complex operations to be completed in a single setup while reducing cycle time and improving accuracy. Within this context, driven tool holders are no longer simple accessories; they are key elements whose mechanical, thermal, and fluidic behavior must be engineered in parallel with the cutting process and the host machine structure.This review has synthesized recent developments in advanced cooling and lubrication techniques, finite element and virtual machining methods, and structural optimization of machine tools, and has examined their implications for live tool holder design and performance. Despite significant progress in machining science, research focused specifically on live tooling remains limited, particularly in areas such as integrated multi physics modeling, hybrid cooling delivery through rotating interfaces, and standardized performance evaluation. The lack of accepted benchmarks for live tool stiffness, runout stability, leakage, and thermal behavior makes it difficult to compare designs or to translate process level innovations such as MQL, HPC, and cryogenic cooling into robust, optimized driven heads.Future advances in live tooling will likely be driven by the integration of sensor technologies, artificial intelligence, and digital manufacturing frameworks, enabling adaptive machining and predictive maintenance. Embedding sensing, communication, and local intelligence within live heads, and coupling them to FEM based digital twins of both process and structure, will make it possible to monitor tool and holder condition, detect instability, and automatically adjust cutting and cooling strategies. Developing smart, thermally stable, and structurally optimized live tool holders will be essential for realizing the full potential of next generation CNC systems, particularly as CNC lathes take on increasingly complex and high value components.By connecting broader machining trends with the specific requirements of driven tool holders, this work provides a roadmap for research and industrial development aimed at enhancing the capability, reliability, and sustainability of live tooling in modern manufacturing environments. Addressing the identified gaps, standardized benchmarking, integrated modeling frameworks, and systematic exploration of hybrid cooling and smart features, will be crucial steps toward turning live tooling into a fully engineered, model driven component of advanced CNC ecosystems.

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