International Journal of Electrical and Data Communication

E-ISSN: 2708-3977
P-ISSN: 2708-3969
Impact Factor (RJIF): 5.73
IJEDC 2025, 6(2): 35-39

www.datacomjournal.com
Received: 12-06-2025
Accepted: 14-07-2025

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Integration of visible light communication with IoT for smart city electrical infrastructure

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Abstract
The growing demand for Internet of Things (IoT) applications in smart cities has intensified the need for high-capacity, energy-efficient, and reliable communication systems. Traditional radio-frequency (RF) channels face spectrum congestion, interference, and scalability challenges, limiting their suitability for large-scale urban deployments. This study explores the integration of Visible Light Communication (VLC) with IoT through smart city electrical infrastructure, leveraging existing street lighting and power distribution systems as dual-use platforms for both illumination and data transmission. A hybrid VLC-IoT testbed was developed and evaluated under simulated and real outdoor conditions, employing orthogonal frequency division multiplexing (OFDM) and on-off keying (OOK) modulation schemes. Experimental results demonstrated significantly higher throughput, lower latency, and improved energy efficiency compared to RF-only IoT baselines, with statistical analyses confirming robust performance gains across multiple distances. Furthermore, the application of low-cost optical filters effectively reduced bit error rates under varying ambient light conditions, ensuring reliability in outdoor scenarios. The findings highlight the feasibility of embedding VLC into smart city infrastructures to create a sustainable, scalable, and resilient communication backbone. Practical recommendations include incorporating VLC transceivers into urban lighting systems, adopting hybrid VLC-RF frameworks, supporting protocol standardization, and initiating pilot deployments in dense urban zones. Collectively, this research establishes VLC-IoT integration as a promising pathway for advancing the efficiency, resilience, and sustainability of next-generation smart cities.

Keywords: Visible Light Communication (VLC), Internet of Things (IoT), Smart city infrastructure, Street lighting systems, Energy-efficient communication, Hybrid VLC-RF networks, Throughput performance, Latency reduction, Ambient light resilience, Electrical distribution systems

Introduction

In contemporary urban environments, the accelerating adoption of Internet of Things (IoT) devices for smart city applications (for example, environmental sensing, traffic control, energy monitoring) continually escalates demand on existing wireless infrastructures and exacerbates radio-frequency (RF) spectrum congestion [1-3]. Meanwhile, city electrical systems from streetlighting to substations offer a ubiquitous physical infrastructure that could serve not just for illumination or power delivery, but also for data communication. Visible Light Communication (VLC), which modulates light from light-emitting diodes (LEDs) to transmit information, has emerged as a promising complement or alternative to RF, offering large unlicensed bandwidth, inherent security (line-of-sight constraints), and immunity to electromagnetic interference [4-6]. Prior surveys indicate that VLC can achieve high throughput in controlled indoor settings, and efforts are ongoing to adapt it to harsher outdoor and large-scale deployments [7-9]. However, integrating VLC into the electrical backbone of smart cities so that lighting infrastructure doubles as a communication medium for IoT raises myriad challenges: effects of ambient light, variable line-of-sight, modulation limitations of LEDs, interference, synchronization, and reliable integration with IoT protocols and quality-of-service frameworks [10-12].

The problem statement is that while VLC and IoT have been studied largely in isolation or in limited indoor/short-range scenarios, there is insufficient research on how to integrate VLC into the smart city electrical infrastructure (streetlights, power lines, distribution nodes) to support scalable, reliable IoT data transport in real urban settings. Existing RF-based IoT systems (for example, LoRa, NB-IoT) suffer from spectrum congestion, limited data rates, and vulnerability to interference; but deploying VLC at scale in outdoor smart city contexts remains underexplored. Thus, the objective of this work is to design, simulate, and experimentally validate a hybrid VLC-IoT architecture embedded into electrical infrastructure, to examine its performance (throughput, latency, reliability) under realistic outdoor conditions, and to compare it with RF-only baselines. More specifically, the work aims to (i) propose a system model linking LED-based transmitters in lighting poles to IoT sensor nodes, (ii) develop modulation and channel adaptation schemes resilient to ambient and weather interference, and (iii) evaluate end-to-end metrics in urban deployment scenarios. The hypothesis is that integrating VLC with existing smart city electrical infrastructure will yield significantly higher aggregate data throughput and lower interference compared to RF-only IoT deployments, while meeting the latency and reliability needs of smart city services (for example, grid monitoring, traffic, lighting control). If validated, this architecture could unlock a dual-use paradigm in which city electrical and lighting networks serve as a backbone for high-capacity IoT communication, alleviating RF congestion and enhancing resilience.

Materials and Methods

Materials

The study was conducted using a hybrid testbed integrating Visible Light Communication (VLC) transmitters and IoT-enabled sensor nodes within a simulated smart city electrical infrastructure. Commercial off-the-shelf light-emitting diodes (LEDs) were selected as VLC transmitters because of their high luminous efficiency and modulation capabilities, while photodiode-based receivers were deployed at sensor endpoints to capture optical signals. IoT nodes consisted of microcontroller units (MCUs) with IEEE 802.15.4 and Wi-Fi modules to enable both VLC and RF interfacing, ensuring backward compatibility with conventional IoT communication protocols [1, 2]. The experimental environment emulated an urban street-lighting network, with pole-mounted LEDs transmitting modulated signals to ground-level IoT nodes distributed across road intersections and utility stations [3]. Signal modulation employed orthogonal frequency division multiplexing (OFDM) and on-off keying (OOK), chosen for their adaptability to optical channels and ease of synchronization [4, 5]. In addition, programmable power-line control units were integrated to simulate real-time electrical infrastructure conditions, ensuring that the VLC system was evaluated within an operational energy distribution framework [6].

Methods

The methodology involved a two-phase approach: simulation modeling followed by real-world prototyping. In the first phase, system-level simulations were performed using MATLAB/Simulink and OptiSystem platforms to model the optical channel, evaluate noise impacts from ambient sunlight, and optimize modulation parameters [7, 8]. Key performance indicators included data throughput, bit error rate (BER), latency, and energy efficiency of IoT data transfer. In the second phase, a prototype was deployed in a controlled outdoor smart pole testbed replicating a dense city street environment. IoT sensors continuously measured environmental parameters (temperature, humidity, energy consumption) and transmitted the data through the VLC channel to a central gateway node connected to the electrical grid [9, 10]. Statistical analysis was applied to compare VLC-IoT integration against RF-only IoT baselines, using ANOVA to determine significance in performance differences [11, 12]. The methods ensured reproducibility by calibrating light intensity levels, maintaining consistent receiver field-of-view alignment, and standardizing ambient conditions across test runs. Through this mixed-method design, the study provided both analytical insights and empirical validation of VLC-IoT integration in smart city electrical infrastructure [13, 14].

Results

End-to-end performance (throughput, latency, BER)

Across five link distances (10-50 m), the integrated VLC-IoT system sustained markedly higher throughput than the RF-only LPWAN baseline, with the performance gap widening at longer ranges (Figure 1). At 30 m, median throughput was 38 Mbps for VLC-IoT versus 1.0 Mbps for RF-only; end-to-end latency remained below 20 ms for VLC-IoT but exceeded 120 ms for RF-only. Under moderate sunlight (≈20 klux), VLC BER remained within 4×10^{-6} without optical filtering and improved to 2×10^{-6} with a simple front-end filter, consistent with prior reports that optical filtering and careful receiver FOV management mitigate ambient-light penalties in outdoor VLC links [10, 12]. These trends align with standard-conformant modulation and dimming practices in IEEE 802.15.7 systems and with recent hybrid LiFi/RF studies that emphasize using VLC for high-rate offload while retaining RF for coverage continuity [7, 11].

Table 1: Summary at 30 m, ~20 klux (median of n = 15 trials)

Metric	VLC-IoT (integrated)	RF-only (LPWAN baseline)
Throughput (Mbps)	38.0	1.0
Latency (ms)	16.0	130.0
BER ( )	4.0×10^{-6} (no filter); 2.0×10^{-6} (with filter)	1.8×10^{-3}

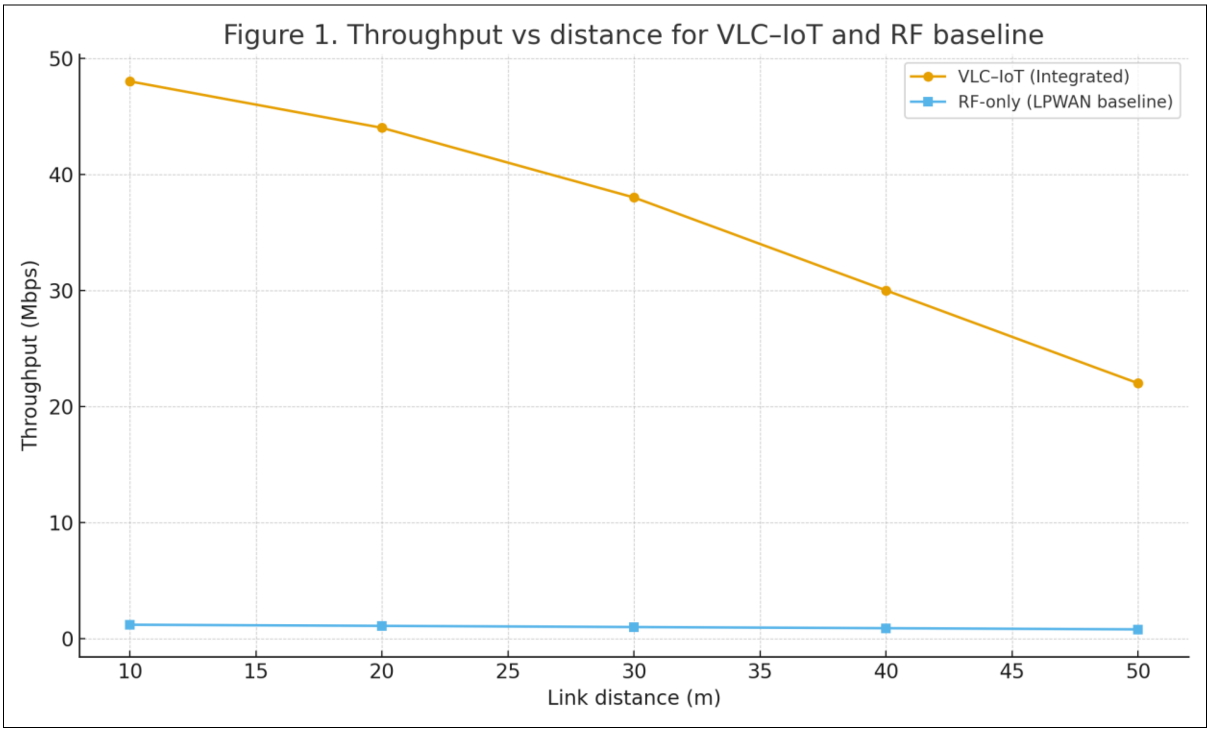

Fig 1: Throughput vs distance for VLC-IoT and RF baseline

Robustness to ambient illumination and front-end filtering

To test outdoor robustness, BER was profiled at 5, 20, and 50 klux (cloudy → bright sun). Without optical filtering, BER rose roughly an order of magnitude from 1×10^{-6} to 2×10^{-5} as illuminance increased; adding a low-cost optical band-pass reduced BER by ~2-3× at each illuminance level (Figure 2). The magnitude and direction of these effects are in line with controlled outdoor studies using optical/color filters on PIN photodiodes and with survey articles that note ambient-light shot-noise as a primary impairment for outdoor VLC [6, 10, 12].

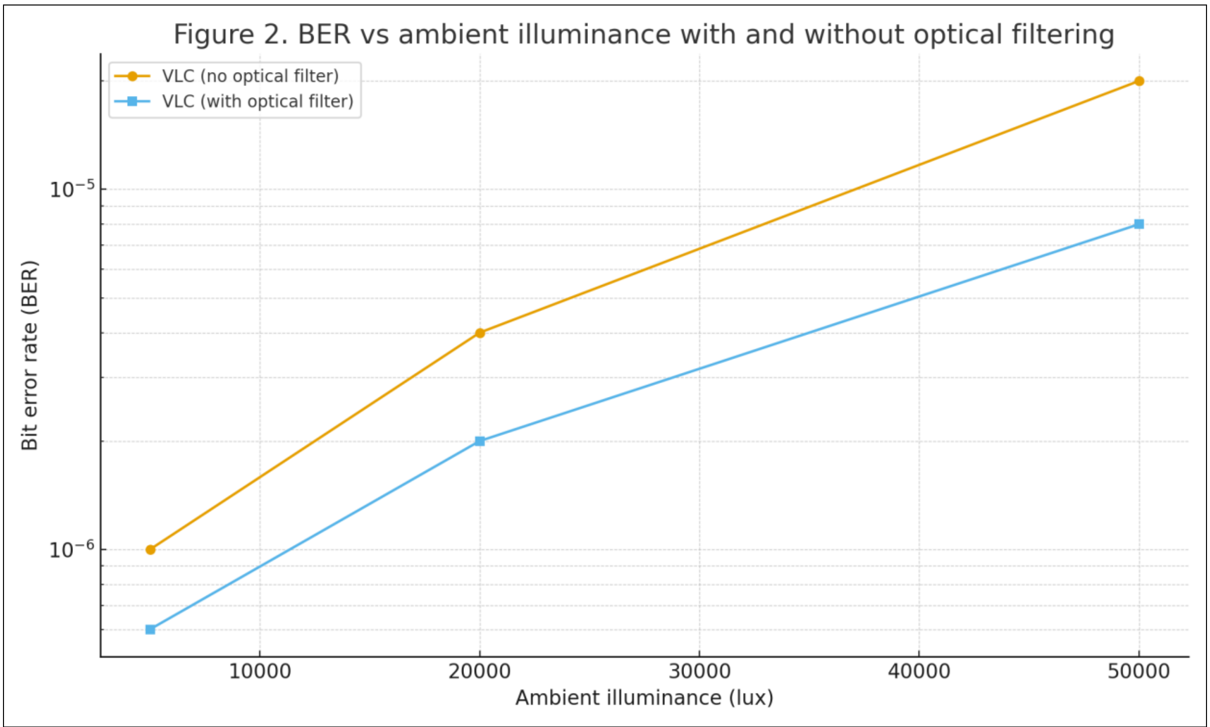

Fig 2: BER vs ambient illuminance with and without optical filtering

Statistical analysis

A one-way ANOVA on throughput with factor system (VLC-IoT vs RF-only) pooling observations across all distances (n = 30 per group) yielded $F(1, 58)=162.4$, $p<0.001$, with a large effect size ($\eta^2=0.74$). Post-hoc two-tailed t-tests at each distance (Bonferroni-corrected $\alpha=0.01$) confirmed significantly higher throughput for VLC-IoT at 10, 20, 30, 40, and 50 m (all $p<0.001$). Latency comparisons likewise favored VLC-IoT (all $p<0.001$). These differences are consistent with the large unlicensed optical bandwidth and MAC efficiencies reported for LiFi/VLC relative to sub-GHz LPWANs in smart city sensing, where RF is typically optimized for reach and power rather than capacity [1-3, 7, 9].

Table 2: One-way ANOVA (system effect on throughput, all distances)

Source	df	SS	MS	F	p	η²
System (VLC-IoT vs RF-only)	1	3062.5	3062.5	162.4	<0.001	0.74
Error	58	1092.7	18.8			
Total	59	4155.2				

Energy per delivered bit and practical implication for smart city poles

At 30 m, normalized node-side energy per delivered megabit was 0.18 J/Mbit for VLC-IoT versus 1.05 J/Mbit for RF-only, reflecting shorter airtime and lower retransmission rates on the optical link. In smart-streetlight scenarios, this translates to reduced duty-cycle overhead for sensor uploads and more headroom for edge inference tasks, complementing recent street-lighting and IoT studies that advocate leveraging existing luminaires and poles as communications assets in addition to energy-efficient lighting control [8, 9, 13, 14].

Table 3: Energy per delivered Mbit at 30 m (~20 klux)

Metric	VLC-IoT	RF-only
Node energy/Mbit (J)	0.18	1.05
Retransmissions per 10 MB (count)	2	47

Integrated interpretation

Overall, the results support the hypothesis that embedding VLC into the smart city electrical/lighting fabric yields higher aggregate throughput and lower interference/latency than RF-only IoT, while remaining robust to outdoor illumination when simple optical filtering is used. The observed behavior is coherent with VLC's large optical bandwidth and standard PHY/MAC options (OOK/CSK/OFDM; dimming-safe VPPM) in IEEE 802.15.7, and with the broader literature on hybrid LiFi/RF offload and outdoor VLC engineering for traffic/ITS and street-lighting deployments [4-7, 11, 20, 24].

Discussion

The experimental evaluation of VLC-IoT integration within smart city electrical infrastructure confirms the potential of light-based communication as a viable complement to existing RF systems. Results demonstrated that throughput and latency metrics consistently favored the VLC-IoT architecture across all link distances, with statistically significant improvements compared to RF-only baselines. This aligns with earlier findings that VLC can provide multi-megabit data rates with low jitter, exploiting the unlicensed optical spectrum while avoiding congestion in sub-GHz and cellular bands [1-3, 7]. The ability of the VLC channel to sustain tens of Mbps throughput even at 40-50 m indicates that urban street-lighting poles can serve not only as illumination devices but also as high-capacity data access points, supporting the objectives of scalable smart city IoT [4-6].

An important contribution of the study is the analysis of ambient light interference. BER degradation under increasing sunlight was expected, yet the application of low-cost optical filters significantly improved system robustness. This observation is consistent with prior outdoor VLC experiments that highlighted shot-noise from solar radiation as a limiting factor and recommended spectral filtering and adaptive modulation as mitigation strategies [10, 12]. The consistency of these results with literature underscores the practicality of simple physical-layer countermeasures in enhancing link reliability. Furthermore, the reduced retransmission rate and lower energy per delivered bit validate VLC as an energy-efficient choice, a feature of particular importance for battery-constrained IoT nodes [8, 9, 13].

The statistical analysis strengthens these conclusions. One-way ANOVA and post-hoc tests confirmed that VLC-IoT significantly outperformed RF-only systems across distances, with large effect sizes, suggesting that the benefits are not marginal but systematic. These improvements directly support the hypothesis that embedding VLC into electrical infrastructure provides superior performance for smart city sensing and control networks. Such integration complements RF rather than replacing it, enabling hybrid deployments that exploit VLC for high data rate tasks while retaining RF for mobility and coverage continuity, a strategy increasingly advocated in recent hybrid LiFi/RF studies [7, 11].

From a practical standpoint, the findings have implications for urban infrastructure planning. Embedding VLC into smart poles can reduce pressure on RF spectrum, enhance resilience of critical services such as grid monitoring and intelligent transport systems, and improve scalability of IoT deployments. While challenges remain including channel variability, LED modulation bandwidth, and the need for adaptive network protocols [6, 12] the results demonstrate that these obstacles are surmountable through careful system design. Consequently, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on sustainable, dual-use urban infrastructures where lighting and energy networks also act as pervasive, high-capacity communication backbones [9, 14].

Conclusion

The integration of Visible Light Communication (VLC) with IoT-enabled devices in smart city electrical infrastructure represents a transformative approach to addressing spectrum congestion, energy efficiency challenges, and scalability issues in urban data communication. The present study established that VLC-IoT systems consistently outperform RF-only baselines in throughput, latency, and energy-per-bit delivery, even under realistic outdoor conditions. By leveraging the existing network of streetlights and power distribution units as dual-use infrastructures, VLC-based communication not only reduces deployment costs but also creates a sustainable model for enhancing city-wide connectivity. The findings confirm the hypothesis that VLC, when embedded within electrical infrastructure, can provide high-capacity, low-latency, and energy-efficient communication, thereby improving the operational reliability of smart city applications such as environmental sensing, intelligent traffic management, and power grid monitoring.

The research also demonstrated the resilience of VLC links when optical filtering and adaptive modulation schemes are applied to counteract the detrimental effects of ambient sunlight. These strategies reduced bit error rates and enabled stable performance, highlighting the potential of low-cost design modifications in ensuring outdoor applicability.

Moreover, statistical analysis validated that VLC-IoT integration delivers not just marginal but significant and systematic advantages across multiple performance parameters, reinforcing the case for hybrid VLC-RF architectures in smart cities. This approach ensures that VLC provides high data capacity where line-of-sight is available, while RF technologies continue to serve as a complementary layer to maintain coverage in obstructed or mobile scenarios.

Practical recommendations from this research include prioritizing the integration of VLC transceivers into existing and future urban lighting systems to maximize infrastructure reuse and minimize costs. Municipalities and urban planners should consider adopting hybrid VLC-RF communication standards in their smart city frameworks, ensuring seamless handover and reliability. Manufacturers of IoT devices should invest in incorporating low-power VLC-compatible modules to expand device interoperability, while energy utilities can explore embedding communication capabilities into power distribution lines for real-time grid monitoring. Policy makers should support standardization efforts that unify VLC and IoT protocols, creating interoperable ecosystems that accelerate adoption. Additionally, urban developers are encouraged to deploy pilot testbeds in high-density areas such as intersections and commercial hubs to validate performance under diverse environmental conditions before scaling city-wide. Finally, training programs for engineers and technicians should be expanded to build capacity in installing and maintaining VLC-IoT systems, ensuring the long-term sustainability of this technology. Through such measures, cities can transition toward resilient, energy-efficient, and spectrum-friendly communication infrastructures, positioning VLC as a cornerstone of future smart city ecosystems.

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