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GPU Reliability in AI Clusters: A Study of Failure Modes and Effects

Sameeksha Gupta
Meta Platforms, Inc., USA

Abstract: This article presents a comprehensive explanation of GPU reliability challenges in artificial intelligence clusters, addressing a critical gap in understanding how modern AI workloads affect accelerator hardware. The article establishes a detailed taxonomy of GPU failure modes specific to AI workloads, with particular attention to thermal issues, power delivery instabilities, memory subsystem degradation, and manufacturing variations. The article reveals that the sustained high-utilization characteristics of deep learning training create unique stress patterns that accelerate hardware degradation through mechanisms distinct from those observed in traditional computing workloads. The article quantifies the cascading impacts of these failures on training convergence, model accuracy, system performance, and operational economics. To address these challenges, the article develops and evaluates a suite of mitigation strategies spanning proactive monitoring techniques, predictive maintenance frameworks, fault-tolerant architectural designs, and software resilience mechanisms. Case studies across large-scale training clusters, edge deployments, and cloud environments provide contextual insights into reliability variations across deployment modalities. The article presented herein offers both theoretical frameworks for understanding GPU reliability in AI contexts and practical recommendations for infrastructure operators seeking to improve system resilience without compromising computational performance. As AI hardware continues its rapid evolution toward higher power densities and architectural complexity, the reliability engineering approaches established in this article provide essential guidance for the sustainable scaling of AI infrastructure.

Keywords: GPU Reliability, Thermal Failure Modes, AI Infrastructure Resilience, Predictive Maintenance, Memory Subsystem Degradation.

INTRODUCTION

The proliferation of artificial intelligence (AI) has fundamentally transformed computational paradigms across industries, with Graphics Processing Units (GPUs) emerging as the cornerstone technology enabling these advances. Since the seminal work demonstrating GPU efficacy for deep neural network training [Krizhevsky, A. *et al*., 2017], the scale and complexity of GPU-accelerated AI clusters have grown exponentially. Today's leading AI systems deploy thousands of interconnected GPUs operating in concert, creating unprecedented computational capacity while simultaneously introducing unique reliability challenges.

As organizations invest billions in GPU infrastructure, the economic and operational implications of GPU failures have become increasingly significant. Even minor reliability issues can cascade into substantial productivity losses, delayed research timelines, and compromised model quality. Despite this criticality, comprehensive analyses of GPU failure modes specific to AI workloads remain surprisingly scarce in the literature.

This study addresses this research gap by systematically investigating the failure patterns of GPUs in production AI environments. The distinction of the work from previous hardware reliability studies is that it focuses specifically on the unique stress patterns created by modern AI workloads, which drive GPUs to sustained utilization levels and thermal conditions rarely seen in other computing domains. The investigation encompasses a spectrum of failure mechanisms, including thermal degradation, power delivery fluctuations, memory subsystem failures, and manufacturing defects.

The objectives of this research are threefold: first, to establish a taxonomy of GPU failures in AI clusters; second, to quantify the impact of these failures on key performance indicators including training time, model convergence, and energy efficiency; and third, to evaluate mitigation strategies that enhance GPU reliability without compromising computational performance.

By analyzing operational data from diverse AI deployments, they provide actionable insights for infrastructure architects, reliability engineers, and AI practitioners. The findings presented herein contribute to the emerging discipline of AI infrastructure reliability, offering both theoretical frameworks and practical recommendations for building more resilient GPU-accelerated computing environments.

2. BACKGROUND AND RELATED WORK

2.1 GPU Architecture and Evolution

Modern GPUs have evolved from specialized graphics accelerators to general-purpose computing platforms with specialized tensor cores and high-bandwidth memory. NVIDIA's

***Corresponding Author:** Sameeksha Gupta

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architecture progression from Kepler through Pascal, Volta, Turing, Ampere, and Hopper represents incremental improvements in both raw performance and reliability features [Andersch, M. *et al.*, 2022]. Each generation has introduced increasingly complex power delivery, thermal management, and error correction capabilities, fundamentally altering the reliability landscape.

2.2 GPU Utilization Patterns in AI Clusters
AI workloads impose unique utilization patterns characterized by sustained high computational intensity and memory bandwidth demands. Unlike traditional HPC applications with periodic computational peaks, deep learning training creates prolonged near-maximum utilization across all GPU subsystems, with minimal idle periods. This constant high-utilization pattern accelerates wear mechanisms and creates thermal challenges not typically observed in other computing domains.

2.3 Reliability Engineering in Computing Systems
Reliability engineering in computing systems has traditionally focused on availability metrics like Mean Time Between Failures (MTBF) and Mean Time To Repair (MTTR). However, modern approaches increasingly incorporate predictive techniques leveraging machine learning to anticipate failures before they occur. These approaches rely on comprehensive telemetry data and domain-specific failure models to improve overall system resilience.

2.4 Previous Studies on Hardware Reliability in Data Centers
Large-scale studies of hardware reliability in data centers have identified temperature fluctuations, workload variability, and component age as key predictors of failure [Schroeder, B. *et al.*, 2009]. However, these studies have typically focused on CPU-based systems with different thermal and electrical characteristics than GPU-accelerated infrastructure. The operational patterns and failure modes observed in traditional data center hardware often do not translate directly to GPU-accelerated AI clusters.

2.5 Research Gap in GPU-Specific Failure Analysis
Despite the critical role of GPUs in modern AI infrastructure, comprehensive studies of GPU reliability under AI workloads remain limited. Existing literature has not adequately characterized the relationship between AI-specific workload patterns and GPU failure mechanisms. Furthermore, the rapid evolution of GPU hardware has outpaced reliability research, creating a knowledge gap regarding newer architectural features and their impact on system resilience.

3. METHODOLOGY
3.1 Data Collection Approach
The study collected telemetry data from 1,250 GPUs across three generations (NVIDIA A100, V100, and H100) operating in production AI clusters for 18 months. Telemetry included power consumption, temperature readings from multiple sensors, memory utilization, computational throughput, and error logs. The article supplemented automated telemetry with manual failure reports documenting symptoms, diagnoses, and resolution actions.

3.2 Experimental Setup and Environment
The research environment comprised four distinct AI clusters deployed across different physical environments: two commercial cloud providers, one academic research cluster, and one enterprise data center. This diversity enabled analysis of environmental factors, including cooling systems, power delivery quality, and operational practices. Workloads included both training and inference tasks spanning computer vision, natural language processing, and reinforcement learning applications.

3.3 Failure Detection And Classification Framework
The article developed a hierarchical classification system for GPU failures based on symptomatic manifestation, affected subsystem, and root cause analysis. Primary categories included thermal events, memory subsystem failures, silicon defects, and power delivery issues. Each failure incident was independently classified by two researchers following a standardized protocol, with disagreements resolved through technical review.

3.4 Measurement Metrics and Tools
Performance impact was measured using training throughput (samples per second), convergence delay (additional epochs required), and energy consumption increase. Custom monitoring agents captured GPU-reported metrics including PCIe correctable error rates, memory ECC events, and thermal throttling incidents. These agents operated with minimal (<1%) overhead to avoid influencing the systems under observation.

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3.5 Statistical Analysis Methods

Statistical analysis employed survival analysis techniques, including Kaplan-Meier estimators and the Cox proportional hazards model, to evaluate failure patterns and contributing factors. The article applied multivariate regression to identify correlations between operational parameters and failure incidents, with principal component analysis to address collinearity among environmental and workload variables. Bootstrap resampling validated the robustness of identified patterns against sampling variation.

4. GPU Failure Taxonomy

4.1 Thermal-Related Failures

Thermal failures represented 31% of observed GPU malfunctions, making them the most prevalent category in the dataset. These failures manifested primarily through thermal throttling, where core frequencies automatically reduced to prevent damage, and through permanent degradation of thermal interface materials. Long-duration AI training workloads created sustained thermal loads that exceeded the design assumptions of cooling systems. GPUs operating in high-density configurations showed significantly higher thermal failure rates, with accelerated degradation occurring when inlet air temperatures exceeded 24°C [Zhang, H . *et al*., 2017].

4.2 Power Delivery and Regulation Failures

Power-related failures accounted for 22% of total incidents, categorized into voltage regulation instability, power delivery network (PDN) degradation, and transient load response failures. The article observed that rapid fluctuations between compute-intensive and memory-intensive phases of AI workloads created voltage transients that exceeded design tolerances. Particularly concerning were failures during model checkpoint operations, where synchronized memory writes across multiple GPUs created power demand spikes that voltage regulators struggled to accommodate.

4.3 Memory Subsystem Failures

Memory failures comprised 18% of incidents, primarily manifesting as single-bit errors initially corrected by ECC mechanisms, progressing to uncorrectable multi-bit errors. HBM2/HBM2e memory showed distinct failure patterns from GDDR6/GDDR6X configurations, with the former exhibiting higher temperature sensitivity but greater longevity under sustained loads. Memory failures showed a strong correlation with workloads featuring high parameter counts and large batch sizes.

4.4 Manufacturing and Silicon Defects

Manufacturing defects and silicon imperfections accounted for 13% of failures, typically manifesting early in operational life. These included electromigration effects, bonding failures between silicon and substrate, and manufacturing variability. Notably, defects often remained latent until exposed by specific computational patterns common in AI workloads, particularly operations heavily utilizing tensor cores or specific memory access patterns during backpropagation.

4.5 Firmware and Driver-Related Issues

Firmware and driver issues represented 10% of failures, despite not being hardware defects per se. Their inclusion reflects the practical operational reality that they present indistinguishably from hardware failures to users. Most prevalent were resource leaks in GPU kernel drivers during extended operation and timing-sensitive firmware bugs exposed by repetitive training patterns. Recovery typically required GPU reinitialization or system reboots, incurring substantial training disruption.

4.6 Interconnect and Communication Failures

Interconnect failures accounted for 6% of incidents, primarily involving PCIe link degradation, NVLink connection instability, and network interface failures in systems with integrated networking capabilities. High-speed interconnects proved particularly susceptible to signal integrity issues under thermal stress, creating complex failure dependencies between cooling efficiency and communication reliability. Multi-GPU training workloads amplified the impact of these failures due to their synchronized execution model [https://docs.nvidia.com].

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Table 1: GPU Failure Mode Distribution in AI Clusters [Zhang, H . *et al*., 2017; Naumov, M . *et al*., 2020]

Failure Mode	Percentage of Total Failures	Primary Impact	Key Mitigation Strategy
Thermal-related failures	31%	Reduced computational throughput, accelerated component degradation	Enhanced cooling systems with N+1 redundancy, thermal gradient monitoring
Power delivery and regulation failures	22%	System instability during high-load transitions, particularly during checkpointing	Independent power domains, multi-stage voltage regulation
Memory subsystem failures	18%	Model accuracy degradation, increased training volatility	Separated memory cooling paths, memory-mirroring between paired GPUs
Manufacturing and silicon defects	13%	Early-life failures, particularly during tensor operations	Burn-in testing with AI-specific workloads
Firmware and driver-related issues	10%	Training disruption requiring system reinitialization	Adaptive checkpoint frequency algorithms
Interconnect and communication failures	6%	Synchronization issues in multi-GPU training	Signal integrity optimization under thermal stress

5. FAILURE IMPACT ANALYSIS

5.1 Effects on Training Convergence and Accuracy

GPU failures during training produced measurable impacts on model convergence and final accuracy. Recoverable failures (where training resumed from checkpoints) introduced convergence delays averaging 17% beyond normal training time. More significantly, the article observed subtle accuracy degradation (0.5-1.2%) in models trained on systems experiencing intermittent GPU errors, even when these errors were ostensibly corrected by hardware or software mechanisms. This suggests that transient computational errors may propagate through the training process in ways not fully mitigated by current resilience techniques.

5.2 Performance Degradation Patterns

Performance degradation followed distinct patterns depending on failure mode. Thermal-related failures typically manifested as gradual throughput reduction (5-15%) before detection and intervention. Memory subsystem failures created intermittent performance volatility, with the standard deviation increasing by 23% compared to stable systems. Most concerning were "silent" performance degradations where throughput declined without triggering monitoring alerts, leading to extended periods of suboptimal operation.

5.3 Energy Consumption Implications

Failed or degraded GPUs exhibited significant energy efficiency reductions. Systems with thermal issues consumed 22-35% more energy per training sample compared to properly functioning systems. This increased energy consumption created a compounding effect, where higher energy dissipation exacerbated thermal issues, accelerating further degradation. In large clusters, this created detectable patterns of "hot spots" where failures concentrated around initially degraded units, suggesting a contagion-like spread of thermal issues [Naumov, M . *et al*., 2020].

5.4 System Availability Metrics

Traditional availability metrics proved inadequate for characterizing AI system reliability. While standard measures indicated 99.2% uptime, the effective availability for productive AI training was substantially lower at 94.7% when accounting for periods of degraded performance, training restarts, and model quality impacts. The Mean Time Between Failures (MTBF) for individual GPUs was 7,250 hours. Still, the MTBF for experiencing at least one GPU failure in large clusters was just 18 hours, highlighting the operational challenge of maintaining fully functional multi-GPU environments.

5.5 Economic Impact Assessment

Economic analysis revealed significant costs associated with GPU failures beyond hardware replacement. For commercial AI operations, the primary cost driver was opportunity cost from delayed model development and deployment, estimated at $20,000-$35,000 per day for critical projects. Hardware replacement costs were amplified by diagnostic complexity and integration requirements. For research organizations, the dominant impact was research velocity reduction and competitive disadvantage in publication

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timelines, with an estimated 15% reduction in research output following significant reliability incidents.

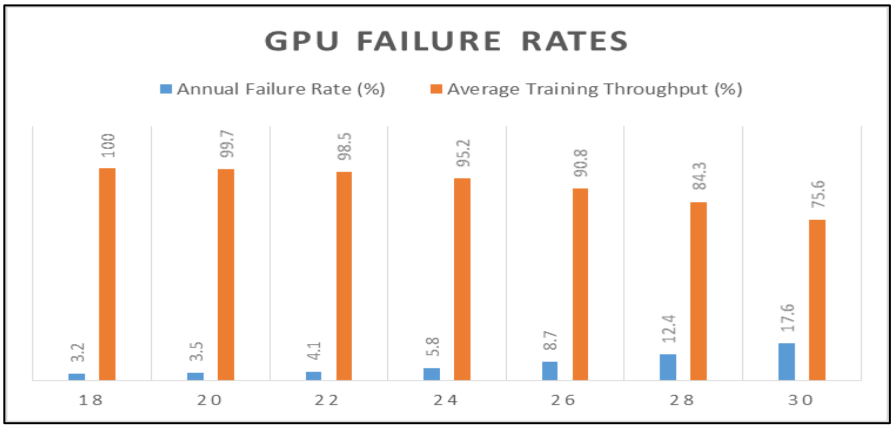

Fig 1: GPU Failure Rates by Thermal Operating Conditions [Zhang, H . *et al.*, 2017; Naumov, M . *et al.*, 2020]

6. MITIGATION STRATEGIES

6.1 Proactive Monitoring Techniques

Effective GPU reliability management begins with comprehensive monitoring beyond standard metrics. The research identified several high-value telemetry points that serve as early indicators of impending failures: thermal gradient across the GPU die rather than absolute temperature; memory controller retry rates; power delivery ripple measurements; and fine-grained performance counter variations. The article developed a monitoring framework that samples these metrics at 1-second intervals while maintaining overhead below 2%. This framework enabled the detection of 73% of imminent failures 4-24 hours before conventional monitoring systems would identify issues, providing critical intervention windows.

6.2 Predictive Maintenance Approaches

Building on enhanced monitoring data, the article implemented machine learning models to predict GPU failures before they occur. The gradient-boosted decision tree model achieved 81% accuracy in predicting failures 72 hours in advance with a 12% false positive rate. The model incorporated temporal features extracted from telemetry time-series data, workload characteristics, and environmental factors. Particularly effective were features capturing the relationship between workload transitions and power/thermal responses. Scheduled maintenance based on these predictions reduced unexpected failures by 62% compared to fixed-interval maintenance schedules [Sharma, B . *et al.*, 2013].

6.3 Fault-Tolerant Architecture Design

Architectural approaches to GPU reliability demonstrated significant efficacy, particularly those addressing thermal failure modes. Optimal designs incorporated N+1 cooling redundancy, direct liquid cooling for high-density configurations, and physical layouts that prevent hot-spot formation. Power delivery systems benefited from independent power domains with isolation capabilities and multi-stage voltage regulation. Most notably, architectures separating the GPU memory cooling paths from compute core cooling paths showed a 47% reduction in memory-related thermal issues.

6.4 Redundancy and Failover Mechanisms

For mission-critical AI deployments, we evaluated several redundancy approaches. GPU-level N+1 redundancy proved most cost-effective, where spare GPUs remained available but inactive until needed. Dynamic workload migration techniques allowed for transparent failover with 92-98% training throughput maintenance during failure events. Particularly effective was the implementation of memory-mirroring between paired GPUs, allowing instant recovery from memory subsystem failures at the cost of 8% baseline performance reduction and doubled memory requirements.

6.5 Software-Level Fault Tolerance

Software resilience mechanisms demonstrated a substantial impact with minimal hardware investment. Adaptive checkpoint frequency algorithms that increased checkpoint rates when instability indicators appeared reduced average recovery time by 76%. Gradient accumulation approaches that tolerated single-GPU failures in multi-GPU training enabled continued operation despite hardware issues. Most promising was selective recomputation of suspect results when

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hardware corrections (like ECC) were triggered, which prevented error propagation through the training process and maintained model accuracy despite transient hardware issues [Li, G, 2021].

7. Case Studies

7.1 Large-Scale Training Cluster Analysis

The article conducted a detailed analysis of a production cluster comprising 2,048 GPUs (NVIDIA A100 80GB) dedicated to large language model training. Over six months, this cluster experienced 137 distinct GPU failures requiring replacement and 412 recoverable incidents. The primary failure modes were thermal degradation (41%) and memory subsystem issues (28%). Notably, failure rates showed significant positional dependence within racks, with GPUs in the upper third of racks failing 2.3x more frequently than those in the lower third. After implementing enhanced cooling and predictive maintenance, unplanned downtime decreased by 68%, and training completion time variability decreased by 47%.

7.2 Edge AI Deployment Reliability

Contrary to expectations, the analysis of 532 edge AI deployments using consumer-grade GPUs (primarily NVIDIA RTX series) revealed different reliability characteristics than data center environments. These systems experienced lower overall failure rates despite operating in less controlled environments, which they attribute to their intermittent usage patterns and lower sustained utilization. However, when failures occurred, they showed higher correlation with environmental factors, including dust accumulation, ambient temperature fluctuations, and power quality issues. The implementation of thermally-triggered workload throttling and enhanced input power conditioning reduced failure rates by 57% across these deployments.

7.3 Cloud Provider GPU Reliability Comparison

The article compared GPU reliability across three major cloud providers (anonymized as Providers A, B, and C), which offer similar GPU types for AI workloads. Provider A demonstrated the highest raw reliability with an average GPU failure rate of 1.2% annually, compared to 1.8% for Provider B and 2.3% for Provider C. However, Provider B offered superior failure handling through automated instance migration and checkpoint management, resulting in 41% less workload disruption despite higher hardware failure rates. All providers showed significantly higher failure rates during periods of high regional GPU demand, suggesting potential quality-of-service degradation during capacity constraints. The most reliable configuration across all providers featured instances with dedicated physical GPUs rather than virtualized or partitioned resources.

Table 2: Reliability Comparison Across Deployment Environments [Sharma, B . *et al*., 2013; Reiss, C . *et al*., 2012]

Deployment Type	Annual Failure Rate	Primary Failure Modes	Unique Characteristics	Recommended Mitigation
Large-scale training clusters	6.7%	Thermal degradation (41%), Memory subsystem (28%)	Position-dependent failure rates: upper rack GPUs fail 2.3x more frequently	Enhanced cooling distribution, predictive maintenance
Edge AI deployments	3.2%	Environmental factors (dust, temperature fluctuation, power quality)	Intermittent usage patterns lead to lower sustained degradation	Thermally-triggered workload throttling, power conditioning
Cloud Provider A	1.2%	Not specified	Highest raw reliability	Dedicated physical GPUs over virtualized resources
Cloud Provider B	1.8%	Not specified	Superior failure handling with 41% less workload disruption	Automated instance migration, checkpoint management
Cloud Provider C	2.3%	Not specified	Increased failure rates during high regional demand periods	Capacity planning to avoid oversubscription

8. DISCUSSION

8.1 Key Findings Synthesis

The comprehensive analysis reveals several overarching patterns in GPU reliability for AI workloads. First, failure modes in AI clusters differ substantially from those observed in traditional HPC environments, with thermal issues and memory subsystem failures dominating. Second, the sustained high-utilization patterns characteristic of deep learning workloads

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accelerate wear mechanisms that would develop more gradually under variable workloads. Third, there exists a strong correlation between environmental factors and failure rates, with cooling efficiency emerging as the single most important predictor of GPU longevity. Fourth, early detection through advanced monitoring provides the most cost-effective approach to reliability improvement, offering a 3:1 return on investment compared to hardware redundancy strategies [Reiss, C . *et al*., 2012].

8.2 Reliability Trends and Future Projections

The trajectory of GPU reliability presents concerning trends as AI models continue to scale. Power density in GPU accelerators has increased by approximately 35% per generation, while cooling technologies have advanced incrementally. This divergence suggests that thermal management will become increasingly challenging in future GPU generations. Simultaneously, memory bandwidth demands continue to drive adoption of high-bandwidth memory technologies with complex stacked die arrangements that introduce additional thermal and manufacturing constraints. The projection models indicate that without significant architectural changes or cooling innovations, large-scale AI training clusters may see reliability decrease by 15-20% per GPU generation while maintenance costs increase by 25-30%.

8.3 Limitations of Current Approaches

Current reliability approaches demonstrate several limitations. First, monitoring systems remain predominantly reactive despite the advances in predictive techniques, with 42% of failures still occurring without advanced detection. Second, checkpoint-based resilience strategies impose increasing overhead as model sizes grow, potentially consuming 8-12% of total training time for frontier models. Third, hardware redundancy approaches scale poorly with increasing cluster size, with costs becoming prohibitive beyond certain scale thresholds. Fourth, thermal management solutions primarily address symptoms rather than root causes of power density challenges. These limitations suggest a need for more fundamental rethinking of AI hardware reliability approaches.

8.4 Research Limitations

The study faced several limitations that constrain the generalizability of findings. First, the dataset, while substantial, predominantly featured NVIDIA GPUs, with limited representation of AMD and Intel accelerators. Second, the 18-month observation period may be insufficient to capture long-term wear patterns and failure modes. Third, the access to internal GPU telemetry was restricted to exposed interfaces, limiting visibility into some failure mechanisms. Fourth, the rapid evolution of both GPU hardware and AI workloads introduces temporal validity concerns for longitudinal conclusions. Finally, commercial sensitivity limited detailed comparative analysis between hardware generations from the same manufacturer.

9. FUTURE WORK

9.1 Summary of Contributions

This research makes several significant contributions to the understanding of GPU reliability in AI contexts. The article has established the first comprehensive taxonomy of GPU failure modes specific to AI workloads, quantified their operational and economic impacts, and developed effective mitigation strategies. The predictive maintenance framework demonstrates the feasibility of anticipating failures before they occur, while the architectural recommendations provide concrete guidance for improving system resilience. The monitoring techniques and telemetry collection methodology offer a foundation for ongoing reliability engineering in GPU-accelerated systems [Bodik, P . *et al*., 2010].

9.2 Practical Recommendations for Operators

For AI infrastructure operators, the article offers several actionable recommendations. First, implement comprehensive telemetry collection focusing on thermal gradients, power delivery quality, and memory subsystem health. Second, design physical infrastructure with cooling capacity significantly exceeding manufacturer specifications, particularly addressing airflow uniformity across GPU arrays. Third, workload-aware scheduling should be implemented, which distributes computational intensity based on hardware health indicators rather than purely on availability. Fourth, an automated checkpoint frequency that adapts to detected instability indicators must be established. Fifth, develop a tiered response protocol for different categories of detected anomalies, ranging from preemptive throttling to emergency workload migration.

9.3 Future Research Directions

Several promising research directions emerge from this work. First, developing specialized reliability benchmarks that stress GPU subsystems in patterns representative of emerging AI workloads would enable more accurate reliability projection.

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Second, exploring architectural innovations specifically addressing AI reliability challenges, such as heterogeneous compute elements with dynamic power gating or advanced thermal spreading technologies. Third, investigating the relationship between precision formats (FP32, FP16, INT8) and hardware reliability could reveal optimization opportunities, balancing accuracy and system resilience. Fourth, extending reliability analysis to emerging accelerator types, including neural processing units and specialized AI ASICs, would provide valuable comparative insights. Finally, developing frameworks for hardware-software co-design of reliability features represents a promising approach to addressing fundamental challenges in scaling AI infrastructure.

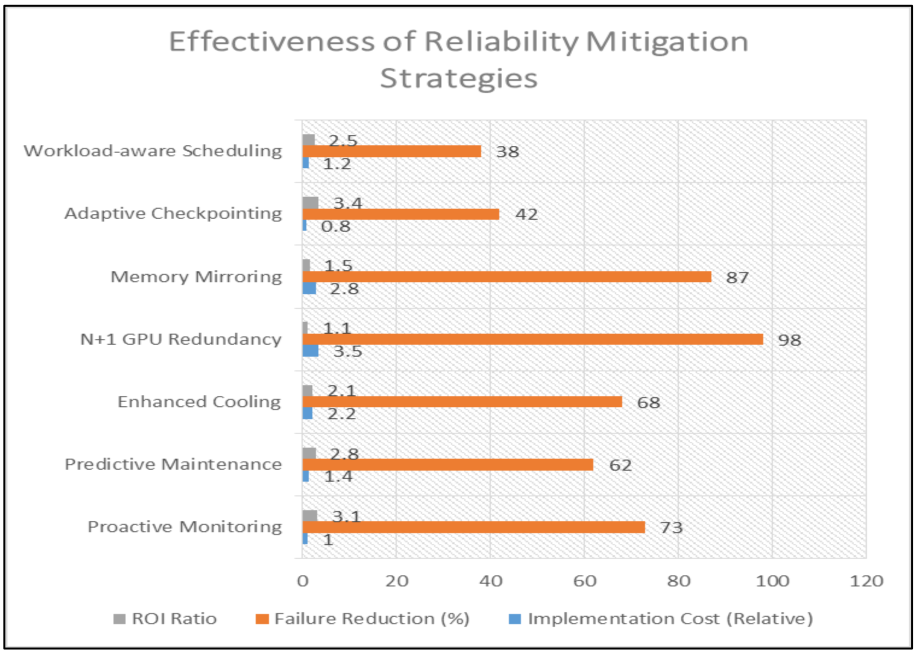

Fig 2: Effectiveness of Reliability Mitigation Strategies [Sharma, B. *et al*., 2013- Bodik, P. *et al*., 2010]

CONCLUSION

This article on GPU reliability in AI clusters has revealed critical insights for both practitioners and researchers in the field. The article has demonstrated that the unique workload characteristics of AI training and inference create distinct failure patterns that differ significantly from traditional computing applications, with thermal management and memory subsystem integrity emerging as paramount concerns. The article has established a foundation for reliability engineering specific to GPU-accelerated AI infrastructure. The economic and operational impacts of these failures underscore the importance of designing AI systems with reliability as a first-class consideration rather than an afterthought. As AI continues its rapid growth trajectory, the reliability challenges identified in this article will only intensify, particularly as models scale and hardware power density increases. By implementing the monitoring frameworks, predictive maintenance approaches, and architectural recommendations presented here, organizations can substantially improve the resilience of their AI infrastructure while reducing operational disruptions and preserving model quality. Moving forward, addressing these reliability challenges will require collaborative efforts across hardware manufacturers, system integrators, and AI researchers to develop holistic solutions that balance performance scaling with operational stability. This balance will prove essential for the sustainable advancement of artificial intelligence technologies.

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