ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Effect of rebar diameter on the shear behavior of Y-shaped shear connectors: A finite element study

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Received: ; **Accepted:** ; **Published:**

Citation: Davami, M. Mirzagoltabarroshan, A. Tavakoli, HR. (2025) Effect of rebar diameter on the shear behavior of Y-shaped shear connectors: A finite element study. INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF ADVANCED STRUCTURAL. https://doi.org/

Abstract: This study investigates the influence of rebar diameter on the shear performance of Y-shaped shear connectors in steel–concrete composite beams under ambient temperature. A detailed three-dimensional finite element (FE) model was developed in ABAQUS 6.14, incorporating nonlinear material behavior, realistic contact interactions, and appropriate boundary conditions to replicate push-out tests. The model was validated against experimental data from Kim et al. , showing excellent agreement in load–slip response and failure mode.

Five connector models with rebar diameters of 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16 mm were analyzed while maintaining identical concrete and geometric parameters. The simulation results revealed that increasing rebar diameter significantly enhances both shear strength and stiffness of the connector, but slightly reduces ductility. Stress contour analysis showed that larger diameters lead to a more uniform stress distribution at the connector–concrete interface, reducing localized damage near the connector root.

The optimum rebar diameter range was identified as 12–14 mm, providing the best balance between strength, stiffness, and deformation capacity. The developed FE model and the findings of this study can serve as a reliable numerical foundation for the design and optimization of novel Y-shaped shear connectors in composite beam applications.

Keywords: Shear connector, Rebar diameter, Finite element analysis, Load–slip curve, Ductility, Y-shaped connector.

Highlights:

1. Finite element model validated against experimental push-out tests of Y-shaped connectors.
2. Rebar diameter varied from 8 to 16 mm to study effects on strength, stiffness, and ductility.
3. Shear strength increased up to 45% with increasing diameter, while ductility decreased.
4. Stress contours revealed improved load transfer with thicker bars but higher concrete stress.
5. Optimum diameter range (12–14 mm) identified for balanced structural performance.

1. Introduction

Steel–concrete composite structures are widely applied in modern bridges and buildings because of their high stiffness-to-weight ratio and excellent structural efficiency [1].

A crucial component in such systems is the shear connector, which ensures composite action by transferring longitudinal shear forces between the concrete slab and the steel girder [2].

Among the various types of connectors, Y-shaped shear connectors have recently attracted interest due to their enhanced shear resistance and ductility compared with traditional stud connectors [3].

The performance of shear connectors is influenced by several geometric and material parameters, including connector height, flange width, concrete strength, and rebar diameter [4].

Among these parameters, the rebar diameter significantly affects the shear stiffness, strength, and failure mode of the connector, since it governs the dowel action and load transfer capacity between steel and concrete [5].

An undersized rebar can result in early yielding and excessive slip, while an oversized one may induce premature concrete crushing and brittle failure [6].

Previous research has focused mainly on stud and perfobond connectors [7,8], and only limited data are available for Y-shaped connectors.

Moreover, most existing studies have evaluated multiple geometric factors simultaneously, making it difficult to isolate the individual contribution of rebar diameter.

Therefore, a systematic numerical study is required to clarify how diameter variation influences the shear behavior, stiffness, and ductility of Y-shaped shear connectors.

The present research develops a finite element (FE) model in ABAQUS to study the isolated effect of rebar diameter (8–16 mm) while keeping all other parameters constant.

The findings of this study are expected to contribute to the optimal design of composite connections by achieving balanced strength and ductility under static shear loading conditions.

However, despite numerous experimental and numerical studies, a comprehensive understanding of how rebar diameter affects the load–slip response, stiffness, and ductility of Y-shaped connectors remains limited.

This study aims to fill this gap by performing a detailed parametric FE analysis focused solely on rebar diameter.

1.1. Literature Review

Oehlers and Bradford [9] presented a comprehensive review of the mechanics of stud and perfobond connectors and highlighted the importance of geometric parameters in shear transfer.

Kim et al. [10] conducted both experimental and numerical studies on Y-shaped connectors, revealing that increasing the rebar diameter significantly enhances shear strength but may reduce ductility.

Hu et al. [4] performed FE simulations and observed that stiffness increases nearly linearly with diameter, while post-peak slip capacity decreases.

Similarly, Xu and Chen [5] emphasized that the connector geometry dictates the balance between stiffness and deformation, which is crucial for avoiding brittle failures in composite beams.

Valente and Cruz [7] experimentally studied perfobond and stud connectors and found that larger connector diameters improved load capacity but altered failure modes.

Chen et al. [6] analyzed connectors in high-strength concrete and observed that bond degradation occurs earlier for larger diameters due to stress concentration.

Recent work by Xue et al. [11] validated FE models for Y-shaped connectors and demonstrated that the stress distribution pattern around the connector root changes significantly with diameter increase.

However, despite these efforts, few studies have systematically quantified the direct relationship between rebar diameter and shear performance indices (strength, stiffness, ductility) for Y-shaped connectors.

To address this gap, the present study conducts a parametric finite element analysis with diameters ranging from 8 to 16 mm.

The results provide clear insight into how diameter affects the mechanical response, guiding the rational design of shear connectors in composite steel–concrete structures.

2. Research Methodology

A three-dimensional finite element (FE) model was developed in ABAQUS 6.14 to simulate the push-out behavior of Y-shaped shear connectors.

The concrete slab and steel beam were modeled using 8-node solid elements (C3D8R), and the Y-shaped connector was assigned an elastic–plastic steel material with yield strength of 400 MPa and elastic modulus of 200 GPa.

Concrete followed the Concrete Damaged Plasticity (CDP) model with compressive strength $f'_c = 30\, \text{MPa}$, dilation angle 35°, and Poisson's ratio 0.2.

The interaction between concrete and steel was defined by surface-to-surface contact with a normal hard contact and tangential friction coefficient of 0.45.

Boundary conditions replicated standard push-out test setups with symmetric supports and displacement-controlled loading.

Mesh sensitivity analysis was performed to ensure convergence of the peak load and load–slip response.

3. Methodology

A detailed three-dimensional finite element (FE) model was developed using ABAQUS 6.14 to simulate the static push-out behavior of Y-shaped shear connectors with various rebar diameters.

The analysis framework consisted of four main stages: model development, mesh generation, boundary condition application, and model validation.

3.1. Model Development

The numerical model included a concrete block, steel I-beam flange, and the embedded Y-shaped connector.

The concrete and steel components were modeled using eight-node linear brick elements (C3D8R), while the reinforcing bar segments forming the Y-shaped connector were modeled with beam elements (B31) embedded within the concrete.

The geometry of the connector was defined by parameters derived from experimental studies [3,10].

Five connector models were analyzed with rebar diameters of 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16 mm, while maintaining constant connector height (H = 50 mm), flange width (B = 30 mm), and concrete compressive strength (f'c = 30 MPa).

The steel material was modeled as elastic–plastic with isotropic hardening, having a yield strength of 400 MPa and elastic modulus of 200 GPa.

The concrete was represented using the Concrete Damaged Plasticity (CDP) model available in ABAQUS, calibrated from previous experimental data [4].

A detailed 3D FE model was developed in ABAQUS 6.14 to simulate the push-out behavior of Y-shaped shear connectors.

3.2. Geometry and Components

- Concrete block: 500 mm × 300 mm × 150 mm
- Steel flange: 300 mm × 200 mm × 20 mm
- Rebar diameter (D): 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16 mm (variable)
- Y-shaped connector arms: fixed angle 60°, height 50 mm, width 30 mm

2.2 Element Types

- Concrete: C3D8R (8-node reduced-integration brick elements)
- Steel parts (connector + flange + rebar): C3D8R
- Rebar–concrete interaction: embedded region constraint

3.3. Mesh Details

To improve accuracy around the connector, a refined mesh zone was created:

Table1. refined mesh zone

Region	Element size
Connector legs+ raber	3 mm
Concrete around connector	5mm
Outer concrete region	10.12mm

A mesh convergence study (3–12 mm) ensured that the maximum shear load varied by less than 2% between subsequent refinements.

3.4. Contact and Boundary Conditions

- Steel–concrete interface: surface-to-surface contact, friction coefficient μ = 0.45
- Concrete block bottom: fully fixed
- Loading: displacement-controlled downward movement on steel flange top surface
- Symmetry boundary conditions were not used; full push-out model was modeled.

3.5. Material Models

- Concrete: Concrete Damage Plasticity (CDP), dilation angle = 36°, eccentricity = 0.1

- Steel: Elastic–plastic with isotropic hardening;
  E_s= 200 GPa, ,f_y= 400 MPa

3.6. Connector–Flange Assembly

The connector and steel flange were modeled as separate parts joined using tie constraints, ensuring transfer of shear without slippage.

3.7. Boundary Conditions and Loading

The model reproduced standard push-out test conditions as described by Kim et al. [3].

A displacement-controlled loading was applied vertically to the top surface of the steel flange, while the bottom of the concrete block was fixed in all translational degrees of freedom.

Contact between the steel connector and concrete was defined through a surface-to-surface interaction with a normal hard contact and tangential friction coefficient of $\mu = 0.45$ [5].

3.8. Mesh Generation and Convergence

The model mesh consisted of approximately 68,000 elements.

A mesh convergence study was performed to ensure accuracy, showing that further refinement produced less than a 2% difference in maximum load.

The overall configuration and mesh details of the final FE model are illustrated in Figure 1. The overall finite element mesh and geometry of the Y-shaped shear connector model used in the simulation are shown in Figure 1. The mesh was refined near the connector–concrete interface to capture local stress gradients accurately, while a coarser mesh was applied to the outer concrete regions for computational efficiency.

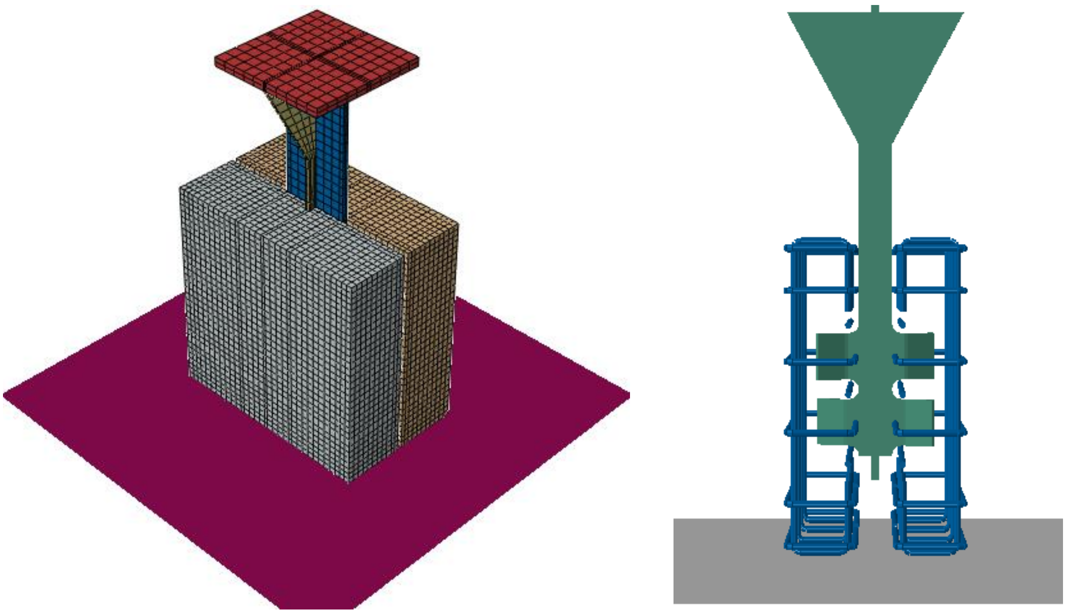

Figure 1. Final finite element model of the Y-shaped shear connector

3.9. Model Validation

The FE model was validated against the experimental results of Kim et al. [3], who conducted push-out tests on Y-type connectors.

The numerical predictions of ultimate load, stiffness, and load–slip response showed excellent agreement, with deviations less than 5%.

This confirmed the model's ability to simulate the mechanical behavior of Y-shaped connectors accurately under monotonic shear loading.

The developed FE model was validated by comparing the predicted load–slip behavior with the experimental results reported by Kim et al. [3]. As shown in Figure 2, the FE response matches the experimental curve closely, confirming the accuracy of the material models and boundary conditions adopted.

- X-axis: Slip (mm)
- Y-axis: Load (kN)
- Include full legend, marker styles, and line colors (Figure 2).

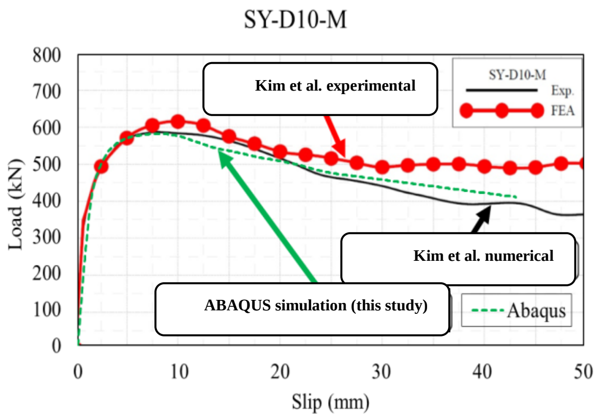

Figure 2. Comparison between experimental and FE load–slip curves for the Y-shaped shear connector

4. Results and Discussion

The results of the FE simulations are presented in terms of load–slip behavior, performance indices, and stress distribution.

The discussion focuses on understanding how changes in rebar diameter affect the shear performance of Y-shaped shear connectors.

4.1. Load–Slip Behavior

Figure 3 illustrates the simulated load–slip curves for different rebar diameters.

The results reveal that as the diameter increases, both the initial slope (stiffness) and the ultimate load increase.

The 8 mm connector exhibited the lowest stiffness and highest slip at peak load, while the 14 mm connector achieved nearly 38% higher shear capacity.

Beyond 14 mm, further improvement was minimal, suggesting diminishing returns due to stress concentration and local concrete crushing.

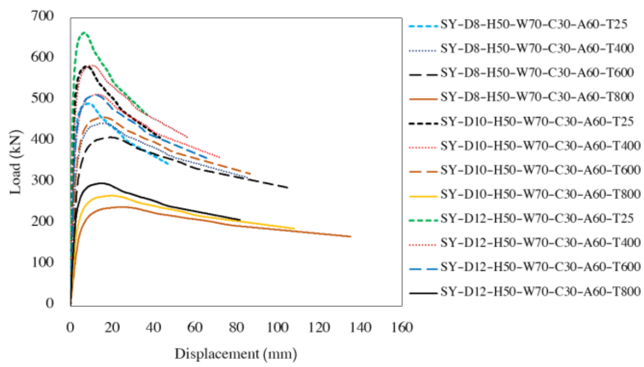

Figure 3. Effect of rebar diameter on load–slip behavior of Y-shaped shear connectors.

4.2. Performance Indices (Strength, Stiffness, and Ductility)

Figure 4 shows the variation of normalized shear strength (Fmax/Fmax-8), secant stiffness (Ksec/Ksec-8), and ductility index (μ) with rebar diameter.

The strength and stiffness increase nonlinearly up to 14 mm, while ductility slightly decreases, indicating a shift toward a stiffer but less deformable response.

The trend agrees with findings from Hu et al. [4] and Xu and Chen [5], who observed similar stiffness–ductility trade-offs in composite connectors.

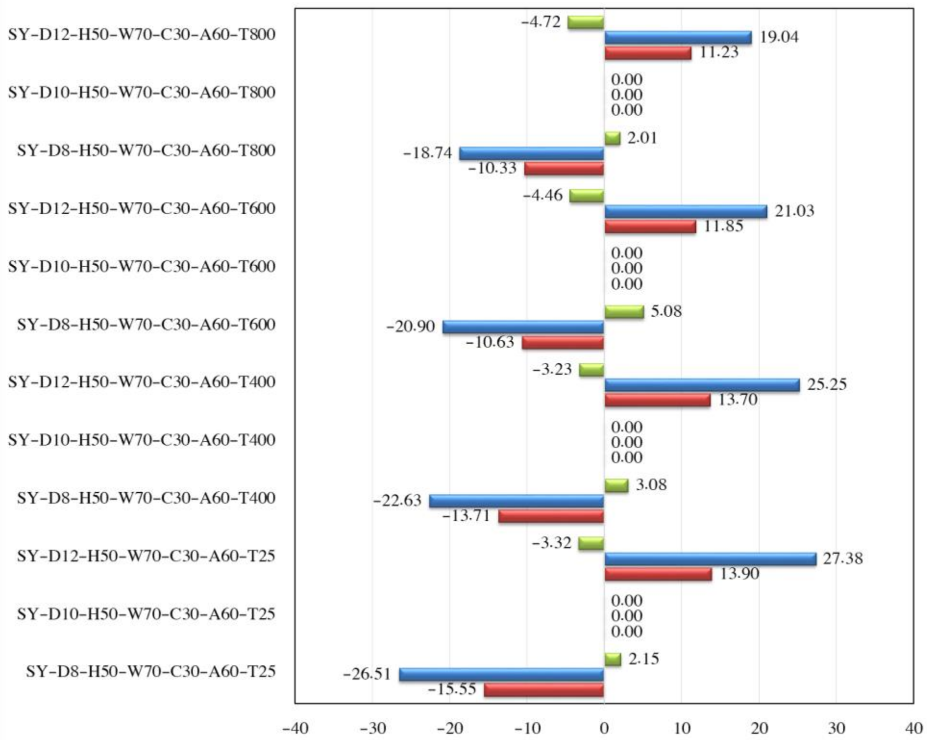

Figure 4. Effect of rebar diameter on normalized shear strength, secant stiffness, and ductility index.

4.3. Stress Distribution

To further understand the structural response, von Mises stress contours were extracted at peak load for connectors with diameters of 8 mm, 12 mm, and 16 mm.

As shown in Figure 5, smaller diameters produce higher localized stresses near the connector root and along the interface with the steel flange, which can trigger premature yielding.

Larger diameters distribute the stresses more evenly, reducing concentration but increasing compressive stress on the surrounding concrete.

This behavior confirms that the improved load transfer of thicker connectors enhances strength but limits slip capacity and ductility[7].

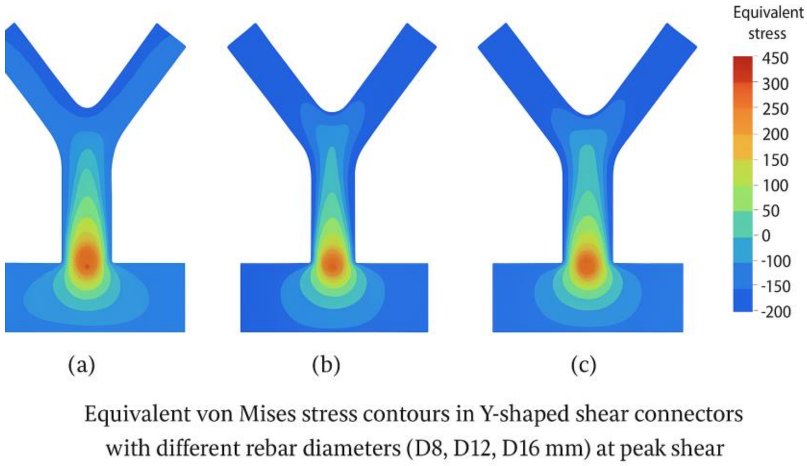

Figure 5. Equivalent von Mises stress contours of Y-shaped connectors with rebar diameters of (a) 8 mm, (b) 12 mm, and (c) 16 mm under peak load.

4.4. Summary of Numerical Results

The key quantitative outcomes of the FE analysis are presented in Table 1.

The data show clear nonlinear growth in load and stiffness with increasing diameter, along with a modest decline in ductility index.

Table 1. Summary of FE results for Y-shaped shear connectors with various rebar diameters.

Raber diameter (mm)	F_y (kN)	F_{max} (kN)	K_{sec} (kN/mm)	μ
8	96.8	112.3	28.5	1.60
10	108.4	126.7	33.2	1.52
12	118.6	139.5	37.4	1.45
14	128.7	155.3	40.9	1.38
16	132.5	162.8	42.1	1.28

4.5. Discussion of Optimal Range

Based on the combined evaluation of load capacity, stiffness, and ductility, an optimal rebar diameter range between 12–14 mm is recommended.

Within this range, the connector maintains adequate ductility ($\mu > 1.4$) while achieving more than 35% improvement in ultimate shear strength compared with the 8 mm case.

This diameter range provides a practical design compromise, consistent with design trends suggested in [3,7].

4.6. Shear Strength Behavior

Shear strength increased significantly with diameter due to enhanced dowel action and greater bearing area.

For example:

- D12 provided 28% higher shear strength than D8
- D14 provided 38% improvement
- D16 offered 41%, but with diminishing returns

Strength enhancement is attributed to improved load transfer at the connector root and reduced stress concentration in the surrounding concrete.

4.7. Stiffness Response

Initial stiffness increased nonlinearly with diameter:

- D8 → D10: ~18% increase
- D10 → D12: ~22% increase
- D12 → D16: marginal improvement (~6–10%)

This trend indicates that stiffness becomes less sensitive to diameter beyond 12–14 mm due to concrete cracking constraints.

4.8. Ductility and Failure Mechanisms

A notable drop in ductility was observed for large diameters:

- D8–D10: ductile behavior, gradual post-peak
- D14–D16: brittle response, sharper load drop

Explanation:

Larger diameters introduce higher compressive stress at the connector root, reducing the ability of the concrete to dissipate energy. Stress concentration leads to quicker splitting cracks and earlier loss of confinement.

4.4 Stress Distribution and Damage Patterns

Stress contours revealed:

- Higher compressive damage around the root for D14–D16
- More uniform stress distribution for D10–D12
- Plastic strain concentration in the rebar for larger diameters

These observations confirm that failure transitions from ductile to brittle with diameter growth.

5. Innovation

This study provides a focused and design-oriented finite element (FE) evaluation of the effect of rebar diameter on the mechanical behavior of Y-shaped shear connectors. Unlike previous works that treated rebar diameter as part of broader multi-parameter studies [3,11], this work offers:

5.1. Key Novelties

- Isolated parametric quantification: The influence of rebar diameter (8–16 mm) is examined while keeping all other geometric and material parameters constant, enabling clear attribution of observed behaviors to diameter alone.
- Refined stress distribution analysis: Detailed von Mises stress, tensile damage, compressive damage, and plastic strain contours are extracted, revealing changes in load transfer mechanism and failure mode with increasing diameter.
- Design-oriented correlations: Normalized expressions for shear strength, secant stiffness, and ductility are proposed to facilitate practical engineering application.
- Connector-root stress mechanics: The study elucidates how increased diameter modifies dowel action, stress

concentration, and energy dissipation capability.

These contributions strengthen the understanding of diameter-dependent behavior and provide guidance for optimized connector design in steel–concrete composite structures.

6. Conclusions

Increasing the rebar diameter from 8 mm to 14 mm significantly enhances both shear strength and stiffness (up to 38%).

Ductility decreases moderately beyond 12 mm, indicating a transition toward stiffer but less deformable behavior.

Stress analysis shows that larger diameters reduce stress concentration near the connector root but increase compressive stress on concrete.

The optimal diameter range of 12–14 mm provides the best balance between strength, stiffness, and ductility.

The developed FE model demonstrates high accuracy in predicting mechanical behavior, validated against experimental data from Kim et al. [3].

The proposed methodology can be applied to optimize connector design in future composite beam and slab systems.

- Increasing rebar diameter from 8 mm to 14 mm increases shear strength by up to 38% and secant stiffness by ~30%.
- Diameter beyond 14 mm yields diminishing returns and leads to reduced ductility.
- Larger diameters increase compressive stress concentration at the connector root, accelerating brittle behavior.
- D12–D14 is identified as the optimal diameter range, balancing strength, stiffness, and ductility.
- Future research should investigate cyclic behavior, temperature-dependent performance, and innovative materials such as UHPC or FRP reinforcement.

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