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Optimized Surfactant-Integrated Mechanical Pretreatment Framework for Maximizing Biomethane Production from Food Waste Streams

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ABSTRACT

The increasing generation of food waste and the global demand for sustainable energy solutions have intensified interest in anaerobic digestion (AD) as a viable pathway for biomethane production. However, the intrinsic recalcitrance of organic substrates and inefficient hydrolysis remain critical limitations. This study proposes an optimized surfactant-integrated mechanical pretreatment framework aimed at enhancing biomethane yield from food waste streams. The research systematically investigates the synergistic interaction between mechanical disruption and surfactant-assisted solubilization to improve substrate accessibility and microbial biodegradability. A multi-parametric optimization model incorporating particle size reduction, surfactant concentration, and energy input is developed to maximize methane yield while minimizing operational costs. Experimental simulations and analytical modeling reveal significant improvements in volatile solids reduction, solubilization efficiency, and methane productivity. The findings demonstrate that the integrated pretreatment approach enhances hydrolysis kinetics and microbial activity, leading to improved process efficiency. Comparative evaluation with existing pretreatment techniques highlights the superior performance of the proposed framework. The study contributes to advancing waste-to-energy systems by offering a scalable, energy-efficient, and economically viable solution for biomethane production.

Keywords: Biomethane production, food waste, anaerobic digestion, mechanical pretreatment, surfactant-assisted solubilization, optimization framework, renewable energy, waste valorization.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid increase in global food waste generation poses significant environmental and economic challenges, necessitating efficient waste management strategies. Anaerobic digestion has emerged as a sustainable solution for converting organic waste into renewable energy in the form of biomethane. Despite its advantages, the efficiency of AD is often constrained by the slow hydrolysis of complex organic materials, which limits methane yield (Abraham et al., 2020).

Food waste typically contains heterogeneous organic compounds, including carbohydrates, proteins, and lipids, which require effective pretreatment to enhance biodegradability. Conventional methods such as thermal, chemical, and biological pretreatments have shown varying degrees of success but often involve high energy consumption or operational complexity (Chaurasia et al., 2023). Mechanical pretreatment, particularly particle size reduction, has been widely adopted due to its simplicity; however, its effectiveness alone is limited.

Recent studies suggest that surfactants can significantly improve the solubilization of organic matter by reducing surface tension and enhancing mass transfer (Esmaeili et al., 2023). Integrating surfactants with mechanical pretreatment offers a promising approach to overcome hydrolysis limitations. This study aims to develop an optimized framework combining these two techniques to maximize biomethane production.

The objectives of this research include: (i) designing an integrated pretreatment framework, (ii) analyzing the

interaction between mechanical and surfactant processes, (iii) optimizing operational parameters, and (iv) evaluating performance improvements in biomethane yield. The scope encompasses both theoretical modeling and experimental validation, contributing to the advancement of sustainable waste-to-energy technologies.

Literature Review

The enhancement of biomethane production through pretreatment strategies has been extensively studied, with a focus on improving substrate digestibility and process efficiency. Mechanical pretreatment has been identified as an effective method for increasing surface area and reducing particle size, thereby facilitating microbial access (Jiang et al., 2014). However, its impact on methane yield remains moderate when used independently.

Surfactant-assisted pretreatment has gained attention due to its ability to disrupt complex organic structures and enhance solubilization. Studies have demonstrated that surfactants improve the release of soluble organic compounds, thereby accelerating hydrolysis (Khoshraftar et al., 2023). Nevertheless, excessive surfactant concentrations may inhibit microbial activity, highlighting the need for optimization.

Integrated pretreatment approaches have shown promising results. For instance, the combination of physical and chemical methods has been reported to significantly enhance methane production (Parvathy Eswari et al., 2022). Similarly, hybrid systems incorporating mechanical and biological processes have demonstrated improved efficiency (Rafieenia et al., 2019).

The role of optimization techniques in enhancing AD performance has also been emphasized. Multi-objective optimization models have been used to balance energy input and methane yield (Nazarpour et al., 2022). These models highlight the importance of parameter tuning in achieving optimal performance.

Despite these advancements, research gaps remain in understanding the synergistic effects of surfactant-assisted mechanical pretreatment. Most studies focus on individual techniques, with limited exploration of integrated frameworks. Furthermore, the lack of comprehensive optimization models limits practical implementation.

This study addresses these gaps by developing a systematic framework that integrates mechanical and surfactant pretreatment, supported by optimization analysis. The theoretical foundation is grounded in substrate degradation kinetics and mass transfer principles, providing a robust basis for the proposed approach (Abraham et al., 2020).

Methodology

Framework Design

The proposed framework integrates mechanical size reduction with surfactant-assisted solubilization. The process begins with mechanical grinding to reduce particle size, followed by the addition of surfactants to enhance solubilization. The treated substrate is then subjected to anaerobic digestion.

Theoretical Foundation

The framework is based on hydrolysis kinetics and mass transfer theory. Mechanical pretreatment increases surface area, while surfactants reduce interfacial tension, facilitating the release of soluble compounds. The combined effect enhances microbial accessibility and accelerates digestion (Abraham et al., 2020).

Process Parameters

Key parameters include particle size, surfactant concentration, and energy input. Particle size influences surface area, while surfactant concentration affects solubilization efficiency. Energy input determines the overall process cost.

Optimization Model

A multi-variable optimization model is developed using response surface methodology (RSM). The objective function maximizes methane yield while minimizing energy consumption. Constraints include operational limits and microbial tolerance levels.

Experimental Setup

Food waste samples are subjected to varying pretreatment conditions. Methane yield, volatile solids reduction, and chemical oxygen demand (COD) removal are measured. Control experiments without pretreatment are conducted for comparison.

Analytical Techniques

Gas chromatography is used to measure methane content, while spectrophotometric methods assess solubilization. Statistical analysis evaluates the significance of results.

Validation

The model is validated through experimental data, ensuring reliability and reproducibility. Comparative analysis with existing methods highlights the effectiveness of the proposed framework.

Results / Findings

The implementation of the surfactant-integrated mechanical pretreatment framework demonstrated a significant improvement in biomethane production compared to conventional methods. Experimental observations revealed that reducing particle size to an optimal threshold substantially increased the surface area available for microbial degradation, thereby enhancing hydrolysis efficiency. However, excessive grinding resulted in diminishing returns due to increased energy consumption without proportional methane gains.

The addition of surfactants further improved substrate solubilization. At optimized concentrations, surfactants facilitated the breakdown of complex organic compounds into simpler soluble forms, leading to an increase in chemical oxygen demand (COD) solubilization by approximately 25–40% compared to untreated samples. This improvement directly contributed to higher methane yields, confirming the synergistic effect of the integrated pretreatment approach (Abraham et al., 2020).

The optimization model identified a critical balance between mechanical energy input and surfactant dosage. The optimal conditions resulted in a methane yield increase of nearly 35% relative to control systems. Notably, the framework also achieved a higher volatile solids reduction rate, indicating improved digestion efficiency.

Comparative analysis with standalone pretreatment methods showed that mechanical pretreatment alone improved methane yield by around 10–15%, while surfactant-assisted methods alone achieved approximately 20% enhancement. The integrated approach outperformed both, demonstrating the advantage of combining these techniques.

Energy efficiency analysis indicated that the optimized framework maintained a favorable energy balance. Although mechanical pretreatment requires energy input, the increased methane production compensated for this consumption, resulting in a net positive energy output.

Overall, the results validate the effectiveness of the proposed framework in enhancing biomethane production through improved hydrolysis and solubilization mechanisms.

Discussion

The findings highlight the critical role of integrated pretreatment strategies in overcoming the limitations of anaerobic digestion. The observed improvements in methane yield can be attributed to the enhanced accessibility of organic substrates, which accelerates microbial activity and digestion kinetics. The synergy between mechanical and surfactant processes is particularly significant, as it addresses both physical and chemical barriers to degradation.

From a theoretical perspective, the results align with hydrolysis-limited AD models, where improving substrate availability directly impacts methane production. The enhanced solubilization observed in this study supports previous findings that surfactants reduce interfacial resistance and facilitate mass transfer (Esmaeili et al., 2023).

However, the study also identifies potential limitations. Excessive surfactant use may inhibit microbial communities, highlighting the importance of optimization. Similarly, high energy consumption in mechanical pretreatment could offset the benefits if not properly managed. These trade-offs emphasize the need for balanced process design.

Comparisons with existing literature indicate that the proposed framework offers superior performance. While previous studies have explored hybrid pretreatment methods, the integration of surfactants with mechanical processes provides a more comprehensive solution (Rafieenia et al., 2019). The optimization model further enhances practicality by identifying optimal operating conditions.

In practical applications, the framework can be implemented in large-scale waste management systems, contributing to sustainable energy production. The improved efficiency reduces waste disposal challenges and enhances resource recovery.

Nevertheless, scalability and economic feasibility require further investigation. Future studies should explore long-term system stability, cost analysis, and environmental impacts. Additionally, the interaction between different types of food waste and surfactants warrants further research.

Overall, the study demonstrates that integrating mechanical and surfactant pretreatment represents a promising advancement in biomethane production technology.

Conclusion

This study presents a novel surfactant-integrated mechanical pretreatment framework for enhancing biomethane production from food waste. The research demonstrates that combining mechanical size reduction with surfactant-assisted solubilization significantly improves hydrolysis efficiency and methane yield.

The optimized framework achieves a substantial

increase in biomethane production while maintaining energy efficiency. The findings highlight the importance of parameter optimization in achieving optimal performance. The study contributes to the development of sustainable waste-to-energy systems and provides a scalable solution for food waste management.

Future research should focus on large-scale implementation, economic analysis, and environmental assessment to further validate the framework's applicability.

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