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1 **A biologically inspired variable-pH strategy for enhancing**
2 **short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs) accumulation in maize**
3 **straw fermentation**

4

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14

1 **Abstract**

2 This study investigates the feasibility of varying the pH to enhance the accumulation
3 of short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs) in the in vitro fermentation of maize straw. The
4 corresponding hydrolysis rate and the net SCFA yield increased as inoculum ratio
5 ($VS_{\text{inoculum}}/VS_{\text{substrate}}$) increased from 0.09 to 0.79. The pH were maintained at 5.3, 5.8,
6 6.3, 6.8, 7.3, and 7.8, respectively. A neutral pH of approximately 6.8 was optimal for
7 hydrolysis. The net SCFA yield decreased by 34.9% for a pH of less than 5.8, but
8 remained constant at approximately 721 ± 5 mg/g_{vs} for a pH between 5.8 and 7.8. In
9 addition, results were obtained for variable and constant pH levels at initial substrate
10 concentrations of 10, 30 and 50 g/L. A variable pH increased the net SCFA yield by
11 23.6%, 29.0%, and 36.6% for concentrations of 10, 30 and 50 g/L. Therefore, a
12 variable pH enhanced SCFA accumulation in maize straw fermentation.

13 **Keywords:** SCFAs production; Maize straw; pH; Anaerobic digestion; Rumen.

14 **1 Introduction**

15 Short-chain fatty acids (SCFAs) can be used as an organic carbon source for nitrogen
16 and phosphorus removal in wastewater treatment plants or to produce biogas, hydrogen,
17 electricity, biodiesel, and bioplastic polyhydroxyalkanoates (PHAs) (Lee et al., 2014).
18 Most solid wastes e. g. sludge (Ji et al., 2010), food waste (Kim et al., 2006), and
19 municipal solid waste (Bolzonella et al., 2005) can be used as source materials for
20 SCFAs production. Hence, the production of SCFAs from solid wastes has recently

1 attracted increasing attention from the research community. Because of the high
2 efficiency of rumen in which the organic loading rate (OLR) can be greater than 100
3 $\text{g}_{\text{vs}}/(\text{L}\cdot\text{d})$ (Meng et al., 2013), a lot of studies have been conducted on producing SCFAs
4 with the mechanisms of ruminant digestive systems. These studies took three
5 approaches. One approach was to examine the fermentation process at the molecular
6 level to understand the high degradation efficiency of rumen microorganisms
7 processing lignocellulosic wastes (Hu et al., 2008). However, rumen microorganisms
8 are difficult to obtain and do not remain active in vitro for extended periods of time
9 (Chapleur et al., 2014); thus, this approach is not practical. The second approach was
10 to represent the alimentary canals of various species of animals as sets of processes,
11 such as various types of reactors (Godon et al., 2010). The third approach was to
12 construct an artificial rumen (RUSITEC) (Czerkawski and Breckenridge, 1977), but
13 this method has mainly been used to study ruminant digestion. Several modified
14 RUSITEC systems have been used to study the decomposition of lignocellulosic waste
15 materials (Gijzen et al., 1986), paper mill sludge (Gijzen et al., 1988), and cereal
16 residues (Kivaisi et al., 1992). However, few studies have investigated the process in
17 depth or on a large scale. Each study focused on one aspect, and there was not a
18 sufficiently comprehensive analysis of the mechanisms of ruminant digestive systems
19 that would explain their high efficiency.

1 According to the authors' analysis, the mechanisms of high efficiency of ruminant
2 digestive systems can be summarized as three aspects. Firstly, the high efficiency of
3 rumens can be attributed to the special microbial communities that they contain, which
4 include bacteria, fungi, archaea, and protozoa (Liu, 1991). Future research should focus
5 on maintaining an in vitro environment similar to that in a rumen to support the activity
6 of rumen microorganisms but not inoculate them directly. Secondly, the processes and
7 conditions particular to rumens, such as immediate product removal, precise salivation,
8 rumination, rumen peristalsis, a constant temperature, and the special pH condition, are
9 all possible mechanisms that can enhance fermentation. Thirdly, the well-organized
10 interactions of the four chambers in the stomachs of ruminants (the rumen, reticulum,
11 omasum, and abomasum) contribute to the fermentation process.

12 An example of the mechanisms is the special pH condition. The difference between
13 natural rumen and artificial systems is that SCFA production and salivation cause the
14 pH in the rumen to vary between approximately 5.5 and 7.0 (Feng, 2004), unlike in
15 artificial fermentation digesters, in which the pH remains relatively constant.
16 Fermentation can be significantly influenced by pH (Wu et al., 2009). A neutral pH is
17 optimal for most microorganisms, increasing product consumption (Elango et al., 2007).
18 Product consumption can be reduced by lowering the pH, but hydrolysis and
19 acidogenesis may also be inhibited because the growth or activity of the ruminal
20 bacteria would be reduced (Russell and Rychlik, 2001; Sari et al., 2015). The activities

1 of some key enzymes for SCFA forming at higher pH were higher than those at neutral
2 or acidic pH (Zhao et al., 2015), however, it needs alkali addition. Therefore,
3 fermentation with a variable pH, such as what occurs in a rumen, could potentially
4 enhance SCFA accumulation. Until now, few studies on the effect of a variable pH
5 condition on fermentation were reported.

6 This research investigates the effects of a variable pH level on the in vitro fermentation
7 of maize straw to inform further research in which the process will be sustained.
8 Additionally, the potential of SCFA production from maize straw and the effects of the
9 inoculum ratio and pH on maize straw fermentation are investigated.

10 **2 Materials and Methods**

11 2.1 Substrates and inoculum properties

12 Maize straw, a kind of source material of fodder for ruminants, was used as substrate
13 in this study. It was obtained from the China Agricultural University, Shangzhuang
14 experimental farm in Beijing, China. Following harvesting, the straw was chopped with
15 a chaff cutter (Taifeng, Qufu, China) and then milled in a straw pulverizer (Yijian,
16 Jinan, China) to the fineness of a #50 mesh. The pulverized straw was stored in a sealed
17 bottle at room temperature. Prior to use, the pulverized straw was air-dried until the
18 moisture content was 0% at 105°C .

19 Rumen fluid, which contains few methanogens and is considered suitable for SCFA
20 production, was used as the inoculum in this study. Three samples of the fluid were

1 obtained from each of three milk cows at the China Agricultural University, Beijing,
2 China. The fluid samples were filtered through four layers of gauze and then stored in
3 a thermos bottle. The fluid samples were used in the experiments within 3 h of being
4 drawn from the donor animals. The properties of the substrate and inoculums are
5 provided in Table 1.

6 2.2 Experimental setup and operation

7 Three experiments were conducted in this study. In experiment A, samples were
8 prepared in which 3.75 g of pulverized maize straw was inoculated with 25, 75, 125,
9 175, and 225 mL of rumen fluid. In addition, 150 mL of artificial saliva and deionized
10 water were added to achieve a total working volume of 375 mL. The pH was maintained
11 at 6.8. In experiment B, the pH was maintained at values 5.3, 5.8, 6.3, 6.8, 7.3, and 7.8.
12 Each sample consisted of 3.75 g of pulverized straw, 200 mL of rumen fluid, and 175
13 mL of artificial saliva. In experiment C, the pH was allowed to vary, i.e., decrease
14 naturally, in certain samples (V-10, V-30, and V-50), and the pH in the remaining
15 samples (C-10, C-30, and C-50) was held constant at 6.8. The amounts of pulverized
16 maize straw used in samples V-10, V-30, and V-50 were 3.75, 11.25, and 18.75 g,
17 respectively. Similarly, 3.75, 11.25, and 18.75 g of pulverized maize straw were used
18 in the constant-pH samples C-10, C-30, and C-50, respectively. To each sample, 125
19 mL of rumen fluid and 250 mL of artificial saliva were added. Replicate samples were
20 prepared in all three of the experiments.

1 All of the samples were prepared in 500 mL serum bottles. The working volume was
2 375 mL. All of the bottles were placed in an incubator at a temperature of $39.0\pm 0.5^{\circ}\text{C}$
3 and stirred at a rate of 100 rpm. The pH was controlled by a system that automatically
4 meted a sodium hydroxide solution (1 mol/L). The pH control system included a pH
5 sensor (Mettler-Toledo, Switzerland), a pH controller (ARK 82, China), and a
6 peristaltic pump (Model BQ50-1J, Baoding Longer Precision Pump Co., Ltd., China).
7 The pH data were recorded automatically by an electronic recorder
8 (Weimingshouwang SY2000C, China). All tests were conducted for 72 h, which was
9 sufficiently long to complete the acidification process (Paul et al., 2011). The samples
10 were analyzed at the end of the 72 h period. Prior to the start of the experiments, the
11 seal on each bottle was tested for gas and liquid leakage. The artificial saliva was
12 prepared according to the procedure of Menke et al (1988).

13 2.3 Analytical methods

14 The gas yield was measured using water volume replacement methods. The total
15 solids (TS), volatile solids (VS), total suspended solids (TSS), volatile suspended
16 solids (VSS), total chemical oxygen demand (TCOD), and soluble chemical oxygen
17 demand (SCOD) were determined using APHA standard methods (APHA, 1998). The
18 SCFAs were measured with a gas-phase chromatograph (Model 7890A, Agilent,
19 USA) equipped with a $30\text{m}\times\Phi 0.53\text{mm}\times 1.0\mu\text{m}$ capillary column (Model DB-FFAP,
20 Agilent, USA) and flame ionization detectors; the operating temperature was 230°C .

1 The operating temperature of the oven was held at 70°C for 3 min, increased to 180°C
 2 at a rate of 20°C/min, and held at 180°C for 5 min. Nitrogen was used as the carrier
 3 gas. The fractions of C, H, and N were analyzed with an elemental analyzer (Model
 4 CE-440, EAI, USA). The gas composition was measured with the gas-phase
 5 chromatograph fitted with a thermal conductivity detector and a 4.5 m × 2 mm
 6 #60/80-mesh capillary column (Carboxen 1000, Agilent, USA). Argon was used as
 7 the carrier gas at a flow rate of 30 mL/min. The temperatures of the injector, detector,
 8 and column were 150, 250 and 150°C, respectively.

9 2.4 Calculations

10 The hydrolysis rate was determined from the VSS conversion rate, as shown in Eq. (1).

$$11 \quad \eta_H = \left(1 - \frac{m_t}{m_0}\right) \cdot 100\% = \left(1 - \frac{V_t \cdot c_{VSS} - V'_t \cdot c'_{VSS}}{m_{\text{substrates}} \cdot VS}\right) \cdot 100\% \quad (1)$$

12 In Eq. (1), η_H is the hydrolysis rate, which is equal to the VSS conversion rate, m_t is
 13 the mass of the VS in the substrate remaining in the system after fermentation, m_0 is
 14 the mass of the VS in the substrate added at the beginning of the fermentation test
 15 (because the sodium hydroxide solution was added to control the pH and evaporation,
 16 the working volume changed during the experiments), V_t and c_{VSS} are the final
 17 working volume and final VSS concentration of the fermentation system, respectively,
 18 V'_t and c'_{VSS} are the final working volume and final VSS concentration of the
 19 fermentation system of the blank group, respectively, $m_{\text{substrates}}$ is the mass of the
 20 straw, and VS is the percentage of VS in the straw.

1 Acidogenesis occurs following hydrolysis; thus, the reactants for acidogenesis are the
2 products of hydrolysis. To assess the acidogenesis process, the net SCFA yield can be
3 expressed as in Eq. (2).

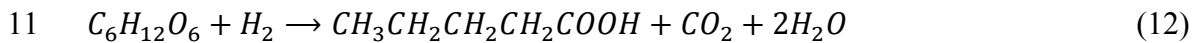
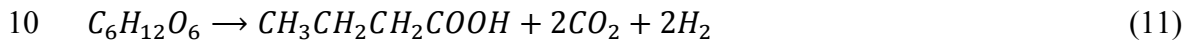
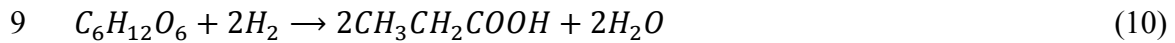
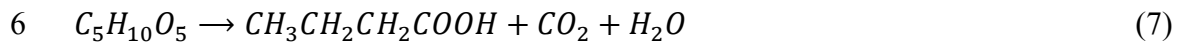
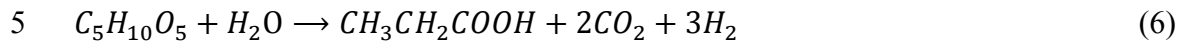
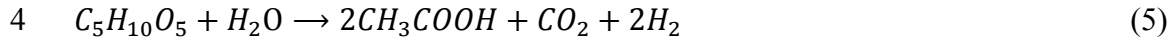
$$4 \quad r_{SCFAs} = \frac{m_{SCFAs}}{m_0} \cdot \eta_H = \frac{V_t \cdot c_{SCFAs,t} - V_0 \cdot c_{SCFAs,0}}{m_{substrates} \cdot VS} \cdot \eta_H \quad (2)$$

5 where r_{SCFAs} is the net SCFA yield, m_{SCFAs} is the mass of SCFAs produced, m_0 is
6 the mass of the VS in the substrate added at the beginning of the fermentation test, η_H
7 is the hydrolysis rate, V_t and V_0 are the final and initial working volumes of the
8 system, respectively, $c_{SCFAs,t}$ and $c_{SCFAs,0}$ are the final and initial total SCFA
9 concentrations of the system, respectively, $m_{substrates}$ is the mass of the pulverized
10 straw, and VS is the percentage of VS in the straw.

11 It is difficult to make the exact detail reactions which occur during fermentation clear.
12 In order to calculate the mass balance, the fermentation was simplified on the
13 assumption that only cellulose and hemi-cellulose are hydrolyzed. Although the
14 cellulose and hemi-cellulose content of the substrates are known, the ratio of pentose
15 and hexose in hemi-cellulose was not clear. However, the result must be between the
16 values assuming that all the hydrolyzed products are pentose or hexose, respectively.
17 Therefore, the average value on the assumption that either pentose or hexose were the
18 sole hydrolyzed products was used for mass balance calculation. The hydrolysis
19 reactions are shown in Eq. (3) and (4).



3 The acidogenesis reactions of pentose or hexose are shown in Eq. (5) – (12).



12 The methanogenesis was ignored because little methane was detected. The H₂O for

13 hydrolysis reaction and solid residues were calculated according to the hydrolyzed

14 TS. The H₂O for acidogenesis reaction, SCFA, CO₂, and H₂ were calculated

15 according to produced SCFA.

1 3 Results and Discussion

2 3.1 Effect of the inoculum ratio

3 To account for differences in the inoculum ratio in experiment C, the effect of the
4 inoculum ratio on fermentation was investigated in experiment A. The inoculum ratios
5 in experiment A were 0.09, 0.26 0.44, 0.62 and 0.79 for rumen fluid volumes of 25, 75,
6 125, 175, and 225 mL, respectively. As shown in Fig. 1, the hydrolysis rate increased
7 from 48±4% to 84±2% as the inoculum ratio increased from 0.09 to 0.79. Zhou et al.
8 (2011) reported that the reduction in VS in fresh okara (soybean curd refuse or residue)
9 increased from 24.3% to 52.5% as the inoculum ratio increased from 0.33 to 1.00.
10 Gunaseelan (1995) reported that the reduction in VS in parthenium increased from
11 23.3% to 40.9% as the inoculum ratio increased from 40.4 to 202.0 mL_{inoculum}/g_{substrate}.
12 In this study, the net SCFA yield increased from 248±29 to 710±34 mg/g_{vs} and the gas
13 yield increased from 26 to 153 mL as the inoculum ratio increased (Fig. 1). The ratio
14 of microorganisms to the VS in the substrate and the enzyme concentration increased
15 as the inoculum ratio increased, which increased the reaction rate, and thus, the higher
16 inoculum ratio enhanced hydrolysis and acidogenesis. The fermentation potential of
17 this amount of substrate could be explored by increasing the inoculum ratio.

18 3.2 Effect of different constant pH

19 To compare the results of the constant-pH and variable-pH samples in experiment C,
20 the effect of pH on fermentation was investigated in experiment B. The hydrolysis rate,

1 net SCFA yield, and gas yield are shown in Fig. 2. The highest hydrolysis rate was
2 $69\pm 7\%$ at pH 6.8. When the pH was maintained at an alkaline pH of 7.8, the hydrolysis
3 rate decreased to $45\pm 6\%$. When the pH was maintained at an acidic pH of 5.3, the
4 hydrolysis rate decreased to $38\pm 7\%$. Therefore, a neutral pH of approximately 6.8 is
5 the optimal pH for maize straw hydrolysis. Hu et al. (2004) found that cellulose
6 inoculated with rumen cultures degraded fastest when the pH was 6.8. In research by
7 Hu and Yu (2006) on anaerobic digestion of cattails with rumen cultures, the highest
8 VS conversion efficiency, 66%, was achieved at pH 6.7, which is similar to value
9 obtained in this study. Lignocellulosic materials, such as maize straw, consist of
10 cellulose and hemicellulose, which are cross-linked and strongly bound to lignin (Gu
11 et al., 2015). This complex structure severely restricts enzymatic and microbial
12 accessibility, and thus, the conversion rate and the reaction speed of fermentation are
13 limited (Pu et al., 2013). Fiber digestion is a pH-sensitive process (Sari et al., 2015),
14 and the reduction in fiber digestion at lower pH levels is likely the result of a reduction
15 in the growth or activity of the ruminal cellulolytic bacteria (Russell and Rychlik,
16 2001).

17 In contrast, the net SCFA yield remained nearly constant at approximately 721 ± 5
18 mg/g_{vs} for a pH between 5.8 and 7.8. The net SCFA yield was only 470 ± 25 mg/g_{vs} at a
19 pH of 5.3, which was 34.9% lower than that of the other samples (pH = 5.8-7.8; Fig. 2).
20 These results indicate that pH levels from 5.8 to 7.8 have only a slight influence on

1 acidogenesis, and pH levels below 5.8 inhibit acidogenesis. The acidogenesis bacteria
2 tolerate a wider range of pH than the hydrolysis bacteria (Ren and Wang, 2004).
3 However, certain types of ruminal bacteria are sensitive to pH, and their activity can be
4 inhibited if the pH is lower than 6.0 (Russell and Rychlik, 2001). A pH of less than 6.0
5 promotes lactic acid production (Zhao et al., 2015). The main products of digestion by
6 rumen microorganisms are acetic, propionic, and butyric acids (Liu, 1991). The SCFA
7 composition was not significantly influenced by the pH level when the pH was held
8 constant. Acetic acid, propionic acid, and n-butyric acid comprised approximately 50%,
9 20%, and 20% of the total SCFAs. At pH 5.3, the activity of the rumen microorganisms
10 responsible for acidogenesis, which mainly produces acetic, propionic, and n-butyric
11 acid, was inhibited.

12 The gas yields were 63, 143, 135, 125, 106, and 71 mL as the pH increased from 5.3 to
13 7.8. The gas yield at pH 5.8 was far higher than that at pH 5.3. The gas yield decreased
14 monotonically as the pH increased from 5.8 to 7.8. The gas volume detected was not
15 the actual volume of gas produced because of the higher solubility of CO₂ in higher-pH
16 solutions; i.e., more CO₂ was dissolved in and less was released from the samples with
17 higher pH levels.

18 3.3 Effect of variable pH

19 The pH levels of the constant-pH samples (C-10, C-30, and C-50) were held constant
20 at 6.8 during the 72 h experiments. The time histories of pH in the variable-pH samples

1 (V-10, V-30, and V-50) are shown in Fig. 3. The pH decreased as fermentation
2 progressed. The final values of pH for the V-10, V-30, and V-50 samples were
3 6.54 ± 0.12 , 5.84 ± 0.08 , and 5.31 ± 0.18 , respectively, and the corresponding final values
4 of the SCFAs concentration were $8,402 \pm 49$, $13,605 \pm 244$, and $17,556 \pm 50$ mg/L,
5 respectively. In the samples with higher initial substrate concentrations, more substrate
6 was fermented, more H^+ was produced, the final values of pH were lower, and the final
7 values of SCFAs concentration were higher.

8 The pH time histories of the variable-pH samples were linear during the first several
9 hours. The value of the correlation coefficient r^2 for pH and time was greater than
10 0.9900 for all of the samples, as shown in Table 2. The slopes of the pH curves during
11 this period for the V-10, V-30, and V-50 samples were -0.0420, -0.0633, and -0.1063,
12 respectively. The absolute values of the slope were higher in the samples with higher
13 initial substrate concentrations. This result indicates that the pH decreased faster in the
14 samples with higher initial substrate concentrations. Similar results were observed in a
15 previous study (Meng et al., 2013). The inhibition of fermentation products was not as
16 significant during the first several hours. The reaction speed in the samples with higher
17 initial substrate concentrations was higher because of the greater amounts of substrate
18 present. The fermentation potential of the amount of inoculum used in experiment C
19 could be explored by increasing the substrate concentration (10-50 g/L, inoculum ratio:
20 0.32-0.06). There were two main differences between the constant-pH and variable-pH

1 samples. One difference was that the average pH levels in the variable-pH samples were
2 lower than that in the constant-pH samples (6.8). The other difference was that the pH
3 was not constant in the variable-pH samples, as is the case in an actual rumen.

4 The hydrolysis rates for the constant-pH and variable-pH samples are shown in Fig. 4.
5 The hydrolysis rates of the constant-pH samples ($55\pm 2\%$, $51\pm 5\%$, and $37\pm 3\%$) were
6 slightly higher than those of the variable-pH samples ($49\pm 7\%$, $38\pm 1\%$, and $27\pm 1\%$). As
7 noted previously, a neutral pH of approximately 6.8 was the optimal value for maize
8 straw hydrolysis. The average pH levels of the variable-pH samples were lower than
9 those of the constant-pH samples. However, there was little indication that activity was
10 inhibited, especially in the samples with lower initial substrate concentrations.

11 The hydrolysis rates decreased as initial substrate concentration increased in both the
12 constant-pH and variable-pH samples. The same amounts of inoculum were used, and
13 the inoculum ratio decreased from 0.32 to 0.06 as the initial substrate concentration was
14 increased from 10 to 50 g/L. As stated previously, higher inoculum ratios resulted in
15 higher hydrolysis rates. The hydrolysis rate decreased as the initial substrate
16 concentration increased in this experiment.

17 As shown in Fig. 5, the net SCFA yields of the variable-pH samples (983 ± 13 , 894 ± 23 ,
18 and 1104 ± 5 mg/g_{vs}) were 23.6%, 29.0%, and 36.6% higher than those of the constant-
19 pH samples (795 ± 5 , 693 ± 10 , and 808 ± 31 mg/g_{vs}) for initial substrate concentrations of
20 10, 30, and 50 g/L, respectively. The average of the net SCFA yield for an inoculum

1 ratio of 0.79 in experiment A (where the pH was held constant at 6.8) and samples with
2 pH levels from 5.8 to 7.8 in experiment B (where the pH was held constant at values of
3 5.8 to 7.8) were 710 ± 34 and 721 ± 5 mg/g_{vs}, which were also lower than those of the
4 variable-pH samples in experiment C. Thus, the net SCFA yield for a constant pH
5 reached a maximum value of approximately 800 mg/g_{vs}. However, the net yield for a
6 variable pH increased to approximately 1,100 mg/g_{vs}. As previously stated, there were
7 two differences between the constant-pH and variable-pH samples. It was demonstrated
8 that a constant pH greater than 5.8 does not influence the net SCFA yield and
9 acidogenesis. Therefore, the variation in pH was the reason that the net SCFA yield in
10 the variable-pH samples was higher.

11 The net SCFA yields increased similarly with the initial substrate concentration in both
12 the constant-pH and variable-pH samples. The initial substrate concentration did not
13 significantly influence the net SCFA yield. The fermentation potential of the amount of
14 inoculum used in experiment C could be explored by increasing the substrate
15 concentration, as previously noted. The amount of inoculum used in each sample in
16 experiment C was the same (125 mL of rumen fluid), and the net SCFA yield was
17 calculated based on the hydrolyzed substrate. Furthermore, acidogenesis occurs more
18 readily than hydrolysis (Lee et al., 2014). A fermentation time of 72 h was sufficiently
19 long for acidogenesis to occur (Paul et al., 2011), and increasing the initial substrate
20 concentration did not affect acidogenesis more than hydrolysis. Hydrolysis limits the

1 degradation rate of straw (Hu et al., 2007). It is possible that the inoculum used in
2 experiment C contained more acidogenesis microorganisms than that used in
3 experiment A. The net SCFA yield and acidogenesis chemical thermodynamics were
4 similar for the various initial substrate concentrations.

5 Many aspects of microbial metabolism are greatly influenced by pH variations over the
6 range within which the population of microorganisms can grow. These aspects include
7 the utilization of carbon and energy sources, the efficiency of substrate degradation, the
8 synthesis of proteins and various types of storage material, and the release of metabolic
9 products from cells (Baily and Ollis, 1986). Microorganisms and the enzymes they
10 produce typically have higher activity at a neutral pH. Moreover, pH variations can
11 affect cell morphology and structure and therefore flocculation and adhesion
12 (Gottschalk, 1986). The rates of hydrolysis and acidogenesis, the growth rate of the
13 microbial population, the enzyme activity, and the product consumption rate are also
14 higher at a neutral pH. Although acidogenesis was not inhibited at a constant pH of 6.8,
15 the cumulative net SCFA yield was lower because of the higher product consumption
16 rate, i.e., methanogenesis. A variable pH can provide a range in which hydrolysis would
17 not be substantially inhibited and the product consumption rate is lower. A similar
18 effect occurs in fruits, where a high diurnal temperature difference promotes sugar
19 accumulation. Therefore, the pH should vary between neutral (6.8, which is optimal for

1 hydrolysis) and acidic (5.3 or lower, which inhibits product consumption but is not so
2 low that microorganisms are destroyed).

3 The gas yields for the constant-pH and variable-pH samples are shown in Fig. 6. Only
4 a small amount of methane was detected in the gas products, so methanogenesis can be
5 ignored. Hu and Yu (2006) did not detect methane in the gas products in the
6 fermentation of cattails with rumen microorganisms in the first 72 h. The gas yield
7 curves are approximately linear for the first 12 h. The slopes of the gas yield curves
8 during this period are similar for the constant-pH and variable-pH samples (see Fig. 6
9 and Table 2). Therefore, the gas production rates of both the constant-pH and variable-
10 pH samples were similar for the first 12 h. This result indicates that the fermentation
11 process was not significantly influenced by pH in the first 12 h. The final gas yields of
12 the variable-pH samples were higher than those of the constant-pH samples. This result
13 is consistent with those of VFA production shown in Fig. 5. The reason for this
14 consistency is that most of the gas is produced from acidogenesis (Ren and Wang, 2004),
15 so the gas yield and SCFA production are correlated. The gas production rates and final
16 gas yields of the samples with higher initial substrate concentrations were higher
17 because more of the substrate was present.

18 3.4 Mass balance

19 Although the final calculated mass balance (Table 3) were the average values on the
20 assumption that either pentose or hexose were the sole hydrolyzed products, the

1 confidence intervals were acceptable. The trend of solid residues, SCFA, and CO₂ and
2 H₂ mass balance was similar to the trend of hydrolysis rates, SCFA yields, and gas
3 yields, respectively. The acidogenesis process could be reflected by the ratio of other
4 products. The ratio of other products decreased as inoculum ratio increased in
5 experiment A. This is because inoculum was scarce in low inoculum ratio treatments
6 so that fermentation could not be completed in three days' time. When pH was
7 controlled at 5.3 in experiment B, the ratio of other products was 22.9±4.2 which was
8 obviously higher than other treatments. This is because acidogenesis process was
9 inhibited as talked in 3.2. The ratio of other products of V-10, V-30, and V-50
10 (variable pH condition) were nearly 0, while other products of C-10, C-30, and C-50
11 (constant pH condition) were higher. This indicates that a variable pH condition
12 indeed promotes acidogenesis process compared with constant pH condition.

13 **Conclusions**

14 Hydrolysis rate and net SCFA yield can be improved by higher inoculum ratio. A
15 neutral pH of approximately 6.8 is the optimal pH for hydrolysis. pH below 5.8
16 inhibits acidogenesis and pH 5.8 – 7.8 does not influence acidogenesis significantly.
17 A variable pH between neutral (6.8) and acid (5.3, or lower) pH promotes SCFA
18 accumulation at the same time does not inhibit hydrolysis and acidogenesis process
19 significantly. This biologically inspired variable pH strategy can be applied in other
20 organic solid wastes fermentation under continuous conditions. This strategy provided

1 a new approach to improve SCFAs production in future biochemical engineering
2 application.

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- 9

1 **Figure Captions**

2 Fig. 1 – Hydrolysis rate, net SCFA yield, and gas yield for various inoculum ratios.

3 Fig. 2 – Hydrolysis rate, net SCFA yield, and gas yield at various constant pH values.

4 Fig. 3 – Course of pH for variable-pH samples in experiments C.

5 Fig. 4 – Hydrolysis rates of constant-pH and variable-pH samples in experiment C.

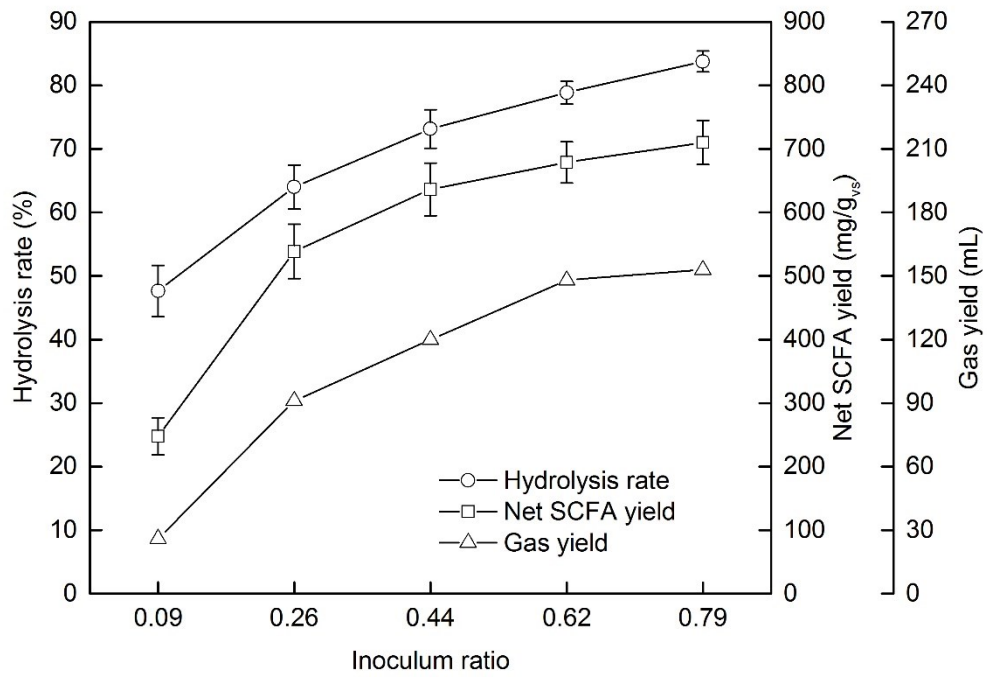
6 Fig. 5 – Net SCFA yield for the constant-pH and variable-pH samples in experiment

7 C.

8 Fig. 6 – Gas yields of constant-pH and variable-pH samples in experiment C.

9

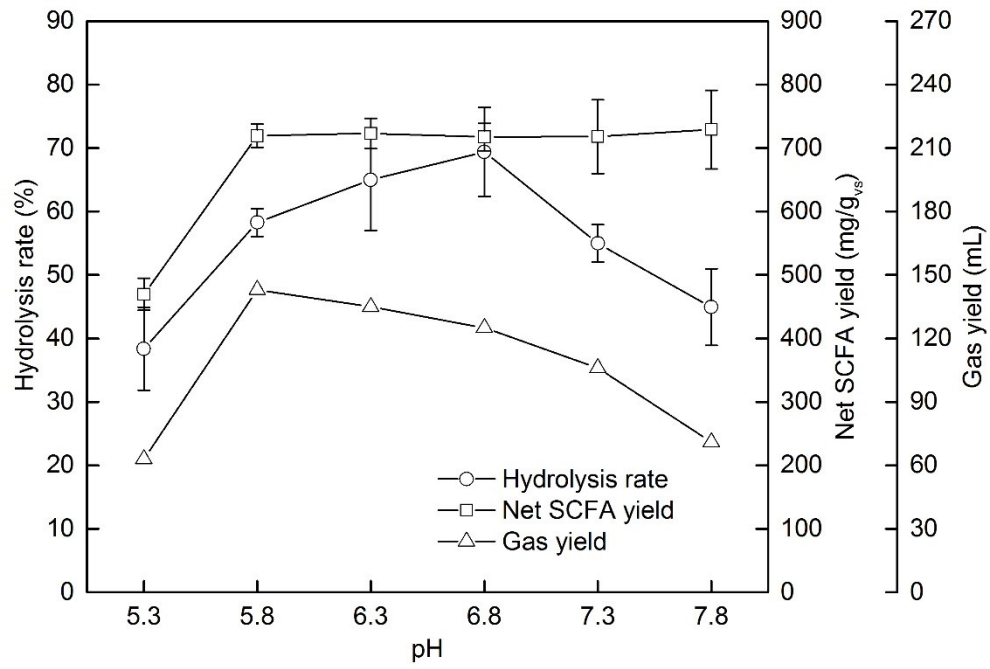
1 **Figures**



2

3 Fig. 1 – Hydrolysis rate, net SCFA yield, and gas yield for various inoculum ratios.

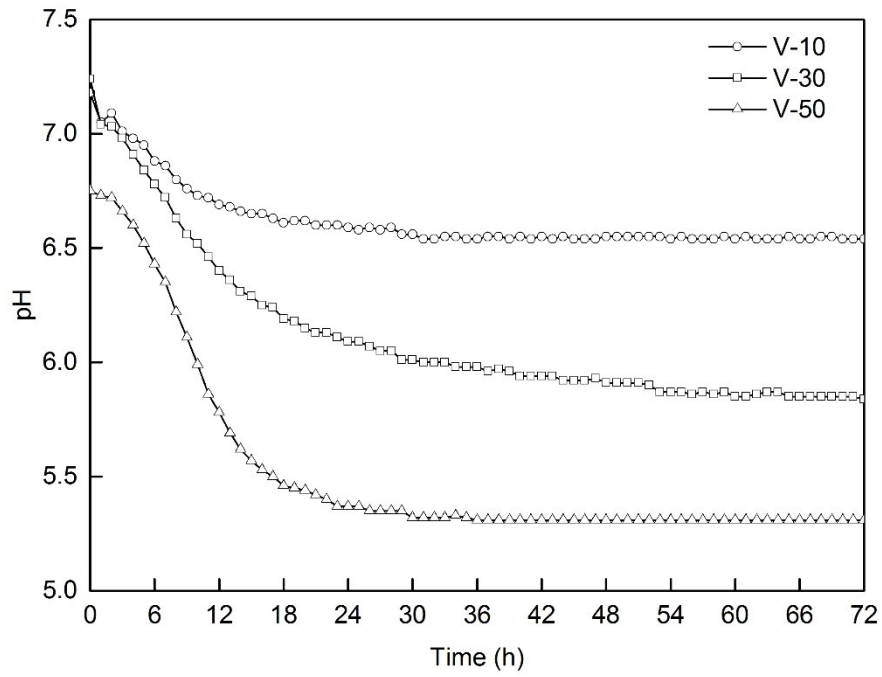
4



1

2 Fig. 2 – Hydrolysis rate, net SCFA yield, and gas yield at various constant pH values.

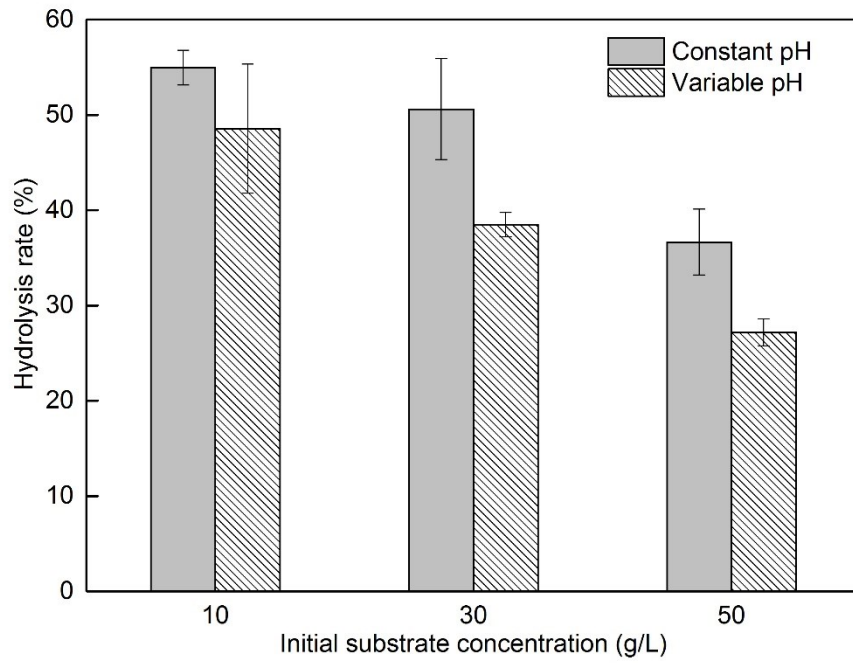
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2 Fig. 3 – Course of pH for variable-pH samples in experiments C.

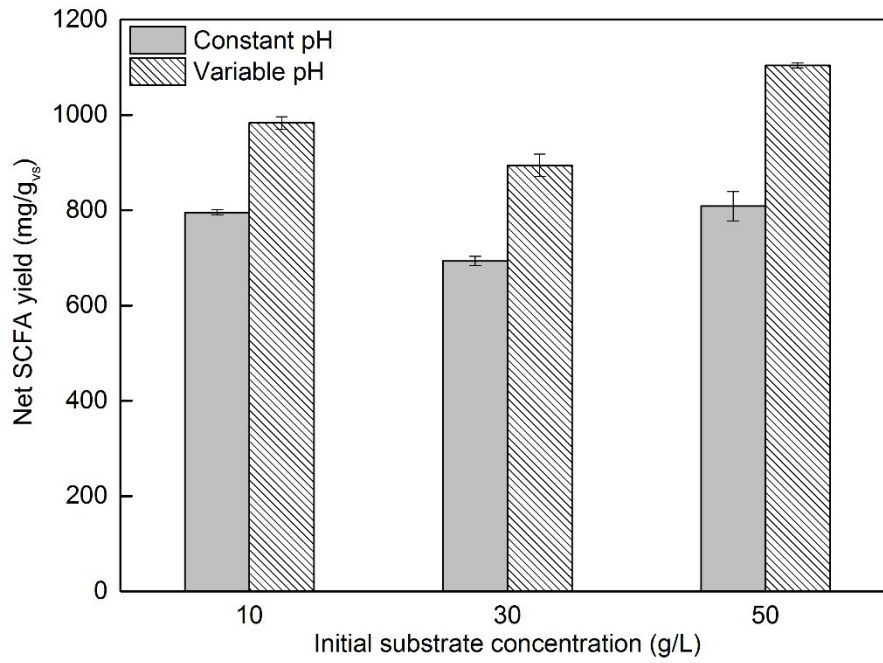
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2 Fig. 4 – Hydrolysis rates of constant-pH and variable-pH samples in experiment C.

3

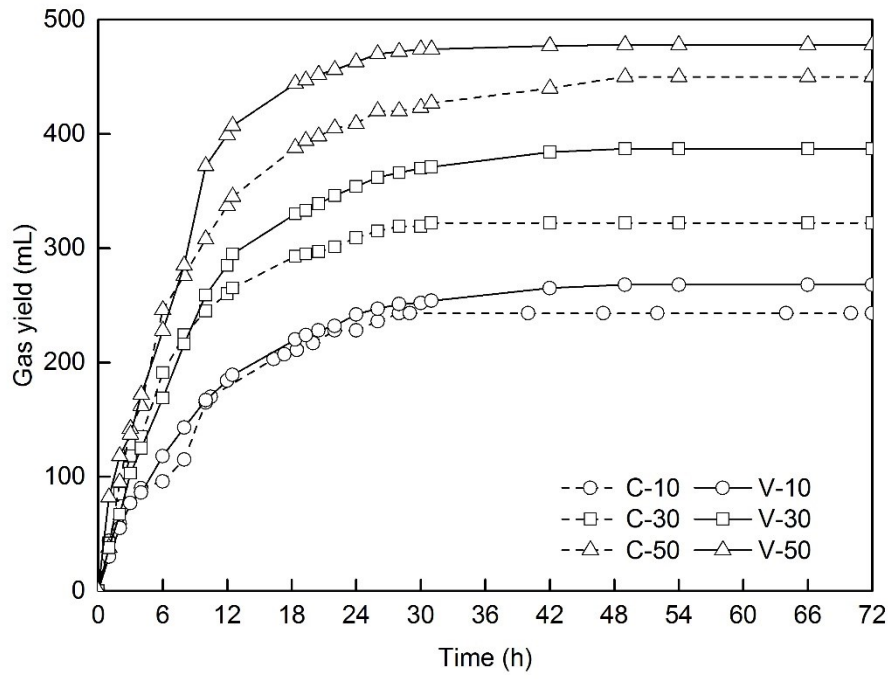


1

2 Fig. 5 – Net SCFA yield for the constant-pH and variable-pH samples in experiment

3 C.

4



1

2 Fig. 6 – Gas yields of constant-pH and variable-pH samples in experiment C.

3

1 **Table Captions**

2 Table 1 – Properties of the substrate and inoculums used in the experiments.

3 Table 2 – pH and gas yield for constant-pH and variable-pH samples (the pH time
4 histories are shown in Fig. 3, and the gas yield time histories are shown in Fig. 6).

5 Table 3 – Mass balance of all the treatments of the three experiments.

6

1 **Tables**

2 Table 1 – Properties of the substrate and inoculums used in the experiments.

Material	Component	Units	Experiment A	Experiment B	Experiment C
Straw	VS	%TS	91.73±0.34		
	C	%TS	42.42±0.14		
	H	%TS	2.16±0.04		
	N	%TS	0.59±0.09		
	Cellulose	%TS	33.25±1.97		
	Hemi-cellulose	%TS	28.47±0.65		
	Lignin	%TS	9.20±1.85		
Inoculum	TSS	g/L	14.10±1.87	9.59±0.36	11.35±0.74
	VSS	g/L	12.05±1.73	7.87±0.31	8.83±0.36
	Acetic acid	mg/L	5646±44	3621±53	5259±21
	Propionic acid	mg/L	3687±47	1406±22	2563±9
	n-Butyric acid	mg/L	3170±53	1572±2	2826±1
	Total SCFAs	mg/L	13226±157	7109±108	11292±32
	TCOD	mg/L	N.D.	23918±436	29232±631
	SCOD	mg/L	N.D.	10379±141	15869±110

3 Note: VS (volatile solids), TSS (total suspended solids), VSS (volatile suspended solids), Total SCFAS
 4 (total volatile fatty acids), TCOD (total chemical oxygen demand), SCOD (soluble chemical oxygen
 5 demand), N.D. (not determined).

6

- 1 Table 2 – pH and gas yield for constant-pH and variable-pH samples (the pH time
- 2 histories are shown in Fig. 3, and the gas yield time histories are shown in Fig. 6).

Sample No.	pH			Gas yield					
	V-10	V-30	V-50	C-10	C-30	C-50	V-10	V-30	V-50
Slope	-0.0420	-0.0633	-0.1063	21.06	27.63	35.59	21.90	26.43	32.72
r ²	0.9905	0.9952	0.9947	0.9227	0.9711	0.9717	0.9691	0.9902	0.9796

3

1 Table 3 – Mass balance of all the treatments of the three experiments.

Experiment No.	Treatments	Reactants			Products					
		Substrates	H ₂ O hydrolysis reaction	for acidogenesis reaction	H ₂ O for acidogenesis reaction	Solid residues	SCFAs	CO ₂	H ₂	Other products
A	0.09	100	5.9±1.1	1.4±0.1	45.7±3.1	9.7±0.6	5.6±0.3	0.4±0.0	46.0±3.4	
	0.26	100	7.6±1.4	2.4±0.0	33.4±3.6	26.2±0.8	15.1±0.1	0.9±0.0	34.4±3.9	
	0.44	100	8.5±1.6	2.3±0.2	26.2±0.8	38.2±0.9	21.9±0.5	1.2±0.0	23.4±1.9	
	0.62	100	8.8±1.6	2.0±0.6	24.2±0.6	43.9±1.0	25.0±1.2	1.3±0.1	16.4±2.3	
	0.79	100	8.9±1.7	1.9±0.9	23.4±0.3	48.8±0.5	27.7±1.9	1.4±0.2	9.5±2.6	
B	5.3	100	5.1±0.9	1.4±1.1	52.2±3.2	14.5±0.8	16.0±2.3	0.9±0.2	22.9±4.2	
	5.8	100	7.2±1.3	3.1±0.7	36.5±0.7	34.4±0.9	27.4±1.5	1.6±0.1	10.4±2.3	
	6.3	100	7.6±1.4	3.4±0.7	33.0±3.3	38.6±1.4	29.7±1.6	1.7±0.1	8.0±4.2	
	6.8	100	7.9±1.5	3.7±0.6	30.8±2.5	40.9±1.2	31.1±1.3	1.8±0.1	7.1±3.4	
	7.3	100	6.0±1.1	3.3±0.7	45.3±1.5	32.4±2.7	26.1±1.4	1.5±0.1	4.0±3.6	
	7.8	100	4.7±0.9	2.8±1.0	54.7±3.1	26.8±2.3	22.9±2.2	1.3±0.2	1.7±4.6	
C	C-10	100	6.8±1.3	3.2±0.1	39.2±1.7	36.3±0.2	20.8±0.3	1.3±0.0	12.4±2.1	
	C-30	100	5.8±1.1	2.5±0.4	46.8±4.6	29.1±0.4	17.0±0.8	1.0±0.1	14.4±4.8	
	C-50	100	3.8±0.7	2.2±0.4	61.5±2.8	24.6±0.9	14.4±0.9	0.9±0.1	4.6±3.2	
	V-10	100	5.8±1.1	3.0±0.2	46.9±5.7	39.7±0.5	22.9±0.4	1.3±0.0	-2.0±5.8	
	V-30	100	4.0±0.8	2.4±0.5	59.9±1.6	28.6±0.7	16.8±1.0	1.0±0.1	0.2±2.2	
	V-50	100	3.1±0.6	2.0±0.3	66.5±2.3	24.9±0.1	14.8±0.7	0.9±0.1	-1.9±2.4	

2