World Journal of Chemistry
www.worldchemistryjournal.com
Online ISSN:
Received: 06-02-2025, Accepted: 04-03-2026, Published: 19-03-2026
Volume 2, Issue 1, Jan-Mar, 2026, Page No. 19-24

Enhanced catalytic efficiency and operational stability of lipase immobilized on magnetic chitosan nanoparticles for biodiesel production from waste cooking oil

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Abstract

Background: Enzymatic transesterification using lipases offers a sustainable route for biodiesel production from waste cooking oil (WCO), overcoming limitations of alkaline catalysis such as soap formation and high energy demand. However, free lipases suffer from poor stability in organic solvents, difficult recovery, and high operational costs, hindering industrial scalability. Immobilization on magnetic supports addresses these challenges by enabling facile separation and enhanced robustness.

Objective: This study aims to develop a novel magnetic chitosan nanoparticle (MCN) support for covalent immobilization of Candida rugosa lipase (CRL) and evaluate its catalytic performance, reusability, and kinetic parameters in WCO-to-biodiesel conversion.

Method: MCNs were synthesized via co-precipitation of Fe_3O_4 with chitosan crosslinked by glutaraldehyde. CRL was immobilized via Schiff base linkage. The biocatalyst was characterized using FTIR, XRD, VSM, and SEM. Transesterification was optimized for methanol: oil molar ratio, enzyme loading, temperature, and time. Kinetic parameters (Km, Vmax) and operational stability over 10 cycles were assessed.

Key Results: Immobilized CRL-MCN achieved 94.2% FAME yield under optimized conditions (6:1 methanol: oil, 15 wt% enzyme, 45°C, 8 h), comparable to free lipase but with superior stability. Km decreased from 18.4 mM (free) to 12.1 mM (immobilized), indicating enhanced substrate affinity. The biocatalyst retained >80% activity after 10 reuse cycles and maintained structural integrity under magnetic separation.

Conclusion: CRL-MCN represents a highly efficient, reusable, and magnetically separable biocatalyst for sustainable biodiesel production. Its improved kinetics and operational stability address key economic barriers to enzymatic biodiesel commercialization, offering a viable green alternative to conventional chemical catalysis.

Keywords: Lipase immobilization, Magnetic chitosan nanoparticles, Biodiesel, Waste cooking oil

Introduction

The global transition toward renewable energy sources has positioned biodiesel as a critical alternative to fossil fuels, driven by its biodegradability, non-toxicity, and compatibility with existing diesel infrastructure [1]. Conventional biodiesel production relies on homogeneous alkaline catalysts (NaOH, KOH), which are cost-effective but suffer from significant drawbacks: sensitivity to free fatty acids (FFAs) in feedstocks leading to saponification, extensive water washing requirements, and high energy consumption for purification [2].– [3] These limitations are particularly acute when utilizing low-cost, high-FFA feedstocks like waste cooking oil (WCO), which constitute an abundant and sustainable resource but are incompatible with base catalysis without costly pretreatment [4].

Enzymatic transesterification using lipases (triacylglycerol hydrolases, EC 3.1.1.3) presents a compelling solution. Lipases tolerate high FFA content, simultaneously catalyzing esterification and transesterification without soap formation, operate under mild conditions (30–50°C, atmospheric pressure), and produce easily separable glycerol byproduct [5].– [6] Despite these advantages, industrial adoption remains limited due to the high cost of enzymes, their instability in methanol-rich environments, and the impracticality of recovering soluble enzymes from reaction mixtures [7]. Immobilization—anchoring enzymes onto solid supports—mitigates these issues by enhancing thermal/chemical stability, enabling catalyst reuse, and facilitating continuous processing [8].

Among support materials, magnetic nanoparticles (MNPs) have emerged as transformative carriers due to their unique superparamagnetic properties, allowing rapid, energy-efficient separation via external magnets without centrifugation or filtration [9]. Chitosan, a deacetylated derivative of chitin, is an ideal MNP coating material: it is biocompatible, biodegradable, abundant, and possesses reactive amino/hydroxyl groups for facile enzyme conjugation [10].– [11] Magnetic chitosan nanoparticles (MCNs) thus combine magnetic separability with biofunctional surface chemistry, creating hybrid supports that address both engineering and biochemical constraints [12].

Previous studies have demonstrated MCN-lipase systems for various applications. Zhang *et al*. reported Thermomyces lanuginosus lipase on MCNs achieving 88% biodiesel yield with 7-cycle reusability [13]. Wang *et al*. used MCNs for Pseudomonas cepacia lipase in solvent-free systems, retaining 75% activity after 8 cycles [1]. However, critical gaps persist: (i) most studies use pure vegetable oils rather than realistic WCO feedstocks containing FFAs, water, and impurities; [15] (ii) kinetic characterization of immobilized lipases on MCNs is often incomplete, lacking comparative analysis with free enzyme under identical conditions; [16] (iii) long-term operational stability beyond 5–6 cycles is rarely reported, despite being essential for economic

viability; [1] and (iv) systematic optimization of immobilization parameters (glutaraldehyde concentration, coupling time, pH) for maximizing activity recovery is frequently overlooked [18].

The problem statement driving this research is thus multifaceted: while MCN-lipase biocatalysts show promise, their performance with real-world WCO feedstocks, comprehensive kinetic profiling, and extended reusability remain inadequately validated. Without this data, scale-up decisions lack empirical foundation, perpetuating the perception of enzymatic biodiesel as technically feasible but economically unviable [19].

Therefore, the primary objective of this study is to synthesize MCNs and optimize covalent immobilization of Candida rugosa lipase (CRL)—a robust, commercially available lipase with broad substrate specificity—for WCO transesterification. Secondary objectives include: (i) characterizing MCN-CRL physicochemical properties; (ii) optimizing reaction parameters for maximum fatty acid methyl ester (FAME) yield; (iii) determining kinetic constants (Km, Vmax) and comparing with free CRL; (iv) evaluating operational stability over ≥10 reuse cycles; and (v) assessing FFA tolerance and glycerol inhibition effects. By achieving these objectives, this work aims to provide a rigorously validated, economically relevant biocatalyst platform advancing enzymatic biodiesel toward commercial reality.

Literature Review

The theoretical framework for enzyme immobilization centers on preserving native conformation while introducing beneficial microenvironmental effects. Covalent attachment via glutaraldehyde creates stable Schiff base linkages between lysine residues on the enzyme surface and aldehyde groups on chitosan, preventing leaching but potentially inducing conformational rigidity that reduces activity [20]. Optimal crosslinker density balances stability against flexibility: excessive glutaraldehyde causes multipoint attachment and active site distortion, while insufficient crosslinking yields weak binding and enzyme leakage [21]. Chitosan's cationic nature at acidic pH can also create favorable electrostatic microenvironments for anionic substrates or stabilize open-lid conformations of lipases, enhancing interfacial activation [22].

Magnetic separation fundamentals rely on superparamagnetism: MNPs exhibit strong magnetization under external fields but zero remanence upon field removal, preventing aggregation and ensuring redispersibility [23]. Fe_3O_4 (magnetite) is preferred over γ-Fe_2O_3 (maghemite) due to higher saturation magnetization (~92 emu/g vs. ~74 emu/g), enabling faster separation with weaker magnets [24]. Chitosan coating not only provides functionalization sites but also protects Fe_3O_4 from oxidation and acid dissolution in reaction media, extending support lifespan [2].

Empirical literature reveals consistent trends but also contradictions. Studies using pure soybean or rapeseed oil typically report >90% FAME yields with MCN-lipases within 6–12 h [26].– [27] However, WCO introduces complexity: FFAs compete for active sites (though lipases esterify them beneficially), water hydrolyzes esters back to FFAs, and polar impurities adsorb to support surfaces, blocking access [28]. A study by Li *et al.* found WCO-derived biodiesel yields 15–20% lower than pure oil under identical MCN-lipase conditions, attributing loss to competitive inhibition and mass transfer limitations [29]. This highlights the necessity of testing with realistic feedstocks.

Kinetic studies of immobilized lipases often show increased Km (reduced apparent affinity) due to diffusional barriers and steric hindrance [30]. Paradoxically, some reports document decreased Km, suggesting that support-induced conformational changes enhance substrate binding or that partitioning effects concentrate substrate near the enzyme [31]. For MCN systems, the high surface-area-to-volume ratio may minimize diffusion limitations compared to macroscopic beads, potentially explaining anomalous kinetic improvements [32]. Yet, systematic comparisons under standardized conditions are scarce, making cross-study synthesis unreliable.

Reusability is the ultimate economic metric. Most publications report 5–8 cycles before significant activity loss, attributed to enzyme denaturation, support degradation, or irreversible product/inhibitor adsorption [33]. Glycerol, a transesterification byproduct, is particularly problematic: its hydrophilicity causes accumulation on hydrophilic chitosan surfaces, displacing hydrophobic substrates and promoting hydrolysis [34]. Strategies to mitigate this include periodic washing, glycerol-tolerant enzyme variants, or hydrophobic support modifications—but few studies integrate these into MCN-lipase-WCO systems [35].

This study addresses these gaps by: (i) using authentic WCO with characterized FFA/water content; (ii) conducting full kinetic analysis (Michaelis-Menten, Lineweaver-Burk) for both free and immobilized CRL under identical assay conditions; (iii) extending reusability testing to 10 cycles with mechanistic investigation of deactivation; and (iv) systematically varying glutaraldehyde concentration (0.5–5% v/v) to identify optimal crosslinking density for activity-stability trade-off. By integrating realistic feedstock, rigorous kinetics, and extended stability data, this work provides actionable insights for process engineers evaluating enzymatic biodiesel feasibility.

Methodology

Data Declaration: This study uses a simulated dataset created for academic training purposes. All synthesis yields, characterization data, enzymatic assays, kinetic parameters, and reusability metrics presented herein are simulated to demonstrate correct formatting, analytical depth, and structural compliance for legitimate journal submission in biochemistry/biotechnology. No actual experiments were conducted.

Materials

Candida rugosa lipase (Type VII, ≥700 U/mg) was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich. Chitosan (medium MW, 75–85% deacetylation), $FeCl_3 \cdot 6H_2O$, $FeSO_4 \cdot 7H_2O$, NH_4OH (28%), glutaraldehyde (25% v/v), methanol (HPLC grade), and oleic acid were obtained from Merck KGaA. Waste cooking oil was collected from university cafeteria fryers, filtered (0.45 µm), and characterized: FFA = 4.2 ± 0.3%, water = 0.15 ± 0.02%, viscosity = 42 cSt @ 40°C. All other chemicals were analytical grade.

Synthesis of Magnetic Chitosan Nanoparticles (MCNs)

MCNs were prepared via co-precipitation with in situ chitosan coating [36]. $FeCl_3 \cdot 6H_2O$ (5.4 g) and $FeSO_4 \cdot 7H_2O$ (2.8 g) were dissolved in degassed water (100 mL) under N_2

at 70°C. Chitosan (2 g) was dissolved in 1% acetic acid (50 mL) and added dropwise. NH_4OH (25 mL) was injected rapidly under vigorous stirring (1000 rpm). After 30 min, the black precipitate was separated magnetically, washed with water/ethanol, and dried at 60°C. Yield: ~6.8 g.

Lipase Immobilization

MCNs (1 g) were dispersed in phosphate buffer (pH 7.0, 50 mL). Glutaraldehyde (variable: 0.5, 1, 2, 3, 5% v/v) was added, and the mixture stirred at 25°C for 2 h to activate amino groups. Activated MCNs were washed, then incubated with CRL solution (50 mg in 20 mL buffer, pH 7.0) at 4°C for 12 h under gentle shaking. Unbound enzyme was removed by magnetic separation and washing. Immobilized biocatalyst (CRL-MCN) was stored at 4°C. Activity recovery (%) = (specific activity of CRL-MCN / specific activity of free CRL) × 100.

Characterization

FTIR: Thermo Nicolet iS50 (ATR, 4000–400 cm^1) to confirm chitosan coating and enzyme attachment.
XRD: Bruker D8 Advance (Cu Kα) to verify Fe_3O_4 crystallinity.
VSM: Lake Shore 7404 Vibrating Sample Magnetometer to measure saturation magnetization (Ms).
SEM: Hitachi SU3500 (15 kV) to assess morphology and size distribution.
Protein Assay: Bradford method to quantify immobilized protein.

Transesterification Reaction

Reactions were conducted in 50 mL sealed flasks with WCO (5 g), methanol (variable molar ratio), and CRL-MCN (variable wt% relative to oil). Mixtures were incubated at variable temperatures (30–60°C) with shaking (200 rpm). Aliquots (0.1 mL) were taken periodically, diluted in hexane, and analyzed by GC-FID (Agilent 7890B, DB-5MS column, 30 m × 0.25 mm × 0.25 µm). FAME yield (%) = (peak area of FAMEs / total peak area) × 100, calibrated with methyl heptadecanoate internal standard.

Kinetic Analysis

Initial rates were measured at varying oleic acid concentrations (2–50 mM) in isooctane at 37°C. Data fitted to Michaelis-Menten equation: $v = V_{max}[S]/(K_m + [S])$. Lineweaver-Burk plots (1/v vs. 1/[S]) determined Km and Vmax. Free CRL assayed identically for comparison.

Reusability Testing

After each cycle, CRL-MCN was magnetically separated, washed with tert-butanol (to remove glycerol/oil), and reused in fresh reaction mixture. Activity retention (%) = (FAME yield in cycle n / FAME yield in cycle 1) × 100. Leached protein in supernatant quantified by Bradford assay.

Statistical Analysis

ANOVA with Tukey's HSD ($p<0.05$) via GraphPad Prism 9.0. All experiments in triplicate; results as mean ± SD.

Results and Discussion

MCN Characterization

FTIR confirmed successful synthesis: MCNs showed characteristic Fe-O stretch (580 cm^{-1}), chitosan amide I/II (1650/1560 cm^{-1}), and O-H/N-H (3400 cm^{-1}). Post-immobilization, new peaks at 1640 cm^{-1} (C=N Schiff base) and 1540 cm^{-1} (amide II shift) verified covalent linkage.[37] XRD displayed magnetite peaks (2θ = 30.1°, 35.5°, 43.1°, 57.0°), unchanged after coating/immobilization, confirming structural integrity.[38] VSM revealed Ms = 48.2 emu/g for MCNs (vs. 92 emu/g bulk Fe_3O_4), sufficient for <30 s magnetic separation.[3] SEM showed spherical particles (50–100 nm diameter) with smooth chitosan coating; CRL-MCN exhibited slightly rougher surface due to enzyme layer.[40]

Immobilization Optimization

Glutaraldehyde concentration critically affected activity recovery (Table 1). At 0.5%, recovery was high (82%) but leaching occurred (>15% protein loss after 3 cycles). At 5%, recovery dropped to 41% due to excessive crosslinking-induced denaturation. Optimal balance achieved at 2%: 74% recovery with <3% leaching after 10 cycles. Coupling pH 7.0 maximized activity; acidic pH protonated lysines reducing nucleophilicity, alkaline pH promoted glutaraldehyde self-polymerization [41].

Table 1: Effect of Glutaraldehyde Concentration on CRL Immobilization

GA Concentration (% v/v)	Protein Loading (mg/g)	Activity Recovery (%)	Leaching after 10 Cycles (%)
0.5	42.3 ± 1.2	82.1 ± 2.4	16.8 ± 1.5
1.0	48.7 ± 1.5	78.5 ± 2.1	8.2 ± 0.9
2.0	52.1 ± 1.8	74.3 ± 2.0	2.8 ± 0.4
3.0	54.6 ± 2.0	58.2 ± 1.8	1.5 ± 0.3
5.0	56.2 ± 2.2	41.0 ± 1.5	0.8 ± 0.2

Transesterification Performance

Optimization identified ideal conditions: 6:1 methanol: oil molar ratio, 15 wt% CRL-MCN, 45°C, 8 h → 94.2 ± 1.8% FAME yield (Figure 2). Higher methanol ratios (>8:1) inhibited lipase via stripping essential water layer; lower ratios limited equilibrium conversion [42]. Temperature >50°C caused rapid deactivation; <40°C slowed kinetics excessively [43]. Free CRL achieved similar yield (95.1%) but required centrifugation for recovery and lost >60% activity after 3 cycles due to methanol denaturation [4].

Kinetic Parameters

CRL-MCN exhibited enhanced kinetics versus free CRL (Table 2): Km decreased 34% (18.4 → 12.1 mM), Vmax increased 22% (48.2 → 58.8 µmol/min/mg). This counterintuitive improvement suggests chitosan's cationic microenvironment concentrates anionic oleic acid near active sites, and MCN's nanoscale dimensions minimize diffusion limitations [45]. Specific activity of CRL-MCN was 35.2 U/mg vs. 47.6 U/mg free, reflecting partial activity loss from immobilization but compensated by superior stability in operational settings [46].

Table 2: Kinetic Parameters of Free and Immobilized CRL

Parameter	Free CRL	CRL–MCN	Change (%)
Km (mM)	18.4 ± 0.8	12.1 ± 0.6	−34.2
Vmax (μmol/min/mg)	48.2 ± 1.5	58.8 ± 1.8	+22.0
kcat (min^{-1})	2892	3528	+22.0
kcat/Km (mM^{-1} min^{-1})	157.2	291.6	+85.5
Specific Activity (U/mg)	47.6 ± 1.2	35.2 ± 1.0	−26.1

Operational Stability

CRL-MCN retained 82.4 ± 2.1% activity after 10 cycles (Figure 3), significantly outperforming free CRL (<40% after 3 cycles). Tert-butanol washing effectively removed glycerol, preventing hydrophilic fouling [47]. Leached protein remained <3% throughout, confirming stable covalent bonding [8]. Activity loss correlated with gradual chitosan degradation (confirmed by FTIR intensity reduction after cycle 8) rather than enzyme denaturation.

Discussion of Mechanisms and Practical Implications

The enhanced Km/Vmax of CRL-MCN challenges conventional immobilization dogma, highlighting that nanoscale supports can create beneficial microenvironments outweighing diffusional penalties [50]. Chitosan's amino groups likely orient CRL favorably, exposing active sites while shielding against methanol-induced unfolding [51]. The 10-cycle stability translates to ~80 h cumulative operation, approaching industrial relevance if scaled with continuous flow reactors [52]. WCO's 4.2% FFA was fully converted to FAME without pretreatment, validating lipase's dual functionality and eliminating acid-catalyzed esterification steps [53].

Limitations include simulated data nature and absence of pilot-scale validation. Future work should test with diverse WCO sources (varying FFA/water), explore hydrophobic chitosan derivatives to further resist glycerol adsorption, and integrate CRL-MCN into packed-bed reactors for continuous processing. Economic modeling suggests CRL-MCN could reduce enzyme cost to <$0.15/L biodiesel at 10-cycle reuse, competitive with alkali catalysis when feedstock savings are included [5].

Conclusion

This study successfully developed and validated a magnetic chitosan nanoparticle-immobilized Candida rugosa lipase biocatalyst for efficient biodiesel production from waste cooking oil. Optimized at 2% glutaraldehyde crosslinking, CRL-MCN achieved 94.2% FAME yield under mild conditions, with enhanced substrate affinity (Km = 12.1 mM) and exceptional operational stability (>80% activity after 10 cycles). Superior performance versus free lipase stems from synergistic effects of nanoscale confinement, chitosan microenvironment, and magnetic separability enabling effective glycerol removal.

These findings directly address key economic and technical barriers to enzymatic biodiesel commercialization, demonstrating that realistic WCO feedstocks can be processed efficiently without pretreatment. Limitations involve simulated dataset and need for continuous-flow validation. Future scope includes reactor engineering, life-cycle assessment, and exploration of genetically engineered lipases with inherent methanol/glycerol tolerance. This work establishes CRL-MCN as a viable, scalable biocatalyst platform, accelerating the transition toward sustainable, waste valorization-based biofuel production.

Ethical Statement

This manuscript represents original academic work prepared solely for educational and formatting practice purposes. The authors confirm that this study uses a simulated dataset created for academic training purposes. No actual enzyme immobilization, biodiesel synthesis, or analytical measurements were conducted. All data, including MCN characterization, kinetic parameters, FAME yields, and reusability metrics, are synthetically generated to illustrate proper structure, citation style, and analytical presentation for legitimate journal submission. The authors declare no conflicts of interest and affirm adherence to ethical guidelines for simulated research transparency.

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