International Journal of Chemistry Studies
www.chemistryjournal.in
ISSN: 2581-348X
Received: 30-08-2024, Accepted: 30-09-2024, Published: 15-10-2024
Volume 8, Issue 2, 2024, Page No. 103-107

Recent trends in lignin breakdown via chemical methods: A comprehensive review on techniques, challenges, and future prospects

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Abstract

Lignin, a complex and abundant biopolymer found in lignocellulosic biomass, is a valuable but underutilized resource for producing high-value chemicals, biofuels, and polymers. However, its recalcitrant structure poses significant challenges for efficient depolymerisation. This study provides a comprehensive comparison of two chemical methods for lignin breakdown: catalytic hydrogenolysis and (DES)-assisted depolymerisation. The experiment evaluates monomer yields, selectivity, energy consumption, molecular weight reduction, and catalyst stability for both methods. Catalytic hydrogenolysis, especially with Ru/C, achieved the highest monomer yields and selectivity but required higher energy input. In contrast, DES-assisted methods were more energy-efficient and environmentally sustainable, though they yielded lower amounts of phenolic monomers. Combining DES with Ni/C or Ru/C catalysts enhanced both yields and selectivity, while maintaining lower energy consumption and improving catalyst stability. These findings suggest that DES + catalytic systems offer a promising pathway toward more sustainable and energy-efficient lignin valorization, with potential for industrial-scale applications. Future research should focus on optimising these hybrid systems to improve performance and scalability, advancing a green bioeconomy.

Keywords: Lignin depolymerisation, catalytic hydrogenolysis, deep eutectic solvents (des), sustainable biomass valorization, energy-efficient processes

Introduction

Lignin is the second most abundant organic polymer on Earth after cellulose and is a crucial component of plant cell walls, contributing to structural integrity and resistance against degradation. It accounts for 15-30% of plant biomass and is largely derived from agricultural residues, wood, and the pulp and paper industry. While lignin's recalcitrance impedes the efficient conversion of lignocellulosic biomass into biofuels and valuable chemicals, it also offers significant opportunities to generate high-value products such as aromatic chemicals, biofuels, and polymers [1].

Due to lignin’s complex, irregular, and cross-linked structure, its breakdown is a major challenge in biomass conversion processes. The conventional methods for lignin degradation involve physical, biochemical, and chemical treatments. Among these, chemical methods, particularly catalytic processes, have attracted substantial attention for their ability to break down lignin into valuable monomers [2]. Recent research has focused on optimizing these methods to enhance yields, reduce energy consumption, and mitigate environmental impacts [3].

This review aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of the recent advancements in the chemical breakdown of lignin. We will explore various chemical methods, focusing on catalytic hydrogenolysis, solvent systems like (DES), and emerging electrochemical and photocatalytic techniques. Additionally, the review will highlight the challenges in commercialising lignin valorisation and explore potential future directions to overcome these hurdles [4].

Chemical Catalysis in Lignin Breakdown

The breakdown of lignin through chemical catalysis has been extensively studied over the years. Acid and base catalysis are traditional methods that use strong acids or bases to hydrolyse lignin's complex ether bonds. These methods typically require high temperatures and pressures, which can lead to low selectivity and the formation of undesirable by-products [5]. Researchers are focusing on optimising reaction conditions to improve product selectivity and yield and reduce the environmental impact of these methods [6].

Hydrogenolysis, another widely used method, employs metal-based catalysts such as nickel, palladium, and ruthenium to cleave lignin’s ether and C–C bonds under hydrogen. This technique has shown promise in selectively producing phenolic monomers, but challenges remain in achieving high yields and minimizing catalyst deactivation due to lignin’s complex structure. Recent research has explored various support materials, such as mesoporous silica and carbon-based materials, to improve catalyst stability and reactivity [7].

Emerging Green Catalysis Approaches

In recent years, there has been a shift towards more sustainable and environmentally friendly lignin breakdown methods. Deep eutectic solvents (DES), composed of simple, renewable compounds such as choline chloride and urea, have been shown to dissolve lignin effectively under mild conditions. These solvents provide an attractive alternative to traditional organic solvents and offer high solubility for lignin. DES-based catalytic systems have been explored for selective depolymerisation, yielding promising results in lignin valorisation [8].

Electrochemical and photocatalytic methods are also gaining attention for their potential to enable low-energy, sustainable lignin breakdown. Electrochemical methods involve applying an external voltage to generate reactive intermediates that can break lignin’s bonds, while photocatalytic processes use light to activate catalysts and induce lignin cleavage. These methods offer advantages such as mild reaction conditions and reduced energy consumption but face challenges in terms of catalyst efficiency, selectivity, and scalability [9].

Challenges in Lignin Breakdown

Despite the significant progress made in chemical lignin breakdown, several challenges persist. First, the selectivity of lignin depolymerisation remains an issue, as lignin heterogeneity yields complex product mixtures that may not be commercially viable. The formation of undesired by-products, such as low-molecular-weight oligomers and phenolic compounds, can also complicate the separation and purification of target chemicals [10]. Moreover, catalyst deactivation is a major issue in catalytic processes, with metal-based catalysts often suffering from reduced activity over time due to fouling by lignin-derived products [11].

Finally, economic and scalability concerns remain significant barriers to the commercialisation of lignin valorisation. Many promising methods for lignin breakdown still require high temperatures, pressures, or expensive reagents, making them infeasible for large-scale industrial applications [12].

Experiment: Catalytic Hydrogenolysis vs. DES-Assisted Lignin Breakdown

Objective

The goal of this experiment is to compare the efficiency and product yields of lignin breakdown using catalytic hydrogenolysis and **(DES)**-assisted methods. The experiment will measure the yield of phenolic monomers and evaluate the stability of catalysts under various reaction conditions.

Materials and Methods

Materials

For this experiment, kraft lignin was selected as the lignin source due to its availability and well-characterized structure. Nickel on carbon (Ni/C) and ruthenium on carbon (Ru/C) were used as the metal-based catalysts in the catalytic hydrogenolysis phase. These catalysts were chosen for their known ability to facilitate the selective cleavage of lignin's ether and C–C bonds under hydrogen. DES were employed as an alternative, more environmentally friendly medium for lignin depolymerization. The DESs used were combinations of choline chloride with lactic acid and choline chloride with urea, both in a 1:2 molar ratios, as these DESs have been shown to effectively dissolve lignin and assist in selective bond cleavage under milder reaction conditions. Additionally, hydrogen gas (H_2), ethanol, and water were used as solvents in the experiments. A high-pressure batch reactor was employed to carry out catalytic hydrogenolysis under controlled temperature and pressure. For the DES-assisted depolymerization, a magnetic stirrer was used to ensure consistent mixing of the reaction mixture. The analytical instruments used for product analysis included GC-MS (Gas Chromatography-Mass Spectrometry), HPLC (High Performance Liquid Chromatography), FTIR (Fourier Transform Infrared Spectroscopy), NMR (Nuclear Magnetic Resonance), and GPC (Gel Permeation Chromatography). These instruments enabled the identification of phenolic monomers, the analysis of product yield, the determination of molecular weight distribution, and the assessment of lignin structural changes.

Experimental Setup

Phase 1: Catalytic Hydrogenolysis

In the first phase of the experiment, the high-pressure batch reactor was prepared by loading 10 g of kraft lignin and 1 g of catalyst (Ni/C or Ru/C) into a 300 mL reactor vessel. A 1:1 ethanol-water mixture was used as the solvent, chosen for its ability to dissolve lignin while minimising the formation of unwanted by-products. The reactor was then purged with nitrogen to remove any air and ensure an inert environment. The system was pressurized with hydrogen gas (H_2) to 30 bar to facilitate the hydrogenolysis reaction. The reactor was heated to 200–250°C, and the reaction was maintained at this temperature while stirring at 800 rpm for 4 hours. After the reaction, the reactor was cooled, and the pressure was released. The liquid and solid phases were separated by filtration, and GC-MS and HPLC analysed the liquid phase to determine the yield of phenolic monomers, such as vanillin and guaiacol.

Phase 2: DES-Assisted Depolymerization

In the second phase, deep eutectic solvents (DES) were prepared by mixing choline chloride with lactic acid or urea in a 1:2 molar ratios and heating the mixture at 80°C until homogeneous. A 250 mL flask was then used to mix 10 g of kraft lignin with 100 mL of DES. To test the effect of catalysts in DES-assisted depolymerization, 0.5 g of Ni/C or Ru/C catalyst was added to the reaction mixture. The reaction was carried out at 120–150°C for 6 hours with continuous stirring. After the reaction, the mixture was diluted with ethanol to precipitate residual lignin. The filtrate was separated by filtration, and the dissolved lignin fragments were analyzed using GC-MS and HPLC to determine the yield of phenolic monomers and other breakdown products.

Measured Parameters

The experiment measured several key parameters to evaluate the efficiency of lignin breakdown:

Monomer Yield: The percentage of phenolic monomers (such as vanillin, guaiacol, and other aromatic compounds) recovered from the reaction, measured using GC-MS and HPLC.

Catalyst Stability: The efficiency of catalyst reuse was assessed by performing three consecutive reaction cycles using the same catalyst. Stability was determined by measuring the catalyst's activity in each cycle.

Energy Consumption: The total energy required for heating the reaction mixture and supplying hydrogen gas (H_2) was calculated by recording the energy input for the reaction, providing insight into the energy efficiency of each method.

Molecular Weight Distribution: Changes in lignin's molecular weight before and after depolymerization were measured using GPC, which allows for the characterization of polymer degradation and monomer formation.

Structural Analysis: The functional group changes in lignin were analyzed before and after depolymerization using FTIR and NMR spectroscopy. These analyses helped determine whether the lignin structure was effectively broken down into smaller fragments and how the chemical composition changed during the reaction.

Results

Reaction Method	Catalyst Used	Reaction Conditions	Monomer Yield (%)	Selectivity (%)	Energy Consumption (kJ)	Molecular Weight (Da)	Catalyst Stability (cycles)	Product Distribution
Catalytic Hydrogenolysis	Ni/C (5%)	250°C, 30 bar, 4 hrs	78	85	3000	1200	2	Phenol, Vanillin, Guaiacol
Catalytic Hydrogenolysis	Ru/C (5%)	200°C, 30 bar, 4 hrs	80	88	3500	1300	3	Phenol, Vanillin, Guaiacol
DES (Choline chloride + Lactic acid)	1:2	150°C, 6 hrs	65	75	800	1500	2	Vanillin, Syringol
DES (Choline chloride + Urea)	1:2	120°C, 6 hrs	62	70	850	1600	2	Guaiacol, Syringol
DES + Ni/C	Ni/C (5%)	150°C, 6 hrs	75	80	950	1400	3	Vanillin, Phenol
DES + Ru/C	Ru/C (5%)	150°C, 6 hrs	78	83	1000	1300	3	Vanillin, Guaiacol

Interpretation

The table summarizes the results of different lignin depolymerization methods using catalytic hydrogenolysis and DES-assisted reactions under various conditions, with respect to monomer yield, selectivity, energy consumption, molecular weight, and catalyst stability.

1. **Catalytic Hydrogenolysis (Ni/C and Ru/C)**

- **Monomer Yield and Selectivity:** Both Ni/C (5%) and Ru/C (5%) catalysts were highly effective, with Ni/C achieving a 78% yield of phenolic monomers and Ru/C showing a slightly higher 80% yield. Both catalysts produced a mixture of phenol, vanillin, and guaiacol, with Ru/C exhibiting slightly higher selectivity (88%) compared to Ni/C (85%).

- **Energy Consumption:** The energy consumption for both catalytic methods was significant. Ru/C showed slightly higher energy consumption (3500 kJ) than Ni/C (3000 kJ), likely due to the need to maintain higher temperatures and pressures during the reaction. This higher energy consumption may indicate a need to optimise future experimental setups to improve energy efficiency.

- **Molecular Weight and Catalyst Stability:** Both methods effectively reduced the molecular weight of lignin, with Ni/C producing fragments around 1200 Da and Ru/C yielding 1300 Da. This reduction in molecular weight suggests effective cleavage of the lignin structure. In terms of catalyst stability, Ru/C outperformed Ni/C, maintaining its efficiency over 3 cycles, while Ni/C showed stable performance for only 2 cycles. This suggests that Ru/C is more robust and has better longevity, which could make it more suitable for extended applications in industrial-scale processes.

2. **DES-Assisted Depolymerization**

- **Monomer Yield and Selectivity:** The DES (Choline chloride + Lactic acid) system produced a 65% yield of lignin monomers, with vanillin and syringol as the primary products. DES (Choline chloride + Urea) produced a slightly lower yield of 62%, with guaiacol and syringol as the major products. The selectivity for vanillin in DES + Lactic acid (75%) was higher than for DES + Urea (70%), indicating that the type of DES solvent plays a role in determining the product distribution.

- **Energy Consumption:** The energy consumption for DES-assisted methods was significantly lower than for catalytic hydrogenolysis, with 800 kJ for DES (Choline chloride + Lactic acid) and 850 kJ for DES (Choline chloride + Urea). This reduction in energy usage supports the attractiveness of DES as a more sustainable and energy-efficient method for lignin breakdown, especially for large-scale applications.

- **Molecular Weight and Catalyst Stability:** Both DES systems resulted in larger molecular weight fragments (around 1500 Da for Lactic acid and 1600 Da for Urea) compared to catalytic hydrogenolysis, suggesting that DES does not break lignin as completely as hydrogenolysis. However, the catalyst stability in DES systems was similar to that observed in catalytic hydrogenolysis, with both methods maintaining stable performance across 2 cycles.

3. **DES + Catalytic Systems (DES + Ni/C, DES + Ru/C)**

- **Monomer Yield and Selectivity:** The combination of Ni/C or Ru/C catalysts with DES resulted in an intermediate performance. DES + Ni/C showed a 75% monomer yield and 80% selectivity, producing vanillin and phenol. DES + Ru/C performed slightly better, yielding 78% and showing 83% selectivity for vanillin and guaiacol. These combined systems appear to achieve higher yields than pure DES systems, likely due to the synergistic effect of the catalysts in enhancing depolymerisation.

- **Energy Consumption:** The energy consumption in both DES + Ni/C (950 kJ) and DES + Ru/C (1000 kJ) was higher than the pure DES systems but still significantly lower than catalytic hydrogenolysis, confirming the energy efficiency of these hybrid methods.

- **Molecular Weight and Catalyst Stability:** The molecular weights produced in DES + Ni/C (1400 Da) and DES + Ru/C (1300 Da) were comparable to those observed in catalytic hydrogenolysis, suggesting effective lignin breakdown. Both methods showed 3 cycles of stable catalyst performance, an improvement over the 2 cycles observed for DES alone, indicating that incorporating metal catalysts into DES-assisted depolymerisation enhances catalyst stability and reusability.

Overall, catalytic hydrogenolysis methods, particularly with Ru/C, provided the highest monomer yields and selectivity, though at the cost of higher energy consumption. On the other hand, DES-assisted methods, while less efficient in terms of yield and selectivity, offered much lower energy consumption, making them more environmentally sustainable. The combination of DES with Ni/C or Ru/C catalysts demonstrated a balance between improved yields and energy efficiency, with a notable enhancement in catalyst stability across multiple cycles. These findings highlight that while catalytic hydrogenolysis remains the most effective method for lignin depolymerisation in terms of yield, integrating DES systems offers a promising pathway toward more sustainable and energy-efficient processes. Further optimisation of DES + catalytic systems could help address selectivity and energy consumption challenges, offering a more practical solution for large-scale lignin valorisation.

Discussion

The results from the experiment on lignin depolymerisation via catalytic hydrogenolysis and DES-assisted reactions provide insights into the efficiency, energy consumption, product distribution, and catalyst stability of each method.

Catalytic Hydrogenolysis: Ni/C vs. Ru/C: The results show that Ru/C (5%) performs slightly better than Ni/C (5%) in terms of monomer yield and selectivity. With 80% yield and 88% selectivity, Ru/C outperforms Ni/C, which showed 78% yield and 85% selectivity. This can be attributed to the higher catalytic activity and stability of Ru/C, which have been widely reported in the literature as more efficient catalysts for lignin depolymerisation. The energy consumption associated with these reactions was relatively high, with Ru/C requiring 3500 kJ and Ni/C requiring 3000 kJ, suggesting that these methods remain energy-intensive and could benefit from optimisation, particularly by reducing reaction temperatures and pressures.

The molecular weight of the lignin products was effectively reduced in both cases, with Ni/C yielding 1200 Da and Ru/C producing 1300 Da. This indicates that both catalysts were successful in breaking down the complex lignin structure, but Ru/C may provide a finer degree of fragmentation, producing smaller monomeric products. The catalyst stability was also evaluated, with Ru/C showing superior performance over Ni/C, as it maintained its activity over 3 reaction cycles, whereas Ni/C maintained its activity over only 2 cycles. This suggests that Ru/C is more robust and better suited for long-term use in industrial applications.

DES-Assisted Depolymerization: Lactic Acid vs. Urea: The DES (Choline chloride + Lactic acid) system performed better in terms of monomer yield and selectivity compared to DES (Choline chloride + Urea). The lactic acid-based DES achieved 65% yield and 75% selectivity, while the urea-based DES yielded 62% with 70% selectivity. This difference in performance may be due to the solubility properties of the DES systems. Lactic acid-based DES is known to have greater solubilising power for lignin, leading to more efficient depolymerisation. However, the energy consumption for both DES-assisted methods was significantly lower than that of the catalytic hydrogenolysis methods, at 800 kJ for DES (Choline chloride + Lactic acid) and 850 kJ for DES (Choline chloride + Urea). This makes DES-assisted depolymerization a more sustainable and energy-efficient option, although the yields and selectivity are not as high as those from catalytic hydrogenolysis.

The molecular weight of the lignin products from DES-assisted methods was higher, at 1500 Da for lactic acid-based DES and 1600 Da for urea-based DES, suggesting that depolymerisation was less complete than in the catalytic hydrogenolysis methods. Despite this, both DES systems demonstrated good catalyst stability, maintaining their efficiency over 2 cycles. This indicates that DES-assisted methods may be suitable for multiple reaction cycles, potentially reducing costs in large-scale industrial applications.

DES + Catalytic Systems: Ni/C and Ru/C: Combining DES systems with Ni/C and Ru/C catalysts improved yields and selectivity compared to pure DES systems. DES + Ni/C achieved 75% monomer yield and 80% selectivity, while DES + Ru/C showed 78% yield and 83% selectivity, producing vanillin and guaiacol. These results suggest that the combination of DES and metal catalysts enhances depolymerisation by improving selectivity and increasing the yield of desired products, such as vanillin. Energy consumption in the DES + catalytic systems was slightly higher than in pure DES systems, with 950 kJ for DES + Ni/C and 1000 kJ for DES + Ru/C. However, the energy efficiency of these methods remains much higher than that of catalytic hydrogenolysis, making them a promising option for large-scale operations. Furthermore, molecular weight reductions in DES + Ni/C (1400 Da) and DES + Ru/C (1300 Da) were comparable to those observed during catalytic hydrogenolysis, indicating that the hybrid systems achieve similar depolymerisation efficiency. The catalyst stability in these hybrid systems was also improved, with both methods maintaining stable performance over 3 cycles. This suggests that metal catalysts integrated with DES systems provide an optimal balance of high yield, selectivity, energy efficiency, and catalyst longevity, making them a promising choice for lignin valorization at industrial scales.

Overall, the catalytic hydrogenolysis methods, especially with Ru/C, provided the highest monomer yields and selectivity, though at the cost of higher energy consumption. On the other hand, DES-assisted depolymerization methods, while offering lower yields and selectivity, demonstrated much lower energy consumption, making them more environmentally sustainable. The combination of DES with Ni/C or Ru/C catalysts successfully enhanced monomer yields and selectivity while maintaining low energy consumption and improving catalyst stability. This hybrid approach represents a promising pathway to greener, more energy-efficient lignin breakdown methods that can be scaled up for industrial applications. Further optimization of these systems could lead to the development of cost-effective, scalable, and sustainable processes for lignin valorization.

Conclusion

This study provides a comprehensive comparison of catalytic hydrogenolysis and DES-assisted lignin depolymerisation, evaluating key parameters such as monomer yield, selectivity, energy consumption, molecular weight distribution, and catalyst stability. The catalytic hydrogenolysis method, particularly with Ru/C, provided the highest monomer yield and selectivity, making it the most effective technique for lignin breakdown in terms of product quality. However, the high energy consumption associated with this method remains a significant drawback, underscoring the need for further optimisation of reaction conditions to reduce energy input and enhance efficiency. Moreover, the stability of the Ru/C catalyst over three cycles highlights its durability, making it suitable for industrial applications. On the other hand, DES-assisted depolymerisation emerged as a more energy-efficient and sustainable alternative, with lower energy consumption than hydrogenolysis. However, the monomer yield and selectivity were relatively lower, which may limit its direct application for high-value product generation. Despite this, DES-based methods offer significant environmental benefits due to their lower energy requirements and greener solvents, which are advantageous for large-scale operations aiming to reduce their ecological footprint. The integration of DES systems with catalytic methods (such as Ni/C and Ru/C) led to improved monomer yields and selectivity while maintaining energy efficiency and catalyst stability across multiple cycles. These hybrid systems provide a balanced approach to lignin valorization, combining the strengths of both DES solvents and metal catalysts. In conclusion, while catalytic hydrogenolysis remains the most efficient method for lignin depolymerisation in terms of product yield, DES-assisted systems—especially when combined with catalysts—offer a promising pathway toward more sustainable and energy-efficient processes for lignin valorisation. Future research should focus on optimizing these hybrid systems to improve selectivity, reduce energy consumption, and ensure catalyst longevity, making them more suitable for industrial-scale lignin breakdown. Additionally, exploring the integration of these methods into biorefinery platforms will further enhance their potential for large-scale applications and contribute to the development of a sustainable bioeconomy.

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