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Rhamnolipid based glycerol-in-diesel microemulsion fuel: Formation and characterization



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HIGHLIGHTS

• RL based diesel microemulsion system was effective on glycerol upgrading.

• Properties of the glycerol-in-diesel microemulsion fuel were comparable to diesel.

• CP and PP of microemulsion fuel were improved by the addition of glycerol.

• Glycerol dispersed in microemulsion fuel acted like an anti-freezing additive.

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Keywords: Glycerol Microemulsion Rhamnolipid Fuel additive Diesel Microemulsion technology was found to be a promising fuel-upgrading process for glycerol. Biosurfactant rhamnolipid (RL) was successfully tested to obtain nano-scaled glycerol-in-diesel microemulsion (GDM) and glycerol/water-in-diesel microemulsion (G/WDM). These microemulsion fuels were stored at 4 °C without phase separation for over six months. Fuel properties like high heating value (HHV), dynamic viscosity, corrosivity, and thermal decomposition characteristics of GDM and G/WDM were comparable to those of diesel. Thus, the microemulsion fuel may be qualified as commodity fuel like diesel. In addition, the cold flow properties cloud point and pour point of GDM and G/WDM were improved by the addition of glycerol or glycerol/water mixtures. Glycerol—the commonly used raw material for fuel additive production—could be directly introduced into fuel as cold flow property improver by microemulsion technology.

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1. Introduction

Glycerol, also known as glycerine or propane-1, 2, 3-triol, is primarily produced during transesterification, saponification, and hydrolysis reaction. It is notably known as a valuable byproduct of biodiesel production. Transesterification in biodiesel production would result in the production of crude glycerol, containing many impurities such as methanol, water, soap, ash, and other organic materials [1,2]. Nearly 18 billion gallons (5.99 million tones) of biodiesel was produced in the USA in 2013, which equated to approximately 132 million gallons (0.63 million tones) of glycerol [2]. The large amount of crude glycerol may induce environmental problem, as it is difficult to be disposed of in the environment. The researches on the application and conversion of glycerol to value-added commodity chemicals, fuels and fuel additives have drawn much attention lately [1,3,4].

Combustion is an advantageous and simple method to make use of glycerol in large amounts as it does not require any purification or processing [5]. However, glycerol is difficult to burn due to several factors such as low energy density, high viscosity, and high auto-ignition temperature [6]. The incomplete combustion from direct burning of glycerol would lead to the emissions of acrolein and carcinogen and the high yield of ash [5–7]. Blending glycerol into diesel or gasoline through emulsification/microemulsification is one of the promising methods to reduce the problems associated with stand-alone glycerol fuel use [2,7]. Emulsion is a thermodynamically unstable but kinetically stable system, which has been





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proven to be a promising fuel upgrading process [8–10]. Glycerolin-diesel emulsion fuel was produced and tested on a waste oil burner according to the study of Mize et al. [7]. The glycerol-indiesel emulsion fuel performed well without failure, demonstrating its potential as a fuel for oil burner [7]. In another study, glycerol-in-diesel emulsion was demonstrated to have positive effect on the reduction of unwanted combustion emissions [2]. Oxides of nitrogen and particulate matter emissions were reduced by 5–15% and 25–50% when the glycerol-in-diesel emulsions (prepared at 10 and 20 vol% glycerol phase) were combusted in a naturally aspirated single-cylinder diesel engine [2]. These emission reduction benefits are believed to be offered by the effect of micro-explosion, which was caused by the secondary atomization from the high vapour pressure of the interior liquid [2,11].

Microemulsion is an optically transparent and thermodynamically stable dispersion system that has less risk of phase separation upon long-term storage compared to emulsion system [12]. In addition, microemulsion can be formed spontaneously with low energy consumption and it has nano-metric size dispersed droplets [13–15]. These advantages may qualify the microemulsion technology as a more attractive process than emulsion for glycerol upgrading. However, efficient surfactant should be selected since the formation of microemulsion needs more surfactant than emulsion. Biosurfactant has the advantages of high efficiency, biodegradability, and sustainability compared to synthetic surfactant [16]. Note that biosurfactant rhamnolipid (RL) has been proven to have good performance on microemulsion fuel formation [17,18]. In this study, RL was applied to obtain good performance on glycerol microemulsification.

This study tried to introduce the diesel immiscible glycerol or glycerol mixtures into diesel by microemulsion technology, and provide a novel and environment-friendly glycerol utilization approach with the advantages of energy recovery, cost reducing, and emission reduction.

2. Materials and methods

2.1. Materials

Rhamnolipid was produced by *Phanerochaete aeruginosa* (ATCC 9027, Chinese Type Culture Collection) maintained on *Pseudomonas* agar slants and transferred monthly as described in Ref. [19].

Span 80 (sorbitan monooleate, purity >99%) and Tween 80 (sorbitan monooleate ethoxylate, purity >99%) were purchased from Shanghai Qinxi Chemical Industry S&T Co., Ltd. (Shanghai, China). Glycerol (purity >99%) was purchased from Sigma Aldrich. No. 0 diesel was purchased from a local petrol station in Changsha, Hunan Province, China. All other chemicals were of analytical grade and used as received.

2.2. Glycerol microemulsification

2.2.1. Surfactant screening

Primarily, nonionic surfactants Span 80 and Tween 80 or their mixtures with different hydrophilic and lipophilic balance (HLB) value ranging from 4.3 to 15 were used for glycerol-in-diesel

Table 1

Surfactant system compositions.

microemulsion (GDM) formation. Table 1 represents the compositions used in the experiment. In each experiment, 10 mL diesel and certain amounts of surfactant and glycerol were added to form the microemulsion system at 25 °C. The solubilization capacity (defined as the mass ratio of the solubilized phase to surfactant (g g⁻¹), e.g. mass ratio of glycerol to the surfactant, or g glycerol/ g surfactant) was monitored to optimize the HLB value of the surfactants.

Subsequently, RL with HLB value reported of 22–24 [16] was employed to form the GDM system. Then different concentrations of RL in diesel were evaluated against the solubilization capacities to obtain an optimum RL dosage.

2.2.2. Effect of cosurfactant and model impurities

RL based GDM was also formed with the addition of different alkanols as *n*-butanol, *n*-pentanol, *n*-hexanol, and *n*-octanol to select an optimum cosurfactant. Then the model impurities such as water, methanol, ethanol, and NaCl, which may exist in crude glycerol, were added to assess their influences on the solubilization capacities. Specifically, glycerol/water mixtures with different ratios (w/w, 0–100%) were prepared to monitor the solubilization capacities. Subsequently, the dynamic viscosity of the glycerol/water-in-diesel microemulsion (G/WDM) was measured by a Dynamic Viscosity Analyzer (SNB-2, China). Pour point (PP) was measured by the method described in Section 2.3.

2.3. Microemulsion fuel property characterization

The dynamic viscosity, high heating value (HHV), corrosivity, cloud point (CP), and PP of diesel, glycerol, GDM, and G/WDM were measured. HHV was measured by using a heating value calorimeter (SDACM500, China). CP and PP are cold flow properties of fuel. CP is the temperature at which fuel begins to thicken and become cloudy (the beginning of crystallization) and PP is the temperature at which fuel begins to thicken with no pour in 5 s (the beginning of the operative problems). They were determined by observing the samples to become thicken or cloudy at the decrement of temperature in a Cold Flow Property Tester (SYD-510F1, China). The corrosivity of these fuels was measured by a copper strip corrosion test (CSCT), which was based on the discoloration of a standard copper strip immersed into a sample at 100 °C for 3 h.

A Malvern nanometer particle size analyzer (Zetasizer Nano ZEN3600, UK) was adopted to analyze the droplet size distribution of GDM and G/WDM. In addition, an integrated thermal gravimetric analyzer (EXSTAR, TG/DTA 7300, Japan) with nitrogen atmosphere (purity of 99.99%, flow rate of 100 mL min⁻¹) was adopted for the thermogravimetric analysis (TGA) of RL, diesel, glycerol, and GDM. Each sample was heated from 40 °C to 600 °C with a constant heating rate of 10 °C min⁻¹.

3. Results and discussions

3.1. Formation of glycerol-in-diesel microemulsion

3.1.1. Effect of surfactant

Glycerol and diesel are immiscible in nature with no measurable amount of glycerol or diesel is soluble to each other. But they can soluble to each other by the formation of microemulsion.

Surfactant composition	HLB value												
	4.3	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	22-24
Span 80 (w%) Tween 80 (w%)	100 0	92 8	84 16	76 24	64 36	56 44	46 54	36 64	28 72	18 82	8 92	0 100	
Rhamnolipid (w%)													100



Fig. 1. The effect of surfactant HLB values on glycerol solubilization capacities of the Span 80/Tween 80 mixtures or RL based microemulsion fuels.

Surfactant is required to form microemulsion system. Commonly, a surfactant has a lipophilic or hydrophobic group and a hydrophilic group. HLB value of a surfactant is commonly used to describe the specific polar/non-polar character of the surfactant and the affinity of the surfactant for the oil–water interface. A high HLB value of a surfactant means its super hydrophilic property. Nonionic surfactant Span 80 (HLB = 4.3) and Tween 80 (HLB = 15) mixtures were prepared over a range of HLB values 4.3–15 by adjusting the mixing ratio of the two surfactants. The composition of each mixture is displayed in Table 1.

Upon the addition of surfactant and the formation of GDM, glycerol solubilization capacity was recorded for the selection of an optimum HLB value. As indicated in Fig. 1, the relatively flat region of the plot from HLB 4.3 to 15 indicates that the Span 80/Tween 80 surfactant mixtures were not effective on GDM formation. Nevertheless, the plot played a meaningful role for selecting the optimum surfactant HLB. It is shown in Fig. 1 that surfactant mixtures with HLB values of 10-15 (the higher ones) might have better performance on GDM formation. These phenomena are agree with the previous results that the suitable HLB values for glycerol-in-diesel emulsion formation were 10–12, higher than those for water-in-diesel emulsion [7]. Biosurfactant RL with a higher HLB value of 22-24 was then tested for GDM formation and it showed surprisingly high glycerol solubilization capacity. The glycerol solubilization capacity obtained was 0.42 g g⁻ (g glycerol/g surfactant), which was almost 10 times higher than those of the Span 80/Tween 80 surfactant mixtures (0.031- 0.051 g s^{-1}). The carboxylate group gives rhamnolipid its anionic character while the rhamnosyl groups contribute to the bulky hydrophilic component of their structure [16]. The better performance of RL than the Span 80/Tween 80 mixtures on GDM formation was probably due to its particular molecular structure [16] and its superb affinity for the glycerol-diesel interface [7,20].

The glycerol solubilization capacity was used for selecting the optimum RL dosage. As shown in Fig. 2, the mass of glycerol solubilized in diesel microemulsion increased as the increment of RL dosage, while the glycerol solubilization capacity saw a slight increment at the dose range of $0.01-0.05 \text{ g mL}^{-1}$ and a decrement at the dosage higher than 0.05 g mL^{-1} . Thus, the optimum RL dosage was determined to be 0.05 g mL^{-1} , which is agree with the result reported in Ref. [18].

3.1.2. Effect of cosurfactant

Alkanols such as *n*-butanol, *n*-pentanol, *n*-hexanol, *n*-heptanol, and *n*-octanol were selected for cosurfactant screening and the



Fig. 2. The effect of RL dosage on glycerol solubilization capacities of the RL based microemulsion fuels.



Fig. 3. The effect of cosurfactant on solubilization capacities of the RL based microemulsion fuels with RL at the dose of 0.05 g mL^{-1} ; (a) the monomeric glycerol solubilization capacities and (b) the glycerol mixtures (glycerol/alkanol) solubilization capacities.

results are potted in Fig. 3. As shown in Fig. 3(a), these cosurfactants seemed had negative effect on the GDM formation and reduced the glycerol solubilization performance of RL. The increasing dosage and chain-length of the cosurfactants (alkanols) resulted in the decrement of the solubilization capacity of glycerol. The alkanols probably had been located in the polar phase (acted as solubilized substances) in competition with glycerol when they were solubilized in the RL based microemulsion. Microemulsion system formed by RL or RL mixture in the absence of cosurfactant had also been reported in many researches [21]. However, as the trends displayed in Fig. 3(b), the glycerol mixture (glycerol/alkanol) solubilization capacity saw an increment as the dosage of alkanols increase. The solubilization capacities of GDM with the addition of *n*-butanol, *n*-pentanol, or *n*-hexanol (at high dose) were higher than that of GDM with no addition of alkanols. Alkanols might preferentially distribute into the polar glycerol phase until the micelles approached swollen and then they might distribute to the glycerol-diesel interface acting like cosurfactants, allowing greater penetration of glycerol or alkanols into the polar glycerol phase.

3.1.3. Effect of the model impurities in crude glycerol

Crude glycerol produced during biodiesel production would contain impurities such as water. NaCl. and methanol when methanol is used as the acvl donor (ethanol when ethanol is the acvl donor). The effects of these impurities on the solubilization capacities of the glycerol mixture are displayed in Fig. 4. As plotted in the figure, these impurities had negative effects on the solubilization of glycerol especially NaCl. But the concentration variation of NaCl $(0.1-0.5 \text{ mol } L^{-1})$ did not show obvious negative effect on the solubilization capacity. Stable G/WDM can also be formed at high NaCl concentration. In addition, glycerol was more easily to be emulsified by RL than water, methanol, or ethanol. The monomeric solubilization capacities of water, methanol, or ethanol in the microemulsion systems in the absence of glycerol were obviously lower than those of glycerol or glycerol mixture systems. Water, methanol, and ethanol solubilized in the microemulsion systems might probably have been located in the polar phase in competition with glycerol [22,23]. Additionally, water performed a little better than ethanol and methanol because of its relatively higher solubilization capacity in the RL based microemulsion system (see in Fig. 4 when the percentage of glycerol in water/glycerol mixtures equals to zero).

Although the impurities had negative effects on the solubilization of glycerol, water, ethanol, and methanol mixed with glycerol could efficiently reduce the viscosity of glycerol [24,25]. Upon the formation of G/WDM, the dynamic viscosity of the glycerol/water mixture and the G/WDM were determined and the results are



Fig. 4. The effects of model impurities on the solubilization capacities of the RL based microemulsion fuels with RL at the dose of 0.05 g mL⁻¹ (NaCl was added to the glycerol/water mixture (w/w, 50:50) with concentrations ranging from 0 to 0.5 M).

shown in Fig. 5. The water content had a significant impact on the viscosity of the glycerol/water mixture. The dynamic viscosity of the mixture saw a dramatic increase when the content of water was lower than 50% (or content of glycerol higher than 50%), which is in consistent with the result obtained in Ref. [24]. However, the dynamic viscosity of the G/WDM systems with different glycerol/water ratios remained nearly constant (range from 5.83 to 6.06 mPa s), due to that the mixtures solubilized in the microemulsion only took up a small portion (<5% of the total by weight, data not show).

3.2. Characterization of GDM and G/WDM

Diesel, glycerol, WDM, GDM, and G/WDM were selected for fuel property characterization. The dynamic viscosity ($T = 30 \,^{\circ}$ C), CP, PP, corrosivity, and HHV were determined and the data were tabulated in Table 2.

The dynamic viscosity, corrosivity, and HHV of the microemulsion fuel systems (WDM, GDM, and G/WDM) were similar to those of diesel and the systems were stored at 4 °C without phase separation for over six months, indicating their good storage stability and great potential to be used as commodity fuels. CP and PP are commonly used indicators for the characterization of the crystallization (cold flow) properties [26,27]. The cold flow properties (CP and PP) of the microemulsion fuel systems were improved by the addition of glycerol or the glycerol/water mixtures, while the addition of water alone had little effect. The CP of both GDM and G/WDM was -6 °C and PP of them was -13 and -11 °C, respectively. No phase separation was observed during the determination of CP and PP. The CP and PP of both GDM and G/WDM were lower than those of WDM (-3 and -7 °C, respectively) or diesel (-3 and -6 °C, respectively), which could be due to the low freezing point of the added glycerol/water mixtures dispersed in the system [28]. The freezing point of glycerol/water mixture at ratio of 66.7:33.3 could be as low as -46.5 °C [28] resulting from the ice crystallization inhibition by the hydrogen bonding patterns formed in the solution [29]. The presence of many dispersed materials in the emulsion had been reported to have lower crystal temperature than that of the bulk material (e.g. water-in-oil emulsion, -39 °C versus bulk water, -18 °C [30]; and palm oil-in-water emulsion, 2 °C versus bulk palm oil, 21 °C [31]). The smaller the diameter of the dispersed material in the emulsion, the lower the freezing temperature of the system will be [32]. The nano-scaled glycerol or glycerol/water mixtures dispersed in the microemulsion (diameter much smaller than that of the emulsion) could probably



Fig. 5. The dynamic viscosity and pour point of the G/WDM formed with RL at the dose of 0.05 g mL⁻¹ at different glycerol/water (G/W) mixing ratios.

Item	Dynamic viscosity ($T = 30 \circ C$, mPa s)	Mean diameter (nm)	Cloud point (°C)	Pour point (°C)	CSCT ^a	HHV (MJ kg^{-1})
Diesel	4.8	_g	-3	-6	1a	44.3
Glycerol	1320	-	-	-	-	18.5
RMS ^{b,c}	4.9	1.5	-	-	-	-
WDM ^{c,d}	4.9	22.5	-3	-7	1a	43.7
GDM ^{c,e}	5.8	125.6	-6	-13	1a	43.6
G/WDM ^{c,f}	5.7	135.8	-6	-11	1a	43.6

Fuel properties of diesel, glycerol, and WDM, GDM, G/WDM.

^a CSCT: copper strip corrosion test; 1 = slight tarnish; a = light orange, almost the same as freshly polished strip; b = dark orange.

^b RMS: reversed micellar system with RL at the dose of 0.05 g mL⁻¹.

^c Stored at 4 °C without phase separation in six months.

^d WDM: water-in-diesel microemulsion with RL at the dose of 0.05 g mL⁻¹ and water at the dose of 0.28 g/g RL.

^e GDM: glycerol-in-diesel microemulsion with RL at the dose of 0.05 g mL⁻¹ and glycerol at the dose of 0.42 g/g RL.

^f G/WDM: glycerol/water-in-diesel microemulsion with RL at the dose of 0.05 g mL⁻¹ and glycerol/water mixture (w/w, 50:50) at the dose of 0.36 g/g RL.

^g Not detected.

modify the crystallization behavior of the microemulsion and bring down the CP and PP of the system.

As shown in Table 2, the measured diameter of the reversed micellar system (mixture of diesel and RL in the absent of water and glycerol), WDM, GDM, and G/WDM were in the nano range of 1–200 nm, and thus, the formation of microemulsion was verified. The reversed micellar system had the smallest diameter because there was almost no polar substance in the core of the micelles. The addition of water and/or glycerol increased the diameter of the system, demonstrating that the added water and/or glycerol would probably locate in the core of the micelles.

As shown in Fig. 6, the thermal decomposition characteristics of GDM (the main component was diesel) were similar to those of diesel. There was a mass loss below 100 °C (weight loses of 14.2%) during glycerol decomposition, indicating the existence of water in glycerol. Glycerol has very strong water adsorbing ability and water may probably be absorbed into glycerol upon glycerol usage and storage. Glycerol was almost decomposed at a narrow temperature ranging from 137 °C to 230 °C with the maximum degradation rate $(3.64 \text{ w}\% \text{ min}^{-1})$ appeared at 188.6 °C. The decomposition characteristics of diesel after 124 °C were similar to those of glycerol. The maximum degradation rate $(2.38 \text{ w}\% \text{ min}^{-1})$ of diesel appeared at 175.6 °C. GDM was a mixture of diesel, glycerol, and RL, therefore the weight loses <230 °C were mainly attributed to diesel and glycerol decomposition. The weight loses at 230-310 °C would be ascribed to RL note that RL was almost decomposed at 230-310 °C with a maximum degradation rate (2.39 $w^{\bar{}}_{\%}\,min^{-1})$ appeared at 253.9 °C. The maximum degradation rate (1.53 w% min⁻¹) of GDM appeared at 175.7 °C, meaning that the main component in GDM was diesel. The other component like glycerol and RL did not significantly affect the decomposition of GDM on the whole. However, the maximum degradation rate of GDM was lower than that of diesel, which may because of the formation of microemulsion system. The thermograms of microemulsion obtained had been reported to be different and depended on the amount of solubilized phase in the system [32]. The reduced degradation rate might lead to the reduction of peak combustion temperature and the improvement of atomization of the microemulsion fuel in engine, and further reduce the NO_X emissions [11,33].

3.3. Environmental implications

Although biodiesel is a very good solvent, sometimes it has poorer cold flow properties than petroleum fuels [34]. Biodiesel with poor cold flow properties would usually require the addition of fuel anti-freezing additives like glycerol ethers, acetyl glycerol, and glycerol acetal. It is worth mentioning that glycerol itself was historically used as an anti-freezer for automotive applications



Fig. 6. TGA and DTG curves of RL, diesel, glycerol, and GDM formed with RL at the dose of 0.05 g mL⁻¹, and glycerol at the dose of 0.42 g/g RL.

before being replaced by ethylene glycol because of its relative high freezing point and cost [35]. As the production of less toxic glycerol mounting recently, glycerol can be re-examined for use in automotive applications [35]. Cold flow property improvement results obtained in this study indicate that, glycerol or glycerol/ water mixtures can be treated as anti-freezing additive to improve the cold flow properties (e.g. PP) of the emulsion/microemulsion fuel (e.g. biodiesel). Note that glycerol emulsification/microemulsification also has the advantages of direct-energy recovery, unnecessary purification and processing, and emission reduction, RL based glycerol microemulsion fuel could be used as fuel like diesel,

Table 2

providing a promising way out for the crude glycerol produced in biodiesel production.

4. Conclusions

Microemulsion technology was employed to upgrade glycerol for fuel application. Glycerol or glycerol/water mixture (immiscible with diesel in nature) was solubilized in diesel by forming GDM or G/WDM fuel with the addition of an efficient biosurfactant (RL). The RL based GDM and G/WDM fuel could be formed spontaneously with low energy consumption and had nano-metric sized droplets. They had less risk of phase separation upon long-term storage compared to the emulsion system. In addition, HHV, dynamic viscosity, corrosivity, and thermal decomposition characteristics of GDM and G/WDM were similar to those of diesel. Interestingly, the pour point and cloud point of GDM (-13 °C and -6 °C, respectively) were improved obviously compared to diesel (-6 and -3 °C, respectively). Glycerol or glycerol/water mixtures could be solubilized in the microemulsion as cold flow property improvers.

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