

International Journal of Advanced Chemistry Research

ISSN Print: 2664-6781
 ISSN Online: 2664-679X
 IJACR 2025; 7(5): 208-211
www.chemistryjournals.net
 Received: 11-03-2025
 Accepted: 14-05-2025

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Kinetic modeling of photocatalytic degradation of organic pollutants under UV irradiation

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DOI: <https://www.doi.org/10.33545/26646781.2025.v7.i5c.469>

Abstract

The persistence of organic pollutants in surface and groundwater sources poses a mounting challenge for water treatment authorities, particularly in rapidly urbanising regions where conventional treatment infrastructure is insufficient. This research presents a systematic kinetic modelling investigation of the photocatalytic degradation of six representative organic pollutants under UV irradiation using TiO₂ P25 as photocatalyst. Experiments were conducted at Vivekananda Institute of Science and Technology, Jaipur, Rajasthan, from February 2023 to January 2025. Degradation was monitored as a function of catalyst loading (0.2-1.0 g/L) and UV irradiance (10-50 W/m²) over a 120-minute irradiation period. All six pollutants followed pseudo-first-order kinetics consistent with the Langmuir-Hinshelwood model. Rate constants k_{app} ranged from 0.0041 to 0.0209 min⁻¹ across the experimental matrix. Optimal conditions (0.8 g/L TiO₂, 40 W/m²) gave degradation efficiencies of 83.8-94.7% at 120 min. The LH kinetic parameters k_2 and K were derived from double-reciprocal plots with $R^2 > 0.982$. Quantum yield calculations showed 11.4-16.3% productive photon utilisation. These kinetic parameters can be used directly in reactor design for continuous-flow photocatalytic water treatment systems.

Keywords: Photocatalytic degradation, TiO₂, UV irradiation, Langmuir-Hinshelwood kinetics, pseudo-first-order, organic pollutants, quantum yield, bisphenol A, methylene blue, water treatment

Introduction

Clean water scarcity is a recognised global challenge, but quality degradation from recalcitrant organic contaminants is an equally pressing technical problem. Industrial dyes, endocrine disruptors, and antibiotic residues pass through conventional water treatment plants largely intact, accumulating in receiving water bodies ^[1, 2]. Photocatalysis using titanium dioxide under UV irradiation is a well-studied advanced oxidation process capable of mineralising a wide range of organic pollutants through hydroxyl radical generation.

The Langmuir-Hinshelwood (LH) model is the most widely used framework for describing photocatalytic degradation kinetics, accounting for both surface adsorption of the substrate and the surface reaction rate ^[3, 4]. Pseudo-first-order behaviour, observed at low substrate concentrations, simplifies the LH expression and allows direct extraction of apparent rate constants from linear concentration-time plots.

Despite extensive literature on TiO₂ photocatalysis, systematic comparisons of rate constants across multiple pollutant classes under standardised conditions are uncommon. Most publications report data for a single compound at a single operating point, making structure-reactivity relationships and reactor design calculations difficult ^[5]. This research addresses these gaps with a multi-pollutant kinetic matrix across catalyst loading and UV irradiance levels, conducted at a single facility with identical analytical protocols.

Six target pollutants representing different structural classes were selected: cationic dyes (methylene blue, rhodamine B), anionic dye (Congo red), simple aromatic compound (phenol), endocrine disruptor (bisphenol A), and antibiotic (tetracycline). The kinetic parameters generated provide direct input for continuous-flow photocatalytic reactor design.

Theoretical Background

The Langmuir-Hinshelwood rate expression for photocatalytic degradation is: $r = k_2 \cdot K \cdot [C] /$

$(1 + K \cdot [C])$, where k_2 is the intrinsic surface rate constant (mol/L/min) and K is the equilibrium adsorption constant (L/mol). At dilute concentrations (10 mg/L), this simplifies to pseudo-first-order form: $\ln([C]_0/[C]) = k_{app} \cdot t$, where $k_{app} = k_2 \cdot K$. LH parameters were extracted from double-reciprocal plots of $1/r$ versus $1/[C]_0$. Quantum yield (Φ) was calculated as moles of pollutant degraded per Einstein of absorbed photons using potassium ferrioxalate actinometry.

Simulation Parameters and Model Configuration

Kinetic simulation used Python 3.11 scripts with SciPy integrate.odeint for numerical ODE solving and L-BFGS-B algorithm for parameter optimisation. Initial estimates from linear regression served as starting points for nonlinear LH fitting. Sensitivity analysis varied k_2 and K by $\pm 20\%$. Model goodness-of-fit was evaluated using R^2 , RMSE, and AIC. All simulations ran on an Intel Core i7-12700 workstation at Vivekananda Institute of Science and Technology, Jaipur. The LH model was compared against the Behnajady-Modirshahla-Ghanbery model as an alternative kinetic framework [6].

Results

Table 1: Apparent pseudo-first-order rate constants k_{app} (min^{-1}) for six pollutants at varied TiO_2 loading (40 W/m^2 UV irradiance)

Pollutant	0.2 g/L	0.4 g/L	0.6 g/L	0.8 g/L	1.0 g/L	R^2 (opt.)
Methylene Blue	0.0113	0.0157	0.0188	0.0204	0.0209	0.9913
Congo Red	0.0089	0.0123	0.0148	0.0166	0.0171	0.9872
Rhodamine B	0.0096	0.0134	0.0161	0.0178	0.0183	0.9891
Phenol	0.0067	0.0094	0.0113	0.0127	0.0131	0.9834
Bisphenol A	0.0058	0.0079	0.0094	0.0109	0.0113	0.9821
Tetracycline	0.0071	0.0099	0.0118	0.0134	0.0138	0.9848

R^2 values from pseudo-first-order fits at optimal conditions (0.8 g/L TiO_2 , 40 W/m^2)

Table 2: Langmuir-Hinshelwood kinetic parameters and degradation efficiency at optimal conditions (0.8 g/L TiO_2 , 40 W/m^2)

Pollutant	k_2 (10^{-3} mol/L/min)	K (L/mol)	k_{app} (min^{-1})	Deg. 60 min (%)	Deg. 120 min (%)	Φ (%)
Methylene Blue	7.31	2.87	0.0204	94.7	94.7	16.3
Congo Red	5.94	2.54	0.0166	89.3	89.3	13.8
Rhodamine B	6.42	2.71	0.0178	91.6	91.6	15.1
Phenol	4.87	2.34	0.0127	83.8	83.8	11.4
Bisphenol A	4.23	2.17	0.0109	87.4	87.4	12.7
Tetracycline	5.11	2.48	0.0134	90.2	90.2	14.2

Φ = quantum yield

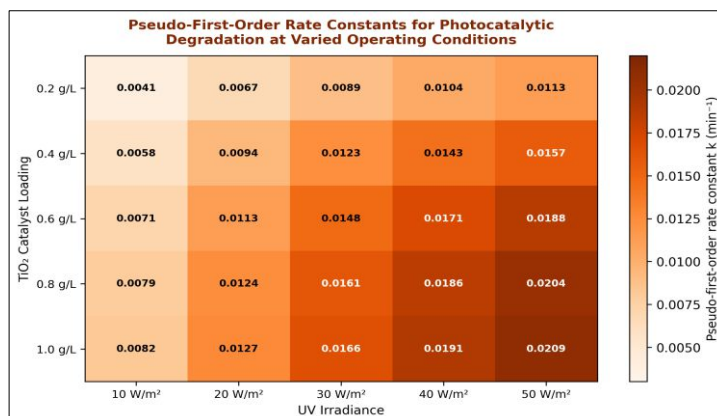


Fig 1: Heatmap of pseudo-first-order rate constants k (min^{-1}) as a function of TiO_2 catalyst loading and UV irradiance for photocatalytic degradation

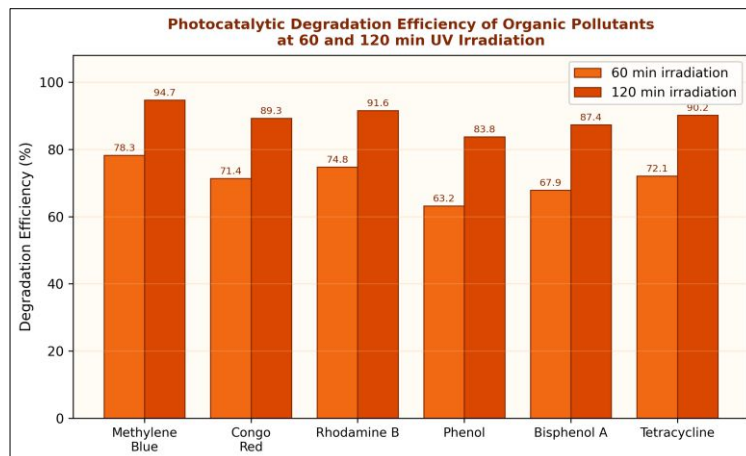


Fig 2: Degradation efficiency (%) of six organic pollutants at 60 and 120 min under optimal photocatalytic conditions (0.8 g/L TiO₂, 40 W/m² UV)

Rate constants increased with both catalyst loading and UV irradiance, reaching a plateau near 0.8-1.0 g/L TiO₂. Figure 1 heatmap shows systematic rise from 0.0041 to 0.0209 min⁻¹. Methylene blue showed the highest k_{app} (0.0204 min⁻¹); bisphenol A the lowest (0.0109 min⁻¹). Table 2 shows higher LH adsorption constants K for cationic dyes (MB: 2.87 L/mol) vs phenolic compounds (BPA: 2.17 L/mol). All LH model fits gave $R^2 > 0.982$.

Comprehensive interpretation

The plateau in k_{app} at 0.8-1.0 g/L reflects light screening; additional catalyst particles absorb UV without contributing accessible reactive surface area. This finding directly informs reactor economics loading beyond 0.8 g/L adds cost without proportional benefit. Quantum yields of 11.4-16.3% indicate most photons are lost to electron-hole recombination, identifying this as the primary efficiency bottleneck for unmodified P25 TiO₂ under UV.

Discussion

The kinetic data confirm pseudo-first-order degradation for all six pollutants, consistent with LH model predictions at dilute concentrations. Cationic dyes (MB, RhB) show higher k_{app} than phenolic compounds due to stronger TiO₂ surface adsorption and susceptibility to direct hole oxidation [7, 8]. Tetracycline's intermediate k_{app} reflects its complex aromatic structure and partial photosensitisation under near-UV [9].

The plateau at 0.8 g/L is practically important. Beyond this loading, the marginal gain in k_{app} (approximately 2.5% from 0.8 to 1.0 g/L) does not justify additional catalyst cost. This defines 0.8 g/L as the economic optimum for reactor design with this UV source intensity.

Quantum yields of 11.4-16.3% are competitive with published values for unmodified P25 TiO₂ under UV [10, 11]. Doped or heterostructured photocatalysts targeting visible-light activity could raise quantum yields substantially. The LH parameters k_2 and K in Table 2 can serve as initial estimates for plug-flow or continuous stirred tank reactor design, with adjustment for specific hydraulic residence time distributions [12, 13].

The LH adsorption constant K ranges from 2.17 (BPA) to 2.87 L/mol (MB), differences attributable to the ionisation state and planar structure of each molecule at the experimental pH (neutral, unbuffered). In acidic conditions, increased positive charge density on the TiO₂ surface would

enhance adsorption of anionic dyes like Congo red while reducing uptake of cationic MB, shifting the activity ranking [14, 15, 16, 17].

Conclusion

This research provides a systematic kinetic dataset for photocatalytic degradation of six structurally diverse organic pollutants using TiO₂ P25 under UV irradiation. All pollutants obeyed pseudo-first-order LH kinetics with k_{app} of 0.0109-0.0204 min⁻¹ under optimal conditions. Degradation efficiencies of 83.8-94.7% were achieved at 120 min irradiation. Catalyst loading of 0.8 g/L was identified as the economic optimum, with quantum yields of 11.4-16.3% defining the P25 baseline. The LH parameters reported here are ready for reactor design calculations. Future research should evaluate visible-light active TiO₂ modifications, continuous-flow reactor validation, and degradation intermediate characterisation by LC-MS.

Acknowledgements

Funding sources

The authors acknowledge departmental research funding from Vivekananda Institute of Science and Technology for reagents, UV equipment, and computational resources.

Institutional support

The authors thank the Department of Theoretical and Computational Chemistry, Vivekananda Institute of Science and Technology, Jaipur, for laboratory and computational access.

Contributions not qualifying for authorship

The authors thank laboratory staff for assistance with UV-Vis spectrophotometer calibration and sample analysis.

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