International Journal of Research and Review Techniques (IJRRT), ISSN: 3006-1075
Volume 4, Issue 4, October -December, 2025, Available online at: https://ijrrt.com

Metabolic Reprogramming of Microalgae for High-Yield Biofuel Production Coupled with Carbon Capture

Dr. Sorin Radu

Principal Investigator, Department of Biotechnology and Chemical Engineering, University Politehnica of Bucharest, Romania

ABSTRACT

The increasing demand for sustainable energy sources and the urgent need to mitigate atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions have intensified research into microalgae-based biofuel production integrated with biological carbon capture. Microalgae represent a promising renewable resource due to their rapid growth rates, high photosynthetic efficiency, substantial lipid accumulation capacity, and ability to utilize CO_2 from industrial flue gases and other emission sources. This study explores the potential of metabolic reprogramming strategies to enhance lipid biosynthesis, improve biomass productivity, and optimize carbon fixation in microalgal systems for sustainable biofuel generation. Advanced genetic engineering, synthetic biology, metabolic pathway modification, and adaptive laboratory evolution are examined as key approaches for redirecting cellular carbon flux toward the accumulation of energy-rich compounds, particularly triacylglycerols (TAGs). Furthermore, the study investigates the manipulation of key metabolic pathways associated with photosynthesis, carbon-concentrating mechanisms, fatty acid synthesis, and nitrogen assimilation to improve cellular productivity and stress tolerance. Integrated cultivation approaches, including photobioreactors, optimized nutrient management, and controlled CO_2 supplementation, are considered for maximizing biomass yield and carbon sequestration efficiency. The proposed framework also evaluates the potential of combining microalgal cultivation with industrial carbon dioxide streams to establish a circular bioeconomy in which captured carbon is converted into valuable bioenergy products. Particular attention is given to the technological challenges associated with genetic stability, large-scale cultivation, harvesting costs, downstream lipid extraction, and overall energy efficiency. The study emphasizes the importance of techno-economic assessment and life-cycle analysis in determining the environmental and commercial feasibility of integrated microalgal biorefineries. Overall, metabolic reprogramming of microalgae offers a promising pathway toward developing high-yield, carbon-efficient biofuel production systems, contributing to renewable energy development, industrial decarbonization, and long-term global climate change mitigation.

Keywords: Microalgal Metabolic Engineering, Biofuel Production, Carbon Capture and Sequestration, Lipid Biosynthesis, Sustainable Renewable Energy

INTRODUCTION

1. The increasing global demand for energy, depletion of conventional fossil fuel reserves, and rising atmospheric greenhouse gas concentrations have created an urgent need for sustainable and environmentally friendly energy alternatives. The excessive consumption of coal, petroleum, and natural gas has significantly contributed to carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions, global warming, climate change, and environmental degradation. Consequently, the development of renewable energy technologies capable of reducing dependence on fossil fuels while simultaneously mitigating carbon emissions has become a major research priority. Among various renewable energy resources, microalgae-based biofuels have emerged as a promising alternative because of their high photosynthetic efficiency, rapid biomass production, and ability to convert inorganic carbon into energy-rich organic compounds.

2. Microalgae are microscopic photosynthetic organisms that utilize sunlight, water, nutrients, and carbon dioxide to produce biomass through photosynthesis. Unlike conventional terrestrial energy crops, microalgae can be cultivated on non-arable land and, under appropriate conditions, can utilize saline water, wastewater, and industrial CO_2 emissions. Their ability to accumulate substantial quantities of intracellular lipids makes them particularly suitable for biodiesel production. In addition to lipids, microalgae can synthesize carbohydrates, proteins, pigments, and other commercially valuable metabolites, providing opportunities for integrated biorefinery applications. Several microalgal species, including Chlorella vulgaris, Nannochloropsis spp., Scenedesmus obliquus, and Dunaliella salina, have demonstrated considerable potential for biofuel production and biological carbon fixation.

PROPOSED MODELS AND METHODOLOGIES

The proposed research framework focuses on integrating microalgal metabolic reprogramming, genetic engineering, optimized cultivation conditions, and biological carbon capture to enhance biofuel production. The methodology aims to improve lipid accumulation while maintaining high biomass productivity and maximizing CO_2 fixation efficiency. A combination of molecular biology, metabolic modelling, laboratory experimentation, photobioreactor development, and computational optimization is proposed to establish an efficient microalgae-based biofuel production system.

1. Selection and Characterization of Microalgal Strains

The first stage involves selecting microalgal species with high photosynthetic efficiency, rapid growth rates, strong carbon fixation capacity, and substantial lipid accumulation potential.

The proposed study will consider the following microalgal species:

- Chlorella vulgaris: Known for rapid growth and adaptability to different cultivation environments.
- Nannochloropsis spp.: Recognized for high lipid content and suitability for biodiesel production.
- Scenedesmus obliquus: Demonstrates potential for wastewater treatment, CO_2 utilization, and lipid accumulation.
- Dunaliella salina: Exhibits strong environmental adaptability and tolerance to elevated salinity.

The selected strains will be evaluated according to biomass productivity, lipid content, photosynthetic efficiency, CO_2 assimilation rate, and environmental tolerance.

2. Genetic Engineering and Metabolic Reprogramming Model

A genetic engineering framework will be developed to redirect intracellular carbon metabolism toward lipid biosynthesis. The proposed model will focus on modifying metabolic pathways responsible for fatty acid synthesis, triacylglycerol (TAG) accumulation, and carbon assimilation.

Important target enzymes and metabolic regulators will include:

- Acetyl-CoA carboxylase (ACCase).
- Diacylglycerol acyltransferase (DGAT).
- Acetyl-CoA synthetase (ACS).
- Acetyl-CoA generation pathways.
- Fatty acid synthase (FAS).
- Carbon-concentrating mechanism (CCM) proteins.

Genome editing techniques, including CRISPR-Cas systems, may be investigated for modifying selected genes associated with lipid accumulation and photosynthetic carbon fixation.

The proposed metabolic engineering strategy will involve:

1. Enhancing the availability of intracellular acetyl-CoA.
2. Increasing fatty acid biosynthesis.
3. Improving TAG assembly and storage.
4. Reducing unnecessary carbon losses through competing metabolic pathways.
5. Maintaining photosynthetic activity and cellular growth.

The objective is to achieve a balanced metabolic state in which increased lipid accumulation does not significantly compromise biomass productivity.

3. Integrated Carbon Capture and Utilization Model

An integrated biological carbon capture system will be designed to utilize industrial CO_2 emissions as a carbon source for microalgal cultivation.

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The proposed system will connect an industrial CO_2 supply source with a microalgal photobioreactor. Carbon dioxide will be introduced through controlled gas injection and distributed through suitable gas-transfer mechanisms.

The major operational parameters will include:

- CO_2 concentration and injection rate.
- Gas-liquid mass transfer efficiency.
- pH and dissolved inorganic carbon concentration.
- Temperature and light intensity.
- Nutrient availability.

- Biomass concentration and cultivation duration.

The model will evaluate carbon fixation efficiency by measuring the quantity of CO_2 assimilated into microalgal biomass.

The carbon fixation rate can be expressed as:
\[R_{CO_2}=\frac{\Delta C_{CO_2}}{\Delta t} \]
Where:
- \(R_{CO_2}\) = CO_2 fixation rate.
- \(\Delta C_{CO_2}\) = Quantity of CO_2 fixed.
- \(\Delta t\) = Cultivation time.

RESULTS & ANALYSIS

The proposed research on metabolic reprogramming of microalgae for high-yield biofuel production coupled with carbon capture focuses on evaluating improvements in biomass productivity, lipid accumulation, photosynthetic efficiency, and CO_2 fixation. The integrated framework combines genetic engineering, optimized cultivation conditions, industrial carbon utilization, and advanced photobioreactor technologies to improve the overall efficiency of microalgal biofuel production.

The expected results are analyzed through biochemical measurements, metabolic performance indicators, computational modelling, and environmental assessments. Since the proposed framework requires experimental validation, the following results represent anticipated research outcomes and illustrative performance scenarios rather than experimentally observed findings.

1. Analysis of Microalgal Biomass Productivity
The selection of suitable microalgal strains is expected to significantly influence biomass production and carbon assimilation efficiency. Species such as Chlorella vulgaris, Nannochloropsis spp., and Scenedesmus obliquus offer different advantages in terms of growth rate, lipid accumulation, and environmental adaptability.

The proposed metabolic reprogramming strategy is expected to improve cellular carbon utilization and increase biomass productivity.

The major performance indicators include:
- Biomass concentration and growth rate.
- Photosynthetic activity.
- Nutrient utilization efficiency.
- Carbon assimilation capacity.
- Cellular metabolic stability.

The analysis is expected to demonstrate that engineered microalgal strains can achieve improved biomass productivity when carbon availability, nutrient supply, and photosynthetic conditions are appropriately optimized.

2. Analysis of Lipid Accumulation and Biofuel Productivity
Lipid accumulation is one of the most important parameters determining the commercial feasibility of microalgal biodiesel production. Metabolic engineering targeting ACCase, DGAT, and fatty acid biosynthesis pathways is expected to increase intracellular lipid accumulation.

The two-stage cultivation strategy is particularly important because it separates biomass generation from lipid induction.

The following table presents illustrative expected performance values.

Performance parameter	Conventional cultivation	Optimized cultivation
Biomass productivity (g/L/day)	0.30	0.50
Lipid content (%)	20	35
Lipid productivity (g/L/day)	0.06	0.175
TAG accumulation (%)	15	28
Biomass concentration (g/L)	2.0	3.0

Note: Values are hypothetical research scenarios for comparative illustration, not measured experimental data.

The results indicate that combining metabolic reprogramming with optimized cultivation could substantially improve lipid productivity. Importantly, lipid productivity depends on both total biomass production and the proportion of lipids accumulated within the cells.

COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS IN TABULAR FORM

The comparative analysis evaluates conventional microalgal biofuel production against advanced metabolic reprogramming and integrated carbon capture approaches. The comparison focuses on biomass productivity, lipid accumulation, CO_2 fixation, cultivation technologies, biofuel quality, economic feasibility, and environmental sustainability.

Table 1. Comparison of Conventional and Metabolically Engineered Microalgal Systems

Parameters	Conventional Microalgae	Metabolically Engineered Microalgae
Biomass productivity	Moderate	Potentially high
Lipid accumulation	Naturally regulated	Enhanced through metabolic modification
Fatty acid synthesis	Native metabolic pathways	Optimized biosynthetic pathways
TAG production	Limited by cellular regulation	Potentially increased
CO_2 fixation	Natural photosynthetic activity	Improved through pathway optimization
Carbon utilization	Variable	Potentially more efficient
Genetic modification	Generally absent	CRISPR and genetic engineering
Biofuel yield	Moderate	Potentially higher
Metabolic control	Limited	Advanced pathway regulation
Production efficiency	Conventional	Optimized and strain-dependent

Table 2. Comparative Analysis of Microalgal Species

Microalgal species	Major characteristics	Lipid production potential	Carbon capture potential
Chlorella vulgaris	Rapid growth and adaptability	Moderate to high	High
Nannochloropsis spp.	High lipid accumulation	High	High
Scenedesmus obliquus	Wastewater treatment capability	Moderate to high	High
Dunaliella salina	High salinity tolerance	Moderate	Moderate to high
Chlamydomonas reinhardtii	Genetic engineering model organism	Variable	High

Note: These are qualitative comparisons; actual performance depends on strain, cultivation conditions, and experimental design.

LIMITATIONS & DRAWBACKS

Despite the significant potential of metabolic reprogramming of microalgae for high-yield biofuel production coupled with carbon capture, several scientific, technological, economic, and environmental challenges may restrict its large-scale implementation. Although genetic engineering, synthetic biology, and advanced photobioreactor technologies offer opportunities to improve lipid productivity and carbon fixation, their practical application requires further investigation and optimization.

1. High Cost of Genetic Engineering

Metabolic reprogramming involves advanced genetic modification techniques, including CRISPR-Cas genome editing, gene overexpression, and synthetic biology. These technologies require specialized laboratory infrastructure, skilled researchers, and expensive experimental procedures. Furthermore, developing genetically engineered microalgal strains with stable and predictable metabolic characteristics can be challenging.

2. Genetic and Metabolic Instability

Genetically modified microalgae may experience changes in gene expression, metabolic activity, and cellular performance over successive generations. Excessive enhancement of lipid biosynthesis pathways may create metabolic imbalances and negatively affect cellular growth. Maintaining long-term genetic stability and consistent lipid production under industrial cultivation conditions remains an important challenge.

3. Trade-Off between Biomass Growth and Lipid Accumulation

One of the major limitations of microalgal biofuel production is the conflict between biomass productivity and intracellular lipid accumulation. Conditions that stimulate lipid storage, particularly nitrogen deprivation, may simultaneously reduce cell division and biomass production. Therefore, maximizing lipid content does not necessarily result in higher overall biofuel productivity.

4. High Energy Requirements

Microalgal cultivation and biofuel processing can require considerable energy for:

- Continuous mixing and circulation.
- Artificial lighting in controlled systems.
- CO_2 compression and delivery.
- Temperature and pH regulation.
- Biomass harvesting and dewatering.
- Cell disruption and lipid extraction.

If these energy requirements are supplied by fossil-based electricity, the overall greenhouse gas benefits of the system may be substantially reduced.

CONCLUSION

Metabolic reprogramming of microalgae for high-yield biofuel production coupled with carbon capture represents a promising and innovative approach toward sustainable energy generation and greenhouse gas emission mitigation. The increasing demand for renewable energy and the urgent requirement to reduce atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO_2) concentrations have highlighted the importance of developing efficient biological systems capable of converting inorganic carbon into valuable energy resources. Microalgae offer considerable advantages because of their rapid growth, high photosynthetic efficiency, lipid accumulation potential, and ability to utilize industrial CO_2 emissions during cultivation.

The proposed research framework demonstrates the potential of integrating genetic engineering, synthetic biology, metabolic pathway optimization, and advanced photobioreactor technologies to improve microalgal biomass productivity and lipid biosynthesis. Modifications targeting important metabolic enzymes, including acetyl-CoA carboxylase (ACCase) and diacylglycerol acyltransferase (DGAT), may enhance fatty acid synthesis and triacylglycerol accumulation. Furthermore, optimizing photosynthetic carbon fixation and intracellular carbon distribution could improve the availability of metabolic precursors required for biofuel production.

The study also emphasizes the importance of integrating industrial carbon capture with microalgal cultivation systems. Utilizing CO_2-rich industrial emissions as a carbon source can support microalgal growth while providing opportunities for carbon utilization and the production of renewable biofuels. The combination of two-stage cultivation, nutrient optimization, and controlled photobioreactor operation may help overcome the traditional trade-off between biomass growth and lipid accumulation. Additionally, the utilization of residual microalgal biomass for biogas, biofertilizers, and other value-added products could improve the economic potential of integrated biorefineries.

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