ISSN: 2320-9267

Indian Journal of Pharmaceutical and Biological Research (IJPBR)

Journal homepage: www.ijpbr.in

RESEARCH ARTICLE

A Conceptual Model for Controlled Drug Release from Agricultural Biomass-Derived Cellulose Nanofiber Aerogels

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ABSTRACT

Cellulose nanofiber (CNF) aerogels prepared from agricultural residues such as cereal straw, rice husk, sugarcane bagasse and corn stover combine very high porosity, large specific surface area, tunable surface chemistry and low cost, which makes them attractive carriers for controlled drug delivery. Experimental reports of drug release from nanocellulose aerogels are growing, yet the release data are usually interpreted with empirical equations (Higuchi, Korsmeyer-Peppas, Weibull) whose parameters cannot be traced back to the structure of the carrier or to the feedstock from which it was made. This paper develops a conceptual and mathematical model that links biomass origin, processing route, aerogel architecture and drug-fiber interactions to the release profile. The model was developed through a theoretical model-development methodology that combines first-principles transport analysis with a thematic synthesis of literature on nanocellulose, agricultural residues, release modelling, process safety, pharmaceutical translation and energy systems. The model treats release as three coupled contributions: (i) a rapid burst of weakly held drug located at external and macropore surfaces, (ii) Fickian diffusion through the water-filled pore network, with an effective diffusivity governed by porosity and tortuosity, and (iii) reversible binding of drug to fiber surfaces, which acts as a retardation factor whose magnitude depends on surface charge density, pH and ionic strength. Optional terms describe network swelling or erosion. Analytical limiting solutions are derived, a dimensionless group analysis identifies the regime that controls release, and illustrative simulations with literature-range parameters show that, at fixed drug-fiber affinity, decreasing porosity from 0.995 to 0.90 lengthens the half-release time by more than an order of magnitude because the solid-to-pore ratio raises the retardation factor from about 2.5 to above 30. The simulations also show that a burst fraction alone can depress the apparent Korsmeyer-Peppas exponent well below 0.5, a common source of misinterpretation. The paper discusses theoretical, practical, regulatory and policy implications, states the limitations of the model, and proposes a validation design and directions for future research.

Keywords: cellulose nanofibers; aerogel; agricultural biomass; controlled release; mathematical model; diffusion; retardation factor; TEMPO oxidation

Indian J. Pharm. Biol. Res. (2022): https://doi.org/10.30750/ijpbr.10.4.06

1. INTRODUCTION

Controlled drug release seeks to keep the concentration of a therapeutic agent within its effective window for a defined period, reducing dosing frequency and side effects. Polymeric matrices remain the dominant carriers, and among the natural polymers cellulose is the most abundant, renewable and biocompatible. When cellulose fibers are disintegrated into nanofibers 3 to 20 nm wide and several micrometres long, the resulting cellulose nanofibers (CNF) form entangled networks with high aspect ratio, high surface area and abundant hydroxyl groups that can be functionalized (Klemm et al., 2011; Isogai et al., 2011).

Removing water from a CNF hydrogel without collapsing its structure, by freeze drying or supercritical CO_2 drying, yields aerogels with porosities commonly above 95 % and densities of a few to a few tens of mg cm^{-3} (Lavoine and Bergström, 2017; De France et al., 2017). These lightweight solids can be loaded with drug before or after drying and have been examined as oral, topical and

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How to cite this article: Eneh N, Aghaduno A, Aladegba OA. A Conceptual Model for Controlled Drug Release from Agricultural Biomass-Derived Cellulose Nanofiber Aerogels. Indian J. Pharm. Biol. Res. 2022;10(4):32-52.

Source of support: Nil

Conflict of interest: None.

Received: 18/10/2022 **Revised:** 09/11/2022 **Accepted:** 14/12/2022
Published: 30/12/2022

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implantable delivery systems (Valo et al., 2013; Kolakovic et al., 2012).

Agricultural residues are a compelling CNF source, particularly in regions with large cereal, cassava, cocoa and sugarcane production. Straw, husk, bagasse and hulls contain roughly 30 to 50 % cellulose alongside hemicellulose, lignin, silica and extractives, and they are currently burnt or discarded in large quantities. CNF has been successfully isolated from wheat straw, soy hulls, rice straw and other residues (Alemdar and Sain, 2008; Abe and Yano, 2009). However, residue-derived CNF differs from wood-derived CNF in fiber diameter distribution, residual lignin and hemicellulose content, crystallinity and surface charge, and each of these properties can alter how a drug is held in and released from the aerogel.

Despite growing experimental work, the field lacks a mechanistic framework that connects feedstock and processing variables to release behaviour. Release data are usually described with empirical equations whose parameters cannot be traced to the structure of the carrier, so results obtained with one residue or one processing route cannot be transferred to another (Siepmann and Siepmann, 2012).

1.1 Nanocellulose aerogels as drug carriers

Nanocelluloses combine renewability and biocompatibility with high aspect ratio and abundant surface hydroxyl groups, which allow chemical modification and strong network formation at low solids content (Klemm et al., 2011). TEMPO-mediated oxidation converts surface hydroxyls to carboxylates, producing individualized nanofibers with a well-defined negative surface charge (Isogai et al., 2011). Freeze drying and supercritical drying of these networks produce aerogels and foams whose porosity, pore size and mechanical stability depend on solids content, freezing conditions and cross-linking (Lavoine and Bergström, 2017; De France et al., 2017). As drug carriers, nanofibrillar cellulose films and aerogels have been shown to sustain release of small molecules and to host drug nanoparticles, with release rates that differ between cellulose sources and aerogel types (Kolakovic et al., 2012; Valo et al., 2013). The synthesis indicates that porosity and surface chemistry are the two structural levers most consistently associated with release behaviour, yet their combined effect has not been expressed in a single mechanistic framework.

1.2 Agricultural residues as feedstock and their wider context

Cellulose nanofibers have been isolated from wheat straw, soy hulls, rice straw and other residues, with fiber dimensions and composition that differ from wood-derived material (Alemdar and Sain, 2008; Abe and Yano, 2009). These differences, particularly in residual lignin, hemicellulose and silica, are expected to change drug-fiber affinity and therefore release.

In Sub-Saharan Africa the availability of agricultural residues is tied to the structure of smallholder production, access to agribusiness finance, extension services and the policy frameworks that shape how farm outputs are valorized (Michael and Ogunsola, 2019a; Michael and Ogunsola, 2019b; Michael and Ogunsola, 2021a; Michael and Ogunsola, 2021b; Michael and Ogunsola, 2021c). Climate-smart practices, barriers to technology adoption and the inclusiveness of agricultural value chains also determine whether residue collection can become a reliable income stream for farmers (Michael and Ogunsola, 2021d; Michael and Ogunsola, 2021e; Michael and Ogunsola, 2022a; Michael and Ogunsola, 2022b). Residues already compete with other uses, notably as ruminant and poultry feed, where cassava peels and *Gmelina arborea* leaves are fed at graded levels (Aye and Tawose, 2015; Aye and Tawose, 2016; Ekeocha et al., 2021), and their handling benefits from locally designed and evaluated processing machinery (Bello et al., 2022a; Bello et al., 2022b). The conversion of agricultural extracts into functional technical products, for example green corrosion inhibitors for mild steel, shows that plant-derived constituents can be upgraded into higher-value materials (Atta et al., 2018).

Using locally sourced bio-based materials also aligns with wider work on low-cost, sustainable materials and design for the built environment in humid tropical regions (Gil-Ozoudeh et al., 2018; Nwafor et al., 2019a; Nwafor et al., 2018a; Nwafor et al., 2018b; Nwafor et al., 2019b; Nwafor et al., 2019c; Uduokhai et al., 2022). Responsible residue use must account for environmental fate and contamination risk, which has been modelled for subsurface contaminant pathways and for offshore effluent streams (Aladegba et al., 2021; Azeez and Badmus, 2018; Lamidi and Olamide, 2018; Falegan and Aniebonam, 2022), and for the balance between chemical safety and circular-economy targets when processing chemicals are recovered and reused (Okojie and Abioye, 2020).

1.3 Mathematical models of drug release

Most experimental studies of nanocellulose carriers fit cumulative release curves with the Higuchi square-root law, the Korsmeyer-Peppas power law or the Weibull function (Higuchi, 1961; Korsmeyer et al., 1983; Papadopoulou et al., 2006). These equations are useful descriptors but their parameters are lumped, and the

power-law exponent in particular is often over-interpreted outside the geometric and kinetic conditions for which it was derived (Ritger and Peppas, 1987; Siepmann and Siepmann, 2012).

Mechanistic models instead derive release from transport equations. For non-swelling matrices, Fickian diffusion solutions for slabs, cylinders and spheres are well established (Crank, 1975), and obstruction models relate effective diffusivity to the volume fraction of an impermeable phase (Mackie and Meares, 1955). Adsorption of solute to the matrix is commonly described with linear or Langmuir isotherms (Langmuir, 1918). These elements have rarely been combined for nanocellulose aerogels, where porosity is extreme, the solid phase is chemically active, and both properties depend on the biomass source.

1.4 Process safety, integrity and quality in scale-up

The steps used to produce CNF aerogels involve hazards that must be managed as processing moves from laboratory to pilot scale. TEMPO-mediated oxidation uses sodium hypochlorite under alkaline conditions, and supercritical drying operates CO_2 above its critical pressure of about 7.4 MPa in pressure vessels. Conceptual models for heat stress, near-miss and hazard observation, contractor safety and continuous safety improvement (Arumosoye and Obriki, 2018; Arumosoye and Obriki, 2019; Arumosoye and Obriki, 2020; Arumosoye and Obriki, 2021; Arumosoye and Obriki, 2022), together with frameworks for operational integrity, QHSE auditing and incident prevention (Nwangwu et al., 2018; Obogo et al., 2020a; Obogo et al., 2020b; Obogo et al., 2020c; Obogo et al., 2021a; Obogo et al., 2021b; Obogo et al., 2022), provide transferable structures for safe scale-up. Work on safety culture, hazard identification, human error causation and safety training (Obogo et al., 2019a; Obogo et al., 2019b; Obogo et al., 2019; Obogo et al., 2021c; Obriki and Arumosoye, 2018; Obriki and Arumosoye, 2019; Obriki and Arumosoye, 2020; Obriki and Arumosoye, 2021; Obriki and Arumosoye, 2022; Obriki et al., 2022a; Obriki et al., 2022b) is relevant where CNF production is transferred to community or small-enterprise facilities. The integrity of pressurized drying equipment can draw on risk-based inspection, fitness-for-service assessment and corrosion management of pressure vessels and static equipment (Obetta, 2018; Obetta, 2019; Obetta, 2020; Obetta and Ninduwezuor-Ehiobu, 2018; Obetta and Ninduwezuor-Ehiobu, 2019; Obetta et al., 2020; Obetta et al., 2021; Obetta et al., 2022), on non-destructive testing and weld quality assurance (Atta et al., 2022; Atta et al., 2021; Atta et al., 2020), and on risk-based process engineering for reliability (Asibor and Isong, 2019).

1.5 Literature synthesis and research gap

Table 1 summarizes how the synthesized literature informs the model. Three gaps emerge. First, no existing framework links feedstock and processing descriptors to drug release parameters. Second, empirical fitting dominates interpretation, and its parameters are not transferable between materials. Third, the conditions for translating residue-derived carriers into products, including feedstock supply, manufacturing quality, regulation and energy, are discussed separately from release mechanisms. The conceptual model presented in Section 3 addresses the first two gaps directly and uses the third body of literature to frame its implications (Section 3.5).

Table 1: Themes from the literature synthesis and their role in the conceptual model.

Theme	Key insight for this work	Role in the model
Nanocellulose structure and chemistry	Porosity and surface charge are the main structural levers	Descriptors ε, τ, σ; Domains II and III
Agricultural residues and value chains	Composition varies with source; supply depends on smallholder systems	Feedstock effects on K_d; Section 3.5.2
Drug release modelling	Empirical fits are not transferable; Fickian solutions are	Equations 4 to 10; Section 3.4.3
Process safety and integrity	Oxidation and supercritical drying require controlled scale-up	Assumptions on processing; Section 3.5.3
Predictive and conceptual modelling	Sequential calibration and surrogate models aid design	Section 3.2.7
Pharmaceutical, health and energy systems	Quality, regulation, access and energy decide translation	Sections 3.5.3 to 3.5.5

1.6 Objective of the study

The objective of this work is to propose a conceptual model, expressed in a solvable mathematical form, that (a) represents the CNF aerogel as a hierarchical porous medium with explicit structural descriptors, (b) separates the physical processes that govern drug release, (c) links model parameters to measurable properties of the biomass-derived material, and (d) yields testable predictions and design rules. The paper is theoretical; illustrative simulations use parameter values drawn from ranges reported for nanocellulose aerogels and small-molecule drugs. Section 2 describes the research method, Section 3 presents and discusses the results, namely the conceptual

model, its mathematical formulation, illustrative simulations, implications, limitations and future research, and Section 4 concludes.

2. Research Method

2.1 Research design

This study follows a theoretical model development design. The approach is deductive: it starts from first principles of mass transport in porous media (Crank, 1975; Siepmann and Siepmann, 2012) and from established descriptions of nanocellulose structure and chemistry (Klemm et al., 2011; Isogai et al., 2011), and combines them with an integrative synthesis of literature on feedstock, processing, modelling practice and translation. No new experimental data were generated; the output is a conceptual model, its mathematical formulation, illustrative simulations and testable propositions.

2.2 Literature identification and synthesis

Two bodies of literature were synthesized. The first consists of core studies on nanocellulose isolation, aerogel formation and drug release modelling, identified from established reviews and the primary studies they cite (De France et al., 2017; Lavoine and Bergström, 2017). The second is a consolidated list of peer-reviewed studies from related and adjacent fields, which was screened for relevance to four questions: (i) what governs the availability and use of agricultural residues; (ii) what safety, integrity and quality requirements apply when CNF processing is scaled up; (iii) which conceptual and predictive modelling practices can support parameter identification and model-based design; and (iv) what manufacturing, regulatory, clinical, energy and capacity conditions determine whether a residue-derived carrier can reach patients. Studies were included if they were published in 2022 or earlier and addressed at least one of these questions; studies from unrelated domains were excluded. Included studies were coded thematically, and the themes were mapped to specific model components or to implications (Table 1).

2.3 Model construction

The model was built in seven steps: (1) identification of the physical processes that release drug from a wetted CNF aerogel; (2) definition of structural and chemical descriptors that can be measured on the material; (3) formulation of mass balances for free and bound drug; (4) derivation of analytical solutions and limiting cases for standard geometries; (5) non-dimensionalization to identify controlling regimes; (6) linkage of each parameter to feedstock and processing variables; and (7) formulation of testable propositions and a validation design.

2.4 Simulation and verification

The cumulative release expression (Equation 9) was evaluated numerically in Python using 200 terms of the series solution, which limits truncation error to below 10^{-6} over the simulated range. The implementation was verified against the short-time square-root limit (Equation 10) and against mass conservation (release tends to unity at long times). Parameter values were taken from ranges reported for nanocellulose aerogels and small-molecule drugs (Table 2). The Korsmeyer-Peppas exponent was obtained by least-squares fitting of log-transformed simulated data between 5 % and 60 % release, the range conventionally used for that equation (Korsmeyer et al., 1983; Ritger and Peppas, 1987).

3. Results and Discussion

3.1 Conceptual model

3.1.1 From biomass to aerogel: structure-determining steps

The model begins upstream of the carrier, because the properties that control release are set during processing (Figure 1). Pretreatment (alkaline extraction, bleaching) determines residual lignin and hemicellulose; fibrillation (mechanical, enzymatic or TEMPO-mediated oxidation) sets fiber width, length and surface charge density; and drying determines porosity, pore size distribution and the degree of fiber aggregation. TEMPO oxidation, for example, introduces carboxylate groups at C6 of surface anhydroglucose units, typically 0.5 to 1.7 mmol g^{-1}, which greatly enhances electrostatic interaction with cationic drugs (Isogai et al., 2011). Residual lignin introduces aromatic and hydrophobic domains that can adsorb poorly water-soluble drugs.

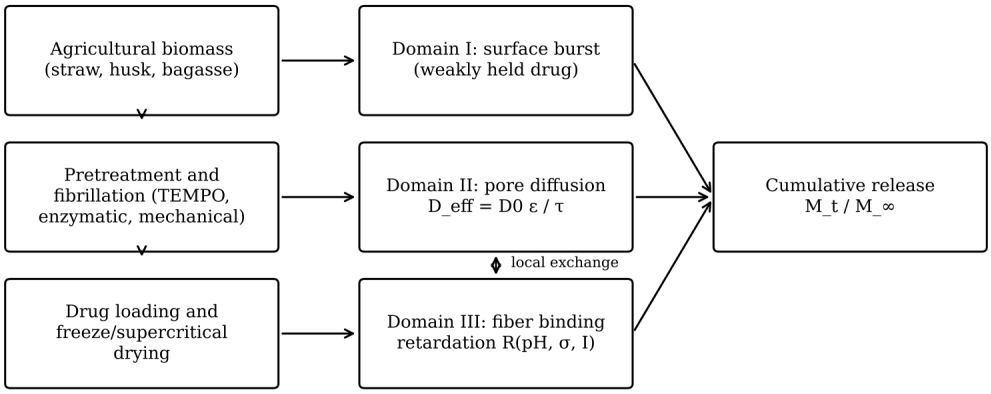


Fig 1: Conceptual model linking agricultural biomass processing to the three release domains of a CNF aerogel. Structural and chemical descriptors set during processing determine the burst fraction (Domain I), effective pore diffusivity (Domain II) and fiber-binding retardation (Domain III), which together produce the cumulative release profile.

3.1.2 Three release domains

Upon immersion in release medium the aerogel wets rapidly, often within seconds, because of its open porosity and hydrophilic surfaces. The model distinguishes three populations of drug, each associated with a release domain:

Domain I, surface burst. Drug crystallites or adsorbed molecules on the external surface and in large interconnected macropores dissolve almost immediately. This fraction, φ_b, is released with first-order kinetics characterized by a rate constant k_b that reflects dissolution rather than transport.

Domain II, pore diffusion. Dissolved drug in the pore water diffuses toward the boundary. Because the solid fraction is small, the dominant obstruction comes from pore connectivity and tortuosity rather than from the fibers themselves.

Domain III, fiber binding. A portion of the drug is reversibly associated with fiber surfaces through electrostatic attraction, hydrogen bonding or hydrophobic interaction. Bound drug is immobile but exchanges rapidly with the pore solution, so binding does not add a new transport path; instead it slows diffusion by storing drug locally. Under the local equilibrium assumption this storage enters the transport equation as a retardation factor.

Two further processes are included as optional modules: swelling of the network after wetting, which changes porosity with time, and erosion or disintegration of weakly cross-linked aerogels, which moves the release boundary.

3.1.3 Model assumptions

The base model assumes: (A1) the aerogel is a slab of half-thickness L (or a cylinder or sphere, treated in Section 3.2.5) releasing from both faces into a perfect sink; (A2) wetting is fast compared with release; (A3) drug loading is below saturation, so dissolution of a solid drug reservoir is not limiting except for the burst fraction; (A4) binding is linear and at local equilibrium; (A5) the pore network is homogeneous at the scale of the device; and (A6) porosity is constant unless the swelling module is activated. Each assumption is relaxed or discussed in Sections 3.2 and 3.6.

3.2 Mathematical formulation

3.2.1 Structural descriptors

Porosity follows from the aerogel bulk density ρ_a and the skeletal density of cellulose ρ_s (about 1.5 to 1.6 g cm^{-3}):

$$\varepsilon = 1 - \rho_a / \rho_s \quad (1)$$

Tortuosity is related to porosity through an empirical relation of the Weissberg type, appropriate for beds of randomly oriented fibers and particles, with p a shape factor of order 0.5:

$$\tau = 1 - p \ln \varepsilon \quad (2)$$

Other forms, such as the Mackie-Meares obstruction model (Mackie and Meares, 1955), can be substituted when the fiber network is highly swollen. The effective diffusivity of dissolved drug in the pore water is then

$$D_{eff} = D_0 \, \varepsilon / \tau \quad (3)$$

where D_0 is the free diffusivity of the drug in the release medium. For pores much larger than the drug molecule, as

is typical for CNF aerogels with pore sizes from tens of nanometres to tens of micrometres, hindered diffusion within individual pores can be neglected; a hindrance factor can be added for nanoporous supercritically dried aerogels.

3.2.2 Fiber binding and the retardation factor

Let c be the drug concentration in pore water and q the bound amount per unit mass of cellulose. With linear binding $q = K_d c$, a mass balance over a representative volume gives

$$\varepsilon\, \partial c/\partial t + (1 - \varepsilon)\, \rho_s\, \partial q/\partial t = \nabla\cdot(\varepsilon\, D_{eff}'\, \nabla c) \qquad (4)$$

which, after substitution and division by ε, becomes

$$R\, \partial c/\partial t = D_{eff}\, \nabla^2 c,\ R = 1 + (1 - \varepsilon)\, \rho_s\, K_d / \varepsilon \qquad (5)$$

The retardation factor R captures the key physical insight of the model: the slowing effect of binding scales with the ratio of solid to pore volume, $(1 - \varepsilon)/\varepsilon$, multiplied by the drug-fiber affinity. For a very light aerogel ($\varepsilon = 0.995$) this ratio is only 0.005, so even strong affinity produces modest retardation, whereas at $\varepsilon = 0.90$ it is 0.11, more than twenty times larger. Porosity therefore acts on release twice: weakly through D_{eff} and strongly through R.

The distribution coefficient is linked to surface chemistry. For an ionizable drug interacting with carboxylated CNF, an electrostatic contribution can be written as

$$K_d = K_{d,0} + K_e\, \sigma\, \alpha_f(\mathrm{pH})\, \alpha_d(\mathrm{pH}) / (1 + I/I_0) \qquad (6)$$

where σ is the surface charge density (mmol g^{-1}), α_f and α_d are the ionized fractions of fiber carboxyls ($pK_a \approx 3.5$ to 4) and of the drug, I is ionic strength and I_0 a screening constant. $K_{d,0}$ collects non-electrostatic contributions (hydrogen bonding, hydrophobic adsorption to residual lignin). Equation (6) predicts that a cationic drug will be released more slowly at intestinal pH, where carboxyls are ionized, than at gastric pH, and faster in high-ionic-strength media. Where binding is nonlinear, a Langmuir isotherm $q = q_{max} K_L c/(1 + K_L c)$ (Langmuir, 1918) yields a concentration-dependent R and must be solved numerically.

3.2.3 Burst release

The burst fraction is released by first-order dissolution:

$$M_b(t)/M_\infty = \varphi_b\, [1 - \exp(-k_b\, t)] \qquad (7)$$

The magnitude of φ_b depends on the loading method. Drug added to the CNF suspension before drying tends to be distributed through the network, while post-loading by soaking concentrates drug near surfaces and increases φ_b. Supercritical impregnation can deposit amorphous drug throughout the solid and generally lowers φ_b.

3.2.4 Diffusion-controlled fraction and total release

For a slab with uniform initial concentration and sink conditions, the classical solution (Crank, 1975) of Equation (5) is

$$F_d(t) = 1 - \Sigma_{n=0}^{\infty}\, [8 / ((2n+1)^2\pi^2)]\, \exp[-(2n+1)^2\pi^2\, D_{app}\, t / (4L^2)] \qquad (8)$$

with the apparent diffusivity $D_{app} = D_{eff}/R$. The total cumulative release combines the two populations:

$$M_t/M_\infty = \varphi_b\, [1 - \exp(-k_b\, t)] + (1 - \varphi_b)\, F_d(t) \qquad (9)$$

At short times ($F_d < 0.6$) Equation (8) reduces to the square-root law

$$F_d \approx (2/\sqrt{\pi})\, (D_{app}\, t / L^2)^{1/2} \qquad (10)$$

which shows that Higuchi-type behaviour is the expected early-time signature of Domain II, and that the Higuchi constant is not a material property but the composite $2(D_{eff}/R)^{1/2}/(\sqrt{\pi}\, L)$.

3.2.5 Geometry, swelling and erosion modules

For cylindrical and spherical aerogels the corresponding series solutions of Crank (1975) replace Equation (8). Swelling is introduced by allowing porosity to relax from its dry value toward an equilibrium value, $\varepsilon(t) = \varepsilon_\infty + (\varepsilon_0 - \varepsilon_\infty)\, \exp(-k_s\, t)$, so that both D_{eff} and R become time dependent. For aerogels with weak physical cross-linking, erosion is modelled as a moving boundary $L(t) = L_0 - k_e\, t$; when the erosion Péclet number $k_e L_0/D_{app}$ exceeds about one, release approaches zero-order kinetics. Chemically or ionically cross-linked CNF aerogels (for example with Ca^{2+} or polyamide-epichlorohydrin) usually satisfy the non-eroding base case.

3.2.6 Dimensionless analysis and controlling regime

Scaling time by the diffusion time $t_D = L^2/D_{eff}$ yields three governing groups: the retardation factor R, the burst Damköhler number $Da_b = k_b t_D$, and the burst fraction φ_b. When $R \approx 1$ and φ_b is small, release is pore-diffusion controlled and the half-release time scales as $t_{50} \approx 0.196 RL^2/D_{eff}$. When $R \gg 1$, binding controls the time scale and t_{50} grows in proportion to R. When $\varphi_b > 0.5$ the half-release time is set by dissolution, independent of structure. Table 2 summarizes the parameters and their links to measurable properties.

Table 2: Model parameters, physical meaning, link to biomass and processing, and typical values used in simulations.

Parameter	Meaning	Controlled by	Range used
ε	Porosity	CNF concentration before drying; drying method; fiber aggregation	0.90 to 0.995

Parameter	Meaning	Controlled by	Range used
τ	Tortuosity	Pore architecture; freezing direction (isotropic or aligned)	1.00 to 1.05 (Eq. 2)
D_0	Free drug diffusivity	Drug molecular size; medium viscosity; temperature	5×10^{-6} cm^2 s^{-1}
K_d	Drug-fiber distribution coefficient	Surface charge (TEMPO, carboxymethylation); residual lignin; pH; ionic strength	0 to 1 mL mg^{-1}
ρ_s	Skeletal density	Cellulose crystallinity; residual silica in husk-derived CNF	1500 mg mL^{-1}
φ_b	Burst fraction	Loading method; surface drug crystallization	0.15
k_b	Burst rate constant	Drug solubility; wetting rate	2 h^{-1}
L	Half-thickness	Device geometry	0.25 cm

3.2.7 Parameter identification and model-based design

Applying the model to experimental data requires estimates of D_{eff}, K_d, φ_b and k_b. Because these parameters are correlated when fitted to a single release curve, sequential identification is recommended: φ_b and k_b from the first minutes of release, K_d from independent batch adsorption on milled aerogel, and D_{eff} from the remainder of the curve with the other parameters fixed. This strategy of formulating a conceptual model first and then calibrating it with data follows established conceptual and predictive modelling practice across engineering and decision sciences (Anene and Clement, 2022; Basnet et al., 2021; Mayo et al., 2021; Oteri and Chibwaye, 2022; Tonoyan et al., 2021a; Tonoyan et al., 2021b; Tonoyan et al., 2022a; Tonoyan et al., 2022b; Tonoyan et al., 2022c).

Multi-objective formulations, in which several objective functions are minimized together, have been applied to the optimization of electrical machines (Amayo, 2017; Amayo and Popoola, 2017a; Amayo et al., 2015) and can be adapted here to fit release curves measured at several pH values or ionic strengths simultaneously, which improves identifiability of the electrostatic term in Equation (6). Data-driven decision models that link structured inputs to forecast outcomes (Adesuyi et al., 2022; Bola-Sadipe et al., 2019; Lawal and Oduleye, 2018a; Lawal and Oduleye, 2018b; Lawal and Oduleye, 2019a; Lawal and Oduleye, 2019b; Lawal and Oduleye, 2021a; Lawal and Oduleye, 2021b; Medon and Oduleye, 2022; Oduleye and Medon, 2021) and multimodal, high-fidelity forecasting of long-term system behaviour (Nwangwu et al., 2022; Nwangwu et al., 2020) illustrate how uncertainty in inputs can be propagated to predictions, for example by Monte Carlo sampling of porosity and charge density from their measured batch variability. Reliability engineering, condition monitoring and predictive maintenance (Gideon et al., 2019; Adaramola et al., 2018; Sunday and Omoegun, 2022; Sunday et al., 2019; Sunday et al., 2020), together with interpretable machine learning for failure prediction and forecasting (Komi, 2021; Komi and Adamolekun, 2021), suggest that once sufficient release data exist, surrogate models trained on mechanistic simulations could accelerate formulation screening without discarding physical interpretability.

3.3 Illustrative model behaviour

To demonstrate the behaviour of the model, Equation (9) was evaluated for a slab of half-thickness 0.25 cm (total thickness 0.5 cm) using the parameter values in Table 2. The values are representative rather than fitted to a particular drug, and the purpose is to show trends and the relative weight of structural and chemical variables.

3.3.1 Effect of porosity at fixed affinity

Figure 2 shows release at a moderate distribution coefficient (K_d = 0.2 mL mg^{-1}) for porosities from 0.90 to 0.995. The change in D_{eff} over this range is small, under 15 %, yet the release profiles differ markedly. The difference arises almost entirely from the retardation factor, which falls from 34 at ε = 0.90 to 2.5 at ε = 0.995 (Table 3). Correspondingly, the time to 50 % release falls from about 18.6 h to 1.3 h. This result suggests that adjusting the CNF solids content before freeze drying, a simple and inexpensive variable, can tune release over more than an order of magnitude when the drug has appreciable affinity for the fibers.

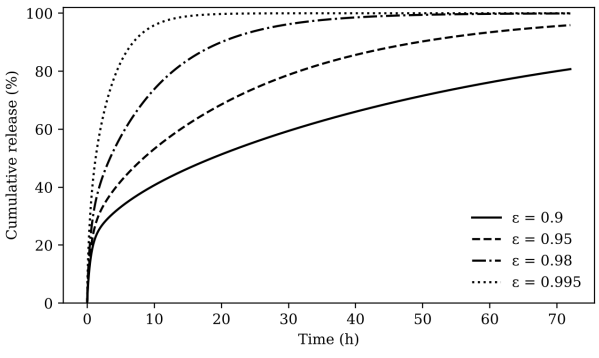


Fig 2: Simulated cumulative release from a CNF aerogel slab at different porosities with a fixed drug-fiber distribution coefficient (K_d = 0.2 mL mg^{-1}, φ_b = 0.15, L = 0.25 cm).

3.3.2 Effect of drug-fiber affinity

Figure 3 holds porosity at 0.98, typical of freeze-dried CNF aerogels, and varies K_d. With no binding, release is complete within a few hours and is governed by pore diffusion. As K_d increases, the profile develops an increasingly prominent initial burst followed by a slow, sustained phase. In practical terms, raising surface carboxyl content by TEMPO oxidation, or choosing a cationic drug at pH above the carboxyl pK_a, is predicted to shift a residue-derived aerogel from hours-long to day-long release.

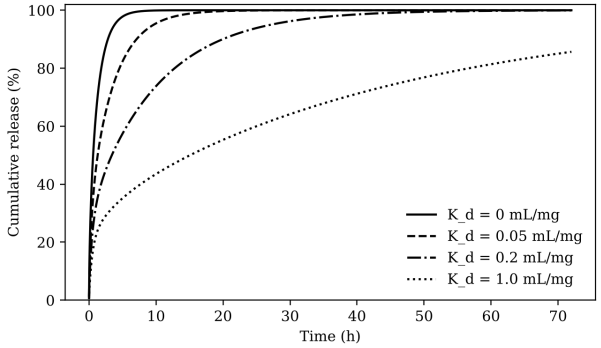


Fig 3: Simulated cumulative release at $\varepsilon = 0.98$ for distribution coefficients from 0 to 1 mL mg^{-1} (other parameters as in Figure 2).

Table 3: Retardation factor, apparent diffusivity, half-release time and apparent Korsmeyer-Peppas exponent from simulations (fit over 5 to 60 % release).

ε	K_d (mL mg^{-1})	R	D_{app} (cm^2 h^{-1})	t_{50} (h)	Apparent n
0.90	0	1.0	1.54×10^{-2}	0.67	0.54
0.90	0.2	34.3	4.48×10^{-4}	18.6	0.33
0.90	1.0	167.7	9.18×10^{-5}	> 72	0.26
0.98	0	1.0	1.75×10^{-2}	0.63	0.54
0.98	0.2	7.1	2.45×10^{-3}	3.4	0.44
0.98	1.0	31.6	5.52×10^{-4}	15.1	0.34
0.995	0	1.0	1.79×10^{-2}	0.63	0.54
0.995	0.2	2.5	7.12×10^{-3}	1.3	0.51
0.995	1.0	8.5	2.09×10^{-3}	4.0	0.43

3.3.3 Interpreting empirical fits

Fitting the simulated curves with the Korsmeyer-Peppas power law $M_t/M_\infty = kt^n$ gives exponents between 0.26 and 0.54 (Table 3), even though every curve was generated by purely Fickian transport plus a burst. For a slab, $n = 0.5$ is the expected Fickian value (Ritger and Peppas, 1987); values below 0.5 are frequently reported for nanocellulose systems and attributed loosely to "quasi-Fickian" or anomalous mechanisms. The model shows that a burst fraction combined with slowed diffusion is sufficient to produce such low exponents. Mechanistic conclusions should therefore not be drawn from n alone; independent measurement of φ_b (for example from release during the first minutes) and of K_d (from batch adsorption isotherms on milled aerogel) is required.

3.4 Discussion of model predictions

3.4.1 Feedstock-specific predictions

Because the model ties release to measurable descriptors, it generates feedstock-specific hypotheses. Rice husk and rice straw CNF retain silica unless it is removed by alkaline extraction; residual silica raises skeletal density and adds weakly acidic silanol sites, which the model predicts will increase R for cationic drugs at equal porosity. Bagasse and corn stover CNF prepared with mild bleaching retain lignin, increasing $K_{d,0}$ for hydrophobic drugs such as curcumin or ibuprofen, so lignin-containing aerogels are expected to sustain release of these molecules longer than fully bleached counterparts. Hemicellulose-rich CNF is more hygroscopic and may swell more after wetting, which activates the swelling module and causes release to accelerate as porosity increases.

3.4.2 Design map

The dimensionless analysis leads to a practical sequence for formulators: first select the drug-fiber pairing and surface chemistry to set K_d; then select solids content and drying method to set ε, which jointly fixes R; then select device thickness to set the absolute time scale through L^2; and finally choose a loading method that keeps φ_b within the acceptable burst for the indication. Because $t_{50} \propto RL^2/D_{eff}$, a target release duration can be achieved by different combinations, which allows low-cost residues to be matched to applications without expensive chemical modification.

3.4.3 Relation to existing release models

The model is consistent with, and generalizes, the empirical descriptions in common use. At early times it reduces to square-root kinetics (Equation 10), so Higuchi-type behaviour is expected whenever burst is small (Higuchi, 1961). At long times it approaches first-order decay with a rate constant proportional to D_{app}/L^2. With a burst fraction, the combined curve resembles a Weibull function with a shape parameter below one (Papadopoulou et al., 2006). The model therefore does not contradict previous fits; it explains their parameters in terms of porosity, surface chemistry and geometry, which allows results to be compared across cellulose sources and aerogel types (Valo et al., 2013).

3.5 Implications

3.5.1 Theoretical implications

The model reframes release from CNF aerogels as a problem of retarded diffusion, in which porosity acts both on transport through D_{eff} and, more strongly, on storage through R. This dual role explains why apparently small changes in aerogel density can produce large changes in release time, and it implies that porosity and surface chemistry cannot be optimized independently. It also shows that the Korsmeyer-Peppas exponent is not a reliable mechanistic indicator for highly porous, adsorptive carriers, which calls for re-examination of mechanistic claims based on that exponent alone.

3.5.2 Practical implications for feedstock sourcing and supply

Translating the model into practice requires a consistent supply of residues with predictable composition, because surface charge and residual lignin feed directly into K_d. Geospatial and remote-sensing tools, including UAV, LiDAR, GIS and satellite image interpretation (Dagodzo, 2018a; Dagodzo, 2018b; Dagodzo, 2018c; Dagodzo and Ahiaeke Patrick, 2020; Dagodzo and Ahiaeke Patrick, 2021a; Dagodzo and Ahiaeke Patrick, 2021b; Dagodzo and Ahiaeke Patrick, 2022; Dagodzo et al., 2022), can map residue availability and collection corridors. Procurement and supply chain frameworks for materials readiness, vendor evaluation, regulatory compliance and risk management (Agbabiaka et al., 2019; Ahiaeke Patrick et al., 2020; Ahiaeke Patrick et al., 2021; Ogunwole et al., 2021; Okonkwo et al., 2020; Okonkwo et al., 2021a; Okonkwo et al., 2021b; Okonkwo et al., 2018a; Okonkwo et al., 2018b; Okonkwo et al., 2019), and for resilience, visibility, demand forecasting and ESG-integrated sustainable sourcing (Aifuwa et al., 2020; Anene, 2021; Filani et al., 2022; Ike et al., 2021; Ike et al., 2022; Nnabueze et al., 2021; Okojie et al., 2020; Sakyi et al., 2022b; Sakyi et al., 2022a; Yeboah and Ike, 2020), provide structures for securing feedstock. Strategic procurement, supplier relationship management and lean, data-driven supply chain optimization in local manufacturing (Akinleye and Adeyoyin, 2021; Akinleye and Adeyoyin, 2022a; Akinleye and Adeyoyin, 2022b; Akin-Oluyomi et al., 2020; Ebisi et al., 2021b; Ebisi et al., 2022; Efobi et al., 2021; Efobi et al., 2022a; Efobi et al., 2022b; Akin-Oluyomi and Akhigbe, 2022) are relevant to keeping CNF costs low, which is one of the main arguments for residue-derived carriers.

3.5.3 Implications for manufacturing quality and regulation

Batch-to-batch variation in residue-derived CNF is a major barrier to pharmaceutical use. Standard operating procedures, standardized workflows and Lean Six Sigma quality systems (Agboada et al., 2018; Agboada et al., 2019; Alieme et al., 2022; Ambali et al., 2021; Ebisi et al., 2021a; Eyetsemitan et al., 2020; Eyetsemitan et al., 2021; Eyetsemitan et al., 2022; Okoli et al., 2022; Oyeleye et al., 2022) offer practical routes to controlling variability in fibre charge and aerogel density, the two inputs to which the model is most sensitive. In pharmaceutical settings, risk-based decision-making under good manufacturing practice, traceability, corrective and preventive action and regulatory readiness (Aneke and Adesemoye, 2019; Aneke and Adesemoye, 2020; Aneke and Adesemoye, 2021; Aneke et al., 2022a; Eze et al., 2022b), together with operational performance, digital transformation and supply chain resilience (Awulu et al., 2022a; Awulu et al., 2022b; Obukadata et al., 2021a; Obukadata et al., 2021b), define what a new excipient or carrier must satisfy. Medicine quality failures contribute to antimicrobial resistance and to shortages of essential medicines (Aneke et al., 2022b; Eze et al., 2022a), and last-mile distribution and drug interaction screening remain challenges in underserved settings (Asiedu, 2022; Asiedu and Asiedu, 2022); stable, locally produced carriers could help address these gaps. Plant-derived actives with antimicrobial activity (Gbadamosi and Obogo, 2013) are candidate payloads, and antimicrobial resistance surveillance (Yusuf et al., 2020) would inform which anti-infectives benefit most from sustained release.

3.5.4 Clinical and laboratory implications

Controlled release is most valuable where adherence is difficult, for example in chronic cardiovascular care and in mental health and behavioural health services (Okwah, 2022; Akinlolu et al., 2022; Oparah et al., 2021b; Osinem et al., 2021; Owoade et al., 2022), and where health systems face financing and access constraints (Ilodigwe and Adesemoye, 2019a; Ilodigwe and Adesemoye, 2019b; Ilodigwe and Adesemoye, 2020; Ilodigwe and Adesemoye, 2021; Okoli et al., 2020). Release testing and aerogel characterization require reliable laboratory infrastructure, and models for sustainable diagnostic laboratory design, regulatory compliance and quality systems (Aminu-Ibrahim et al., 2018; Aminu-Ibrahim et al., 2019; Aminu-Ibrahim et al., 2020; Aminu-Ibrahim et al., 2021; Aminu-Ibrahim et al., 2022; Ogbete et al., 2018; Ogbete et al., 2019; Ogbete et al., 2020; Ogbete et al., 2021; Ogbete et al., 2022; Abdulrazaq et al., 2019;

Abdulrazaq et al., 2021; Ejofodomi et al., 2014; Yusuf and Abdulrazaq, 2018) are directly relevant to establishing such capacity. Health informatics, surveillance and predictive outbreak models (Nnaji and Akinlolu, 2022; Omaghomi et al., 2022; Ekemezie et al., 2018; Oparah et al., 2021a; Oparah et al., 2022) could identify settings where sustained-release formulations of anti-infectives would offer the greatest benefit.

3.5.5 Energy, economic and capacity implications

Freeze drying and mechanical fibrillation are energy intensive, so the economics of residue-derived aerogels depend on energy supply. Solar integration in small-scale manufacturing, load distribution and voltage control with distributed generation (Sunday and Omoegun, 2018; Sunday and Omoegun, 2019; Oshevire et al., 2017), grounding and distribution network design (Adeniji et al., 2020), and microgrids, battery storage and smart-grid architectures (Shittu et al., 2021; Adenuga, 2022; Komi and Adamolekun, 2022; Komi and Adeniji, 2020; Komi and Ganiu, 2022), together with hydrogen as a secondary energy carrier (Shittu et al., 2019), are relevant where grid power is unreliable. Critical path scheduling, capital budgeting and change-program evaluation (Makut et al., 2021; Nwangwu et al., 2021; Obukadata et al., 2022) support the planning of pilot facilities. Finally, building local capability requires workforce development, onboarding and change management (Akhigbe et al., 2020; Falemi et al., 2020; Ukadike, 2018; Ukadike, 2019; Uzondu et al., 2021; Wikiri, 2019; Wikiri et al., 2022), and digital learning platforms and network infrastructure suited to low-connectivity environments (Orise and Niniola, 2020; Orise and Niniola, 2022; Unamma et al., 2018; Amayo and Popoola, 2017b).

For policy makers, the model suggests that support for residue collection, CNF processing infrastructure and quality laboratories should be coordinated, because the parameters that determine product performance are set across all three stages.

3.6 Limitations

The base model assumes linear, instantaneous binding; slow desorption or strong nonlinear binding at high loading would require kinetic or Langmuir terms solved numerically. Drug loading above solubility introduces a dissolving reservoir and moving front, for which a Higuchi-type pseudo-steady treatment is more appropriate. The tortuosity relation is empirical and may underestimate obstruction in anisotropic, directionally frozen aerogels, where release will also depend on orientation. Partial pore collapse during wetting, observed in some unmodified CNF aerogels, would reduce ε and should be measured on the wet material. Finally, in vivo conditions (enzymatic attack is negligible for cellulose in humans, but protein adsorption and non-sink conditions are not) are outside the present scope.

3.7 Future research

The most immediate priority is experimental validation.

The model can be falsified with a compact experimental design: (i) prepare aerogels from one residue at three solids contents and two surface charge levels; (ii) measure bulk density, specific surface area (N_2 adsorption), pore size distribution (mercury intrusion or micro-CT) and carboxyl content (conductometric titration); (iii) determine K_d by batch adsorption at release pH; (iv) measure release of a cationic and a neutral model drug of similar size, for instance methylene blue or propranolol versus caffeine or paracetamol, in buffers of two pH values and two ionic strengths. The key prediction is that the release time of the cationic drug collapses onto a single curve when plotted against $t/(RL^2)$, whereas the neutral drug depends mainly on L^2/D_{eff}.

Beyond validation, five directions are proposed. First, nonlinear and kinetically limited binding should be incorporated for high drug loadings and strongly binding drugs. Second, the model should be extended to anisotropic, directionally frozen aerogels, where tortuosity and release depend on orientation. Third, composite aerogels combining CNF with alginate, chitosan or mineral phases should be treated as multi-phase media with separate binding terms. Fourth, release under physiologically relevant non-sink conditions and in the presence of proteins and enzymes should be modelled to bridge in vitro and in vivo performance. Fifth, life-cycle and techno-economic assessments should be coupled to the model so that release targets can be met at the lowest cost and environmental burden for a given residue.

4. Conclusion

A conceptual and mathematical model has been developed for controlled drug release from cellulose nanofiber aerogels derived from agricultural biomass. By separating surface burst, pore diffusion and fiber binding, and by expressing binding as a retardation factor that scales with $(1-\varepsilon)\rho_s K_d/\varepsilon$, the model explains why porosity and surface chemistry interact strongly, why release can be tuned over more than an order of magnitude with simple processing changes, and why empirical power-law exponents below 0.5 do not by themselves indicate non-Fickian transport. The framework links each parameter to a measurable property of the feedstock and process, provides a design

map for formulators, and sets out testable predictions. It is intended to support the rational development of low-cost, locally sourced drug delivery materials from residues that are currently underused.

Nomenclature

Symbol	Definition (units)
c	Drug concentration in pore water (mg mL^{-1})
D_0, D_{eff}, D_{app}	Free, effective and apparent diffusivity (cm^2 h^{-1})
K_d	Linear distribution coefficient (mL mg^{-1})
k_b, k_s, k_e	Burst, swelling and erosion rate constants
L	Slab half-thickness (cm)
M_t, M_∞	Cumulative and total releasable drug (mg)
R	Retardation factor (dimensionless)
ε, τ	Porosity and tortuosity (dimensionless)
ρ_a, ρ_s	Aerogel bulk and cellulose skeletal density
σ, I	Surface charge density (mmol g^{-1}); ionic strength (mol L^{-1})
φ_b	Burst fraction (dimensionless)

Data Availability

The model equations and simulation parameters are fully specified in the text; simulation scripts are available from the corresponding author on request.

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