

CRACKING OF LOW DENSITY POLYETHYLENE DISSOLVED IN BENZENE TO  
LIQUID FUELS USING ZEOLITE-BASED CATALYSTS

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To my beloved parents and friends

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## ABSTRACT

Researchers proposed numerous solutions to plastic pollution, with the hope to tackle the intractable problems brought by plastic especially to mankind and environment. One of the proposed methods of solving the problem is the conversion of plastic waste to chemicals and fuels through pyrolysis and cracking. However, previous studies focused on polymer cracking in a batch process, which resulted in the wide distribution of the products. Thus, there is a need to develop polymer cracking process in continuous mode and improve the product quality by using a suitable catalyst. The aim of this research is to investigate on catalytic cracking of low density polyethylene (LDPE) in a fixed bed reactor into liquid fuel. LDPE was dissolved in different solvents with similar solubility parameter and the most suitable solvent was selected. The catalytic cracking was then carried out on the LDPE solution using a fixed bed reactor at atmospheric pressure. Parent zeolites and nickel-impregnated zeolites were screened as catalysts for the cracking of LDPE. The change in product composition at different reaction conditions was also studied, and a plausible reaction mechanism was proposed. This was followed by parametric study of the process involving five factors, namely temperature (A), catalyst mass (B), feed flow rate (C), N<sub>2</sub> flow rate (D), as well as concentration of LDPE solution (E), and the two responses were LDPE conversion (Y<sub>1</sub>) and liquid yield (Y<sub>2</sub>). Two level full factorial design was used to evaluate the factors. It was found that benzene is the most suitable solvent for LDPE dissolution. Catalytic cracking of the LDPE solution produced C1-C8 hydrocarbons in all runs. During the catalyst screening, zeolite Z2 (ZSM-5 zeolite, Si/Al: 1000) was found to be the most promising catalyst, as it was able to obtain high LDPE conversion (99.93%), high liquid yield (92.28%) and low coke formation (0.02%). The parametric analysis showed that four out of five factors (A, B, C and D) produced significant effects on Y<sub>1</sub> and Y<sub>2</sub>. On the other hand, factor E was statistically insignificant on the responses. Analysis on products composition showed that cracking of LDPE over zeolite Z2 produced a high amount of aliphatic branched-chain compounds, together with the moderate amount of cyclic compounds (C7-C12). The reaction conditions also led to alkylation of benzene by the cracking products from LDPE. It is suggested that the catalytic cracking of LDPE is dominated by free radical mechanism, while the influence of carbenium ion mechanism is less pronounced due to low acidity of the catalyst. Hence, it is concluded that catalytic cracking of dissolved LDPE in fixed bed reactor with zeolite Z2 is able to convert LDPE into liquid fuel in gasoline range and has the potential to tackle the plastic pollution.

## ABSTRAK

Para penyelidik mencadangkan pelbagai penyelesaian kepada pencemaran plastik, dengan harapan untuk menangani masalah yang dibawa oleh plastik terutamanya kepada manusia dan persekitaran. Salah satu penyelesaian yang dicadangkan adalah penukaran sisa plastik kepada bahan kimia dan bahan api melalui pirolisis dan perengkahan. Walau bagaimanapun, kajian-kajian sebelum ini lebih tertumpu kepada perengkahan polimer dalam proses berkelompok yang menghasilkan taburan produk yang luas. Maka, adalah perlu untuk mengkaji perengkahan polimer dalam mod berterusan, serta meningkatkan kualiti produk dengan pemangkin yang sesuai. Tujuan kajian ini adalah untuk mengkaji perengkahan berpemangkin polietilena berketumpatan rendah (LDPE) dalam reaktor lapisan tetap kepada bahan api cecair. LDPE dilarutkan dalam pelarut yang berbeza dengan parameter kelarutan yang hampir sama, dan pelarut yang paling sesuai dipilih. Perengkahan berpemangkin kemudian dijalankan ke atas larutan LDPE menggunakan reaktor lapisan tetap mikro pada tekanan atmosfera. Zeolit asal dan zeolit yang mengandungi nikel telah digunakan sebagai pemangkin. Perubahan dalam komposisi produk pada keadaan tindak balas yang berbeza juga telah dikaji, dan mekanisme tindak balas yang munasabah telah dicadangkan. Ini diikuti dengan kajian parametrik proses melibatkan lima faktor, iaitu suhu (A), jisim pemangkin (B), kadar aliran suapan (C), kadar aliran  $N_2$  (D), serta kepekatan larutan LDPE (E), dan dua respon yang dilihat adalah penukaran LDPE ( $Y_1$ ) dan hasil cecair ( $Y_2$ ). Reka bentuk penuh faktorial dua peringkat telah digunakan. Benzena merupakan pelarut yang paling sesuai untuk pelarutan LDPE. Perengkahan berpemangkin LDPE menghasilkan hidrokarbon C1-C8 dalam semua eksperimen. Dalam saringan pemangkin, zeolit Z2 (zeolit ZSM-5, Si/Al: 1000) didapati sebagai pemangkin yang sesuai, kerana ia menghasilkan penukaran LDPE yang tinggi (99.93%), hasil cecair yang tinggi (92.28%) dan pembentukan kok yang rendah (0.02%). Kajian parametrik menunjukkan bahawa empat daripada lima faktor (A, B, C dan D) menghasilkan kesan yang ketara ke atas  $Y_1$  dan  $Y_2$ . Sebaliknya, faktor E adalah tidak penting secara statistik ke atas respon-respon yang dikaji. Analisis ke atas komposisi menunjukkan bahawa perengkahan LDPE dengan zeolite Z2 menghasilkan amaun sebatian rantai bercabang alifatik yang tinggi, bersama dengan amaun sebatian siklik (C7-C12) yang sederhana. Keadaan tindak balas juga membawa kepada alkilasi benzena oleh produk perengkahan dari LDPE. Adalah dicadangkan bahawa perengkahan berpemangkin LDPE dikuasai oleh mekanisme radikal bebas, manakala pengaruh mekanisme ion karbenium adalah kurang ketara akibat keasidan pemangkin yang rendah. Secara kesimpulannya, perengkahan berpemangkin LDPE dalam benzena dalam reaktor lapisan tetap dengan zeolite Z2 boleh menukar LDPE kepada bahan api cecair dalam lingkungan petrol dan mempunyai potensi untuk menangani pencemaran plastik.

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**LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

ANOVA	-	Analysis of Variance
BET	-	Brunauer, Emmett and Teller method
BTX	-	benzene, toluene and xylene
CCD	-	central composite design
CSBR	-	conical spouted bed reactor
DOE	-	Design of experiment
EVA	-	Ethylene Vinyl Acetate
FCC	-	fluid catalytic cracking
FID	-	flame ionization detector
FTIR	-	Fourier-Transformed Infra-red
GC-MS	-	Gas chromatography coupled with mass selectivity detector
HDPE	-	High density polyethylene
HHV	-	higher heating value
HT-GPC	-	high temperature gel permeation chromatography
LCO	-	light cycle oil
LDPE	-	Low density polyethylene
LLDPE	-	linear low density polyethylene
LPG	-	liquefied petroleum gas
MAP	-	microwave assisted pyrolysis
MAT	-	automated microactivity unit
MPW	-	municipal plastic waste
MSW	-	municipal solid waste
N.A.	-	not available
OVAT	-	one-variable-at-a-time method
PE	-	Polyethylene
PET	-	Polyethylene terephthalate



PIONA	-	paraffins, olefins, naphthenes and aromatics
PP	-	polypropylene
PS	-	Polystyrene
PS-PBD	-	polystyrene-polybutadiene
PVC	-	Poly(vinyl chloride)
RDF	-	refuse-derived fuel
RGA	-	Residual Gas Analyser
R <sup>2</sup>	-	correlation coefficient
SEM	-	Scanning electron Microscope
TCD	-	thermal conductivity detector
TGA	-	Thermogravimetric analysis
TPO	-	temperature-programmed oxidation
TPR	-	Temperature-programmed reduction
VGO	-	vacuum gas oil
WPB	-	waste particle board
XRD	-	X-Ray diffraction
Zeolite Y	-	zeolite CBV 720
Zeolite Z1	-	zeolite CBV 2314
Zeolite Z2	-	Zeolite ZSM5
ZSM	-	Zeolite Socony Mobil-5

**LIST OF SYMBOLS**

°C	-	degree Celcius
g	-	Gram
wt%	-	weight percentage
mm	-	millimeter
L	-	Liter
mL	-	milliliter
μm	-	micrometer
nm	-	nanometer
Å	-	Armstrong ( $1 \times 10^{-10}$ meter)
V	-	volt
VA	-	volt ampere
°	-	degree
min	-	minute

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

#### **1.1 Background of Research**

Since their first synthesis in early 1900s, plastics have substituted many types of materials in production of consumer products, as they possessed superior qualities compared to traditional materials such wood, metal and ceramics. Among different types of plastics, polyethylene (PE) is widely used for numerous purposes, including the production of wrapping papers and plastic bags due to its light weight, strength, durability and low cost. As a result, the global demand of polyethylene is increasing. In 2012, annual LDPE production of 21 million tonnes was reported, following a steady growth of over 700,000 tonnes over a year [1].

Despite the advantages brought by plastic-made materials, their disposal causes a lot of problems to the environment, as they do not degrade in landfill, and remain buried in the soil for hundreds or even thousands of years thereby constituting an environmental pollution. It is estimated that plastic waste accounted for 8-12% of total municipal solid waste (MSW) around the globe, and is estimated to reach 9-13% by 2025 [2]. In order to solve the problem brought by the plastic waste, researchers have proposed many solutions, however, none of the proposed solutions can effectively solve the plastic pollution with positive reception from the public. Researchers are currently focusing on the potential of polymer cracking, which involves the depolymerization of plastic to small hydrocarbon molecules, which can be then utilized as fuels. Recently, a lot of effort was made by researchers in this area.

However, as most studies in polymer pyrolysis and cracking process were carried out in batch reactors, there are some difficulties to apply the process in polymer recycling industry. In order to achieve such development, polymer cracking has to be carried out in continuous process mode. Nonetheless, polymer waste in its solid waste is difficult to be fed into reactor continuously. Thus, there is a need to develop a method that enables smooth continuous feeding of polymer waste into the reactor for catalytic cracking, as there are many advantages associated with this process. Studies by several researchers [3-5] may serve as a possible solution to the mentioned problem. In their studies, the polymer is dissolved in compatible solvents to form solutions with reasonable viscosity. The polymer solution was then fed into the cracking reactor to produce liquids comparable to fuels. However, such studies are very scarce in literature, and only limited to small scale. Hence, it is necessary to investigate on catalytic cracking of polymer in larger scale.

## **1.2 Problem Statement**

Due to the increasing demand on plastic-made consumer products, there is an urgent need to propose proper alternatives to plastic waste disposal. Among the proposed solutions, catalytic cracking seems to be an interesting option, since it converts plastic waste to liquid fuel. However, most studies on catalytic cracking of polymer were done in batch process, which is difficult to be applied in polymer recycling industry. There is a need to develop catalytic cracking of polymer in continuous mode, since such process is more scalable and suitable for industry requirements. Nevertheless, development of catalytic cracking of polymer in continuous mode is challenging due to the lack of comprehensive studies. In order to develop such process, the compatible solvent for the studied polymer has to be determined, since not all solvents can be used to satisfactorily dissolve the polymer. Another challenge faced by researchers in studying continuous catalytic cracking of polymer is the proper method to determine the polymer conversion during the process. For polymer cracking in batch reactor, the polymer conversion can be easily determined based on the weight of unreacted polymer in the reactor after the cracking process. Such method does not work on polymer cracking in continuous

mode, since the unconverted polymer is mixed with the liquid product after the cracking process. Several strategies used in previous studies to overcome this problem, as explained in Section 2.5.2, are difficult to be replicated in most laboratories. Therefore, there is a need to propose an easy method for quantification of polymer conversion in continuous cracking.

In addition, the understanding on polymer cracking in continuous mode is still shallow, due to the limited works in literature. The findings on polymer cracking in batch mode can only be partially generalized on the continuous cracking of polymer, due to the differences of these processes. Thus, there is a need for a comprehensive study on continuous cracking of polymer, including the effects of different catalysts and reaction parameters towards the polymer conversion and liquid yield. It is also necessary to find out how these factors influence the composition of products, especially liquid, since such property is of utmost important to determine its suitability to be used as fuel.

### **1.3 Objectives of Research**

The main objective of this research is to study on catalytic cracking of low density polyethylene (LDPE) dissolved in solvent in a fixed bed reactor. The specific objectives are listed in the following:

- a. To screen solvent in dissolution of commercial LDPE.
- b. To investigate the effects of different catalysts on the composition and yield of liquid and gaseous products in catalytic cracking of LPDE dissolved in best solvent in the fixed bed reactor.
- c. To study the effects of different factors towards liquid product composition, and propose the reaction mechanism of the catalytic cracking of LDPE/benzene solution.
- d. To determine the significant reaction parameters in catalytic cracking of LDPE using two-level full factorial design.

## 1.4 Scope of Research

In order to achieve the research objectives, the scope of this research is designed as follows:

(a) Screening was carried out on five solvents (benzene, chlorobenzene, toluene, xylene and trichloroethylene) to determine the best solvent for dissolution of commercial low density polyethylene (LDPE). Characterizations were also performed on LDPE in solid and solution state (using selected solvent), in term of elemental and proximate analysis, viscometry, Fourier-transformed Infra-red (FTIR) spectrometry, Thermogravimetric analysis (TGA), and bomb calorimetry.

(b) Zeolite Z1 (ZSM-5 type, CBV 2314, Si/Al: 23) was selected as the catalyst as it is the one of the widely used ZSM-5 zeolites in cracking of hydrocarbons, polymer and biomass [6-9]. Zeolite Y (USY type, CBV 720, Si/Al: 30) is another typical USY zeolite used for the same purpose [10-12]. They are reported to have large surface area with high amount of acidic sites that enables effective contact of the reactants on its surface for reactions. Thus, it is necessary to test their catalytic performance in the cracking of LDPE solution. Comparison between the performances of the two catalysts revealed the difference between ZSM5 zeolite and USY zeolite. Another aim of this research is to study the potential of a ZSM-5 zeolite (named as Z2, Si/Al: 1000) in catalytic cracking of LDPE solution. The use of such zeolite has not been reported in the literature, hence it is worthy to study its potential in LDPE cracking process. Another aim of this study is to study the effect of Ni impregnation of the catalytic properties of zeolites, which is not yet reported in catalytic cracking of dissolved polymer. Nickel is chosen due to its ability to improve products quality as explained in Section 2.7.3. According to literature, metal loadings of 0.5% -15% is often used by researchers in this field [13-16]. Therefore, a metal loading of 10wt% was chosen for this research. Characterizations of the zeolites were carried out using Brunauer, Emmett and Teller (BET) analysis

method for surface area, Scanning electron Microscope (SEM), X-Ray diffraction (XRD), Temperature-programmed reduction (TPR), and Temperature-programmed desorption of ammonia (TPD-NH<sub>3</sub>). Catalytic cracking of LDPE solution was then carried out in the fixed bed reactor using a total of six catalysts (Y, Ni-Y, Z1, Ni-Z1, Z2, Ni-Z2), and the liquid products from the cracking process were characterized using Gas chromatography coupled with mass selectivity detector (GC-MS), Fourier-Transformed Infra-red (FTIR) spectroscopy, as well as bomb calorimetry. The coke formation on catalyst was also studied using temperature-programmed oxidation in thermobalance (TGA-TPO). The most promising catalyst was selected based on polymer conversion, liquid yield and coke yield.

(c) By using the selected catalyst, a parametric study was carried out on catalytic cracking of LDPE solution in fixed bed reactor. Two-level full factorial design was generated using Minitab for the purpose. The factors studied were temperature (400-600 °C), mass of catalyst (0.1-0.2 g), flow rate of LDPE solution (1-3 ml/min), flow rate of carrier gas (20-80 ml/min), as well as concentration of LDPE solution (0.005-0.2 g LDPE/ml benzene), while the responses studied were LDPE conversion and liquid yield.

(d) Compositions of liquid products were determined after performing catalytic cracking at varying reaction conditions. The effects of significant factors determined from scope (c) towards the liquid products were then determined. The plausible mechanism was proposed for catalytic cracking of LDPE, based on the composition of products at varying reaction parameters.

## **1.5 Significance of Research**

Following a great number of detailed studies in thermal and catalytic cracking of various polymers in batch reactors, there is a need to develop polymer cracking process in continuous mode. Such conversion is important in commercialization of polymer cracking process, as it offers higher versatility compared to polymer



cracking in batch mode. Compared to the latter, the former process is easier to be controlled, and thus leads to more stable products quality. In addition, polymer cracking in continuous mode reduces the time solely for reactor heating (during start-up) and cooling (before products discharge) when compared to batch units, which requires heating and cooling every batch. These improvements ultimately results in higher efficiency of the process.

In addition, development of polymer cracking in continuous mode also opens more possibilities for the process. For instance, it is possible to selectively separate the plastic waste to different types of polymers by using different solvents and dissolution temperatures [17]. Such separation, termed as selective dissolution, may increase the efficiency for polymer cracking process [18], and more studies on this possibility are under way. It is also interesting to investigate the possibility to carrying out the continuous polymer cracking in fluid catalytic cracking (FCC) unit in petroleum refinery. Such process is feasible due to the similar structure of dissolved polymer and crude oil [19, 20].

In order to realize the mentioned potentials, comprehensive studies on continuous polymer cracking are necessary to enable in-depth understanding by the researchers. To the best of our knowledge, no study is reported in the open literature using a continuous catalytic cracking of LDPE to generate liquid fuel. Thus, the result from this research is expected to expand the frontier of knowledge in the field of plastic waste recycling.

## **1.6 Thesis Outline**

This thesis consists of five chapters. Each chapter provides information on specific research area:

Chapter 1 contains the research background, research objectives and scopes, as well as significance of research. Chapter 2 discusses the literature review

including background knowledge on catalytic cracking of polymers, design of experiment (DOE), analysis techniques that are commonly used for characterization purpose in catalytic cracking etc. Chapter 3 describes the experimental setup and the procedures followed during the research work. These include characterization methods on polymer feed, catalysts and products design and fabrication of the fixed bed reactor, as well as study on effects of reaction parameters towards process performances and products compositions. Chapter 4 deals with data processing and discussions on the results, followed by proposed mechanism on catalytic cracking of dissolved LDPE. Chapter 5 presents the conclusions derived from this research and the recommendations for future studies.

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