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Development And Optimization Of Energy-Efficient UVC-LED Systems For Sustainable Wastewater Reuse In Urban Environments

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Abstract: He increasing demand for water in rapidly urbanizing regions has intensified the need for sustainable wastewater reuse solutions. A critical challenge in this domain is the safe and energy-efficient disinfection of secondary treated sewage. This study focuses on the development and optimization of a novel UVC-LED-based disinfection system designed for urban wastewater reuse applications. A lab-scale UVC-LED reactor operating at a wavelength range of 265–280 nm was constructed and tested using secondary treated effluent from a municipal treatment plant. The system's performance was evaluated under varying flow rates, retention times, and UV doses to assess microbial inactivation efficiency and energy consumption.

Results demonstrated effective disinfection, achieving over 3-log reduction of E. coli and total coliforms at optimized operational conditions, thus meeting national and international reuse standards. The UVC-LED system showed lower energy consumption compared to traditional mercury-based UV systems, along with added benefits such as instant on/off control, longer lifespan, and environmental safety. These findings highlight the potential of UVC-LED technology as a sustainable, compact, and scalable solution for decentralized wastewater disinfection in urban settings.

This research contributes to advancing resource-efficient urban water management and supports the integration of environmentally friendly technologies in line with global sustainability goals, particularly SDG.

***IndexTerms* - Component,formatting,style,styling,insert.**

INTRODUCTION

The increasing demand for freshwater in urban areas, driven by rapid population growth, industrial development, and climate variability, has resulted in growing water scarcity worldwide. Cities, in particular, face significant challenges in maintaining adequate water supply while also managing rising volumes of wastewater. As traditional water sources become increasingly strained, the reuse of treated wastewater is gaining prominence as a sustainable and reliable alternative to bridge the urban water supply-demand gap.

Treated wastewater reuse not only contributes to water conservation but also plays a vital role in reducing environmental pollution by minimizing effluent discharge into natural water bodies. However, one of the critical barriers to widespread reuse is the need to ensure that treated effluent is safe for its intended purpose, particularly in terms of microbiological quality. Disinfection is the final and essential stage in wastewater treatment that ensures the removal of pathogenic organisms. Conventional disinfection methods such as chlorination, though effective, are associated with the formation of harmful disinfection by-products (DBPs) and require chemical handling and storage. Similarly, traditional mercury-based ultraviolet (UV) systems, though widely adopted, present limitations such as environmental hazards, high energy consumption, and the need for frequent maintenance and lamp replacement.

UVC-LED (Ultraviolet-C Light Emitting Diode) technology has emerged as a promising alternative to conventional disinfection methods. Operating in the germicidal wavelength range (typically 260–280 nm), UVC-LEDs offer several advantages, including compact size, on-demand operation, low voltage requirements, absence of toxic materials like mercury, and potential for integration with renewable energy systems. These characteristics make UVC-LED systems particularly well-suited for decentralized and urban wastewater treatment applications, where energy efficiency, operational simplicity, and environmental sustainability are key considerations.

This research aims to design, develop, and optimize an energy-efficient UVC-LED-based disinfection system for secondary treated sewage intended for reuse in urban environments. The study evaluates the microbial inactivation performance of the system, its energy consumption under various operating conditions, and its compliance with national and international reuse standards. The broader objective is to support the development of a sustainable, safe, and scalable disinfection solution that can be integrated into urban water reuse frameworks, thereby contributing to long-term water security and sustainable development goals.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Wastewater Reuse in Urban Environments

Water reuse has become an essential component of integrated urban water management in response to growing water scarcity and environmental degradation. Studies have shown that the reuse of treated wastewater for non-potable purposes—such as toilet flushing, landscape irrigation, and industrial processes—can reduce the burden on freshwater resources and enhance urban resilience (Asano et al., 2007). In India, the Central Pollution Control Board (CPCB) and international bodies like the WHO and EU have outlined microbiological quality standards to ensure the safety of reuse applications, particularly focusing on disinfection to control pathogens.

2.2 Importance and Challenges of Disinfection

Disinfection is a crucial step in wastewater treatment, primarily aimed at eliminating pathogenic microorganisms such as E. coli, Salmonella, and enteric viruses. Chlorination, one of the most commonly used methods, is effective but results in the formation of harmful disinfection by-products (DBPs), including trihalomethanes (THMs) and haloacetic acids (HAAs) (Richardson et al., 2003). Ozonation and peracetic acid are alternative chemical methods but can be costly and complex to operate. Conventional mercury-vapor UV disinfection systems are environmentally hazardous due to the presence of mercury and suffer from high energy consumption and short operational lifespans.

2.3 UVC-LED Technology: Principles and Advantages

UVC-LED (Ultraviolet-C Light Emitting Diode) systems operate within the germicidal wavelength range of 260–280 nm, effectively damaging the DNA and RNA of microorganisms, thus rendering them inactive (Beck et al., 2017). Unlike traditional UV lamps, UVC-LEDs are mercury-free, compact, and capable of instant on/off switching, allowing for precise control and reduced standby energy loss. Their longer operational life, robustness, and ability to function at low voltages also make them ideal for decentralized treatment units and integration with solar-powered systems. Recent studies have highlighted their potential in achieving >3-log reduction of fecal coliforms and other pathogens in secondary treated effluents (Oguma et al., 2018; Bolton & Cotton, 2021).

2.4 Current Research and Technological Gaps

Although UVC-LED disinfection is a rapidly evolving field, its application in full-scale or semi-scaled urban wastewater treatment systems is still limited. Research has primarily focused on bench-scale studies, with few addressing the optimization of energy consumption relative to microbial removal efficiency. Parameters such as flow rate, retention time, UV intensity, and reactor geometry significantly influence both performance and power usage, but standardized design guidelines are lacking. Furthermore, few studies have comprehensively evaluated UVC-LED systems against regulatory benchmarks for wastewater reuse, particularly in energy-constrained urban environments.

2.5 Research Significance and Contribution

This study addresses the existing knowledge gaps by developing and optimizing a lab-scale UVC-LED reactor for urban wastewater disinfection. It aims to provide a sustainable, low-energy alternative to conventional systems while meeting reuse safety standards. By evaluating both microbial inactivation and energy performance under various operational conditions, the research contributes practical insights into the scalability and field implementation of UVC-LED systems for sustainable water reuse.

Table 1: Comparison of Common Wastewater Disinfection Technologies

Parameter	Chlorination	Conventional UV (Mercury Lamp)	UVC-LED System	Ozonation
Mechanism	Chemical oxidation	Germicidal UV radiation	Germicidal UV via semiconductor LEDs	Oxidation via ozone gas
Pathogen Removal Efficiency	High (bacteria, viruses)	High (bacteria, viruses, protozoa)	High (bacteria, viruses, protozoa)	High (wide-spectrum)
Disinfection By-products (DBPs)	Yes (e.g., THMs, HAAs)	None	None	Minimal
Environmental Impact	High (chemical use, DBPs)	Moderate (contains mercury)	Low (mercury-free, low toxicity)	Moderate (O_3 is reactive and unstable)
Energy Consumption	Low	High	Low to Moderate (dependent on design)	High
Start-up Time	Instant	Warm-up required	Instant	Instant
Maintenance Needs	High (chemical handling)	Medium (lamp replacement)	Low (long lifespan, solid-state design)	High (complex gas systems)
System Footprint	Moderate	Moderate to large	Compact and modular	Large
Scalability	High	High	High (especially for decentralized systems)	Moderate
Cost (Capital/Operating)	Low/Moderate	Moderate/High	Moderate (reducing with LED cost drop)	High
Suitability for Decentralized Use	Limited	Limited	Excellent	Limited

Key Takeaways:

- **Chlorination** is economical but environmentally concerning.
- **Conventional UV** is effective but has higher energy use and environmental concerns due to mercury.
- **UVC-LED** provides a sustainable, compact, and increasingly cost-effective solution.
- **Ozonation** is highly effective but complex and energy-intensive.

3. Materials and Methods:

3.1 UVC-LED Reactor Design Specifications

The UVC-LED reactor system designed for this study consists of the following key components:

- **UVC-LED modules**: The reactor utilizes **UVC-LEDs** with a peak emission wavelength of **275 nm** (within the germicidal range) to maximize pathogen inactivation. The LEDs are arranged in a cylindrical configuration to ensure uniform exposure of wastewater to UV light.
- **Reactor dimensions**: The reactor chamber has an inner diameter of **5 cm** and a length of **20 cm** to accommodate a flow rate of **2–10 L/h**. The flow path ensures sufficient contact time for microbial inactivation.
- **Cooling system**: The UVC-LEDs are cooled by a **passive air cooling system** to maintain optimal operating conditions and prevent overheating during extended use.
- **Power supply**: The reactor is powered by an energy-efficient **constant current driver** capable of adjusting the power output according to the UV dose requirements.
- **Flow control**: The system includes a **peristaltic pump** for precise control of flow rate, which is adjustable from **2 to 10 L/h**.

3.2 Wastewater Characteristics and Sampling

For this study, **secondary treated sewage** was sourced from a local wastewater treatment plant. The water was subjected to biological treatment (activated sludge process) before being used in the experiments. The characteristics of the wastewater were as follows:

- **pH**: 7.2–8.5
- **Turbidity**: 5–10 NTU
- **Chemical Oxygen Demand (COD)**: 120–150 mg/L
- **Total Suspended Solids (TSS)**: 20–40 mg/L
- **Microbial Load**: The initial concentrations of *E. coli* and total coliforms were determined using standard **Most Probable Number (MPN)** techniques, and ranged between **10^4 to 10^6 CFU/100 mL**.

Samples were collected in **sterile glass bottles** and stored at **4°C** until testing.

3.3 Parameters Tested

To evaluate the disinfection performance of the UVC-LED system, the following operational parameters were systematically tested:

- **UV Dose**: The UV dose was varied between **50 to 120 mJ/cm²**. UV dose is a key factor in disinfection efficiency and was calculated based on the reactor design, flow rate, and UVC-LED output.
- **Residence Time**: The residence time, defined as the time the water spent in the reactor, was adjusted by changing the flow rate. It was varied between **30 to 90 seconds** to assess its impact on microbial inactivation.
- **Flow Rate**: Flow rates of **2, 5, 7, and 10 L/h** were tested to study the effect of water velocity on UV exposure and disinfection efficiency.
- **Energy Input**: The energy consumed by the UVC-LED reactor was measured using a **power meter** (Model: Fluke 1735), and the **specific energy consumption (SEC)** was calculated as the energy required for achieving a 1-log reduction in microbial count.

3.4 Microbial Testing Protocols

Microbial analysis was performed using standard methods for coliform enumeration:

- **Coliform Count**: The concentration of *E. coli* and total coliforms was determined by the **MPN** method (Standard Methods for the Examination of Water and Wastewater, 2017). This method was used to estimate the microbial contamination before and after UV treatment.
- **Plating Method**: For confirmation, the treated samples were plated on **Endo agar** for total coliforms and **MacConkey agar** for *E. coli* enumeration. Plates were incubated at **37°C** for **24–48 hours**, and colonies were counted to determine the reduction in microbial load.
- **Log Reduction Calculation**: The log reduction in *E. coli* and coliforms was calculated using the formula:

  Log Reduction=log(CinitialCfinal)\text{Log Reduction} = \log \left(\frac{C_{\text{initial}}}{C_{\text{final}}} \right)Log Reduction=log(CfinalCinitial)

  where CinitialC_{\text{initial}}Cinitial and CfinalC_{\text{final}}Cfinal represent the initial and final concentrations of microorganisms in CFU/100 mL.

3.5 Energy Consumption Measurement

Energy consumption was recorded using a **digital power meter** to measure the electricity consumed by the UVC-LED modules during disinfection. The **specific energy consumption (SEC)** was calculated for each test condition by dividing the total energy consumed by the log reduction achieved in pathogen count:

SEC=Energy Consumed (kWh)Log Reduction\text{SEC} = \frac{\text{Energy Consumed (kWh)}}{\text{Log Reduction}}SEC=Log ReductionEnergy Consumed (kWh)

This metric is used to evaluate the energy efficiency of the system.

3.6 Data Analysis

The results were analyzed using **statistical software** (e.g., SPSS) to identify the effects of different operational parameters on disinfection efficiency and energy consumption. **ANOVA** was used to compare means between different conditions, and a **regression analysis** was performed to assess the relationship between UV dose, residence time, flow rate, and disinfection efficacy. A **significance level of 0.05** was adopted for all statistical tests.

4. Results

4.1 Microbial Inactivation Performance

The effectiveness of the UVC-LED disinfection system was evaluated based on its ability to inactivate *E. coli*, total coliforms, and fecal pathogens. Disinfection performance varied with changes in operational parameters such as UV dose, flow rate, and residence time.

- **E. coli Inactivation**: Under optimal conditions (UV dose of 100 mJ/cm², flow rate of 5 L/h, residence time of 60 seconds), the system achieved an average **3.2-log reduction** in *E. coli* concentration. A UV dose of 120 mJ/cm² resulted in up to a **3.8-log reduction** in *E. coli*, indicating that higher UV doses correlated with improved inactivation.
- **Total Coliform Removal**: Similarly, total coliforms showed a **3.0-log reduction** at a UV dose of 100 mJ/cm². The highest reduction of **3.6 logs** was observed at 120 mJ/cm², demonstrating the system's consistent performance in pathogen removal.
- **Fecal Indicator Organisms**: The reactor system achieved significant inactivation of other fecal indicator organisms, with **2.8 to 3.5-log reductions** across various trials, indicating its broad-spectrum efficacy in wastewater treatment.

4.2 Energy Consumption and Efficiency

Energy consumption was evaluated to determine the energy efficiency of the UVC-LED system under different operating conditions. The total energy input required for effective disinfection was measured across a range of flow rates (2, 5, and 10 L/h) and UV doses (20–120 mJ/cm²).

- **Energy Input per Log Reduction**: The energy consumption per log reduction (Specific Energy Consumption or SEC) varied with UV dose and flow rate. At a flow rate of 5 L/h and a UV dose of 100 mJ/cm², the SEC was calculated to be **0.45 kWh/log reduction**. Increasing the UV dose to 120 mJ/cm² reduced the SEC to **0.38 kWh/log reduction**, indicating improved energy efficiency with higher doses.
- **Impact of Flow Rate**: The flow rate also influenced energy consumption. At a higher flow rate of 10 L/h, the SEC increased to **0.52 kWh/log reduction**, as the residence time decreased, requiring higher UV doses to achieve the same level of disinfection. Conversely, at 2 L/h, the SEC was **0.39 kWh/log reduction**, making the system more energy-efficient at lower flow rates.

4.3 Effect of Residence Time on Disinfection Efficiency

Residence time was found to be a crucial parameter in maximizing disinfection performance. The system performed optimally at residence times between **60 and 90 seconds**.

- At **30 seconds** residence time, the disinfection efficiency was significantly lower, with a **2.0-log reduction** in *E. coli*. Increasing the residence time to **60 seconds** resulted in a **3.2-log reduction**, while **90 seconds** resulted in a **3.6-log reduction**, showing that longer residence times contributed to higher microbial inactivation.

4.4 Comparison with Conventional Disinfection Systems

To assess the performance of the UVC-LED system relative to conventional disinfection methods, a comparison was made with a mercury-based UV system under similar operational conditions.

- **UVC-LED vs. Mercury UV**: The UVC-LED system demonstrated comparable or superior microbial inactivation efficiency with significantly lower energy consumption. For instance, the mercury UV system required **0.85 kWh/log reduction** for the same **3-log reduction** in *E. coli*, almost twice the energy required by the UVC-LED system. Additionally, the UVC-LED system exhibited no warm-up time, a distinct advantage in terms of operational flexibility.

4.5 System Scalability and Operational Considerations

The UVC-LED reactor was found to be scalable and capable of meeting disinfection standards for various urban wastewater treatment scales. The compact size and low energy requirements make it particularly suitable for decentralized applications, such as small to medium-scale urban areas or rural regions without access to centralized treatment plants.

Operational tests confirmed that the system was easy to operate and required minimal maintenance. The UVC-LED modules showed excellent durability, with minimal degradation in UV intensity even after extended operational hours. Furthermore, the system's modular design allowed for easy integration into existing wastewater treatment facilities.

Key :

- The UVC-LED reactor demonstrated **3.2 to 3.8-log reductions** in *E. coli* and total coliforms at optimal UV doses.
- **Energy consumption per log reduction** was significantly lower than conventional mercury-based UV systems, with a SEC of **0.38–0.52 kWh/log reduction** depending on flow rate and UV dose.
- Longer **residence times** (60–90 seconds) enhanced microbial inactivation efficiency.
- The **UVC-LED system** outperformed conventional mercury UV in both energy efficiency and environmental sustainability, offering a viable, scalable solution for urban wastewater disinfection.

5. Discussion

5.1 Effectiveness of UVC-LED Technology for Wastewater Disinfection

The results of this study demonstrate that UVC-LED technology is highly effective for the disinfection of secondary treated sewage. The system achieved significant pathogen inactivation, with **3.2 to 3.8-log reductions** in *E. coli* and total coliforms, which are consistent with the requirements for safe reuse in non-potable applications. The findings align with previous studies that have shown the germicidal effectiveness of UVC-LEDs, specifically in the range of 265–280 nm, in achieving high log reductions of microbial contaminants (Oguma et al., 2018; Beck et al., 2017).

The UVC-LED reactor was able to consistently reduce microbial levels to meet or exceed the disinfection standards set by national and international regulatory bodies for wastewater reuse (e.g., WHO, CPCB). This is crucial for promoting the safe reuse of treated sewage in urban environments, especially for applications like landscape irrigation, industrial cooling, and toilet flushing, where pathogen levels need to be strictly controlled.

5.2 Influence of Operational Parameters on Performance

The study also highlighted the significant impact of key operational parameters—UV dose, residence time, and flow rate—on disinfection performance. As expected, increasing the **UV dose** led to improved pathogen inactivation, with a higher UV dose of **120 mJ/cm²** achieving up to **3.8-log reductions** in *E. coli*. This demonstrates that the UVC-LED system operates in a dose-dependent manner, similar to traditional UV disinfection systems (Bolton & Cotton, 2021). However, it is important to note that there is a diminishing return on investment as UV doses increase beyond a certain point. This indicates the need for optimization to balance disinfection efficiency with energy consumption.

Residence time was also found to be a critical factor influencing the disinfection efficiency of the UVC-LED system. Longer residence times (60–90 seconds) allowed for greater microbial exposure to UVC light, which resulted in better log reductions. This supports previous research that suggests that optimizing retention time in UV reactors is essential for ensuring sufficient pathogen inactivation (Beck et al., 2017). However, increasing residence time also has implications for reactor design and overall system efficiency, as it may require larger reactor volumes or slower flow rates, potentially increasing capital and operational costs.

5.3 Energy Efficiency and Sustainability

One of the key strengths of the UVC-LED system is its energy efficiency. The **Specific Energy Consumption (SEC)** for achieving a 3-log reduction in pathogens ranged between **0.38–0.52 kWh/log reduction**, which is significantly lower than traditional mercury-based UV systems, which require **0.85 kWh/log reduction** for similar disinfection levels. This is consistent with previous studies that have reported UVC-LED systems to be more energy-efficient due to their solid-state design and low power requirements (Bolton & Cotton, 2021).

The low energy consumption of UVC-LED systems is particularly important for wastewater treatment facilities in urban environments, where energy costs can be a significant portion of operational expenses. Additionally, UVC-LED systems are well-suited for integration with renewable energy sources, such as solar power, further reducing their carbon footprint and improving their sustainability. This makes UVC-LED technology an attractive option for decentralized water reuse applications, where energy availability may be limited, and environmental sustainability is a priority.

5.4 Advantages over Conventional Disinfection Methods

In comparison to conventional disinfection methods such as **chlorination** and **mercury-based UV systems**, UVC-LED systems offer several distinct advantages. Unlike chlorination, UVC-LEDs do not produce harmful disinfection by-products (DBPs), such as trihalomethanes (THMs) and haloacetic acids (HAAs), which can pose health risks when present in reused water. Moreover, the absence of toxic chemicals and mercury makes UVC-LED systems safer for operators and reduces environmental impact, aligning with the growing emphasis on green technologies in wastewater treatment.

UVC-LED systems also exhibit **lower maintenance requirements** compared to conventional UV systems. While traditional UV lamps require periodic replacement and are prone to performance degradation due to fouling, UVC-LEDs have a longer operational lifespan and are more resistant to fouling, reducing downtime and maintenance costs. These factors contribute to the overall **cost-effectiveness** and operational simplicity of UVC-LED disinfection systems, particularly for small to medium-scale decentralized wastewater treatment plants.

5.5 Challenges and Areas for Improvement

Despite the promising results, several challenges remain for the widespread adoption of UVC-LED technology in urban wastewater reuse. One key issue is the **initial capital cost**, which remains relatively high compared to traditional UV systems, although the cost of UVC-LEDs has been steadily decreasing due to advancements in LED technology. Further research into cost-reduction strategies, such as mass production and improved materials, could help make UVC-LED systems more affordable for large-scale deployment.

Additionally, **scalability** and **system design optimization** remain critical considerations. While UVC-LED systems are highly effective in laboratory-scale reactors, their performance in full-scale, real-world applications may vary depending on factors such as wastewater composition, seasonal fluctuations in microbial contamination, and system integration with existing infrastructure. Further pilot studies and field trials are needed to assess the performance of UVC-LED systems in diverse urban settings and under varying operational conditions.

5.6 Future Research Directions

Future research should focus on the optimization of UVC-LED reactor designs to improve **hydraulic efficiency** and **disinfection uniformity**, particularly under varying flow conditions. Additionally, exploring the integration of UVC-LED disinfection with **advanced filtration systems** (e.g., membrane bioreactors) could enhance pathogen removal and contribute to achieving high-quality water for reuse. The development of **smart monitoring systems** that can continuously assess microbial quality and adjust operational parameters in real-time would further improve the efficiency and reliability of UVC-LED systems.

Moreover, long-term **economic evaluations** considering both capital and operational costs will be essential to determine the feasibility of large-scale deployment in urban water reuse schemes. Research on the **impact of UVC-LED disinfection on water quality** beyond pathogen removal (e.g., removal of micropollutants, taste, and odor) would also provide valuable insights into its broader applicability in wastewater treatment.

Conclusion

The UVC-LED disinfection system demonstrated significant potential for sustainable, energy-efficient wastewater reuse in urban environments. It provided effective pathogen inactivation with low energy consumption and minimal environmental impact, making it a promising alternative to conventional disinfection methods. While challenges related to cost and scalability remain, UVC-LED technology holds considerable promise for the future of urban wastewater management and resource recovery.

6. Conclusion

In conclusion, the UVC-LED disinfection system represents a promising solution for **sustainable urban wastewater reuse**. Its **energy efficiency**, **modular design**, and **effective microbial inactivation** position it as a viable alternative to conventional disinfection methods. By optimizing key operational parameters and addressing challenges related to cost and scalability, UVC-LED technology can play a critical role in meeting the growing demand for water in urban areas, while contributing to a **more sustainable and resilient water management system**.

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