



Assessment of Combustion Properties of Briquettes Produced from Three Different Biomasses Sourced from Tarkwa, Ghana

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration among all authors. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Climate change and population growth has necessitated the need for sustainable fuel/energy sources. This study aimed to produce alternative fuel sources from waste biomasses (coconut husk, wood sawdust and waste charcoal residue). Particularly, the influence of agro-waste type on resulting briquette combustion properties (volatile matter, calorific value, fixed carbon and ash content) was examined. Charring was achieved using local reactor whilst cassava starch was used as a binder. Briquettes of sizes ranging between ~ 40 - 60 mm with varying residual moisture contents (8 – 12%) were produced. For thermal characteristics, the results showed that the briquettes from coconut husk yielded highest volatile matter content (36%) followed by fine charcoal particles' (33%) and sawdust briquettes (3%). The Ash contents for the briquettes from coconut

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husk, charcoal and sawdust were 2%, 21% and 31%, respectively. For the fixed carbon contents, briquettes from coconut husk had 34% whilst charcoal and sawdust ones had 46% and 96%, respectively. The calorific values of the briquettes from coconut husk, charcoal and sawdust were 3531, 4047 and 5085 kcal/kg, respectively. Generally, the results showed that briquettes produced from sawdust had superior combustion characteristics than those from coconut husk and charcoal. Overall, the work has demonstrated the possibility of producing quality briquettes which could serve as alternative sustainable fuel/energy for various households who are dependent on unsustainable fuels such as charcoal produced from trees. Moreover, the outcome can also serve as a key alternative method for managing abundant agro-waste in various communities, especially in the developing countries.

Keywords: Briquettes; sawdust; calorific value; biomass; coconut husk.

1. INTRODUCTION

Currently, there is an increased interest in alternative renewable energy sources, such as biomass energy, for sustainable economic development [1,2]. This is due to the great concerns of negative environmental impact, particularly issues related to climate change (green gas emissions), resulting from the extraction and utilisation of fossil fuels [3-7]. Biomass, as an energy source, presents notable advantages when compared to fossil fuels. Thus, it is a renewable resource that contributes to reduced greenhouse gas emissions, as the carbon released during combustion is part of a natural cycle facilitated by plant growth. Biomass utilisation allows for the responsible management of organic waste, offering a sustainable solution for waste disposal. With diverse feedstocks including agricultural residues, wood waste, and organic materials, biomass provides flexibility and can be locally produced, promoting energy security [8]. Several reports have highlighted that developing countries produce large volumes of biomass annually as by-products from the agricultural, forestry and industrial activities [4-7]. Statistically, it is estimated that about 1 billion metric tonnes and 140 million metric tonnes of biomass are produced annually from the forestry and agricultural sectors, respectively, in Sub-Saharan Africa [4]. Unfortunately, these biomasses are usually regarded as waste and hence are either burnt without heat recovery or left to rot in-situ, subsequently emitting greenhouse gasses (GHGs) and leading to other environmental issues [4].

Interestingly, most of these biomass resources (such as crop residues, wood wastes from forestry and agricultural industry, dedicated energy crops, residues from food and paper industries) can be utilised to generate electricity, heat, combined heat and power, and other forms

of bioenergy [9,10]. Thus, some of these biomasses can be used directly or indirectly as fuel, hence utilising them for this purpose prevents unnecessary burning or burying that create environmental issues. For example, sugarcane bagasse, sawdust, coconut and rice husks can be used directly to fire brick kilns or boilers for producing electricity through steam, or can be converted to gas [11-14]. The direct usage of any biomass for fuel is economically justifiable when the source of waste is in close proximate to the point of energy generation or use. This implies that as distances between sources and sites of end-use increase, densification/compaction of these waste into briquettes or pellets facilitates easy handling and storage, lowers transportation costs and increases access to more distant markets. Additionally, it has been reported that the utilisation of these biomass residues (e.g., sawdust, coconut and rice husks) in their natural form as fuel is quite challenging due to their low bulk density, low heat release and excessive smoke generation [9,10]. These characteristics make it difficult to handle, store, transport and utilise biomass residues in their unprocessed form. Briquetting technology has been identified as one of the methods for improving the thermal value of several biomasses [15,16].

The briquetting method is the process of transforming low bulk density biomass into high-density and energy-concentrated fuel. In other terms, the process “involves the densification of loose biomass to produce fuel briquette which has better handling characteristics and enhanced volumetric calorific value compared to the biomass in its original state” [17]. Generally, the briquetting process consist of two main stages, namely carbonisation/charring and compaction/cohesion. The carbonisation process involves pyrolytic conversion of biomass into high carbon content material (biochar), by subjecting the

biomass to high temperature, low oxygen conditions to remove volatile compounds and moisture [18,19]. Notably, carbonisation of the biomass residues doubles the energy value per unit of weight with resulting biochar having a calorific value of 25 - 30 MJ/kg compared to that of unprocessed biomass (~15 MJ/kg) due to the removal of volatile compounds and moisture [18,19]. Compaction/Cohesion of biochar can either be achieved by low-pressure agglomeration with the use of binders (e.g. molasses, starch), medium-pressure compaction with a lower binder percentage, or high-pressure compaction with little or no binder [14,20,21]. Primarily, compacting of biomass increases its energy density (the amount of useful energy per unit of volume). Additionally, the energy density can be increased further by carbonising the biomass before or after compaction [22,23].

As noted in various studies, the production of briquettes from agro-wastes, such as sawdust and rice husk, exemplifies the potential of a suitable approach or technology for the usage of biomass which abounds in large quantities in developing countries [24,25]. However, the adoption of this technology in the utilisation of vast quantities of biomass in the developing countries, like Ghana, is very low due to relatively high cost of production, inadequate knowledge about its sustainability, lack of a ready market and poor packaging and distribution systems for the product [9,10,26,27,28]. For example, it is reported that commercial production of sawdust briquettes which had high prospect as an alternative to firewood in Ghana, started in 1984, but the production could not be sustained broadly due to operational, marketing and standardisation challenges [9,10]. Thus, briquettes produced had poor thermal behaviour or characteristics primarily influenced by their physico-chemical properties such as moisture content, ash content, bulk density, volatile matter and heating value among others. Notably, the type and nature of the biomass, aside from operating conditions and binder type, mainly influences the thermal

performance of the resulting briquettes. Hence, there is a need to always select the suitable biomass type for the fuel briquette production to obtain optimal performance, high yield, and energy content. This study, therefore, assessed thermal characteristics of briquettes produced from three different biomass types sourced from Ghana. Particularly, the physico-chemical properties (residual moisture content, ash content, fixed carbon and volatile matter) of briquettes produced from three different biomasses (coconut husk, sawdust and fine charcoal particles) were examined.

2. EXPERIMENTAL MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Materials and Equipment

2.1.1 Materials

Three different materials: coconut husk (Fig. 1A), sawdust (wood chippings) (Fig. 1B), and fine charcoal particles (Fig. 1C), were used as feedstocks for the study. The coconut husk, sawdust and fine charcoal particles were sundried to reduce the moisture content to approximately 12%, which is within the acceptable operating limit for briquetting and storage [29]. Starch produced from cassava (sourced locally) (Fig. 1D) was also used as binding agent in the briquette production.

2.1.2 Equipment

Fig. 2A and B are the two main equipment employed in this study for moulding and carbonisation/charring, respectively. The equipment was built using locally sourced materials. Notably, carbonisation reactor (Fig. 2B) is designed to maintain a low oxygen environment within but is able to withstand high temperatures. Thus, the bottom of the carbonisation reactor is perforated to regulate the flow of oxygen into the reactor since it operates as a closed system.

Table 1. Raw materials and their sources

| Raw Material | Sources |
|--------------------|---------------------|
| Sawdust | Carpentry Workshop, |
| Coconut Husk | Coconut Sellers |
| Charcoal Particles | Charcoal Sellers |



Fig. 1. Biomass feedstocks used as raw materials (A) Coconut husk (B) Sawdust (C)Charcoal particles and (D) Cassava starch as binding agent

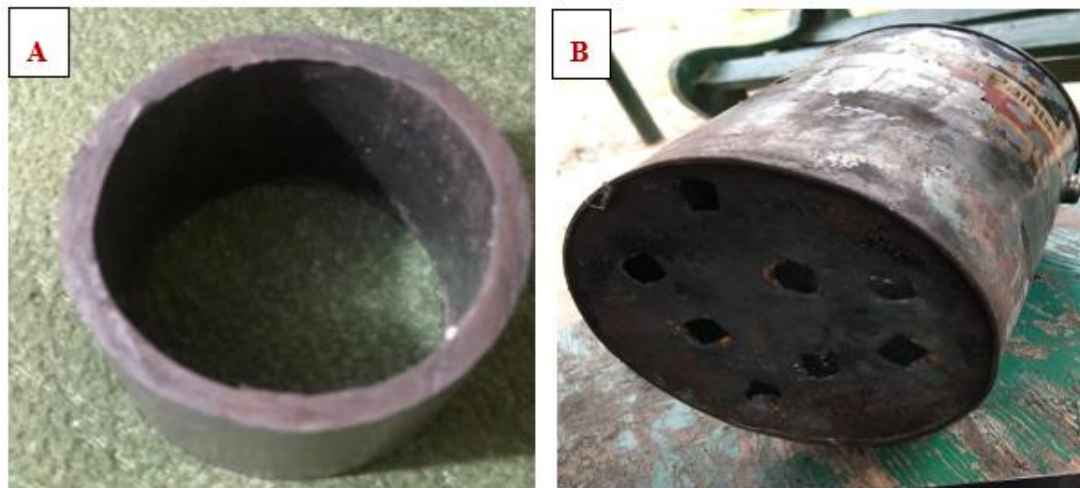


Fig. 2. Locally designed (A) moulding equipment and (B) Carbonisation/Charring reactor

2.2 Experimental Methods

2.2.1 Briquette productions

The production of briquettes was carried out via three stages: feedstock sourcing/preparation, charring, and moulding.

Stage 1: Feedstock preparation

This stage involved sourcing and sun-drying of the feedstock for a week. Notably, the coconut husk (Fig. 1A) was cut/shred into pieces prior to sun-drying.

Stage 2: Charring of biomass feedstocks

The sun-dried coconut husks and sawdust were charred in a carbonisation reactor (Fig. 2B). The biomass materials were fed into the reactor and covered. The reactor containing the biomass was fired on traditional stone stove with firewood for about 5 min (wood sawdust) and 10 min (coconut husk). The wood sawdust was charred for only 5 min since its ashes quickly. The charred biomass was then taken out of the reactor and spread on a pan to cool down. Notably, the fine charcoal particles were already charred, hence they were used as received for the study.

Stage 3: Briquette moulding / production process

The charred biomass was ground and sieved through a 1.18 mm-sized screen to ensure uniform feed particle sizes, similar to that method reported by Ogwu et al. [30]. Approximately 400 g of the sieved product of each charred biomass (coconut husk, wood sawdust and fine charcoal particles) was mixed with 250 g of binder (cassava starch). The mixture was handfed into a pipe and compacted to obtain uniform briquettes sizes. The compacted briquettes were then dried in an oven at a temperature of 120°C for 12 h.

2.2.2 Briquette characterisation

The properties of the compacted briquettes produced from the coconut husk, wood sawdust and fine charcoal particles were assessed. Specifically, the residual moisture content, volatile matter, ash content, fixed carbon and specific heat combustion of the briquettes produced from the various biomass were examined using methods similar to those methods reported by Egbewole et al. [31]; Tembe et al. [32]; Fuwape et al. [33].

Moisture content (% Mc): The moisture content of the briquette produced for each biomass was measured. It is worth noting that the residual moisture influences the overall durability, strength and calorific value of the briquettes. This was achieved by weighing the fresh briquette before (w1) and after oven-dried at 105°C (w2) [18] for 3 hours [30]. The moisture content was calculated using Equation 1.

$$\%Mc = \frac{\text{wet weight } (W1) - \text{oven dry weight } (W2)}{\text{wet weight } (W1)} \times 100 \quad \text{Eq.1}$$

Volatile Matter (% Vm): The amount of volatile matter was determined by weighing and placing

oven-dried briquette (W₂) in a furnace for 10 min at 550°C to obtained weight (W₃) after the escape of its volatile matter. The volatile matter (%Vm) was estimated using Equation 2 [30].

$$\%Vm = \frac{W_2 - W_3}{W_3} \times 100 \quad \text{Eq.2}$$

Where W₂ is the oven-dried weight and W₃ is the weight of sample after 10 mins in the furnace at 550 °C.

Ash Content (% Ash): About 5 g of crushed oven-dried briquette was placed in a furnace for 4 h at 550°C to obtain the ash weight (W₄) [30]. The percentage Ash Content (% Ash Content) was calculated using Equation 3.

$$\text{Ash Content (\%)} = \frac{\text{Weight of Ash } (W_4)}{\text{Oven Dry weight } (W_2)} \times 100 \quad \text{Eq. 3}$$

Fixed Carbon (% Fc): The percentage fixed carbon was calculated by subtracting the sum of volatile matter (%) and ash content (%) from 100 % as shown in Equation 4 [34].

$$\text{Fixed Carbon (\% Fc)} = 100 \% - (\% Vm + \% Ash) \quad \text{Eq.4}$$

Specific Heat of Combustion (Hc): The Specific Heat of Combustion (Calorific Value) of the briquettes was calculated using Equation 5 [34].

$$Hc = 0.35(147.6 \times \% Fc) + (144 \times \%Vm) + (\%Ash) \quad \text{Eq. 5}$$

3. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

3.1 Physical Characteristics of the Briquettes

Fig. 3 (A-D) shows the photomicrographs of the briquettes produced from wood sawdust (Fig. 3A), coconut husk (Fig. 3B) and fine charcoal residue (Fig. 3C), respectively. It is worth noting that the sawdust briquette appeared brownish because the feedstock was slightly charred/carbonised before moulding, given its tendency to turns into ashes quickly. The size of produced briquettes ranged within ~ 40 – 60 mm with varying residual moisture contents as highlighted in Table 2.

In terms of the residual moisture content, briquettes produced from coconut husk had the highest (12%), followed by those obtained from charcoal particles (10%) and the sawdust (8%). The differences can be attributed to the

variations in the feed properties, such as particle size, moisture content, and surface area, as well as the binder content [35]. Evidently, the particle size distribution of the coconut appeared finest, requiring most binder to wet the surface of the particles followed by charcoal and sawdust, hence contributing to the difference in moisture content among the materials. Generally, the residual moisture contents of the various briquettes are consistent with the standard residual moisture content of 5 - 10% [16]. The variations in the residual moisture contents

observed are expected to affect the general performance of briquettes in terms of their calorific value, ash content, fixed carbon content and volatile matter content [15]. Thus, briquettes with low moisture content are expected to ignite easily, yielding higher energy/calorific values [9,10]. Therefore, it is expected that briquettes produced from sawdust, with lowest moisture content, would ignite easily and yield higher calorific value, followed by those produced from charcoal and coconuts.

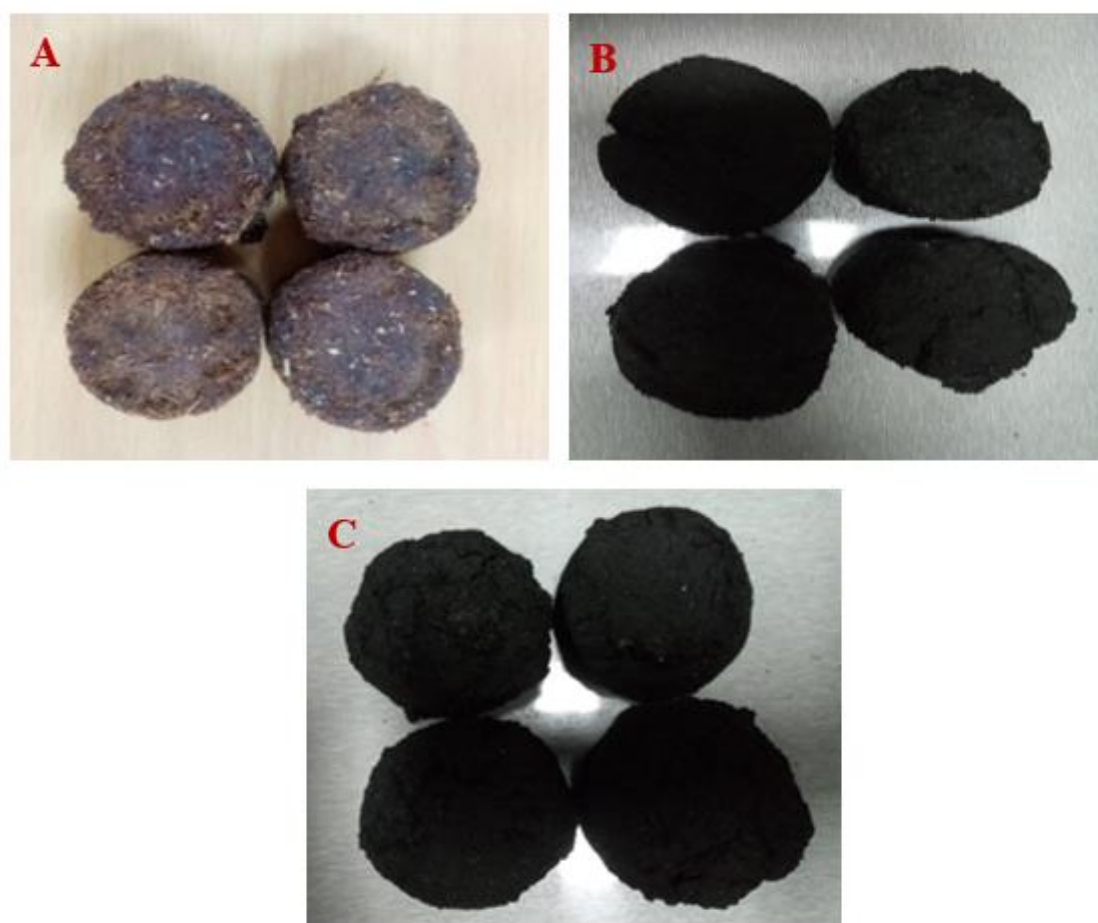


Fig. 3. Photomicrograph of briquettes with cassava starch as binder produced from charred (A) wood sawdust (B) coconut husk and (C) fine charcoal material

Table 2. Residual moisture content of briquettes produced from sawdust, coconut husk and fine charcoal particles

| Briquette type | Residual moisture (%) |
|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Sawdust | 8 |
| Coconut Husk | 12 |
| Charcoal Particles | 10 |

3.2 Combustion/ Thermal Properties of Briquettes

3.2.1 Volatile matter (%)

The volatile matter content representing the gaseous phase formed from the thermal degradation of the coconut husk, charcoal and sawdust briquettes was examined. Notably, a high volatile matter content is an indication of the readiness of briquettes to ignite and burn easily [15]. Fig. 4 shows the volatile matter content of the briquettes produced from coconut husk, charcoal particle and sawdust under similar thermal degradation testing conditions. The results indicate that the volatile matter content that was distilled off from coconut husk, charcoal particles and sawdust were 36%, 33% and 3%, respectively. The differences in volatile matter can be attributed to the variations in the residual moisture contents and the amount of combustible-incombustible materials present in the briquette. In terms of quality, the results show that briquettes produced from coconut husk with the high volatile matter would readily ignite with a high proportionate flame during combustion compared with those from charcoal and sawdust.

3.2.2 Ash content

The ash content, representing the mass of non-combustible component obtained from briquette produced from the biomass was examined. Fig. 5 shows the ash contents of the briquettes produced from coconut husk, charcoal particles and sawdust. The ash content for the briquettes produced ranged from 2 wt.% to 31 wt.%. The highest ash content of 31 wt.% was obtained from the coconut husk briquettes whilst the lowest ash content of 2 wt.% was obtained from sawdust briquettes. The difference in the ash contents can be linked to the amount of char left after the volatile matter is distilled off Deepak et al. [36]. The ash content of the briquettes produced from the coconut husk (31 wt.%) and charcoal particles (21 wt.%) were found to be within the acceptable ash limit (5 - 40 wt.%) for a solid biomass briquette [37]. Generally, high ash content of briquette means a high combustion remnant of such fuel was high but with a low heating value. High ash content also results in dust emissions that may lead to air pollution during combustion [38,39]. Ash content has a significant effect on heat transfer and oxygen diffusion to the surface of fuel during combustion [40]. Therefore, the excessive ash content of solid fuel affects its combustion volume and efficiency [41,42]. Hence, the produced

briquettes from the coconut husk, charcoal particles and sawdust would perform well based on the ash contents.

3.2.3 Fixed carbon

The fixed carbon, which represents the percentage of carbon available for char combustion of the briquettes, was examined. Fig. 6 shows the fixed carbon contents for the briquettes produced from coconut husk, sawdust and fine charcoal particles. The results revealed that briquettes produced from the sawdust exhibited highest fixed carbon content of 96%, followed by fine charcoal particles briquettes (46%) and coconut husk briquettes (34%). The result of fixed carbon contents demonstrated by the various briquette was much expected due to the variations in their residual moisture content as shown in Table 2 (discussed in section 3.1). Thus, increasing residual moisture of briquettes often leads to decreasing fixed carbon content. Evidently, coconut husk briquettes with the highest residual moisture yielded the lowest fixed carbon content, whilst sawdust briquettes with the lowest residual moisture content exhibited the highest fixed carbon content, relatively. Generally, a low percentage of fixed carbon is an indication of a low heating value of the briquette, and the vice versa. Hence, it is expected that the heating values of the briquettes produced in this study will increase in the order of sawdust > fine charcoal particles > coconut husk.

3.2.4 Calorific value

The main thermal property of any fuel is its calorific value, which refers to the amount of heating value of the fuel per unit volume or the amount of heat obtained when the fuel/briquette is burnt [7]. The heating values for the briquettes produced from coconut husk, fine charcoal particles and sawdust were also examined. The results showed that briquettes from sawdust yielded the highest heating value of 5085 kcal/kg, followed by fine charcoal particles' briquettes (4047 kcal/kg) (Fig. 7). Those obtained from the coconut husk yielded the lowest heating value 3531 kcal/kg. The differences in calorific value can be linked to the variations in properties of the briquettes such as residual moisture, volatile matter, fixed carbon content and ash content (as discussed in sections 3.2). Notably, the differences in the properties of the raw feedstock/biomass and the binder formulation (type and amount) underpin the variations in the briquettes' properties.

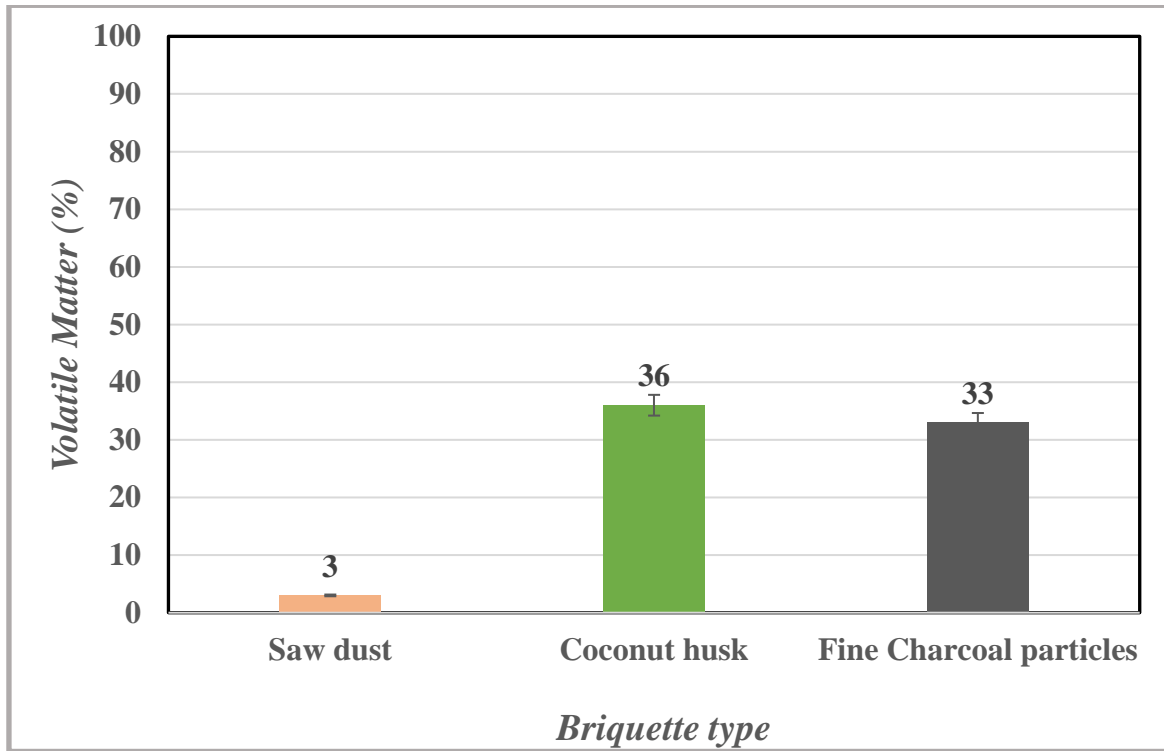


Fig. 4. Volatile Matter (%) of briquettes produced from sawdust, coconut husk and fine charcoal particles

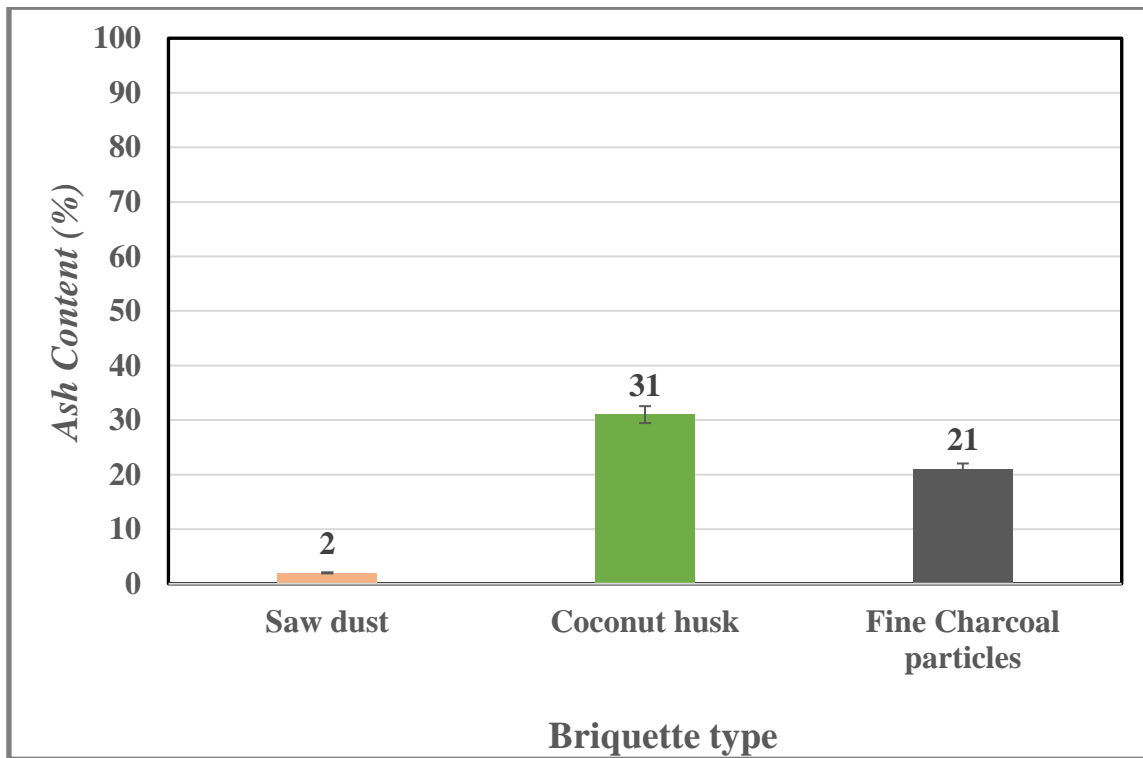


Fig. 5. Ash content (%) of briquettes produced from sawdust, coconut husk and fine charcoal particles

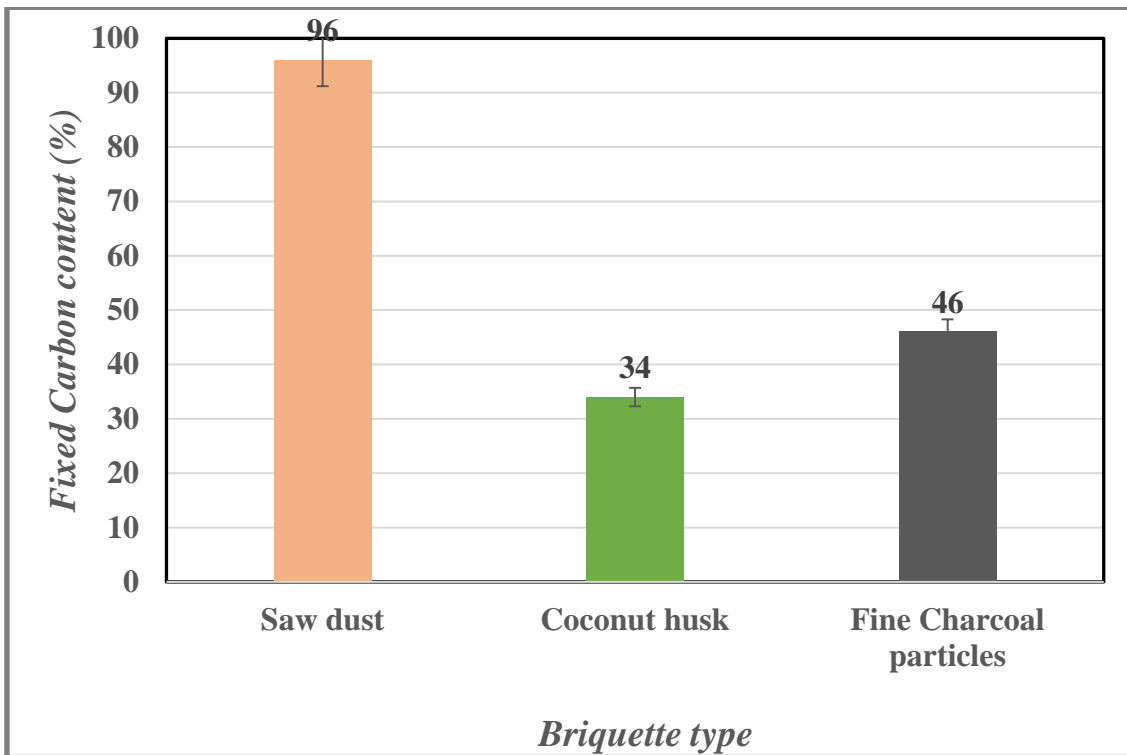


Fig. 6. Fixed Carbon contents of briquettes produced from sawdust, coconut husk and fine charcoal particles

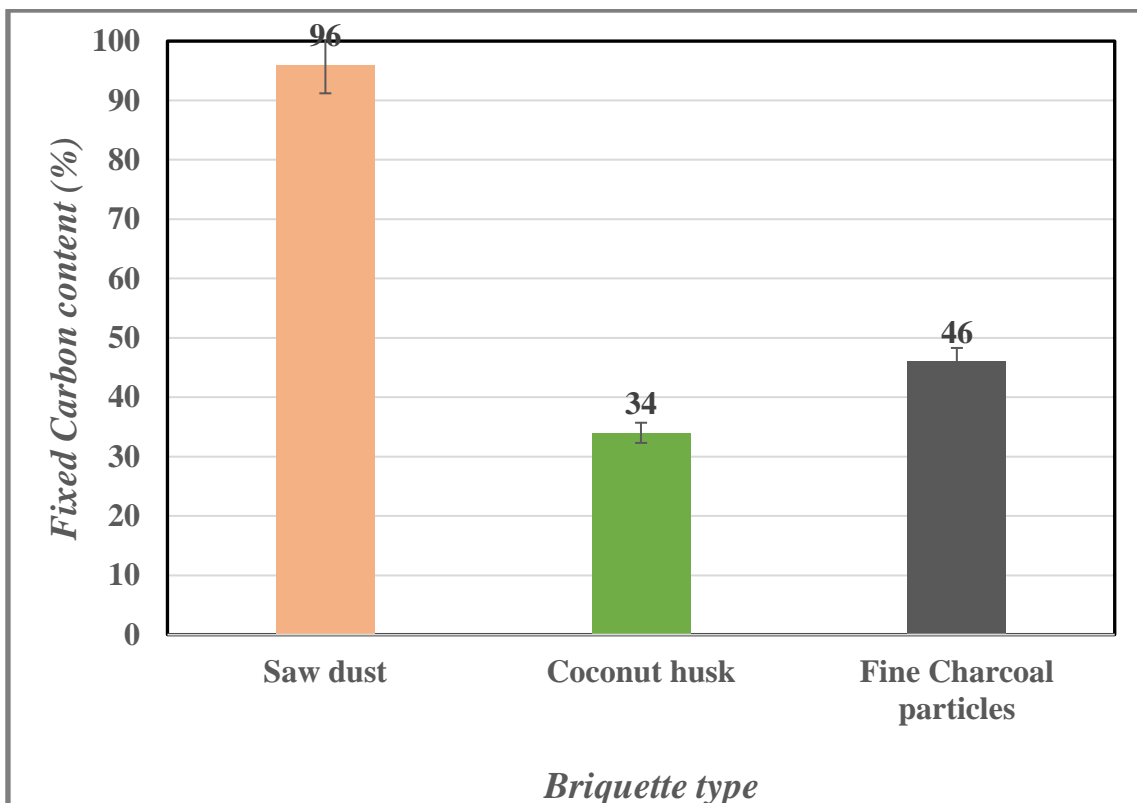


Fig. 7. Calorific values of briquettes produced from sawdust, coconut husk and fine charcoal particles

It is worth mentioning that a higher heating value is a great indication of a good and efficient briquettes [43]. This implies briquette performance in terms of heating value/caloric value is superior when produced from sawdust compared to those obtained from fine charcoal particles and coconut husk [44,45].

4. CONCLUSION

The outcomes of the study investigating the properties of briquettes produced from different biomass sourced from Ghana include:

- Briquettes of sizes ranging between 40 – 60 mm were produced from coconut husk, fine charcoal particles and sawdust using cassava starch as binder.
- The briquettes produced had varying residual moistures with those produced from coconut husk containing the highest (12%) followed by fine charcoal particles (10%) and sawdust (8%).
- The volatile matter content that was distilled off from coconut husk, charcoal particles and sawdust briquettes was 36%, 33% and 3%, respectively.
- The ash content for the briquettes produced ranged from 2 wt.% to 31 wt.% with coconut husk briquettes yielding the highest ash content of 31 wt.% followed by fine charcoal particles (21 wt.%) and sawdust briquettes (2 wt.%).
- For the fixed carbon content, the briquettes produced from the sawdust exhibited the highest fixed carbon content of 96%, followed by fine charcoal particles briquettes (46%) and coconut husk briquettes (34%).
- In terms of heating values or calorific values, the briquettes from sawdust yielded the highest heating value of 5085 kcal/kg followed by fine charcoal particles briquettes (4047 kcal/kg) and the coconut husk (3531 kcal/kg).

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COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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