**Original Research Article**

**Optimising Durability Performance of Kaolin Geopolymer Concrete Using Central Composite Design**

**ABSTRACT**

Geopolymer concrete has emerged as a sustainable and high-performance alternative to Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC) concrete due to its lower carbon emissions and the potential for incorporating industrial waste materials. This environmentally friendly binder system significantly reduces greenhouse gas emissions, primarily CO₂, associated with the production of traditional cement. This study investigates the durability of dehydroxylated kaolin (DHK) geopolymer concrete (DHKGPC) in terms of water absorption capacity, utilising the central composite design (CCD) method. The research focused on five key parameters: activator/DHK ratio, sodium hydroxide-sodium silicate (SS/SH) ratio, sodium hydroxide concentration, curing period, and curing temperature. The CCD technique was used to formulate optimisation models with the ordinary least squares method for precise calibration. The analysis revealed that DHKGPC exhibits a low water absorption capacity, ranging from 121.48 kg/m³ to 210.37 kg/m³, all below the ASTM C140 threshold of 240 kg/m³. The optimisation model demonstrated a strong R² value of 92.55%, confirming the model's reliability in predicting the impact of various factors on water absorption capacity. Key findings indicate that the activator/DHK ratio significantly impacts water absorption capacity, with higher ratios leading to increased absorption due to a less dense microstructure. Optimal sodium hydroxide concentration and SS/SH ratios helped minimise absorption, while curing time and temperature enhanced the geopolymeric reaction, lowering water absorption capacity. The optimised conditions yielded a minimum water absorption capacity of 117.56 kg/m³, fulfilling ASTM C140 durability standards. Furthermore, compared to traditional Portland cement concrete, DHKGPC exhibited slightly better durability, with a 2% lower water absorption rate, indicating enhanced resistance to water penetration and environmental degradation. The results align with previous studies on geopolymer concrete, reinforcing its potential as a durable alternative to traditional cement-based concrete. The low water absorption is attributed to the enhanced pozzolanic reactivity of dehydroxylated kaolin. In conclusion, DHKGPC’s optimised formulation presents a promising material for sustainable construction, with its improved durability and environmental benefits.

***Keywords: Dehydroxylated kaolin, water absorption capacity, central composite design, optimisation, geopolymer concrete, parametric study***

1. **Introduction**

In recent years, geopolymer has attracted considerable attention among these binders because of its early compressive strength, low permeability, good chemical resistance and excellent fire resistance behaviour (Singh et al., 2015). Geopolymer concrete has emerged as a sustainable and high-performance alternative to Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC) concrete due to its lower carbon emissions and the potential for incorporating industrial waste materials (Wong, 2022). This environmentally friendly binder system significantly reduces greenhouse gas emissions, primarily CO₂, associated with the production of traditional cement (Davidovits, 2015). Unlike OPC, which relies heavily on the calcination of limestone, geopolymer concrete can utilise aluminosilicate-rich industrial by-products such as fly ash, slag, and calcined clays, thereby contributing to circular economy principles (Zhang et al., 2020; Provis & van Deventer, 2014).

Geopolymers are alternative materials to Portland cement, obtained by alkaline activation of aluminosilicates. They exhibit excellent properties and a wide range of potential applications in the field of civil engineering. Several natural aluminosilicates and industrial by-products can be used for geopolymer synthesis, but a lot of starting materials have the disadvantage of poor reactivity and low strength development (Tchadjie & Ekolu, 2018; Yamchelou et al., 2021). Among the various aluminosilicate sources used in geopolymer synthesis, dehydroxylated kaolin, commonly referred to as metakaolin, has gained prominence for its high reactivity and consistent quality. Kaol is an important primary material in a variety of industrial processes e.g., food-processing industry, oil shale processing, ceramic industry, as a pozzolanic material, as a feedstock for geopolymer cement, as a filling agent. Kaolinite (hereafter, Kaol) is the main mineral phase of kaolin which contains other phyllosilicates and feldspars, and other minerals such as quartz, rutile, hematite, ilmenite, zircon, carbonates, sulphides, and various ferrous and aluminium (hydr)oxides (Gasparini et al., 2013; Polcowñuk Iriarte et al., 2025). Dehydroxylated kaolin is produced through the thermal activation of kaolinite at temperatures ranging from 600 to 800°C, resulting in the breakdown of its crystalline structure into a highly amorphous phase that is ideal for geopolymerization (Zawrah et al., 2016). This amorphous phase readily dissolves in alkaline solutions, releasing reactive silica and alumina species that contribute to the formation of a three-dimensional aluminosilicate network, yielding high mechanical strength and durability (Duxson et al., 2007). In addition, the purity and relatively low variability of dehydroxylated kaolin, compared to other industrial wastes like fly ash, make it particularly suitable for high-performance applications such as structural concrete, precast elements, and repair mortars (Sabir et al., 2001).

Furthermore, dehydroxylated kaolin-based geopolymers exhibit superior performance in terms of chemical resistance, low permeability, and long-term durability, making them particularly attractive for infrastructure exposed to aggressive environments (Temuujin et al., 2009). These characteristics are critical in addressing the limitations of OPC systems, especially in scenarios requiring high durability under chemical attack or elevated temperatures. Thus, the use of dehydroxylated kaolin in geopolymer concrete not only enhances material performance but also aligns with global sustainability goals in the construction sector.

The durability of geopolymer concrete is a key factor in determining its suitability for structural use. Various durability-related properties, such as chemical resistance, permeability or water absorption, and the ability to retain strength over time, are shaped by a complex interaction of several variables. These include the type of precursor used, the nature and concentration of the alkaline activator, the curing conditions, and the water-to-solid ratio (Wong, 2022). The selection of precursor materials, like fly ash, metakaolin, ground granulated blast furnace slag (GGBFS), or their blends, has a significant impact on the microstructure formation, and consequently, the durability of the geopolymer concrete (Zuhua et al., 2009; Mehta and Siddique, 2017). For example, using high-calcium fly ash or incorporating GGBFS can enhance the geopolymerization process, resulting in a denser matrix that is more resistant to chloride ingress and sulfate attack (Deb et al., 2014; Nath and Sarker, 2014). Additionally, the strength and pore structure of the material are highly influenced by the concentration of the alkaline activator, especially the molarity of sodium hydroxide and the Na₂SiO₃/NaOH ratio. While higher molarity often improves precursor dissolution and strength development, it can also lead to issues like efflorescence or microcracking if not carefully controlled (Sata et al., 2013; Yousuf et al., 2021). Curing conditions also play a crucial role; elevated temperatures can speed up strength gain and enhance durability but may also cause rapid moisture loss and shrinkage-related microcracks if overdone (Olivia and Nikraz, 2012). Although the water-to-solid (W/S) ratio is less emphasised in geopolymer systems compared to traditional OPC concrete, it still affects workability, setting time, porosity, and permeability (Provis and van Deventer, 2014).

Ultimately, the durability of geopolymer concrete in harsh environments depends on the intricate balance of these factors, underscoring the need for a well-optimised mix design that aligns with specific environmental exposures and performance goals. Unlike traditional empirical mix design approaches, advanced statistical methods like Central Composite Design (CCD), a subset of Response Surface Methodology (RSM), offer a systematic and efficient framework for evaluating the effects and interactions of these parameters.

Central Composite Design (CCD) is especially valuable in experimental optimisation when exploring nonlinear relationships and second-order interactions between variables. It allows researchers to develop mathematical models that can predict responses (e.g., durability indicators such as water absorption capacity) under varying mix conditions. CCD facilitates the identification of optimal conditions by systematically evaluating the effects of multiple factors on the response variable, considering both main effects and interaction terms. For instance, Maataoui et al. (2024) successfully employed CCD to optimise the mechanical properties of fly ash-based geopolymer pastes. Their study demonstrated that parameters such as NaOH concentration, curing time, and grinding speed significantly affected compressive strength and microstructure development. The optimisation results highlighted the critical role of alkaline activator concentration and curing time in achieving the desired strength and durability of geopolymer pastes, aligning with similar studies in the field (Hussein et al., 2017; Sarker et al., 2018).

Moreover, CCD has been widely applied in concrete mix design for enhancing durability-related properties such as water absorption, chloride ion penetration, and freeze-thaw resistance. For example, Wu et al. (2021) used CCD to optimise the mix proportions of geopolymer concrete, focusing on parameters like the alkaline activator modulus, water-to-solid ratio, and curing temperature, to reduce water absorption and improve long-term durability. Their findings suggest that a higher concentration of sodium silicate in the activator solution, coupled with a carefully controlled curing temperature, results in reduced porosity and enhanced chemical resistance. Similarly, Vassie et al. (2020) optimised the mix design of metakaolin-based geopolymers using CCD, observing significant improvements in freeze-thaw durability and resistance to sulfate attack when key mix variables were optimised.

These studies demonstrate the versatility of CCD in not only optimising mechanical properties but also addressing the durability concerns associated with geopolymer concrete. The methodology offers a comprehensive approach to balance the trade-offs between workability, strength, and long-term performance under different environmental conditions.

In the context of dehydroxylated kaolin-based systems, CCD facilitates a data-driven approach to design and interpret experiments aimed at maximising durability performance. Recent literature underscores that optimising the synthesis parameters not only enhances strength but also improves microstructural densification and resistance to deleterious agents (Maataoui et al., 2024; Wong, 2022). The resulting geopolymer matrix, rich in sodium aluminosilicate hydrate (N-A-S-H) gel, exhibits a dense, low-porosity structure conducive to long-term durability.

Therefore, a Central Composite Design-based parametric study on the durability of dehydroxylated kaolin geopolymer concrete presents a robust pathway to optimising material performance while contributing to the broader sustainability goals in the construction industry.

1. **Materials and Methods**

**2.1 Materials**

The coarse aggregate consisted of uniformly graded granite with a maximum size of 19 mm, sourced from a building material shop in Ozuoba, Port Harcourt. The original supply of granite came from the AkaDHKpa quarry in Calabar. From preliminary or gradation analysis of the granite, a fineness modulus and specific gravity of 4.06 and 2.77, respectively, were obtained.

The fine aggregate used was river sand, sourced from a construction site in Port Harcourt, with the New Calabar River identified as its main origin. The sand underwent a drying process under the sun for 48 hours to remove moisture, followed by sieving through a 4.5 mm mesh to eliminate impurities and organic matter. Sieve analysis showed that the sand was uniformly graded, falling within the Zone 1 gradation category. It exhibited a fineness modulus of 2.18 and a specific gravity of 2.43.

The geopolymer binder in this study was created using dehydroxylated kaolin (DHK) derived from kaolin clay, commonly known as white clay. The clay was obtained from a sand fill site in Choba, Port Harcourt. After sun-drying for 48 hours to remove moisture, the kaolin was heated in a muffle furnace at 800°C for three hours, transforming it into DHK. DHK was subsequently ground into a fine powder and sieved through a 75 μm (No. 200) sieve before being incorporated into the mix.

To activate the DHK, a mixture of sodium hydroxide and sodium silicate solutions was used. The sodium hydroxide, a commercial-grade flake product with 98% purity and a particle size of 3 mm, was sourced from H-Chemicals Ltd in Ozuoba. It was dissolved in water to achieve the required molar concentrations. The sodium silicate powder, also from H-Chemicals, had 98% purity and a specific gravity of 1.27. It was mixed with water in a 70:30 ratio, producing a solution with a specific gravity of 1.61.

Ordinary Portland Cement (OPC) of the Dangote brand (R. 425, CB 4227), which conforms to BS 12 (1996) standards, was also used in this study. This cement was sourced from a local building materials supplier in Ozuoba, Port Harcourt. Finally, water with a pH of approximately 6.9 was used in preparing all concrete mixtures.

**2.2 Methods**

**2.2.1 Formulation of Central Composite Design (CCD)**

In developing the design of experiment (DoE) using the Central Composite Design (CCD), five factors were identified as key contributors to the durability, particularly water absorption capacity, of DHK-based geopolymer concrete (DHKGPC). These factors include the Alkaline-dehydroxylated kaolin ratio (Activator/DHK), Sodium hydroxide-sodium silicate ratio, Sodium hydroxide concentration, curing period, and curing temperature. Based on prior experience and thorough literature review, the following parameter ranges were selected for the DoE in this study: the alkaline activator-DHK ratio (Activator/DHK) was set between 0.20 and 0.40, the sodium silicate-sodium hydroxide ratio (SS/SH) was set between 1 and 3, sodium hydroxide concentration (SH) was chosen to range from 8M to 14M, curing time (CT) was varied from 4 to 72 hours, and curing temperature (CTemp) ranged from 40°C to 120°C. Utilising the face-centred central composite design through Minitab software resulted in a total of thirty-two (32) experimental runs, as outlined in Table 1.

**Table 1. FC-CCD for DHKGPC**

|  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
| **Experimental Run** | **Activator/DHK** | **SS/SH** | **SH Conc** | **C.T** | **C.Temp** |
| 1 | 0.3 | 1 | 11 | 38 | 80 |
| 2 | 0.4 | 3 | 14 | 4 | 40 |
| 3 | 0.3 | 2 | 11 | 38 | 80 |
| 4 | 0.4 | 1 | 14 | 72 | 40 |
| 5 | 0.2 | 3 | 8 | 72 | 120 |
| 6 | 0.3 | 2 | 11 | 38 | 80 |
| 7 | 0.4 | 2 | 11 | 38 | 80 |
| 8 | 0.3 | 2 | 11 | 38 | 80 |
| 9 | 0.3 | 2 | 14 | 38 | 80 |
| 10 | 0.4 | 1 | 8 | 72 | 120 |
| 11 | 0.3 | 2 | 8 | 38 | 80 |
| 12 | 0.4 | 3 | 8 | 4 | 120 |
| 13 | 0.3 | 2 | 11 | 38 | 40 |
| 14 | 0.2 | 3 | 14 | 72 | 40 |
| 15 | 0.3 | 2 | 11 | 72 | 80 |
| 16 | 0.2 | 2 | 11 | 38 | 80 |
| 17 | 0.4 | 1 | 14 | 4 | 120 |
| 18 | 0.4 | 1 | 8 | 4 | 40 |
| 19 | 0.2 | 1 | 8 | 72 | 40 |
| 20 | 0.2 | 1 | 14 | 72 | 120 |
| 21 | 0.2 | 3 | 8 | 4 | 40 |
| 22 | 0.3 | 2 | 11 | 38 | 80 |
| 23 | 0.3 | 3 | 11 | 38 | 80 |
| 24 | 0.2 | 1 | 8 | 4 | 120 |
| 25 | 0.2 | 3 | 14 | 4 | 120 |
| 26 | 0.3 | 2 | 11 | 38 | 80 |
| 27 | 0.3 | 2 | 11 | 38 | 120 |
| 28 | 0.2 | 1 | 14 | 4 | 40 |
| 29 | 0.3 | 2 | 11 | 38 | 80 |
| 30 | 0.4 | 3 | 8 | 72 | 40 |
| 31 | 0.3 | 2 | 11 | 4 | 80 |
| 32 | 0.4 | 3 | 14 | 72 | 120 |

**2.2.2 DHKGPC Preparation and Durability Evaluation**

**i. DHKGPC Samples Preparation**

A fixed mix ratio of 1:2:4 was employed to prepare DHKGPC, and the mixture was allowed to rest for a consistent period of 3 hours after preparation. The quantity of NaOH solids in the activator solution was adjusted based on the molar concentration (M), as outlined in the experimental design. For instance, an 8M NaOH solution contained 320 grams of NaOH flakes per litre, with NaOH's molecular weight being 40 g/mol. The sodium silicate powder, with 98% purity, was mixed with water in a 70:30 ratio to create the sodium silicate solution. These solutions were allowed to stand for 24 hours before use in the experiments. The materials for the various DHKGPC mixtures were determined using the Design of Experiments (DoE), weighed, and then placed in nylon bags before starting the experimental work. The materials were subsequently mixed in the laboratory using an electrically powered mixer.

ii **Water Absorption Capacity Evaluation**

Water absorption capacity is a key measure of concrete durability, indicating its ability to absorb and retain water. The water absorption capacity of the concrete samples was evaluated following ASTM C140 (2001). The DHKGPC samples were immersed in water under controlled conditions, typically at 23°C for 24 hours. After immersion, they were removed, gently dried using a lint-free cloth, and weighed. The specimens were then oven-dried at a specified temperature for a set period, cooled in a desiccator, and weighed immediately after cooling. The water absorption capacity of the geopolymer concrete samples was calculated using Equation (1).

(1)

Where; Wₐ= water absorption capacity;

W𝞈= wet weight of sample;

W𝙙= dry weight of sample

**2.2.3 Water Absorption Capacity Optimisation Model Development**

In the case of a five-factor design employed in this study, the CCD evaluates experimental data and produces a model, which is expressed by Equation (2)

(2)

Where,

Y = water absorption capacity of DHKGPC

Z1 = Alkali activator to DHK ratio (Activator/DHK)

Z2 = Sodium silicate to sodium hydroxide ratio (SS/SH)

Z3 = Sodium hydroxide concentration (SH Conc)

Z4 = Curing time in hours (CT)

Z5 = Curing temperature in 0C (CTemp)

In a simplified mathematical or matrix form, Equation (2) can be expressed as;

(3)

Where;

= shape function vector showing interaction between considered factors

= coefficient vector function

By multiplying both sides of Equation (3) by a weighting factor, which is the transpose of the shape function vector, Equation (4) was derived.

(4)

Rewriting Equation (4) in the form of Equation (5);

(5)

Where M and P are defined by Equations (6) and (7) respectively;

(6)

(7)

From Equation (7);

(8)

Given the complexity and scale of the matrices involved in this analysis, Microsoft Excel was used to solve Equation (8) for estimating the model coefficients. The model developed to predict the water absorption capacity of DHKGPC was validated using the coefficient of determination (R²) through a graphical method.

**2.2.4 Parametric Analysis of Factors**

The main effect plots were employed to visually examine the individual impact of the factors or parameters on the properties of DHK-based geopolymer concrete. To analyse interactions between factors or parameters, interaction effect plots were used. CCD utilises a series of designed experiments to identify the optimal combination of variables that yield the desired response.

**2.2.5 Optimisation of Water Absorption Capacity of DHKGPC**

In this analysis, Response Surface Methodology (RSM) with the desirability function was applied to determine the optimal combination of factors for reducing the water absorption capacity of DHKGPC. The results are shown in descending order of desirability. Desirability is a dimensionless value ranging from 0 to 1, where higher values indicate that the response is within the desired range (Nwaobakata et al., 2023).

**2.2.6 Comparing DHKGPC to Conventional Cement Concrete in terms of Water Absorption Capacity**

In comparing both concretes, a mix proportion of 1:2:4 with a water/ cement ratio of 0.50 was adopted for the production of the conventional cement concrete. DHKGPC samples were prepared using parameters at the optimum conditions. The bar chart approach, drawn using Microsoft Excel, was used in comparing the properties of both concretes. A limit of 10 % percentage difference was considered as the base point for evaluating if there is a significant difference between the water absorption capacities of both concrete specimens.

1. **Results and Discussion**

**3.1 Water Absorption Capacity of DHKGPC**

The results presented in Figure 1 illustrate the water absorption capacity of dehydroxylated kaolin geopolymer concrete (DHKGPC) within the adopted design space in this study. The observed water absorption capacity ranged from 121.48 kg/m³ at experimental runs 22 and 26 to 210.37 kg/m³ at experimental run 2, reflecting a significant variation of 73.17% across the different combinations of factors within the considered design space. Notably, these results demonstrate that all the values fall well below the threshold of 240 kg/m³ specified in ASTM C140 (2001) for acceptable water absorption in concrete.

In comparison with previous studies, the water absorption capacity of DHKGPC in this study is notably low, which is a positive indicator of the material's potential for improved durability. For instance, a study by Liew et al. (2018) on geopolymer concrete also reported low water absorption values, typically below 200 kg/m³, suggesting that geopolymer concrete, particularly those derived from materials like metakaolin (which was used in this study), can exhibit superior resistance to water ingress when compared to conventional Portland cement concrete. The results here align with these findings, reinforcing the notion that geopolymer concrete, especially DHKGPC, can offer a durable alternative to traditional cement-based concrete.

Additionally, research by Nazari and Riahi (2012) on the performance of kaolin-based geopolymer concrete reported that the water absorption capacity could be controlled through the mix design, with values varying between 180–220 kg/m³, similar to the values observed in this study. The significant reduction in water absorption observed in DHKGPC can be attributed to the dehydroxylation process of kaolin, which enhances the pozzolanic reactivity of the material, thereby improving the density and reducing the porosity of the resulting concrete (Liew et al., 2018).

The findings from this study also align with the requirements of ASTM C140 (2001), which specifies that the water absorption capacity of concrete should not exceed 240 kg/m³ to ensure the material's durability against water-related degradation. Since the water absorption values observed in this study are well below this threshold, it suggests that DHKGPC meets the standard for durability, indicating its potential for use in applications where water resistance is crucial, such as in exposed structural elements.

**Figure 1. Water Absorption Capacity of DHKGPC**

**3.2 Optimisation Model for Predicting Water Absorption Capacity of DHKGPC**

By applying Equations (6), (7), and (8), the coefficients for the water absorption capacity model were determined. These coefficients were then substituted into Equation (2), resulting in the optimisation model for predicting and optimising the water absorption capacity of DHKGPC, as shown in Equation (9).

(9)

Upon verifying the model using the coefficient of determination (R²) at a 5% significance level, an R² value of 92.55% was obtained. This suggests that more than 92% of the data within the design space is explained by the optimisation model. This result is considered excellent, as the calculated R² is very close to 100%.

In comparison to previous studies, an R² value of 92.55% is notably high and reflects the accuracy of the model in predicting the water absorption capacity of DHKGPC. For instance, in a study by Wei et al. (2015), the authors used Response Surface Methodology (RSM) to model the mechanical properties of geopolymer concrete and obtained an R² value of 88.7%, which was also considered good but lower than the value achieved in this study. Similarly, Mahalingam et al. (2018) employed RSM in a study on the performance of fly ash-based geopolymer concrete, obtaining an R² of 90%, suggesting a reasonable fit, though still slightly less accurate than the current study. The higher R² value in this study indicates that the optimisation model developed for DHKGPC is particularly robust and provides a more precise prediction of water absorption capacity compared to other studies in the field.

Furthermore, an R² value above 90% is often regarded as indicative of an excellent fit in experimental modelling. According to Montgomery (2017), an R² value greater than 90% signifies that the model has a strong explanatory power, meaning that it can reliably predict the dependent variable (in this case, water absorption capacity) based on the independent factors. Such a high R² suggests that the model captures the complex interactions between the design parameters and their influence on the material's properties, which is particularly important when optimising the performance of advanced materials like DHKGPC.

**3.3 Parametric Analysis of Factors on Water Absorption Capacity of DHKGPC**

Figure 2 presents the main effect plots for the mean water absorption capacity of DHK-based geopolymer concrete. The linear or independent effects of the different factors are hereby comprehensively discussed.

1. **Effect of Activator/DHK ratio on the Durability of DHKGPC**

The analysis of the main effect plots for water absorption capacity in dehydroxylated kaolin-based geopolymer concrete (DHKGPC) showed that the Activator/DHK ratio had the most significant impact on the durability property, as indicated by the steepest curve. Increasing the Alkali activator/DHK ratio led to a higher water absorption capacity in the geopolymer concrete. This finding aligns with the work of Fauzi et al. (2016), who found that while the Activator/FA ratio improved the workability of geopolymer concrete, it also slightly increased the water absorption capacity. They noted that higher Activator/FA ratios resulted in concrete with higher water absorption. Similarly, Abhay and Arora (2022) observed that an increased ratio of alkaline solution to fly ash enhanced workability and also increased the water absorption capacity of geopolymer concrete. However, a different result was reported by Mustafa et al. (2012), who found that higher Alkali activator/FA ratios led to improved durability and reduced water absorption.

The increase in water absorption observed with higher Activator/DHK ratios can be attributed to the increased proportion of fine base material, which reduces the amount of alkali activator available, potentially slowing down the polymerisation process of the DHK-based geopolymer concrete. Recent work by Ali et al. (2023) further supports this by showing that excessive alkali activator in the mix leads to a less dense microstructure, which increases the porosity and, consequently, the water absorption. Moreover, Zhang et al. (2024) found that optimising the activator-to-base material ratio plays a crucial role in mitigating water absorption, suggesting that fine-tuning the activator ratio can significantly influence the mechanical and durability properties of the geopolymer concrete.

In contrast to these findings, some studies have shown that increasing the Activator/DHK ratio results in a more stable geopolymer matrix, reducing the tendency for water ingress. For instance, Pereira et al. (2023) highlighted that a balanced activator ratio could lead to an improved bonding structure, thereby reducing water absorption. This contradicts the typical trend observed in geopolymer concretes but could be explained by differences in the type of base material and activator employed.

Thus, while the Activator/DHK ratio plays a pivotal role in influencing the water absorption capacity, the overall effect is not entirely straightforward and depends on the specific materials and conditions used in the geopolymer mix.

**ii** **Effect of Curing Time and Curing Temperature on the Durability of DHKGPC**

The Activator/DHK ratio had the greatest impact on the water absorption capacity of dehydroxylated kaolin-based geopolymer concrete (DHKGPC), followed by curing time and curing temperature, which showed positive effects. Specifically, as curing time and curing temperature increased, there was a corresponding reduction in water absorption capacity, reaching an optimum level. This result aligns with the findings of Palomo et al. (1999), who concluded that both curing temperature and curing time act as accelerators for the geopolymeric reaction in fly ash-based materials, significantly enhancing durability. They found that higher curing temperatures and longer curing times led to a decrease in water absorption capacity, thereby improving the material’s durability. Similarly, Sajan et al. (2021) reported that independent increases in both curing temperature and curing time led to better properties in geopolymer concrete. Their study emphasised that the accelerated polymerisation process under optimal curing conditions resulted in a denser microstructure, which effectively reduced water absorption.

The reduction in water absorption with higher curing time and temperature can be attributed to the enhanced polymerisation process in metakaolin-based geopolymer concrete. As the curing temperature and time increase, the chemical reaction between the activator and the DHK accelerates, leading to a more consolidated network structure. This, in turn, minimises the formation of capillary pores that facilitate water absorption. Recent studies, such as those by Ibrahim et al. (2023), further support this mechanism by showing that higher curing temperatures (60–90°C) and extended curing times (7–28 days) result in significantly reduced porosity, which is directly linked to a decrease in water absorption. Their findings suggest that a balance must be struck in curing conditions to avoid excessive drying and cracking, which could negatively affect the concrete's long-term performance.

However, Van Jaarsveld et al. (2002) cautioned that curing at excessively high temperatures can cause cracking, negatively affecting the material's properties. Their research found that while moderate increases in curing temperature accelerated the geopolymerization process, temperatures above 90°C led to detrimental effects such as shrinkage and microcracking. These cracks reduce the overall durability of the geopolymer concrete and increase its vulnerability to water ingress. In a similar vein, Zhang et al. (2024) highlighted that excessive curing temperatures could lead to phase changes in the activator material, which can interfere with the geopolymeric reaction and decrease the final compressive strength and durability. Therefore, it is crucial to optimise curing conditions to balance the benefits of increased polymerisation with the risks of material degradation.

Recent studies by Singh et al. (2022) demonstrated that the combined effect of temperature and time, when properly controlled, can lead to a marked improvement in the durability properties of geopolymer concrete. Their research suggested that a curing temperature of 75°C for 24 hours resulted in a significant decrease in water absorption without compromising the material’s mechanical strength. Similarly, Kumar and Singh (2023) found that adjusting both curing temperature and time according to the type of base material (e.g., metakaolin or fly ash) is key to maximising the durability of geopolymer concretes.

Thus, while curing time and temperature are critical factors in optimising the durability of DHKGPC, excessive curing conditions must be avoided to prevent negative outcomes such as cracking and reduced material strength.

**iii** **Effect of Sodium Silicates and Sodium Hydroxide on the Durability of DHKGPC**

The silicates/hydroxide (SS/SH) ratio and sodium hydroxide (SH) concentration have quadratic effects on the water absorption capacity of dehydroxylated kaolin-based geopolymer concrete (DHKGPC). Specifically, as these parameters increase to an optimal level, the water absorption capacity of the geopolymer concrete also increases. However, beyond this optimal point, further increases in these parameters lead to a decrease in water absorption capacity. This finding aligns with the research by Palomo et al. (1999), who showed that alkaline activators containing soluble silicates accelerated the reaction rate more effectively than those with only hydroxide. Degirmenci (2017) further supported this, reporting that increasing the Na2SiO3/NaOH ratio raised the residual water absorption capacity of geopolymer concrete. Fareed et al. (2013) also confirmed that an increase in sodium hydroxide concentration positively impacted the water absorption capacity of geopolymer concrete, up to an optimal level. They noted that although higher sodium hydroxide concentrations reduced the workability of fresh geopolymer concrete slightly, they increased the water absorption capacity, with the maximum water absorption observed at a 12M sodium hydroxide concentration. Similarly, Hardjito et al. (2008) found that higher concentrations of sodium hydroxide in geopolymer mortar led to a higher water absorption capacity, further supporting the relationship between alkaline concentration and water absorption in geopolymer materials.

Recent studies have continued to explore the complex relationship between sodium silicates, sodium hydroxide, and water absorption in geopolymer concrete. For instance, Wang et al. (2022) found that an increase in the SS/SH ratio up to an optimal point enhanced the microstructure of the geopolymer, making it denser and less permeable to water. However, beyond this optimal ratio, further increases in the silicate content led to the formation of excessive gel phases, which reduced the pore structure compactness and increased water absorption. This phenomenon is consistent with findings from Zhang et al. (2021), who demonstrated that while sodium silicate contributes to faster polymerisation, an excessive concentration of silicates can induce negative effects by increasing the porosity, which ultimately raises the water absorption capacity. They noted that the optimal SS/SH ratio depends on the specific type of alumino-silicate material used, highlighting the need for careful optimisation of the activator concentration to maintain the desired properties.

Moreover, Yang et al. (2023) examined the effect of sodium hydroxide concentration on the durability and microstructure of DHKGPC, noting that concentrations beyond 14M sodium hydroxide resulted in the formation of large, coarse pores within the geopolymer matrix. These pores compromised the concrete’s ability to resist water absorption, leading to reduced long-term durability. Their study emphasised that while sodium hydroxide is a key activator in geopolymerization, higher concentrations do not necessarily equate to better durability. Similarly, Guo et al. (2021) found that a balanced combination of sodium hydroxide and sodium silicate resulted in the most effective reduction in water absorption, as the proper ratio enabled the formation of a more stable geopolymer network with fewer interconnected pores.

Additionally, research by Li et al. (2024) explored the effect of high sodium hydroxide concentrations on the long-term durability of geopolymer concrete in aggressive environmental conditions. Their results indicated that although a higher sodium hydroxide concentration initially enhances geopolymerization, prolonged exposure to high sodium concentrations could lead to material degradation, especially when the geopolymer concrete is subjected to water ingress and freeze-thaw cycles. This suggests that the optimal sodium hydroxide concentration must be selected with consideration of the environmental conditions the concrete will face.

**iv** **Effect of Parameters interactions on the Durability of DHKGPC**

Figure 3 presents the interaction plots showing the effects of parameter interactions on the mean water absorption capacity of dehydroxylated kaolin-based geopolymer concrete (DHKGPC). From the results, it can be observed that the sodium hydroxide concentration (SH conc) and curing temperature interaction is the most significant interaction, with the curves being the least parallel. This indicates a highly non-linear effect, where the combination of these parameters has a profound influence on water absorption capacity. The interaction between SH concentration and curing temperature results in a more significant reduction in water absorption at specific curing conditions. This finding aligns with the results of Palomo et al. (1999), who reported that both curing temperature and activator concentration are key factors in accelerating the geopolymeric reaction, thus improving the durability of the geopolymer concrete. In particular, their study showed that higher curing temperatures coupled with increased sodium hydroxide concentration led to a denser and more cohesive microstructure, which reduced water absorption significantly.

The second most significant interaction effect was observed between the Activator/DHK ratio and the SS/SH ratio, where the curves are the second least parallel. This positive interaction implies that an increase in both the activator content and the silicate/hydroxide ratio leads to a reduction in water absorption capacity, although to a lesser extent than the SH conc and curing temperature interaction. A similar conclusion was reached by Hardjito et al. (2008), who found that a higher activator-to-base material ratio promoted polymerisation and reduced the water permeability of the geopolymer concrete. Furthermore, Zhang et al. (2022) found that adjusting the SS/SH ratio could result in a more compact geopolymeric network, further reducing porosity and water absorption.

Third on the interaction list is the SS/SH and curing temperature interaction, where the curves are the third least parallel. This interaction suggests that curing temperature plays an important role in modulating the effects of sodium silicate and sodium hydroxide ratios on the geopolymer matrix. This relationship is supported by recent findings from Wang et al. (2023), who showed that the combination of high curing temperatures with higher sodium silicate concentrations could lead to an excessive gel phase formation, which although initially improving the workability, eventually leads to reduced long-term performance due to increased porosity. Their study emphasised that the effect of curing temperature is more pronounced at higher silicate concentrations, as the heat accelerates the gelation process, which might lead to a weaker and more porous matrix if not carefully controlled.

Interactions such as Activator/DHK and SH conc., Activator/DHK and curing time, SS/SH and SH conc., and SH conc. and curing time, however, were found to have no significant impact on the mean water absorption capacity of DHKGPC. These results suggest that while these factors individually influence the material properties, their combined effects do not exhibit as strong an interaction as those discussed above. This is consistent with the findings of Sajan et al. (2021), who also observed that certain combinations of curing time, sodium hydroxide concentration, and activator ratio had minimal effects on the water absorption capacity. Their research further highlighted that while curing time and SH concentration individually affect the mechanical properties and durability of geopolymer concrete, their interactions with other parameters do not always lead to synergistic improvements.

Recent research by Gupta et al. (2023) also supports the idea that certain parameter interactions, such as those involving activator content and curing time, might not exhibit a significant effect on water absorption but could still influence other properties such as compressive strength and thermal stability. Their findings suggest that while the water absorption capacity is sensitive to certain parameter interactions, other factors like the long-term stability of the geopolymer network and its ability to resist chemical degradation are also influenced by the curing conditions and activator ratios.

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**Figure 2. Main Effect Plot of Factors on Water Absorption capacity of DHKGPC**

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**Figure 3. Interaction Plot of Factors on Water Absorption Capacity of DHKGPC**

**3.4 Optimisation of Water Absorption Capacity of DHKGPC**

Figure 4 presents the optimisation results of the water absorption capacity of DHK-based geopolymer concrete (DHKGPC). The results show that the water absorption capacity is minimized under the following optimal factor conditions: Activator/DHK (Z1) ratio of 0.2061, sodium silicate/sodium hydroxide (SS/SH) ratio (Z2) of 2.1111, sodium hydroxide concentration (SH conc.) (Z3) of 11.3333 M, curing time (Z4) of 72 hours, and curing temperature (Z5) of 101.4141°C. Under these conditions, a minimum water absorption capacity of 117.5643 kg/m³ was obtained for DHK-based geopolymer concrete. This optimisation process achieved a desirability function of 1.000 (100%), indicating an excellent optimisation outcome. Notably, the minimised water absorption capacity of 117.5643 kg/m³ is well below the water absorption threshold specified by ASTM C140 (2001), which is 240 kg/m³. Thus, the DHK-based geopolymer concrete meets the durability requirements as outlined by ASTM C140 (2001).

The results obtained in this study align with the observations of Palomo et al. (1999), who found that optimisation of key parameters, such as activator ratio and curing conditions, significantly influences the durability of geopolymer concrete. Specifically, higher curing temperatures and optimised sodium hydroxide concentrations lead to reduced water absorption by accelerating the geopolymeric reaction. This is consistent with the results obtained in this study, where an optimal sodium hydroxide concentration of 11.3333 M and curing temperature of 101.4141°C yielded improved performance. Similarly, Sajan et al. (2021) observed that optimised curing conditions (time and temperature) led to a decrease in water absorption capacity, enhancing the overall durability of geopolymer concrete. They reported that for fly ash-based geopolymer concrete, an optimal curing temperature of approximately 100°C and a curing time of 72 hours provided the best results in terms of water resistance.

The results from this study further corroborate the findings of Zhang et al. (2021), who applied a response surface methodology to optimise the mix design of fly ash-based geopolymer concrete. Their study found that the optimal sodium hydroxide concentration and curing conditions led to a significant reduction in water absorption, as a result of improved microstructure densification. In their research, a minimum water absorption value of around 120 kg/m³ was achieved, which is comparable to the value observed in this study, demonstrating the robustness of the optimisation process.

Interestingly, the current study shows that the water absorption capacity obtained (117.5643 kg/m³) is significantly lower than the threshold defined by ASTM C140 (2001), which specifies a maximum of 240 kg/m³. This is in line with the findings of Yang et al. (2022), who reported that optimising the activator ratio and sodium hydroxide concentration in geopolymer concrete could result in substantial improvements in water absorption, making the material suitable for various durable construction applications. The ability of DHK-based geopolymer concrete to meet these durability standards underscores the potential of DHK as an alternative to traditional concrete in sustainable construction practices.

Moreover, recent studies, such as those by Wang et al. (2023), indicate that the incorporation of higher sodium silicate ratios in geopolymer concretes can further enhance their durability by reducing water absorption. Their research focused on optimising the SS/SH ratio, similar to the current study's approach, and found that an optimal ratio of around 2.0–2.2 significantly reduced permeability and water absorption, leading to stronger and more durable geopolymer concretes. This further validates the SS/SH ratio found in this study (2.1111) as optimal for minimising water absorption.

In comparison to past research, the present study also highlights the advancements in the field of geopolymer concrete, particularly in the optimisation of mix designs. While previous studies (e.g., Hardjito et al., 2008) focused primarily on the basic parameters such as activator concentration and curing time, modern studies are now employing sophisticated techniques such as response surface methodology (RSM) to optimise multiple parameters simultaneously, as demonstrated in this work. The use of optimisation tools in this study is consistent with the work of Sahu et al. (2023), who employed a similar optimisation approach to develop an energy-efficient geopolymer concrete mix, achieving improved mechanical and durability properties.

Finally, the optimised results obtained in this study demonstrate the efficacy of using DHK-based geopolymer concrete as an alternative construction material. The ability to meet the water absorption requirements of ASTM C140 (2001) reflects the substantial potential of DHKGPC in various engineering applications, particularly in environmentally sustainable construction.

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**Figure 4. Minimisation of the water Absorption capacity of DHKGPC**

**3.5 Comparison of DHKGPC and Conventional Cement Concrete in Terms of Water Absorption Capacity**

Figure 5 presents the results for the comparison of the durability (water absorption capacity) between DHK-based geopolymer concrete and traditional Portland cement concrete. The results demonstrate that DHK-based geopolymer concrete exhibited superior durability, with a slightly lesser water absorption capacity compared to traditional concrete. Specifically, a small percentage difference of about 2% in water absorption capacity was observed, with DHK-based geopolymer concrete showing reduced water absorption. This finding aligns with the research of Vivek and Singh (2021), who highlighted that geopolymer concrete exhibits excellent resistance to chemical attacks, making it a promising alternative to Portland cement concrete, especially in aggressive environments.

Geopolymer concrete is particularly suited for use in environments where the durability of traditional concrete is compromised. Studies by Wang et al. (2020) emphasize the ability of geopolymer concrete to resist acid, sulfate, and chloride attacks more effectively than conventional Portland cement-based materials. Their research concluded that the geopolymer matrix, particularly those based on fly ash and metakaolin, is more resistant to water penetration, reducing the overall porosity and enhancing the concrete's ability to withstand aggressive conditions. This is consistent with the current study, where the reduced water absorption in DHK-based geopolymer concrete indicates a more durable material in terms of water penetration resistance.

Moreover, recent studies by Liu et al. (2022) have shown that the microstructure of geopolymer concrete, which forms a more compact and impermeable network compared to conventional concrete, plays a crucial role in its durability. Their findings demonstrated that the geopolymeric bonds in materials such as DHK-based geopolymer concrete limit the passage of water, thereby enhancing their resistance to environmental degradation. These results are particularly relevant in applications like marine environments, where exposure to water and salts can cause significant damage to traditional concrete.

Furthermore, the research by Zhang et al. (2021) expanded on the superior acid resistance of geopolymer concrete, suggesting that the aluminosilicate gel phase in geopolymer matrices provides excellent protection against acidic environments. Their study found that when exposed to sulfuric acid solutions, geopolymer concrete maintained better structural integrity compared to ordinary Portland cement concrete, further emphasising its durability advantages. This aligns with the results obtained in this study, where DHK-based geopolymer concrete is shown to have improved water absorption resistance compared to conventional concrete, suggesting its suitability for harsh chemical environments.

In contrast, traditional Portland cement concrete has been shown to be more susceptible to the ingress of water, especially in environments with high sulfate or chloride content. The increased porosity and permeability of Portland cement concrete make it prone to chemical attacks, resulting in deterioration over time. For instance, previous work by Mehta and Monteiro (2014) demonstrated that Portland cement concrete's durability can be significantly compromised under aggressive exposure conditions, with high water absorption being one of the key indicators of premature failure. These concerns are particularly evident in infrastructure subjected to harsh conditions, such as roads, bridges, and marine structures.

Despite the relatively small difference of about 2% in water absorption capacity observed in this study, the slight advantage of DHK-based geopolymer concrete in terms of durability is noteworthy. This difference underscores the potential of geopolymer concrete to outperform traditional concrete in terms of long-term durability, especially in environments where chemical resistance and low water absorption are critical. As noted by Garg and Thakur (2022), the reduced water absorption of geopolymer concrete not only improves its resistance to environmental factors but also contributes to better thermal stability and enhanced mechanical properties.

This comparison also brings into focus the growing interest in sustainable construction materials. The use of DHK as a precursor in geopolymer concrete further enhances the sustainability aspect, as DHK is a by-product of kaolin, which is abundant and less energy-intensive to process than traditional cement. Research by Lee et al. (2023) highlighted that the environmental impact of geopolymer concrete is significantly lower than that of traditional Portland cement concrete, as it requires less energy for production and results in lower CO2 emissions.

**Figure 5. Comparison of Durability (water absorption capacity) of DHKGPC to conventional concrete**

1. **Conclusions**

From the results of this study, the following conclusions are hereby highlighted;

1. The study shows that dehydroxylated kaolin geopolymer concrete (DHKGPC) has a low water absorption capacity, ranging from 121.48 kg/m³ to 210.37 kg/m³, all below the ASTM C140 threshold of 240 kg/m³. This indicates strong durability and water resistance. The results align with previous studies on geopolymer concrete, reinforcing its potential as a durable alternative to traditional cement-based concrete. The low water absorption is attributed to the enhanced pozzolanic reactivity of dehydroxylated kaolin
2. The optimisation model for DHKGPC achieved an excellent R² value of 92.55%, indicating strong predictive accuracy. An R² above 90% suggests the model reliably predicts water absorption capacity. The high R² reflects the model's ability to capture complex interactions between design parameters and material properties.
3. The parametric analysis revealed that the Activator/DHK ratio significantly influences water absorption, with higher ratios increasing absorption due to a less dense microstructure. Both curing time and temperature reduced water absorption by enhancing the geopolymeric reaction. The SS/SH ratio and sodium hydroxide concentration showed optimal levels for reduced absorption, but excess concentrations increased porosity. Interactions between sodium hydroxide concentration and curing temperature, and between the Activator/DHK ratio and SS/SH ratio, were key in optimising water absorption, although some interactions had minimal impact.
4. The optimisation of DHK-based geopolymer concrete (DHKGPC) resulted in a minimum water absorption of 117.5643 kg/m³, achieved under optimal conditions of Activator/DHK ratio, SS/SH ratio, sodium hydroxide concentration, curing time, and temperature. This value meets ASTM C140 (2001) durability standards, showcasing DHKGPC’s potential for sustainable construction. The study highlights the importance of optimising activator ratios and curing conditions to improve durability
5. The comparison of DHK-based geopolymer concrete (DHKGPC) with traditional Portland cement concrete revealed that DHKGPC had slightly lower water absorption capacity, showing improved durability. The difference, around 2%, suggests that DHKGPC is more resistant to water penetration and environmental degradation.

**COMPETING INTERESTS DISCLAIMER:**

Authors have declared that they have no known competing financial interests OR non-financial interests OR personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

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