Physical properties of silane-treated sugar palm fiber reinforced thermoplastic polyurethane composites

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Abstract. Fiber modifications are widely utilized to enhance the interface of fiber and matrix adhesion based on eco-friendly fibers such as sugar palm fibers. The sugar palm (SP) fibers in particle size of 150-250μm were immersed in 2 wt. % silane for 3hrs in this research. Composites of untreated and treated sugar palm fibers reinforced thermoplastic polyurethane (TPU) with different fiber loadings, ranging from 0 to 50 wt. % were then prepared by melt mixing compounding followed by hot pressing moulding. The physical property such as density, water absorption and thickness swelling of the composites were evaluated. Ten replicates of SP/TPU composites with the standard dimension were immersed in distilled water for 168hrs. The chemical changes for untreated and treated through Fourier-transform infrared spectroscopy (FTIR) was done to distinguish the untreated and silane treated of the SP/TPU composites. Increasing the fiber content resulted in higher water uptake and thickness swelling. Moreover, the silane treated SP/TPU composites was shown reducing water absorption and thickness swelling properties. This study is a part of exploration potential application of the composites for automotive part applications.

1. Introduction

Natural fibers are taken from natural plants such as sugar palm, kenaf, flax, and bast which are extracted from its plants, stems, leaves or any part thereof which are classified as an eco-friendly material due its biodegradability and abundance. Sugar palm is one of the best examples that exhibited noteworthy potential to be used as reinforcement in polymer for the development of composite materials [1-2]. On the potential notes, sugar palm has an acceptable standard of strength in its mechanical properties as well as low density, good tolerance in its mechanical and thermal properties [3]. However, on the drawback notes, sugar palm has poor adhesion with polymer matrix. This drawback has extended to be investigated further on the distribution load in reinforcement fibers in order to obtain its maximum strength. Many researchers have tackled this drawback issue by using a certain method such as chemical treatment onto fibers in order to enhance its adhesion to get ideal bonding strength.

The reinforcement between fiber and matrix plays the main role in transferring the stresses performing on the matrix to the fibers. In order to have a good properties of the composites, the fiber
and matrix interface must be strongly attached. Nevertheless, if the interface is too durable, the composite will have the brittle and low stiffness properties. There are numerous reported works to enhance the interfacial bonding between the polymer matrix and natural fibers through fiber treatment modification such as sisal/PLA [4], ijk/polypropylene [5], pineapple/kenaf/phenolic [6].

One of the common methods to modify the fiber surface properties is by silane treatment. Silane treatment has been discovered to modify the glass fiber surface to be reinforced in polymer matrices. Currently, researches employed the same technique to natural fibers in order to improve the adhesion bonding of fiber/matrix. The fiber treatment enhances the adhesion between the polymer matrix and the surface of fiber by changing the polarity of the fiber surface [7-8].

The previous study conducted by Atiqah, Jawaid, Ishak and Sapuan [9] have investigated the bonding strength of sugar palm reinforced thermoplastic polyurethane. Various treatment such as alkaline, silane and combined alkaline-silane were selected to undergo single fiber test and found that silane treatment showed a good compatible for sugar palm fiber. Silane treatment was employed in modifying natural fiber-polymer matrix interface and improving the interfacial strength. The hydrophobic chemical derivatives of SiH₄ called silane can be hydrolysed and bonded to the hydroxyl groups of cellulose chains [10]. It had been reported that, the cross-linked network between silane treated fibers and the matrix showed non-swelling behaviour and chemical resistance [11].

This paper reports a study of the influence of fiber treatment (silane) on the physical and structure of sugar palm fiber. In order to analyse the physical property of SP/TPU composites, the variation of fiber loading consisted of 0, 10, 20, 30, 40 and 50 wt. % and 2 wt. % of silane treatment were selected in this investigation.

2. Experimental

2.1. Materials
Estane® 58311 TPU was supplied in pellet form with the density of 1.13 g/cm³ by Pultrusion Sdn. Bhd. and was used as the polymer matrix. The sugar palm fiber (SPF) was collected from sugar palm tree at Jempol, Negeri Sembilan, Malaysia.

2.2. Preparation of Sugar Palm
Firstly, sugar palm fiber was first washed with tap water for several times to get rid of any impurities and dirt that attached to the SPF. The SPF was kept in an open air for 24hrs and dried in an air circulating oven at 60°C for 48hrs. The dry SPF grounded to get the size of 10mm-15mm using plastic crusher machine then followed by using pulverize machine. Next, the particle SPF were sieved to obtain 125-250 μm.

2.3. Silane Treatment of Sugar Palm
The SPFs in particulate size of 125-250 μm were immersed in 2 wt. % of silane for 3hrs. For silane treatment, 3-aminopropyl-triethoxysilane was used and dissolved in a mixture of methanol-water (90/10 w/w) for their hydrolysis. The pH of the solution was adjusted to 3.5 with acetic acid and stirred continuously for 10 minutes. Then, the fibers were immersed in the solution and left for 3hrs under agitation. The SPF were thoroughly rinsed with distilled water and then oven-dried at 60 °C for 72hrs to completely eliminate any moisture effect from the fibers.

2.4. Fabrication of SP reinforced TPU composites
The SP/TPU composites were prepared using melt compounding technique followed by hot moulding process. Sugar palm with particles size of 125-250 μm and thermoplastic polyurethanes in pellet form were dried in an electric oven at 80°C for 48hrs. Six set of neat TPU and SP/TPU composites (0, 10, 20, 30, 40 and 50) wt. % were fabricated. SP/TPU composites were prepared using melt-mixing compounding, followed by hot pressing moulding process to achieve uniform distribution. Haake polydrive R600 was used in the mixing process at the optimum processing parameters temperature,
time and rotating speed; 190 °C, 11 minutes and 40 rpm, respectively. Vechno Vation 40 ton compression molding machine was used in the hot pressing moulding. The samples were pre-heated for 7 minutes at 190°C. Then they were fully pressed for another 10 minutes at 190 °C. Finally, the sample were cold-pressed for 5 minutes at 25 °C. Table 1 shows the composition of the formulation of untreated and treated sugar palm fiber reinforced thermoplastic polyurethane.

| Materials                        | TPU (wt %) | SP (wt %) |
|----------------------------------|------------|-----------|
| Neat TPU                         | 100        | 0         |
| TPU + Sugar Palm Fiber           | 90         | 10        |
| TPU + Sugar Palm Fiber           | 80         | 20        |
| TPU + Sugar Palm Fiber           | 70         | 30        |
| TPU + Sugar Palm Fiber           | 60         | 40        |
| TPU + Sugar Palm Fiber           | 50         | 50        |

3. Characterizations

3.1. Physical Properties Testing
Density was measured in air using a digital weighing scale and in water using densimeter, MD-200S Mirage. The difference in weight of the sample in two media gives the weight in gram was converted to volume in cm³.

Water absorption specimens of the untreated and treated SP/TPU composites were immersed in distilled water in accordance with ASTM D 570. The SP/TPU composites samples were cut into the size of 20 mm long, 20 mm wide and 3 mm thickness. All specimens were conditioned in and oven at 60° C for 24hrs then put into the sealed plastic bag and cooled in desiccator over granulated silica gel. The samples were then weighed and immersed in a distilled water at room temperature for 72, 150 and 168hrs. Then the specimen was removed from the water, wiped with tissue paper, weighed to measure the weight gain, and put back in the water for continued soaking.

Ten specimens of 20 x 20 x 3 mm samples of each different type of composites were prepared according to ASTM D570 for the testing of thickness swelling.

3.2. FTIR
Fourier transform infrared (FTIR) spectra of the neat TPU, untreated SP/TPU and silane treated SP/TPU composites were tested by using a FTIR machine (SHIMADZU81001. Japan) to evaluate the changes in functional groups on the composites. All spectra were recorded in the range from 4000 cm⁻¹ to 350 cm⁻¹.

4. Result and Discussion

4.1. Physical Properties

4.1.1. Density Properties. The results of density measurement of neat TPU, untreated and silane treated SP/TPU composites subjected to different fiber loading were presented as in Figure 1. The density of SP/TPU composites decreased when the sugar palm fibers were treated with silane treatments. It can be seen that neat TPU has lower density (1.07 g/cm³) neat TPU and SP/TPU composites (10, 20, 30, 40, 50 wt. %) are 1.07, 1.08, 1.14, 1.16 and 1.20 g/cm³, whereas the values of density seems to reduce after reinforcing for silane treated fibers which are 1.07, 1.07, 1.09, 1.13 and 1.17 g/cm³. On the contrary, the density should be higher after fiber treatment, it was suggested that
due to treatment employed on the fiber surface, the fiber cell wall become more compact that increased the density of the fiber [12, 13].

![Density of untreated and silane treated SP/TPU composites.](image)

4.1.2. Moisture Absorption Properties. Figure 2 shows the values of the water absorption for the untreated and silane treated of SP/TPU composites, which vary depending upon the fiber loading. As shown in Figure 2, the water absorption of the composites increased with increasing fiber loading, but was lower for neat TPU composites due to the matrix is hydrophobic, whereas the sugar palm fiber composites are hydrophilic. The 2 wt. % of silane treated of SP/TPU composites are significantly lower than those of composites as shown in Figure 2. The gradient of the water absorption graphs for the neat TPU and SP/TPU composites (10, 20, 30, 40, 50 wt. %) are 1.17, 4.23, 4.44, 6.24, 7.47, and 8.21 whereas the values of water absorption for silane treated are 3.24, 3.82, 4.74, 5.73 and 6.83. The neat TPU and 10 wt. % of treated SP composites exhibited less water absorption than those containing 50 wt. % untreated and treated composites. The silane treatment was prone to effective in enhancing the fiber-matrix interface properties [14, 15]. The surface modification of silane after hydrolysis undergo bond formation stage and condensation that induced polysiloxane structures form the reaction hydroxyl groups on the fiber. Hence, the reduction of water absorption of treated SP/TPU composites is due to the improved interfacial adhesion between the TPU chains and the lignocellulosic fiber.
4.1.3. Thickness Swelling Test. As shown in Figure 3, the thickness swelling of neat TPU, untreated and silane treated of SP/TPU composites were varied according to fiber loading (10, 20, 30, 40 and 50 wt. %). The silane treated of thickness welling are lower as compared than untreated of SP/TPU composites. The gradient of the thickness swelling graphs for the neat TPU and SP/TPU composites (10, 20, 30, 40, 50 wt. %) are 0.99, 3.95, 4.64, 6.18, 7.14 and 7.62 whereas the values of water absorption for silane treated are 3.11, 5.49, 6.28, 5.62, and 6.84. In this case, the higher loading of sugar palm fiber exhibited the higher thickness swelling. However, the treated fiber loading of 40 wt. % showed the less thickness swelling as compared to other formulations. According to Agrawal, Saxena, Sharma, Thomas and Sreekala [16], silane treatments may reduce the number of cellulose hydroxyl group in the surface of the fiber and polymer matrix. The silanols group were formed due to the presence of the hydrolyzable alkoyl group from the moisture that existed on the fiber surface. Then, the silanols react with the hydroxyl group of the fiber to form the stable covalent bonds to the outer cell wall so that the chemical easily absorbed onto the fiber surface. Thus, the hydrocarbon chain that induced by the employing of silane treatment detains the swelling of the fiber by creating a cross-linked network because of covalent bonding between the fiber and matrix.
4.2. Chemical and Morphological Analysis

4.2.1. FTIR. Figure 4 exhibits the FTIR spectra of the neat TPU, untreated and silane treated sugar palm fibers reinforced TPU (SP/TPU) composites. To attain good physical properties of the composites requires a good interface between fiber and matrix. The sugar palm fiber was treated with silane treatment to improve the interfacial adhesion between sugar palm fibers and TPU matrix in this study. Figure 4 shows the untreated SP, which showed similar attributions nearly the neat TPU. The chemical structure of absorption peak at 921 cm\(^{-1}\) was due to the Si-O vibration [17], which agreed on the confirmation of 3-aminopropytriethoxysilane of treated SP/TPU composites. The presence on chemical structure as observed in Figure 4 conformed that the silane chemical structure are existed on the sugar palm fibers. The possible chemical structure that existed on the neat TPU, untreated and silane treated were tabulated in Table 1.
Figure 4. Spectrography from FTIR on neat TPU and untreated fibers (a) neat TPU, (b) untreated SP/TPU composites and (c) silane treated SP/TPU composites.

Table 2. The wave numbers of peaks used for FTIR analysis and corresponding functional groups and vibrational type of neat TPU, untreated and silane treated SP/TPU composites [18-19].

| Peak Location (cm⁻¹) | Chemical Structure | Motion                     | Neat TPU       | Untreated SP/TPU composites | Silane Treated SP/TPU composites |
|----------------------|--------------------|----------------------------|----------------|-----------------------------|----------------------------------|
| 1510-1550            | H-N-CO             | Combined motion            | 1531.228       | 1535.085                    | 1531.228                         |
| 1690                 | C=O                | Associated urethane        | 1700.936       | 1700.936                    | 1700.936                         |
| 1740                 | C=O                | Non-bonded urethane       | 1731.792       | 1729.863                    | 1727.935                         |
| 2800-3000            | CH₂ and CH₃       | Stretching                 | 2917.818       | 2919.747                    | 2919.747                         |
| 1590-1650            | N-H                | Bending                    | 1627.653       | 1598.728                    | 1629.851                         |
| 3200-3420            | N-H                | Stretching                 | 3330.517       | 3328.588                    | 3332.445                         |

5. Conclusion
In this study, the SP/TPU were successfully prepared with fiber treatment of silane. The experimental results showed that the physical of TPU based were improved with the incorporation of 50 wt. % of SP and 2 wt. % silane treatment of fibers. The silane treated of SP/TPU reduce the density, water
absorption, and thickness swelling properties was the minimum for 40 wt. % of SP compared with those of untreated sugar palm fiber which enhances their suitability for automotive components.

Acknowledgment
The authors are grateful for the financial support from Universiti Putra Malaysia through Putra grant no. GP-IPS/2015/9441501. The author would also like to thank the Ministry of Higher Education for the MyBrain15 scholarship.

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