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Rattanakunsong N., Jullakan S., Plotka-Wasyłka J., Bunkoed O., A hierarchical porous composite magnetic sorbent of reduced graphene oxide embedded in polyvinyl alcohol cryogel for solvent-assisted-solid phase extraction of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, JOURNAL OF SEPARATION SCIENCE (2022), pp.1-10, which has been published in final form at <https://dx.doi.org/10.1002/jssc.202200041>. This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with Wiley Terms and Conditions for Use of Self-Archived Versions. This article may not be enhanced, enriched or otherwise transformed into a derivative work, without express permission from Wiley or by statutory rights under applicable legislation. Copyright notices must not be removed, obscured or modified. The article must be linked to Wiley's version of record on Wiley Online Library and any embedding, framing or otherwise making available the article or pages thereof by third parties from platforms, services and websites other than Wiley Online Library must be prohibited.

2 **A hierarchical porous composite magnetic sorbent of reduced graphene oxide**
3 **embedded in polyvinyl alcohol cryogel for solvent assisted-solid phase extraction of**
4 **polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons**

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10 **Running title: Porous composite sorbent for polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons**

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17
18 **Abbreviations:** SPE, solid-phase extraction; PAHs, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons;
19 rGOx, reduced graphene oxide; PVA, polyvinyl alcohol; CaCO₃, calcium carbonate; Phe,
20 Phenanthrene; Pyr, Pyrene; BaA, Benzo(a)anthracene; BbF, Benzo(b)fluoranthene; BaP,
21 Benzo(a)pyrene

22 **Keywords:** Cryogel, polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons, porous sorbent, reduced graphene
23 oxide, solvent-assisted

Abstract

24
25 A hierarchical porous composite magnetic sorbent was fabricated and applied to the
26 dispersive solvent assisted-solid phase extraction of five polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. A
27 sorbent was first prepared by incorporating graphene oxide, calcium carbonate and magnetite
28 nanoparticles into a polyvinyl alcohol cryogel. The graphene oxide was converted to reduced
29 graphene oxide using ascorbic acid and a hierarchical porous structure was produced by
30 reacting hydrochloric acid with incorporated calcium carbonate to generate carbon dioxide
31 bubbles which created a second network. Before extracting the target analytes, extraction
32 solvent was introduced into the hierarchical pore network of the sorbent. The extraction was
33 based on the partition between the analytes and introduced extraction solvent and the
34 adsorption of analytes on reduced graphene oxide. The extraction efficiency was enhanced
35 through π - π and hydrophobic interactions between polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and
36 reduced graphene oxide and extraction solvent. The extracted polycyclic aromatic
37 hydrocarbons were determined using HPLC coupled with fluorescence detector. The
38 developed method was applied to extract polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons in disposable
39 diaper, coffee and tea samples and recoveries from 84.5 to 99.4% were achieved with relative
40 standard deviations below 7%. The developed sorbent exhibited good reproducibility and can
41 be reused for ten cycles.

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50 1. Introduction

51 Polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons (PAHs) are persistent organic environmental
52 pollutants, generally produced by the incomplete combustion of organic matter or by high
53 temperature pyrolysis during manufacturing processes [1]. PAHs are frequently found in
54 industrial products and foods. Some PAHs have been classified as potential human
55 carcinogens and the World Health Organization (WHO) has set the maximum permissible
56 concentration of some PAHs in drinking water at $0.2 \mu\text{g L}^{-1}$. For this reason, the quantitative
57 analysis of PAHs in certain matrices is of great importance. The determination of PAHs is
58 normally performed with high performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) since the
59 separation column used in this technique enables the simultaneous detection of several target
60 PAHs with high sensitivity and good precision [2, 3]. However, target PAHs usually exist at
61 trace concentrations in complex matrices and before chromatographic analysis can be
62 performed, an appropriate extraction and enrichment process is normally required to reduce
63 matrix interferences and increase the sensitivity of the response [4].

64 The extraction and enrichment of PAHs in various matrix samples can be
65 accomplished with liquid-liquid extraction (LLE) [5], solid phase extraction (SPE) [4, 6],
66 solid phase microextraction (SPME) [7], stir bar sorptive extraction (SBSE) [8] and magnetic
67 solid phase extraction (MSPE) [9-11]. SPE is a widely used technique because it can be
68 modified to improve extraction efficiency and the enrichment factor. Efficient analyte
69 extraction with SPE requires a suitable adsorbent material and the choice of adsorbent
70 material depends on the target molecule and the anticipated interactions between the target
71 analyte and the adsorbent [12, 13]. Solid sorbents for the adsorption of PAHs have been
72 fabricated using multiwalled carbon nanotubes [14], polyaniline [11], graphene [15],
73 molecularly imprinted polymer [16] and covalent organic frameworks [17] but commercial



74 packed-particle SPE sorbents for the extraction of PAHs normally generate high back
75 pressure, resulting in clogging of the cartridge. The use of a porous composite SPE sorbent is
76 a more convenient approach that is able to overcome this drawback and improve extraction
77 **performance** [18].

78 An alternative strategy that also improved the extraction efficiency of PAHs is a
79 recently reported extraction technique that combined a liquid phase and a porous solid phase
80 [19]. Using this technique, PAHs could be extracted from the sample solution based on the
81 partition between the liquid phase, which is the extraction solvent, and the surface of the solid
82 phase sorbent. Polyvinyl alcohol (PVA) cryogel is an interesting porous material since it can
83 entrap other adsorption materials and also hold an extraction solvent [20, 21]. PVA cryogel
84 can be easily prepared under cryogenic condition, and after thawing the ice crystals generated
85 by freezing, the pores created can form the template for an interconnected hierarchical porous
86 network [22]. A hierarchical porous PVA cryogel is a good choice for SPE and the extraction
87 efficiency of PVA cryogel can be increased by incorporating hydrophobic material in a
88 composite sorbent. A suitable hydrophobic material for this application is reduced graphene
89 oxide (rGOx) which can adsorb PAHs via π - π interaction [23].

90 In this work, an extraction solvent was introduced into a hierarchical porous
91 composite monolith sorbent for the extraction and enrichment of PAHs. The sorbent was
92 fabricated by incorporating rGOx, magnetite nanoparticles and CaCO_3 into PVA cryogel
93 (rGOx/ Fe_3O_4 - SiO_2 /PVA cryogel). The incorporation of CaCO_3 enabled the creation of a
94 porous network structure by reacting the CaCO_3 embedded in the PVA cryogel with HCl to
95 produce CO_2 bubbles inside the sorbent. The porous composite sorbent was then soaked in
96 extraction solvent. The developed solvent-assisted porous composite monolith sorbent was
97 applied to extract and enrichment PAHs from samples of diaper material, tea and coffee. The
98 extraction **performance** of the developed sorbent was compared with the **performance** of a



99 commercial sorbent. The developed method was successfully applied to extract PAHs in
100 disposable diaper, coffee and tea samples.

101 **2. Materials and Methods**

102 **2.1 Chemicals and reagents**

103 Phenanthrene (Phe), Pyrene (Pyr), Benzo(a)anthracene (BaA), Benzo(b)fluoranthene
104 (BbF) and Benzo(a)pyrene (BaP) were purchased from Restek (Bellefonte, USA). Acetic
105 acid, ascorbic acid, hydrochloric acid, toluene and poly (vinyl alcohol) (PVA) ($\geq 98\%$
106 hydrolyzed) were from Merck (Darmstadt, Germany). Glutaraldehyde, iron (III) chloride
107 hexahydrate ($\text{FeCl}_3 \cdot 6\text{H}_2\text{O}$), acetonitrile, methanol, and graphene oxide (15 - 20 sheets, 4 -10
108 % edge-oxidized) were purchased from Sigma–Aldrich (Steinheim, Germany). Deionized
109 water (DI) was produced from an ELGA Maxima ultrapure system (Buckinghamshire,
110 England).

111 The individual stock standard solution of Phe, Pyr, BaA, BbF and BaP was prepared
112 in acetonitrile at a concentration of 1000 mg L^{-1} . Working standard solutions of five PAHs
113 were freshly prepared by serial dilution of the stock solutions with acetonitrile to the desired
114 concentration.

115 **2.2. Samples**

116 Samples of disposable baby diapers (27), tea (5) and coffee (5) from many
117 manufacturers typical for the specific type of sample were used for the analysis. The samples
118 were stored in the original manufacturers' packaging at room temperature and protected from
119 light.

120 **2.3 Instrumentation**

121 HPLC analysis of PAHs was performed on the Agilent 1100 series (Agilent
122 Technologies Inc., Germany). PAHs were separated using a Fortis C_{18} column ($5 \mu\text{m}$, 150
123 $\text{mm} \times 4.6 \text{ mm i.d.}$). The mobile phase was water and acetonitrile (12:88 % v/v) passed at a



124 constant flow rate of 1.0 mL min⁻¹. The injection volume was 20 μL and the column
125 temperature was controlled at 30 °C. The responses of the target PAHs were measured by
126 fluorescence detection. Excitation and emission wavelengths used are given in **Table S1**.

127 FTIR spectra were recorded by FTIR spectroscopy (PerkinElmer Waltham, MA,
128 USA). Sorbent morphologies were determined by scanning electron microscopy (JSM-5200
129 JEOL Tokyo, Japan). Nitrogen adsorption and desorption isotherms, and surface areas were
130 measured using the Quantachrome Autosorb 1 system (Quantachome Instruments, USA).
131 CHN elemental analysis was performed on a MACRO CHNS Analyzer (LECO, USA). TGA
132 analysis was carried out using the TGA8000 apparatus (Perkin Elmer, USA).

133 **2.4 Synthesis of magnetite nanoparticles**

134 Fe₃O₄-SiO₂ nanoparticles were synthesized following a reported procedure [14] with
135 modification. The detail for the synthesis of Fe₃O₄-SiO₂ is provided in the Supporting
136 Information.

137 **2.5 Fabrication of hierarchical porous composite monolith sorbent**

138 The fabrication procedure of the porous composite rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel
139 sorbent is shown in **Fig. 1**. A homogenous PVA solution was obtained by stirring 2.0 g of
140 PVA powder in 100 mL of DI water at 90°C for 20 min. The solution was allowed to cool
141 down to room temperature and pH was adjusted to 1.0 with 0.5 M HCl. Subsequently, 0.2 g
142 of the synthesized Fe₃O₄-SiO₂ nanoparticles, 5.0 mg of GOx, and 0.25 g of CaCO₃ were
143 added to the PVA solution and stirred at 30 °C for 6 h. The composite cryogel sorbent was
144 fabricated by dropping 0.20 mL of the mixture solution into the well of a 96-well plate,
145 adding 5.0 μL of glutaraldehyde to the well, and freezing the solution at -20 °C for 12 h. The
146 porous GOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/CaCO₃ PVA cryogel sorbent was obtained by thawing the frozen
147 sorbent at room temperature (29 ± 2 °C). The thawed sorbent was removed from the plate and
148 washed with DI water until pH was neutral (~5.5-7.0). The GOx incorporated in the obtained

149 cryogel sorbent was reduced to rGOx by heating the sorbent in 100 mL of 0.20% w/v
150 ascorbic acid at 80 °C for 6 h. When the sorbent changed color from brown to black, a
151 composite rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/CaCO₃ PVA cryogel sorbent was obtained. The sorbent was
152 removed from the acid, washed with 50 mL of DI water and dried. The dried cryogel sorbent
153 was then placed in 100 mL of HCl (20% w/v). The CaCO₃ in the composite sorbent reacted
154 with the HCl to produce CO₂ bubbles which created a second pore system in the cryogel.
155 Finally, the fabricated hierarchical porous composite cryogel sorbent was washed with DI
156 water until pH was nearly neutral (~5.5-7).

157 **2.6 Solvent-assisted solid phase extraction**

158 The solvent assisted-SPE of PAHs using the porous rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel
159 sorbent is illustrated in **Fig. 1A**. First, porous composite sorbents are placed in a glass bottle
160 containing the extraction solvent and stirred for 30 min to allow the extraction solvent to
161 diffuse and fill the pores of the sorbents. The pores of the sorbents retain the solvent through
162 hydrophobic interaction with the rGOx. The composite sorbents, now charged with extraction
163 solvent, are isolated using a magnet, transferred to 10.0 mL of sample solution in a vial and
164 stirred for 15 min at 1000 rpm to extract the target analytes. The sorbents are isolated from
165 the sample solution using a magnet, soaked in 2.0 mL of eluting solvent, sonicated for 5 min
166 to elute PAHs and again isolated with a magnet. The eluting solvent is evaporated to dryness
167 at 50 °C using a rotary evaporator. The residue is reconstituted in 0.5 mL of mobile phase
168 and 20.0 µL are injected into the HPLC-FLD. The quality control of the developed method
169 was considered from the blank extraction. To ensure that there is no contamination which
170 may occur during the extraction, blank extraction was performed with deionized water and
171 the whole procedure was conducted as described above.

172 To achieve the highest extraction efficiency, the following parameters were
173 optimized: the amount of CaCO₃ and GOx incorporated in the PVA solution, the extraction

174 time, the stirring rate, the type of extraction solvent used, the volume of eluting solvent used,
175 desorption time, sample volume and sample pH. Extraction **performance** was evaluated from
176 extraction recovery (ER), which was determined according to the following equation:

$$177 \quad ER (\%) = (CV/C_X V_X) \times 100$$

178 where C and C_x are the respective concentrations of PAHs in the reconstituted solvent ($\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$)
179 and spiked sample, and V and V_x are the volumes of the reconstituted solvent (0.50 mL)
180 and the spiked sample, respectively.

181 **2.7 Preparation of diaper, coffee and tea samples**

182 Three parts of each diaper, the top sheet, inside, and back sheet, were cut into small
183 pieces (0.5 cm x 0.5 cm) and mixed together at an average weight of approximately 0.40 g in
184 a 50 mL centrifuge tube. Then, 8.0 mL of acetonitrile were added and the samples were
185 extracted with ultrasonication for 30 min. This step was repeated two times and the collected
186 supernatants were combined and evaporated to dryness at 60 °C using a rotary evaporator.
187 The residue was dissolved in 0.50 mL of acetonitrile and diluted with 10 mL of DI water
188 ready for solvent assisted-SPE. Tea and coffee samples were prepared using hot water. In 100
189 mL of water at 95°C, 1.0 g of instant coffee was dissolved and stirred for 2 min. The solution
190 was diluted 50 times before being extracted. Similarly, 1.0 g of dried tea leaves was soaked in
191 100 mL of hot water at 95°C for 2 min. Tea leaves were removed by filtering the infusion
192 through a 15 μm filter paper. The liquid was allowed to cool to room temperature before
193 being extracted by solvent assisted-SPE.

194 **3. Results and Discussion**

195 **3.1 Characterization of porous composite monolith sorbent**

196 The porous composite rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel sorbent was characterized
197 using SEM, FTIR, TGA, CHN, BET and VSM techniques. SEM was used to investigate the
198 surface morphology of the sorbent. SEM images (**Fig. 2A, B**) showed the high porosity of the

199 PVA cryogel which helps the sample solution pass through the sorbent easily. A photograph
200 of the PVA cryogel is shown in **Fig. 2C**. The fabricated rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel
201 sorbent exhibits a rough surface with a large surface area that aids analytes adsorption (**Fig.**
202 **2D, E**). A photograph of the porous rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel adsorbent is shown in
203 **Fig. 2F**.

204 The PVA cryogel, different elements of the fabricated sorbent, and the sorbent itself
205 were characterized by FTIR spectroscopy. The FTIR spectrum of PVA cryogel (**Fig. S1A a**)
206 shows adsorption bands at 3458 cm⁻¹ and 2948 cm⁻¹ related to -OH and -CH₂- asymmetric
207 stretching, respectively. The adsorption band at 1436 cm⁻¹ was assigned to C-H bending. The
208 band at 1018 cm⁻¹ corresponds to the C-O group. The FTIR spectrum of Fe₃O₄-SiO₂ (**Fig.**
209 **S1A b**) shows bands at 3399 cm⁻¹ and 1626 cm⁻¹ that indicate the presence of -OH stretching
210 vibrations due to the presence of hydroxyl. The adsorption bands at 592 cm⁻¹ and 1088 cm⁻¹
211 are due to the vibrations of Fe-O and Fe-O-Si stretching, respectively. In the spectrum of
212 rGOx (**Fig. S1A c**), the bands at 1542 cm⁻¹ and 1192 cm⁻¹ correspond to C=C and C-OH,
213 respectively. The FTIR spectrum of the porous composite rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel
214 sorbent (**Fig. S1A d**) indicate that rGOx and Fe₃O₄-SiO₂ were successfully composited in the
215 PVA cryogel.

216 CHN analysis was used to measure elemental carbon, nitrogen and hydrogen
217 components of the porous composite sorbent. The results showed that the fabricated sorbent
218 consisted of 58.87 % carbon, 0.02 % nitrogen and 7.76 % hydrogen.

219 The N₂ adsorption-desorption isotherm of the porous composite rGOx/Fe₃O₄-
220 SiO₂/PVA cryogel sorbent is shown in **Fig. S1B**. The results showed that the sorbent
221 exhibited a type IV isotherm and a clear hysteresis loop was obtained, implying a
222 mesoporous structure. The BET surface area of the sorbent was calculated as 6.7650 m² g⁻¹.

223 To determine the thermal stability of the porous composite rGO_x/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA
224 cryogel sorbent, TGA analysis was performed from 25 to 900 °C. Since the TGA curve (**Fig.**
225 **S1C**) indicated that no significant weight loss occurred up to 200 °C, the stability of the
226 sorbent was considered sufficiently high for the intended extraction condition ($27 \pm 2^\circ\text{C}$).

227 The saturation magnetization of the porous composite rGO_x/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel
228 sorbent was determined using a vibrating sample magnetometer (VSM). As shown in **Fig.**
229 **S1D**, the saturation magnetization was about 2.290 emu g⁻¹ which is easily high enough for
230 the sorbent to be separated from the solution with an applied magnet.

231 **3.2 Optimization of the sorbent synthesis and extraction conditions**

232 **3.2.1 Effect of amount of calcium carbonate**

233 Calcium carbonate (CaCO₃) was incorporated into the composite sorbent to produce
234 the hierarchical porous structure by reacting with HCl to produce CO₂ bubbles. The
235 optimization of incorporated CaCO₃ was studied from 0.0 to 0.75% w/v (**Fig. 3A**). Extraction
236 recovery was the determining parameter and this increased with increments of CaCO₃ up to
237 0.25% w/v CaCO₃. Recovery decreased at greater loadings of CaCO₃ because the sorbent
238 became unstable and began to break up during stirring. Thus, 0.25% w/v of CaCO₃ was used
239 for the fabrication of the porous rGO_x/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel sorbent.

240 **3.2.2 Amount of graphene oxide**

241 The GO_x incorporated in the composite sorbent was reduced to rGO_x, which can
242 interact with PAHs via π - π interaction and can help to retain the extraction solvent in the
243 pores of the sorbent through hydrophobic interaction. The optimization of the GO_x loading
244 was studied from 2 to 20 mg. The recoveries of PAHs increased with increments of GO_x up
245 to 5 mg and did not significantly change at larger loadings (**Fig. 3B**). Therefore, 5 mg of GO_x
246 was the optimal loading.

247 **3.2.3 Extraction time**

248 The duration of the solvent assisted-SPE of PAHs using the porous composite
249 rGO_x/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel sorbent was varied from 10 to 30 min to obtain the highest
250 recovery of PAHs. At 15 min, recoveries of all PAHs were higher than they were at 10 min,
251 but remained constant after 15 min (**Fig. 3C**). Consequently, 15 min was selected as the
252 optimal extraction time.

253 **3.2.4 Effect of stirring rate**

254 The stirring rate of the sample solution can affect the contact rate between the
255 analytes and the sorbent, or the acceptor phase. In this work, the stirring rate of the sample
256 solution was optimized between 500 and 1500 rpm. The highest extraction recoveries for all
257 target PAHs was obtained at 1000 rpm (**Fig. 3D**). Lower recoveries were obtained at slower
258 and faster stirring rates. At slower rates the low recoveries were perhaps due to insufficient
259 contact rates between the analytes and liquid and solid acceptor phases. The lower recoveries
260 at stirring rates above 1000 rpm may have been due to the reduced contact between the
261 analytes and extraction phases. Also, too fast a stirring rate can cause extraction solvent to be
262 discharged from the pores of the sorbent. Therefore, the optimal stirring rate of the sample
263 solution was 1000 rpm.

264 **3.2.5 Effect of type of extraction solvent**

265 PAHs are non-polar compounds. The extraction solvent used to assist the extraction
266 of PAHs from the sample solution, was selected after investigating the extraction
267 **performance** achieved using acetonitrile, methanol, toluene, acetonitrile+toluene (1:1, v/v)
268 and methanol+toluene (1:1, v/v) (**Fig. S2A**). The mixture of acetonitrile and toluene (1:1, v/v)
269 provided the highest extraction recovery for all target PAHs, and therefore this was the
270 solvent introduced into the pores of the porous composite rGO_x/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel
271 sorbent to assist extraction.

272 **3.2.6 Volume of eluting solvent**

273 At the end of the extraction cycle, the adsorbed PAHs were eluted from the pores of
274 the sorbent using a mixture of acetonitrile and toluene (1:1, v/v). The volume of solvent used
275 to elute the adsorbed PAHs was optimized from 1.0 to 4.0 mL (**Fig. S2B**) to obtain the lowest
276 solvent consumption that could achieve a good extraction recovery. Recoveries of the five
277 target PAHs increased with the increment of eluent volume from 1.0 to 2.0 mL and was
278 unchanged above 2.0 mL. Thus, 2.0 mL of the mixture of acetonitrile and toluene (1:1, v/v)
279 was selected to elute target PAHs from the fabricated sorbent.

280 **3.2.7 Effect of desorption time**

281 The optimization of the time required to desorb PAHs from the porous composite
282 rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel sorbent was studied under sonication from 1 to 20 min and
283 the results are shown in **Fig. S2C**. The desorption of all target PAHs was completed after 5
284 min. The highest recoveries could therefore be obtained with a desorption time of 5 min.

285 **3.2.8 Effect of sample volume**

286 Sample volume normally affects the enrichment and extraction of analytes. Larger
287 sample volumes provide higher enrichment factors which can help detect analytes at low
288 concentrations. However, if the sample volume is too large, extraction recoveries can be low.
289 Therefore, to achieve a high enrichment factor with satisfactory recoveries, the sample
290 volume must be accurately optimized. In this work, sample volume was investigated from 5
291 to 20 mL. The optimal sample volume was 10 mL, which provided acceptable recoveries
292 with a high enrichment factor (**Fig. S2D**).

293 **3.2.9 Effect of sample pH**

294 Sample pH can affect the extraction of analytes and the stability of the sorbent. Since
295 PAHs are aromatic compounds, sample pH does not affect their structure but the stability and
296 other properties of the sorbent may be affected. Therefore, the effect of sample solution pH
297 was investigated between pH 3 and 11 and the results demonstrated that recoveries were not



298 significantly changed within the studied range (**Fig. S3**). This finding confirmed that the
299 fabricated composite sorbent can be used to extract PAHs in sample solutions within a wide
300 pH range without the need to adjust the sample solution pH.

301 **3. 3 Comparison of various polyvinyl alcohol cryogel sorbents**

302 The PVA cryogel sorbent was evaluated at different stages of fabrication. The five
303 target PAHs were extracted with hierarchically porous sorbents of Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA,
304 GOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA and rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA. The rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA sorbent
305 exhibited the best extraction efficiency for all target PAHs (**Fig. S4**) due to the greater
306 hydrophobicity of reduced graphene oxide compared to graphene oxide. The extraction
307 efficiency of the Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA sorbent was low due to its greater polarity, which inhibits
308 interactions with less polar compounds.

309 **3.4 Analytical performance**

310 The developed porous composite rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel sorbent was coupled
311 with HPLC analysis to determine the analytical performance of the system. The developed
312 method demonstrated good linearity of BaA from 0.34-500.0 µg kg⁻¹ of diaper material and
313 from 1.7 -500.0 µg L⁻¹ of coffee and tea. For the determination of Phe, BbF and BaP, the
314 method showed linearity from 0.50-500.0 µg kg⁻¹ of diaper material and from 3.4-500.0 µg L⁻¹
315 of coffee and tea. For the determination of Pyr, the response was linear from 1.67-500.0 µg
316 kg⁻¹ of diaper material and from 5.0-500.0 µg L⁻¹ of coffee and tea. The calculation of LODs
317 was based on a signal-to-noise (S/N) ratio of 3. The LODs were 0.10-0.50 µg kg⁻¹ for diaper
318 material and 0.5-1.5 µg L⁻¹ for both coffee and tea. The calculation of LOQs was based on an
319 S/N of 10. The LOQs were 0.34-1.67 µg kg⁻¹ for diaper and 1.7-5.0 µg L⁻¹ for coffee and tea
320 (**Table 1**).

321 **3.5 Analysis of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons in disposable baby diapers, coffee and** 322 **tea**



323 The developed method was applied to extract and determine PAHs in samples of
324 single-use diaper material (27 samples), coffee (5 samples) and tea (5 samples). The
325 preparation of all samples was described in **Section 2.7**. The HPLC chromatograms of diaper
326 material, coffee and tea are shown in **Fig. S5**. Five PAHs were found in baby diaper between
327 8.1 and 177.9 $\mu\text{g kg}^{-1}$, BaA, BbF and BaP were found in coffee and tea samples between 4.2
328 and 22.0 $\mu\text{g L}^{-1}$. The accuracy of the developed method was evaluated by determining the
329 relative recoveries of PAHs from spiked samples at different concentrations and relative
330 recoveries are summarized in **Table S2**. The relative recoveries of all target PAHs were in the
331 range of 84.5 to 99.4% with RSDs of 0.9-6.5%. These results confirmed that the developed
332 method has a good accuracy and can be applied to extract and determine PAHs in various
333 sample matrices.

334 **3.6 Reproducibility and Reusability**

335 The fabrication reproducibility of the porous composite $\text{rGO}_x/\text{Fe}_3\text{O}_4\text{-SiO}_2/\text{PVA}$
336 sorbent was evaluated by preparing six different lots of sorbent using the same procedure.
337 The fabricated sorbents were used to extract the target PAHs and the results are presented in
338 **Fig. S6**. The RSDs of all target PAHs were between 0.75 and 2.70 % which confirmed the
339 good reproducibility of the fabrication process, which contributes to the good precision of the
340 method.

341 The reusability of the fabricated sorbent was also evaluated to reduce fabrication time,
342 material costs and chemicals used. After being applied to extract PAHs, the used sorbent was
343 cleaned with 1.0 mL of the extraction solvent, rinsed with 5.0 mL of DI water and then used
344 to extract PAHs for another extraction/desorption cycle. The extraction recovery of PAHs
345 was better than 80% up to the tenth extraction cycle (**Fig. S7**). The reduction in recovery after
346 10 extraction cycles may have been due to the loss of rGO_x from the composite sorbent
347 during desorption and washing. Perhaps some interfering species in the samples were



348 adsorbed on the surfaces of the sorbent and reduced the number of active adsorption sites for
349 target PAHs. We concluded that the developed porous composite rGO_x/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA
350 cryogel sorbent can be reused for 10 cycles of extraction and desorption.

351 **3.7 Comparison with commercial sorbent and other works**

352 The analytical **performance** and accuracy of the developed method were compared
353 with the **performance** and accuracy of an octadecyl (C₁₈) modified silica sorbent and the
354 results are presented in **Fig. S8**. Both the developed sorbent and the C₁₈ modified silica
355 sorbent achieved recoveries better than 80% for all target PAHs. These results confirm that
356 the developed method is accurate and can be applied to extract PAHs in real samples. The
357 advantages of the present method include simple preparation, convenience of use, reusability
358 and high efficiency. The **performance** of the developed method was compared with the
359 **performance** of other reported methods and the comparative study is summarized in **Table**
360 **S3**. The LOD and extraction recovery of the developed method are better than or comparable
361 with other methods. Therefore, the hierarchically porous composite rGO_x/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA
362 cryogel sorbent can be used to extract PAHs from complex samples for subsequent analysis.

363 **4. Concluding remarks**

364 A solvent assisted-solid phase extraction method was successfully developed and
365 applied to extract, preconcentrate and determine polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons. The
366 developed method integrated solvent assisted and solid phase extraction strategies. A porous
367 composite sorbent was prepared by incorporating graphene oxide into a PVA solution that
368 was then subjected to cryogelization and thawing. The graphene oxide was converted to
369 reduced graphene oxide with ascorbic acid. A hierarchical porous network was generated by
370 incorporating CaCO₃ into the cryogel and then reacting it with HCl to create CO₂ bubbles
371 that generated a second network of smaller pores. Magnetite nanoparticles were also caged
372 into the PVA cryogel to produce a magnetic sorbent for simple and rapid isolation from



373 sample solutions. The SPE was assisted by introducing an extraction solvent into the
374 hierarchical porous network of the composite sorbent. The developed extraction method
375 achieved recoveries of polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons from 84.5 to 99.4%. This developed
376 porous composite sorbent can be used to extract trace polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons and
377 can also be modified to extract less polar compounds.

378 **Acknowledgements**

379 This research was supported by the Research Fellowship, Faculty of Science, Prince
380 of Songkla University (contract no. SCI64002) and The Center of Excellence for Innovation
381 in Chemistry (PERCH-CIC). This work was also supported by the National Science Center in
382 Poland granted on the basis of the decision number DEC-2020/37/B/ST4/02886 project
383 number UMO-2020/37/B/ST4/02886. Mr. Thomas Duncan Coyne is also acknowledged for
384 assistance with the English text of this manuscript.

385 **Conflict of interest**

386 The authors declare that they have no competing interests.

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463

464 **Figure captions**

465 **Fig. 1** Diagram (A) shows the procedures for the fabrication of the porous composite
466 rGO_x/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel sorbent and the dispersive solvent assisted-solid phase
467 extraction of PAHs. Diagram (B) shows the formation of the hierarchically porous
468 rGO_x/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel sorbent.

469 **Fig. 2** SEM images (A) and (B) are of PVA cryogel at magnifications of 100X and 10,000X
470 and the photograph (C) is of the PVA cryogel monolith. SEM images (D) and (E) are of the
471 porous composite rGO_x/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel sorbent at magnifications of 100X and
472 10,000X, and the photograph (F) is of the porous rGO_x/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA sorbent.



473 **Fig. 3** Five polycyclic aromatic hydrocarbons in solution were extracted by solvent assisted-
474 solid phase extraction using a porous composite rGOx/Fe₃O₄-SiO₂/PVA cryogel sorbent.
475 Charts (A) and (B) show the effect on extraction recovery of the CaCO₃ and GOx loadings
476 used in the sorbent fabrication. Charts (C) and (D) show the effect on recovery of extraction
477 time and stirring rate used during the extraction procedure.

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