

Dynamic Modelling of Tetrazolium Based Microbial Toxicity Assay – A Parametric Proxy of Traditional Dose-Response Relationship

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Research Article

Keywords: Dynamic Model, Heavy metals, Formazan, Sensitivity analysis, Tetrazolium, Microbial toxicity

Posted Date: February 17th, 2021

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21203/rs.3.rs-158139/v1>

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Version of Record: A version of this preprint was published on April 17th, 2021. See the published version at <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11356-021-13870-1>.

1 **Dynamic Modelling of Tetrazolium Based Microbial Toxicity Assay – A**
2 **Parametric Proxy of Traditional Dose-Response Relationship**

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19 **Abstract**

20 Microbial toxicity of test substances in tetrazolium assay is often quantified while referring to
21 IC_{50} values. However, the implication of such estimates is very limited and can differ across
22 studies depending on prevailing test conditions. In this work, a factorial design-based end-point
23 microbial assay was adopted, which suggests significant interaction ($P= 0.041$) between
24 inoculum and tetrazolium dose on formazan production. A dynamic model framework was
25 proposed to be incorporated in toxicity assay, that not only captures the nonlinear
26 interdependency between biomass, substrate, formazan content but also measure the toxicity
27 in terms of inhibition parameter. Microbial growth, glucose uptake, formazan production in
28 presence and absence of heavy metal toxicant (Cu^{2+}) in designed batch studies were utilized
29 for sequential estimation of model parameters and their bootstrap confidence intervals. A
30 logistic growth model ($R^2>0.96$) with multiplicative inhibition terms fit the experimental data
31 reasonably well. Dynamic relative sensitivity analysis revealed that both microbial growth and
32 formazan production profiles were sensitive to toxicant inhibition parameter. The adoption of
33 a dynamic model framework as a stable index for the toxic potential of test substances can be
34 extended to design a versatile, robust in-vitro assay system.

35

36

37 **Keywords:** Dynamic Model; Heavy metals; Formazan; Sensitivity analysis; Tetrazolium;
38 Microbial toxicity

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40

41 **1. Introduction**

42 Evaluation of toxicity for new molecules, formulation, materials, toxicants or xenobiotics using
43 appropriate organism is an integral part of risk characterization and assessment (Gabrielson et
44 al. 2003; Wadhia et al. 2007). Biological assay systems with a microorganism, invertebrates,
45 plants, or higher organisms have been used to measure the change in test organism or its
46 response in presence of the toxicant in a quantitative manner (Iqbal 2016; Bartlett et al. 2017;
47 Özgür et al. 2018; Luan et al. 2020). Toxicity assay using microbes as bioindicators remained
48 simple, fast, versatile, reproducible, and can be extended to environmental, food, or biomedical
49 applications (Polo et al. 2011; Hassan et al. 2016). Depending on the microorganism,
50 environment and biological response, appropriate analytical techniques such as respirometric
51 (Vasiliadou et al. 2018), fluorescent and luminescent bioassays (Roslev et al. 2015; Abbas et
52 al. 2018), microbial fuel cell-based sensor (Dávila et al. 2011), methanogenic activity assay
53 (Gonzalez-Estrella et al. 2013), microbial growth (Baek and An 2011) can be adopted.

54 Microbial reduction of tetrazolium has been widely used to measure microbial metabolic
55 activity in toxicity assay (Wang et al. 2010; Lupu and Popescu 2013; van Tonder et al. 2015).
56 The prototype 2,3,5-triphenyl-tetrazolium chloride (TTC) is one of widely studied redox
57 indicator, which gets reduced into water-insoluble red formazan by microbial dehydrogenase
58 in metabolically active cell (Junillon et al. 2014; Sabaeifard et al. 2014). The amount formazan
59 extracted from the microbial cells grown in presence of toxicants would be lower than that of
60 the control (Sydow et al. 2018). The inhibition of tetrazolium reduction with increasing dose
61 of toxicant has also been used to assign a numerical indicator of the pollutant *e.g.* IC₅₀ value-
62 the effective concentration causing 50% reduction in measured response (Ma et al. 2018).

63 Despite being rapid and simple, selection of time for final reading in endpoint assay require
64 optimization of the whole experiment (Stefanowicz-Hajduk and Ochocka 2020). In some cases,
65 IC₅₀ for a 24-hr incubation period can be different from 48-h incubation. A toxicant cannot be

66 tagged with a unique IC50 value as the outcome of tetrazolium assay depends on a multitude
67 of interacting variables, such as the initial concentration of microorganism, substrate, TTC, and
68 the incubation time (Ghaly and Mahmoud 2007; Sylvester 2011). The formazan yield has been
69 known to increase with TTC concentration but beyond a critical point the yield declines (Ghaly
70 and Mahmoud 2007). Assumption of a proportional relation between the amount of formazan
71 deposit to the number or activity of living cells has already been questioned (Etxeberria et al.
72 2011). Intracellular accumulation of formazan can compromise the integrity of the plasma
73 membrane (Bernas and Dobrucki 2004; Lü et al. 2012) and cell viability.

74 Accumulated formazan is a result of non-linear dynamics of substrate consumption, microbial
75 growth, and toxicity of formazan as well as an external toxicant, integrated over the incubation
76 period. Constant rate of formazan production can only be presumed when kinetics is known in
77 a priori (Januszek et al. 2015; Małachowska-Jutcz and Matyja 2019). Substrate inhibition
78 models based on modified Michaelis-Menten kinetics or empirical variants have also been
79 adopted to explain TTC reduction data (Ghaly and Mahmoud 2007). The inhibition constant
80 or parameters estimated for toxicants while modelling of temporal change in biomass,
81 substrate, formazan concentration can be an invaluable static, toxicity indicator, resilience to
82 variation incurred in endpoint toxicity assay.

83 In this study, a comprehensive dynamic model was developed to simulate the temporal change
84 in biomass, substrate, formazan concentration during a toxicity assay. Model parameters were
85 sequentially estimated using independent experimental data sets, designed to explore
86 incremental subspace of complex model hierarchy. Appropriate kinetics (and parameters) for
87 growth and substrate consumption were selected from a set of representative models that
88 corroborate experimental data. The model fitness was ascertained using cross-validation, and
89 the confidence intervals (CIs) of all estimated parameters, their sensitivities were also
90 evaluated.

91 **2. Materials and methods**

92 *2.1. Chemical, Microbial culture Media*

93 Nutrient-broth for growth/maintenance of *E. coli* was purchased from HiMedia Co (Mumbai,
94 India). Tetrazolium salt, 2,3,5-triphenyl-2H-tetrazolium chloride (TTC) for microbial toxicity
95 assay was purchased from Sigma-Aldrich, India. Methanol and ethanol were purchased from
96 SRL laboratories, Mumbai, India. Ultra-filtered Milli-Q® water (Millipore, Molsheim, France)
97 was used for the preparation of the solutions. The components of Bushnell Haas (BH) mineral
98 media in g l⁻¹: MgSO₄, 0.20; CaCl₂, 0.02; KH₂PO₄, 1.00; K₂HPO₄, 1.000, NH₄NO₃, 1.00; FeCl₃
99 0.050; were purchased from Loba Chemie®, Mumbai, India.

100 *2.2. Media preparation, culture growth and toxicity assay conditions*

101 Overnight grown fresh *Escherichia coli* (ATCC 25922) in sterile nutrient broth medium
102 centrifuged at 3500 × g for 15 min, re-dispersed in distilled water, was used as the test
103 microorganism in all toxicity studies. Autoclaved BH media (pH 7) supplemented with filter-
104 sterilized glucose stock (10 g l⁻¹) was used for further studies. TTC and CuSO₄, if required in
105 experimental sets, were added from the aqueous stock solution (5 g l⁻¹, 50 mg l⁻¹, respectively).

106 *2.2. Influence of initial biomass, glucose, TTC on tetrazolium reduction*

107 Influence of biomass concentration (X₁), glucose (X₂), and TTC dosage (X₃) on tetrazolium
108 reduction was evaluated by adopting a 2³ full factorial experimental design as in **Table 1**.
109 Different volume freshly grown (and resuspended) *E. Coli* culture, glucose and TTC solution
110 was transferred into a set of 15 ml-sterile centrifuge tubes. The tubes were wrapped with
111 aluminium foil, incubated in a shaker incubator for 2 h under dark condition. Following
112 centrifugation at 3500 g for 10 min, the cell palette was processed for formazan extraction and
113 analysis. Analysis of variance was carried out to determine the individual effects as well as the

114 interaction effects of the factors on the responses. Data processing and plotting were carried
115 out using the software Minitab 18.

116 *2.3. Experimental design for the discretization of dynamic model*

117 The purpose of the design is to explore temporal change in microbial growth, glucose
118 consumption, and TTC production (in presence or absence of toxic chemical), which can be
119 used to model the dynamic behaviour of the process. The experiment was independently
120 conducted in sets of 100-ml Erlenmeyer flasks with 50 ml of BH media (Table 2). Glucose was
121 added at final concentration of 1 g l^{-1} , while 2 ml TTC (5 g l^{-1} stock) and $250 \mu\text{l}$ CuSO_4 (50 mg
122 l^{-1}) were added if included in the design. All flasks were incubated at 37°C in a shaker incubator
123 for 16 h. On every 2 h interval, 2 ml sample was collected, optical density was measured at 600
124 nm, and kept in the refrigerator for further analysis. After completion of the experiment,
125 samples were centrifuged at 3500 g for 15 min, the supernatant was collected for residual
126 glucose analysis and cell palette was processed for formazan extraction.

127 *2.4. Analytical Methods*

128 The optical densities of the samples were measured at 600 nm (path length 1 cm) using a UV–
129 visible spectrophotometer. The measurements were converted to dry-weight based biomass
130 concentration (in g l^{-1}) using a standard prepared in the identical range of concentrations.

131 calibration Residual glucose concentration in the culture supernatant was measured using
132 dinitro-salicylic acid (DNSA) method (Kona et al. 2001) using a standard curve prepared with
133 known glucose concentration ($0.2\text{-}1 \text{ g l}^{-1}$).

134 Concentrated HCl ($20 \mu\text{l}$) was added to cell palette to release intracellular formazan, which
135 was dissolved in 2 ml methanol (Lopez Del Egado et al. 2017). The sample extract was
136 centrifuged at 3500 g for 10 min and absorbance of supernatants were recorded 480 nm against
137 reagent blank.

138 2.5. Biomass growth, substrate consumption and Toxicity modelling

139 2.5.1. Formulation of model structure

140 Microbial growth on glucose is assumed to be substrate limited process, and a flexible and
141 generalized rate expression is preferred. High formazan concentration (F) and/or presence of
142 toxicant (M) is assumed to inhibit microbial growth, where the increasing concentration of
143 formazan crystal inside a cell can reduce viability. That phenomenon can be modelled as
144 product inhibition perspective (Lin et al. 2008) as shown in generalized specific growth rate
145 expression as in Eq. 1.

146
$$\mu = \mu_G \left(\frac{K_F}{K_f + r_{F/X}} \right) \left(\frac{K_m}{K_m + M} \right) \quad (1)$$

147 Where μ_g is a mathematical expression for glucose-limited microbial growth (explained later).
148 The second and third terms on the right-hand side represent growth inhibition due to formazan,
149 and toxicant (e.g., heavy metal), respectively. The $r_{F/X}$ is the relative concentration of formazan
150 (F) to biomass (X) and K_f is the inhibition constant. The inhibition effect would be negligible
151 at an early phase of incubation when biomass accumulated formazan concentration is very low
152 (i.e., $r_{F/X} \approx 0$). However, at a very high level of intracellular formazan (i.e., $r_{F/X} \gg K_f$), the
153 growth rate becomes inversely proportional to formazan content. The K_m is inhibition constant
154 for the toxicant – a dose that would cause a 50% reduction in microbial growth rate than in the
155 toxicant free environment. The spiked toxicant in the present study is heavy-metal, that is not
156 degraded metabolized, and hence its concentration (M) is assumed to remain constant, time-
157 invariant.

158 The dynamic change in biomass, glucose, and formazan concentration is given by Eq. 2-4.

159
$$\frac{dX}{dt} = \mu X \quad (2)$$

160
$$\frac{dG}{dt} = -\frac{1}{Y_{X/G}} \frac{dX}{dt} - \beta X \quad (3)$$

161
$$\frac{dF}{dt} = \begin{cases} \gamma \frac{dX}{dt} + \delta X & F < F_{\max} \\ 0 & F = F_{\max} \end{cases} \quad (4)$$

162 Glucose consumption and formazan production are (from tetrazolium reduction) modelled as
 163 growth associated or non-associated process as in Eq. 3 and 4, respectively. The term $Y_{X/G}$ on
 164 the right-hand side in Eq. 3 represent true biomass yield coefficient, while the second term (β)
 165 represents maintenance requirement. The rate of formazan production ceases once formazan
 166 concentration attains its theoretical asymptotic maximum (F_{\max}) assuming 1:1 molar reduction
 167 of added tetrazolium in the culture broth.

168 2.5.2. Selection of Growth model

169 In absence of tetrazolium/formazan or heavy metals, the glucose-limited growth of
 170 microorganism μ_G was modelled using Logistic, Monod, Contois, and Tessier kinetics as
 171 represented in Equations 5a-5d, respectively

172
$$\mu_G = \mu_m \left(1 - \frac{X}{X_{\max}} \right) \quad (5a)$$

173
$$\mu_G = \frac{\mu_m G}{K_d + G} \quad (5b)$$

174
$$\mu_G = \frac{\mu_m G}{K_c X + G} \quad (5c)$$

175
$$\mu_G = \mu_m (1 - \exp(-G/K_t)) \quad (5d)$$

176 Where X_{\max} is the asymptotic biomass concentration in logistic growth. The K_d , K_c , K_t are
 177 kinetic constant relevant to Monod, Contois and Tessier models.

178 2.5.3. Formulation of the dynamic model and parameter estimation strategy

179 A complete set of coupled ordinary differential equations (ODEs) reflecting the rate of change
180 for all state variables is shown in Eqs. (1)–(5). Simultaneous estimation of all eight parameters
181 from a single experimental data set using biomass, glucose and formazan concentration profiles
182 could be inherently inaccurate. A discretized approach, where only a subset of parameters is
183 required to be estimated from the hierarchical model subspace, utilizing the data from a
184 designed experiment (Table 2), was adopted as outlined in following steps.

185 **Step 1.** Experimental set containing only biomass, glucose data were used to select the ideal
186 growth model (i.e., Logistic, Monod, Contois, or Tessier) as well as their relevant parameters.
187 The inhibition terms for formazan and toxicant as in Eq. 1 can be dropped.

188 **Step 2.** Experimental set containing biomass, glucose, formazan data was used to estimate
189 growth inhibition term (K_F) in Eq. 1, and formazan production parameters (γ , δ). Growth related
190 parameters were adopted from an earlier step, the biomass yield coefficient or maintenance
191 requirement of glucose ($Y_{X/G}$, β) was re-calibrated.

192 **Step 3.** Experimental set containing biomass, glucose, formazan, and toxicant was used to
193 estimate growth inhibition term (K_m) in Eq. 1 while adopting all other parameters from step 2.
194 The numerical solution of the dynamic model was approached from an initial value state
195 variable and reasonable guess of parameters (within suitable space boundaries) in Matlab®
196 ode45 solver. Subsequently, a normalized residual sum of squares (NSSE) between
197 experimental and modelled profiles was minimized (Eq. 6) while changing relevant
198 parameter(s) in a constrained minimization algorithm using *fmincon* function in Matlab®.

199

$$NSSE = \sum_{i=1}^u \left(\frac{\sum_{j=1}^n (x_{i,j} - \hat{x}_{i,j})^2}{\sum_{j=1}^n (x_{i,j} - \bar{x}_i)^2} \right) \quad (6)$$

where u is the number of measured state variables (i.e., two or three in this study), n is the number of data points in each measured ($x_{i,j}$) or modelled ($\hat{x}_{i,j}$) profiles. The \bar{x} is the average measured value of the i th profile.

2.5.4. Cross-validation, confidence interval estimation and sensitivity

As a check against overfitting, and to assess the model's ability to predict data not used in model fitting (i.e., its capacity for out-of-sample prediction), a five-fold cross-validation analysis was carried out and coefficient of determination (R^2_{cv}) was estimated. The confidence interval (CI) for parameter estimates in the dynamic model data was processed using a residual-based, non-parametric bootstrap resampling approach (Dogan 2007). The dynamic relative sensitivity, i.e. relative sensitivity at different time intervals, for the model parameters was calculated using the finite difference approximation (Yue et al. 2006) with a repeated solution (twice) of the model for each parameter. The sensitivity analysis represented here is essentially a univariate, where a change in modelled responses (e.g., biomass, substrate, product) is mapped from the perturbation of single parameter value while keeping other parameters on hold at their original estimate. Local relative sensitivity as a function of time allows a direct comparison of responses at different states or across different parameters (Eq. 7).

$$\bar{s}_{i,j,t} = \frac{\partial y_{i,t} / y_{i,t}}{\partial \theta_j / \theta_j} \quad (7)$$

where $y_{i,t}$ is the i th response at time t and θ_j is the j th parameter of which sensitivity is being measured.

220

221 **3. Results and Discussions**

222 *3.1. Impact of initial biomass, substrate, and tetrazolium on formazan concentration*

223 A factorial analysis was performed on the data to study the influence of inoculum size, glucose
224 concentration, TTC dose and their interactions on formazan production and the results are
225 presented in Table 3. Analysis of variance performed on the data set (Table 4) revealed that
226 inoculum size and TTC dose and their 2-way interactions did significantly affect formazan
227 production ($P < 0.05$). This is also supported by the Pareto chart (Fig.1) showing order of
228 influencing parameters. The plots for individual factor effects on formazan productivity
229 showed that increasing amounts of inoculum was favourable while increasing amount of
230 glucose or TTC can inhibit actively growing microbial culture, resulting in lower TTC
231 reduction into formazan. Similar toxic effect of tetrazolium salts has been made in previous
232 studies (Junillon and Flandrois 2014). A reversible increase in the duration of lag phase has
233 also been observed for gram-positive *Listeria monocytogenes* culture growing in presence of
234 different tetrazolium salts (Junillon and Flandrois 2014).

235 *3.2. Dynamic model parameters in toxicity assay*

236 The microbial biomass and glucose concentration profile from experimental sets without TTC
237 or toxicant (i.e., copper salt) were modelled using Logistic growth, Monod, Contois, and
238 Tessier models. The fitness of the chosen models against experimental data has been shown in
239 Table 5. The overall fitness of the logistic model to biomass or substrate profiles (respective
240 R^2 of 0.9663, 0.9633) is better than the other three models. It should be noted that the biomass
241 growth is not coupled with substrate concentration in the Logistic model structure, but the
242 substrate depletion is proportion to biomass growth. The logistic model has successfully been
243 used to explain growth and substrate consumption by *E. coli* in batch studies under substrate

244 limited conditions (Li et al. 2010; Wittgens et al. 2011) or population growth model in
245 microbial culture in toxicity assay (E. Lindstrom et al. 1998).

246 The experimental and modelled profiles (for biomass, substrates and formazan) are also shown
247 in **Fig. 2**, depicting the suitability of the selected kinetics for modelling observations in toxicity
248 assay. The modelled profiles are in good agreement with experimental data, except for substrate
249 concentration which is somehow over-predicted at the late phase in a batch experiment
250 involving both TTC and toxicants.

251 The least-square estimates of substrate consumption, formazan production and microbial
252 growth inhibition (due to formazan and toxicant) parameters along with their boot-strap CIs
253 are presented in **Table 6**. The high cross-validation R^2 for both biomass and substrate
254 concentration profiles suggests no over-prediction in the proposed logistic growth model.
255 Certainly, the estimates for μ_{max} (0.3674 h^{-1}) and X_{max} (1.2658 g l^{-1}) can be extended to other
256 experimental sets containing TTC and/or copper, as long as the growth-limiting substrate
257 remains identical. However, estimates biomass yield and maintenance coefficient can change
258 in presence of formazan and/or toxicant (Şengör et al. 2009). Those parameters were
259 recalibrated from additional experimental sets containing inhibitor /toxicants. It should be
260 noted that all parameters were not estimated from a single batch experiment, rather sequentially
261 estimated that improves the accuracy (Wang et al. 2018).

262 The biomass growth yield coefficient (0.747 g g^{-1}) and formazan inhibition constant K_F ,
263 (30.963 mg g^{-1}) were estimated from experimental sets containing glucose, and TTC. The yield
264 coefficient estimates seem to be in the same order of growth-associated stoichiometric true
265 yield coefficient (0.57 g g^{-1}) as reported for *E. coli* in glucose-limited continuous culture
266 (Kayser et al. 2005). It should be noted that the biomass yield coefficient reported in the present
267 study does not consider the corrections for the maintenance requirement. Though literature
268 advocates bacterial growth inhibition in presence of tetrazolium salts (Villegas-Mendoza et al.

269 2015), no attempts (either mechanistic or empirical) has been made to model the kinetics of
270 formazan toxicity. No comparison or discussions on the estimate of K_F (30.963 mg g⁻¹) can be
271 made in the light of existing literature.

272 The estimates formazan production parameters (γ and δ respectively) suggests the process be
273 primarily growth associated one. The non-growth associated formazan production rate (1.257e⁻
274 ⁰⁵ mg g⁻¹ h⁻¹) is very trivial and accumulated intracellular formazan within the incubation period
275 for in-vitro toxicity assay is likely to be far below than the K_F . In other words, non-growth
276 associated formazan production alone cannot exert any toxicity. A significant positive
277 relationship between specific growth rate and formazan production rate has also been reported
278 in other studies (Villegas-Mendoza et al. 2019). Though formazan production in batch cultures
279 increases with time, the formazan production rate decreases more rapidly.

280 The inhibition parameter pertinent to metal toxicity has been estimated to be 152.39 mg l⁻¹
281 from the third batch study containing TTC as well as Cu⁺². The regression coefficients for
282 biomass, substrate and formazan concentration profiles (0.856, 0.782, 0.964) in this least
283 square estimation exercise were inferior in comparison to the other two batches. This could be
284 attributed to constrained parameter subspace for K_m , as all other parameters were already pre-
285 fixed, leaving a lower degree of freedom. Utgikar et al modelled toxicity of copper on sulfate-
286 reducing mixed microbial cultures at two perspectives, i.e., a toxic effect causing the death of
287 cells or inhibitory effect using an inverse exponential function (Utgikar et al. 2003). The author
288 reported inhibition constant 1140 mg l⁻¹ for copper, which is about 10-fold higher than the
289 current estimate. The reported half inhibitory concentrations (IC₅₀) for Cu(II) in enzymatic or
290 respirometric assays vary widely (<0.2 to 200 mg l⁻¹) in the literature (Esquivel-Rios et al.
291 2014). This difference or discrepancy is very logical considering the variance in microbial
292 culture, test conditions and the mathematical model adopted.

293 3.3. Bootstrap parameter distribution and sensitivity

294 The distribution of bootstrap parameters in the proposed toxicity model is shown in **Fig. 3**,
295 where a near symmetric normal/gaussian distribution for μ_{max} , X_{max} (from glucose consumption
296 and biomass growth data) assures better credibility. The distribution of parameters such as K_F
297 and $Y_{X/G}$ are somewhat right-skewed, which can be related to the inaccuracy of the estimate,
298 or poor parameter sensitivity. The distribution of γ and K_m exhibits a marginal left-skewness,
299 implying the presence of outlier in experimental data (Joshi et al. 2006). Such deviation can be
300 linked to the hierarchical parameter estimation approach and nonlinearity of the dynamic
301 model.

302 Sensitivity analysis of the toxicity model parameters on biomass, substrate, and formazan
303 content is shown in Fig. 4. The relative sensitivities of the different parameters not only vary
304 between profiles but also with time for a given response. The growth profile appears to be most
305 sensitive toward μ_{max} , K_f , K_m . This is very logical as the specific growth rate is directly
306 dependent on those parameters. Moreover, the relative sensitivities have been shown to
307 increase with time. This can be attributed to a higher amount of accumulated biomass and
308 formazan at later phase of microbial growth. As the growth model is not directly coupled with
309 substrate consumption, growth data remains insensitive to β , δ , or $Y_{X/G}$. The negative relative
310 sensitivity of substrate profiles with X_{max} reflects faster depletion of the substrate. The substrate
311 consumption profile remains insensitive to β , δ , which are non-growth associated parameters
312 for glucose consumption or formazan production, respectively. Entire sets of parameters that
313 had a significant influence on growth (i.e., μ_{max} , K_f , K_m , γ) appears to impact formazan
314 production as well. However, the sensitivity of γ on the formazan profile is positive which is
315 very reasonable from their kinetic relationship. As formazan content increases, the absolute
316 sensitivity of γ declines over time. Conceivably, parameters in the dynamic model are

317 temporarily separated where any parameter(s) relevant to a later stage does not influence the
318 preceding process responses.

319 *3.4. External Validation of the Proposed Model*

320 A dynamic model for toxicity assay was validated using an independent TTC free experimental
321 set spiked with $50 \text{ mg l}^{-1} \text{ Cu}^{2+}$ while keeping the other process conditions unchanged. The
322 experimental and modelled data for biomass and residual glucose concentrations are presented
323 in Fig. 5. The experimental and modelled data were in close agreement, particularly at the
324 initial growth phases. However, at the later stage, experimental biomass and glucose profiles
325 drifted toward the lower and higher side respectively as compared to the model. Although an
326 explanation for such discrepancies is not available, such deviations were within reasonable
327 limits of uncertainty due to measurement error.

328 **4. Conclusions**

329 Mathematical formalization of tetrazolium based microbial toxicity assay and projection of
330 estimated kinetic model parameter as an invariable and reproducible alternative to traditional
331 toxicity assay reporting has been proposed. Growth inhibition was modelled as a function of
332 intracellular formazan content and toxicant concentration. Parameters, sequentially estimated
333 from batch experimental data, were credible with narrow confidence intervals. Though a
334 limited combination of growth, substrate consumption and inhibition models were only
335 adopted in this study, the approach can easily be extrapolated to much larger and multivariate
336 data set incorporating mechanistic insight of the toxicity assay. Parametric representation of
337 result can offer a unified format of reconciliation, reporting and validation for in-vitro toxicity
338 assay.

339 **Acknowledgements**

340 Standard ethical and professional conduct have been followed. There are no conflicts of
341 interests (financial or otherwise) associated with this publication.

342 **Declarations**

343 *Ethics approval and consent to participate*

344 The study does not involve any human participants, human data or human tissue. Ethics
345 approval is not applicable.

346 *Consent for publication*

347 N/A

348 *Availability of data and materials*

349 Experimental the data in this study are available on request to corresponding author.

350 *Competing interests*

351 None

352 *Funding*

353 This work is financially supported by Karunya Institute of Technology and Sciences.

354 *Authors' contributions*

355 BM conceived and designed the experiments. CDF performed the experiments and sample
356 analysis. BM and CDF analyzed the data for modelling. CDF and BM drafted the manuscript.

357 All authors revise and approve and manuscript.

358

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505 **Table 1.** Factorial design to examine the dependence of TTC reduction on biomass, substrate
 506 and TTC concentration.

Factor	Units	Actual values at coded levels	
		-1	+1
Inoculum (X_1) OD@600 nm 0.196	ml	0.5	1.5
Glucose solution (10 g l ⁻¹) added (X_2)	ml	0.1	0.3
TTC solution (5 g l ⁻¹) added (X_3)	ml	0.05	0.10

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508 **Table 2.** Hierarchical experimental design to decipher tetrazolium-based toxicity model

Exp. Set	Biomass	Glucose	TTC	CuSO ₄	Parameters to be estimated for
1	+	+	-	-	Growth, substrate consumption
2	+	+	+	-	TTC reduction, and TTC toxicity
3	+	+	+	+	Test toxicant related parameters

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511 **Table 3.** Factorial design matrix and formazan concentration

Sl. No:	Factors			Response
	<i>E. coli</i> culture (ml)	Glucose solution (ml)	TTC solution (ml)	Formazan content absorbance @480 nm
1	1.50	0.30	0.05	0.845
2	1.50	0.10	0.10	0.62
3	1.50	0.30	0.10	0.931
4	1.50	0.10	0.05	0.882
5	0.50	0.10	0.10	0.096
6	0.50	0.30	0.10	0.143
7	0.50	0.10	0.50	0.16
8	0.50	0.30	0.50	0.158

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514 **Table 4.** Analysis of variance performed on the formazan production data.

Source	DF	Adj. SS	Adj. MS	F-Value	P-Value
Model	6	0.042879	0.007147	176.46	0.058
Linear	3	0.029382	0.009794	241.82	0.047
Inoculum	1	0.017861	0.017861	441.00	0.030*
Glucose	1	0.000421	0.000421	10.38	0.192
TTC	1	0.011101	0.011101	274.09	0.038*
2-Way Interactions	3	0.013498	0.004499	111.09	0.070
Inoculum * Glucose	1	0.003698	0.003698	91.31	0.066
Inoculum *TTC	1	0.009800	0.009800	241.98	0.041*
Glucose *TTC	1	0.000000	0.000000	0.00	1.000
Error	1	0.000040	0.000040		
Total	7	0.042920			

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519 Table 5. Performance of different kinetic models fitting microbial growth and glucose
 520 utilization data in absence of tetrazolium or toxicant.

Model	Associated Parameters *	Regression coefficients on profile for		
		Biomass	Substrate	Average
Logistic growth	$\mu_{max} = 0.3604$; $X_m = 1.2658$ $Y_{X/S} = 4.2122$; $\beta = 0.0437$	0.9602	0.9663	0.9633
Contois model	$\mu_{max} = 0.7819$; $K_c = 6.0312$ $Y_{X/S} = 3.7230$; $\beta = 0.0409$	0.9462	0.9713	0.9587
Tessier model	$\mu_{max} = 2.4161$; $K_t = 11.533$ $Y_{X/S} = 1.5701$; $\beta = 0.0038$	0.8560	0.9551	0.9055
Monod model	$\mu_{max} = 2.6378$; $K_d = 12.205$ $Y_{X/S} = 1.5234$; $\beta = 0.0013$	0.8602	0.9321	0.8962

521 * The units associated with parameters are h^{-1} (μ_{max}), $g.l^{-1}$ (X_m , K_d , K_t), and $g.g^{-1}$ ($Y_{X/S}$, K_c)

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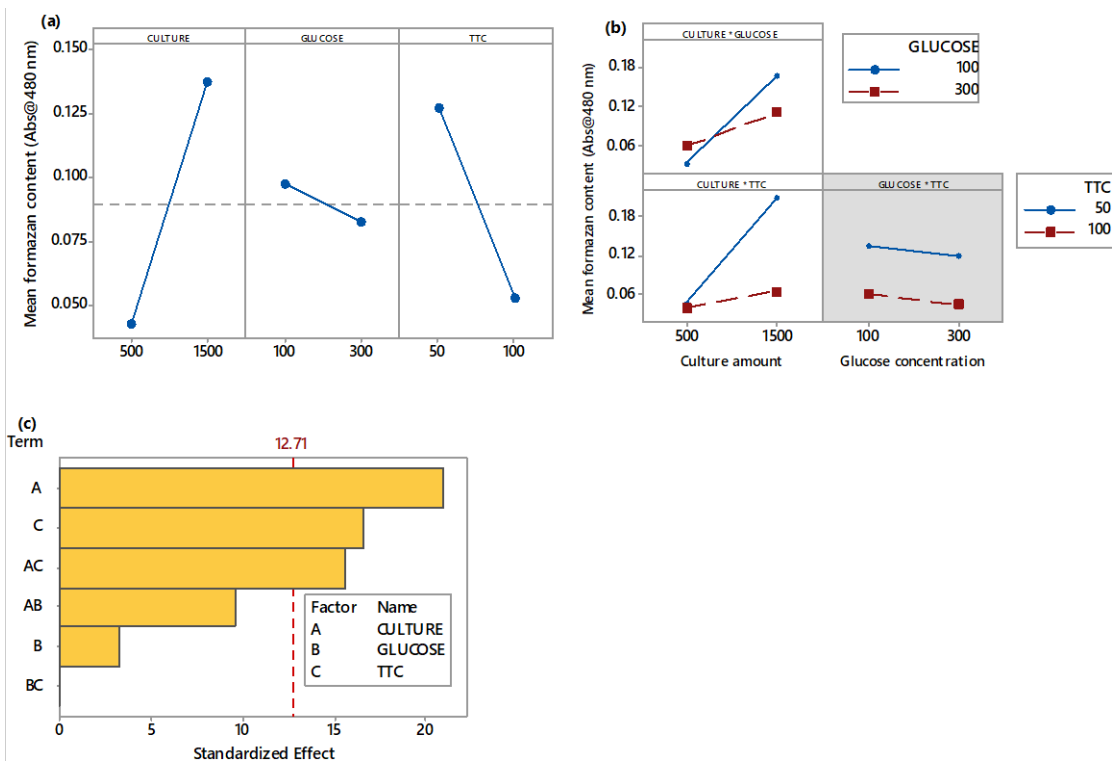
523 **Table 6.** The bootstrap confidence interval of parameter estimates for the dynamic model
 524 structure at different modelling stages and the regression coefficients [§]

Exp. Sets	Parameters	$R^2_{cal} (R^2_{cv})$	Parameter Estimates	95% CI	
				Lower	Upper
Set-1	$\mu_{max} (h^{-1})$	$R^2_X = 0.960 (0.907)$	0.360	0.296	0.429
	$X_{max} (g l^{-1})$	$R^2_G = 0.966(0.915)$	1.266	1.131	1.428
Set-2	$K_F (mg g^{-1})$	$R^2_X = 0.958 (0.909)$	30.963	26.738	37.126
	$Y_{X/G} (g g^{-1})$	$R^2_G = 0.975 (0.955)$	0.747	0.659	0.793
	$\beta (h^{-1})$	$R^2_F = 0.967 (0.933)$	$8.778e^{-07}$	$8.192e^{-07}$	$9.015e^{-07}$
	$\gamma (mg g^{-1})$		20.641	19.02	23.81
	$\delta (mg h^{-1} g^{-1})$		$1.257e^{-05}$	$1.173e^{-05}$	$1.295e^{-05}$
Set-3	$K_m (mg l^{-1})$	$R^2_X = 0.856 (0.828)$	152.39	141.68	186.49
		$R^2_G = 0.782 (0.667)$			
		$R^2_F = 0.964 (0.913)$			

525 [§] four-fold cross-validation R^2 (R^2_{cv}) with 10 Monte-Carlo repetitions for validation.

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530 **Figure 1.** Influence of inoculum, glucose and TTC dose on formazan concentration as depicted
531 in (a) main effect plot as a mean response, (b) interaction plot for each combination of two
532 factors, and (c) Pareto chart where bars represent the absolute value of the effect of each factor
533 and the dotted line indicates the limit of significance ($\alpha = 0.05$).

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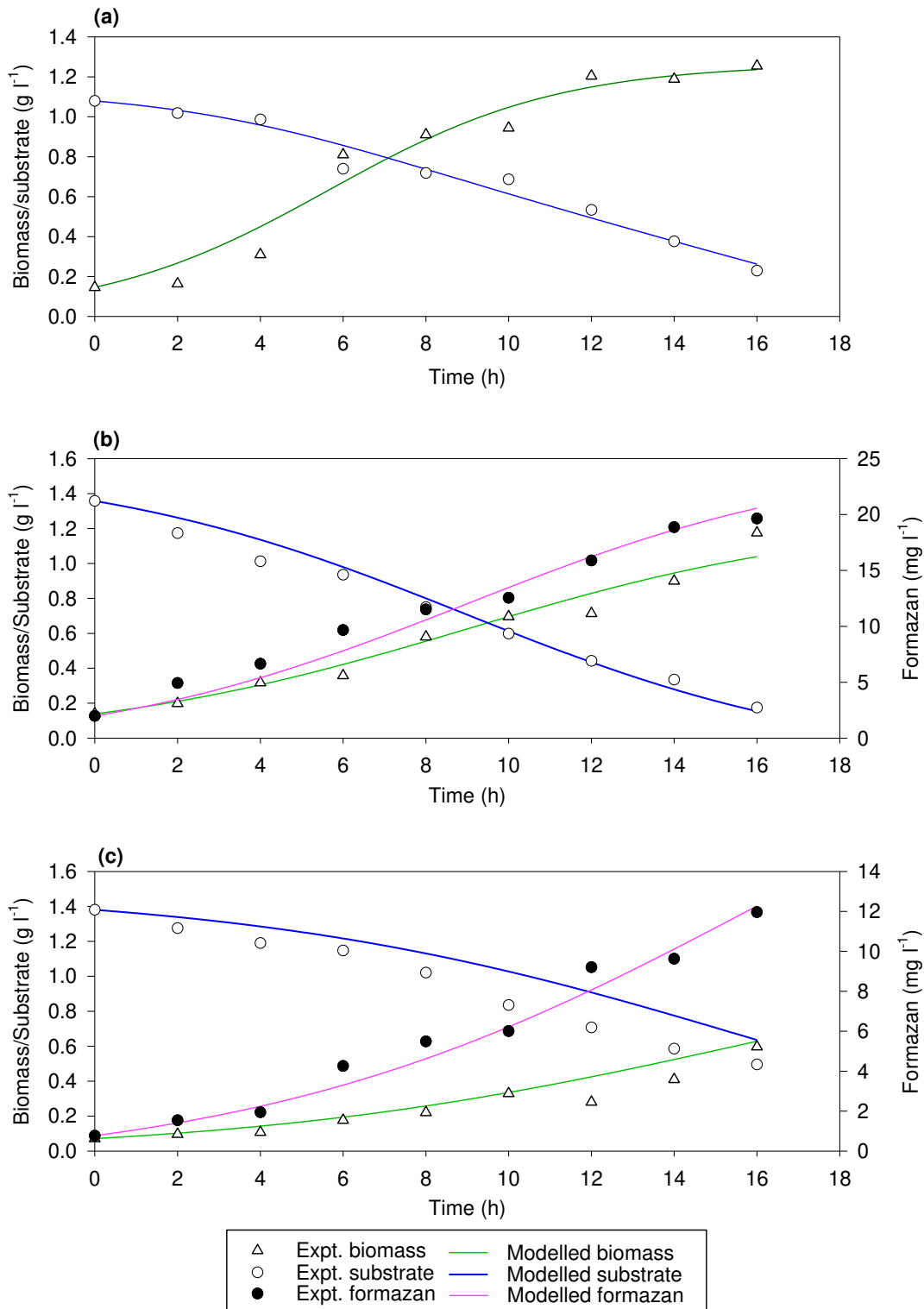
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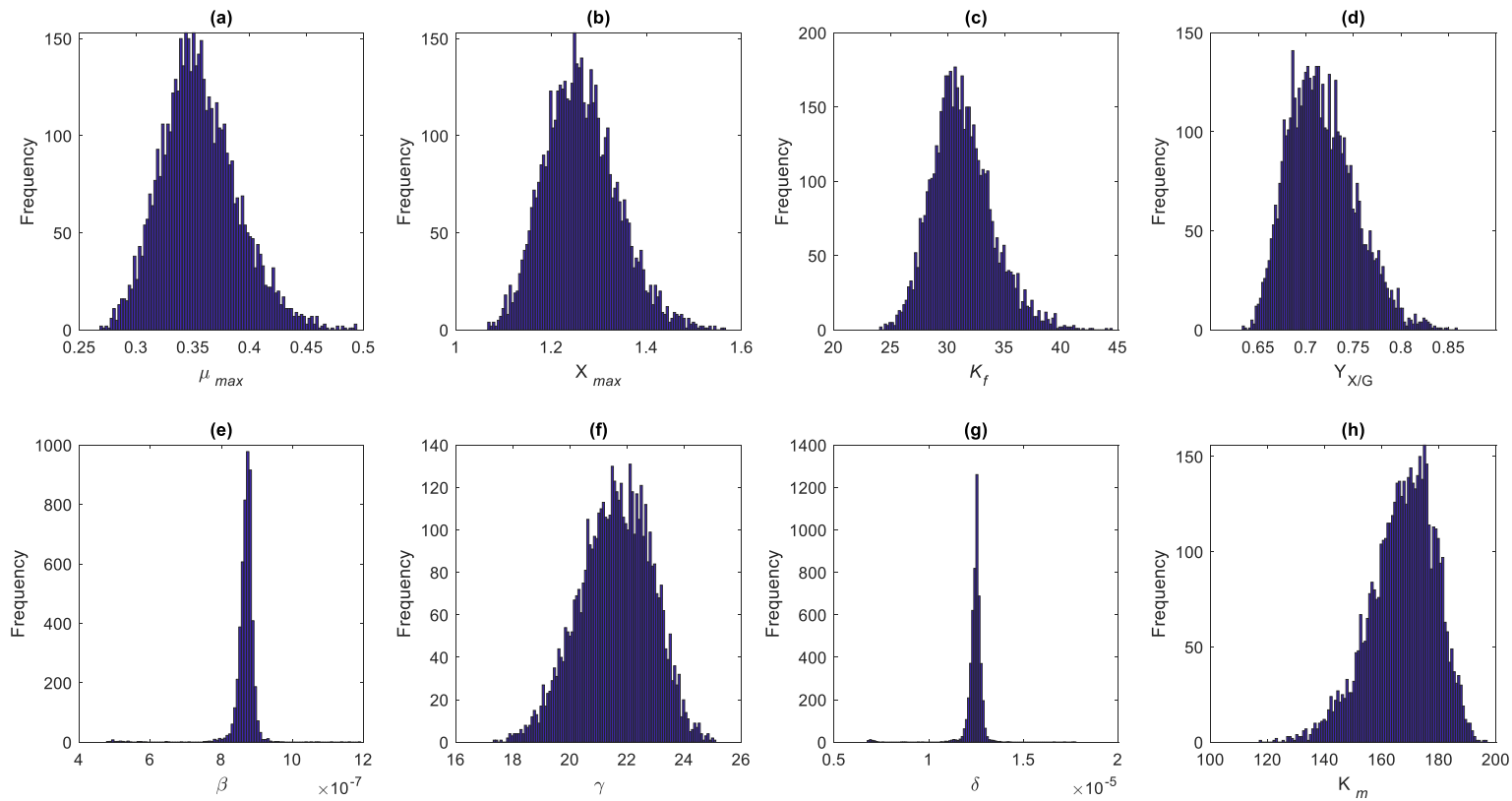
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542 **Figure 2.** Experimental (symbols) and model-predicted (solid line) profiles for biomass,
 543 substrates and formazan concentration (if applicable) in batch studies involving sets with (a)
 544 no TTC or toxicant, (b) TTC but no toxicant, and (c) with TTC and toxicant.

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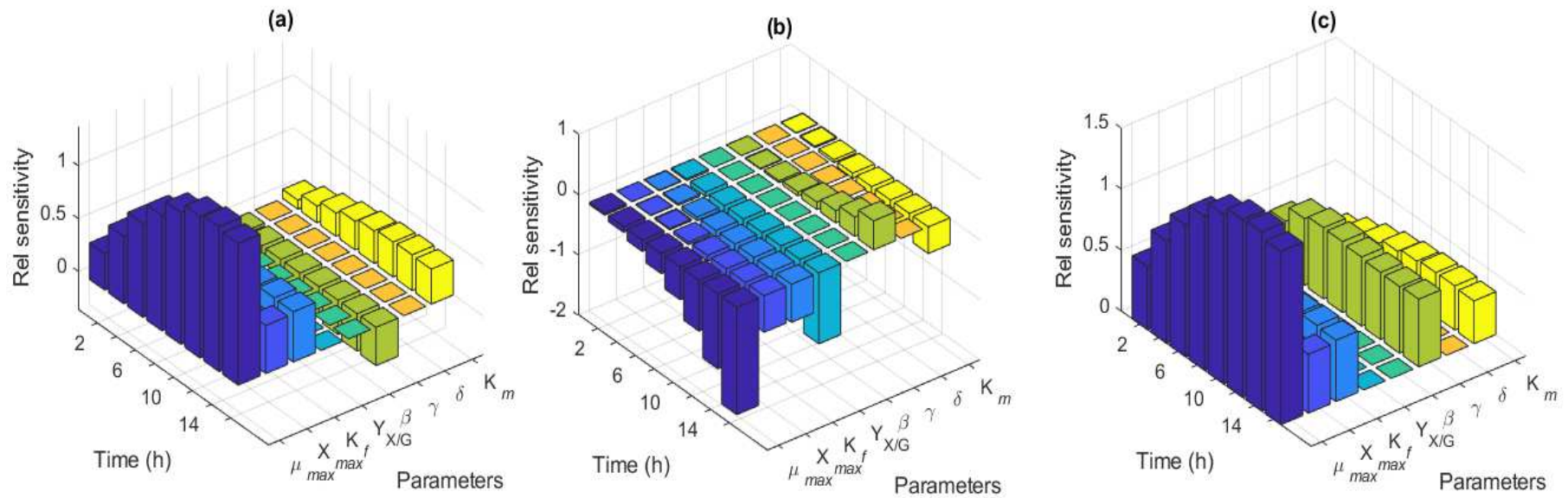


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547 **Figure 3.** Distribution of bootstrap parameter estimates (N=5000) relevant to microbial growth, substrate consumption, formazan production in
548 the proposed toxicity model.

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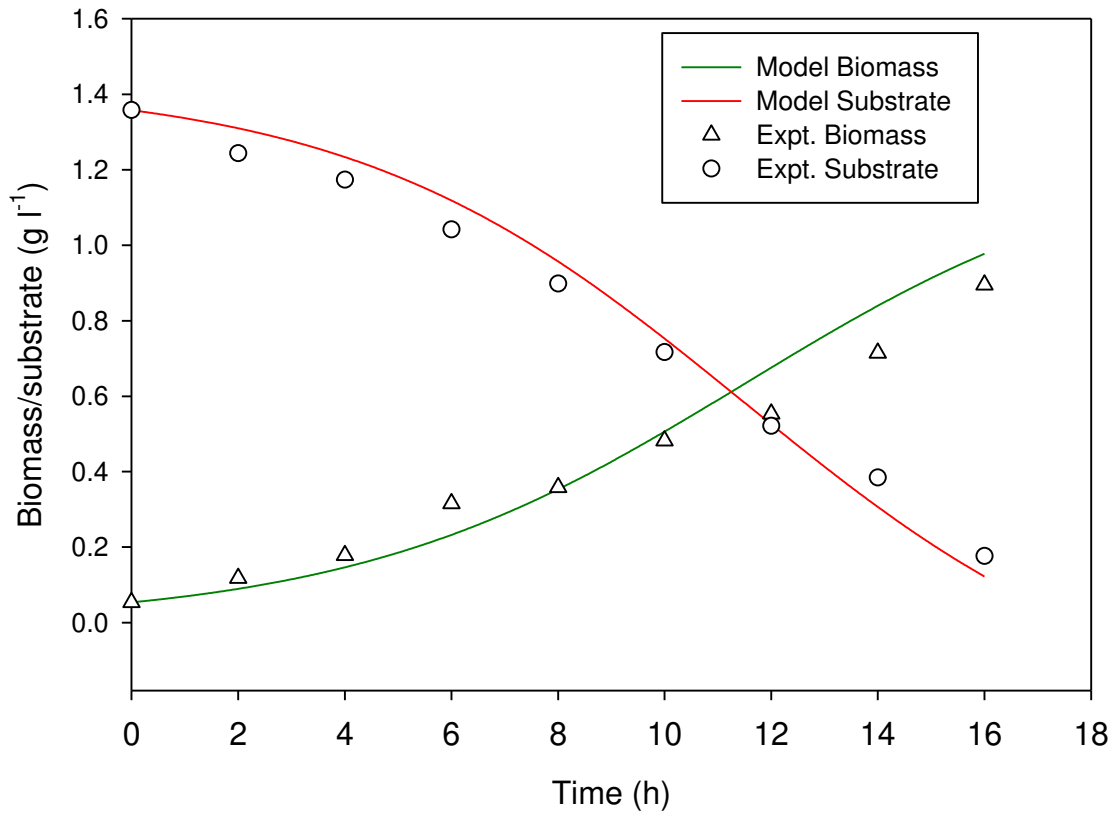
552 **Figure 4.** Relative sensitivity of parameters on (a) biomass growth, (b) substrate consumption, and (c) formazan production

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558 **Figure 5.** Experimental and modelled biomass and glucose concentration profiles in the
 559 validation of toxicity assay model, performed with 50 mg l⁻¹ Cu²⁺ in absence of TTC.

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Figures

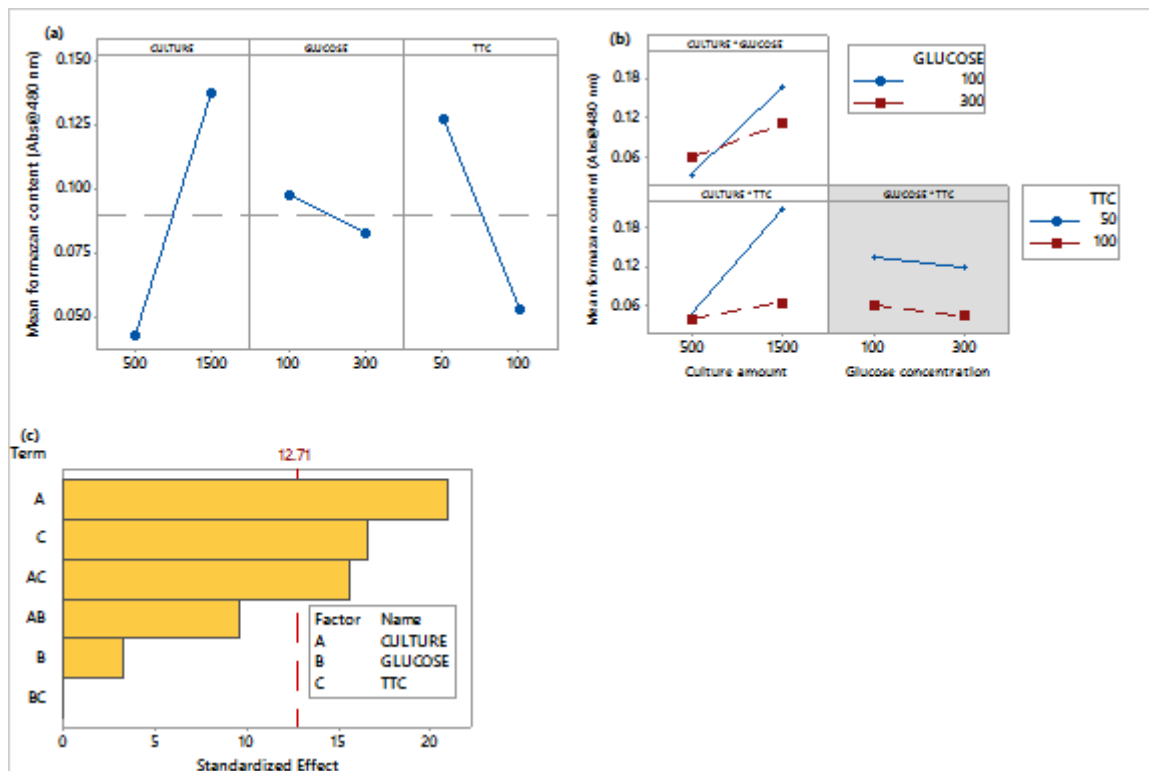


Figure 1

Influence of inoculum, glucose and TTC dose on formazan concentration as depicted in (a) main effect plot as a mean response, (b) interaction plot for each combination of two factors, and (c) Pareto chart where bars represent the absolute value of the effect of each factor and the dotted line indicates the limit of significance ($\alpha = 0.05$).

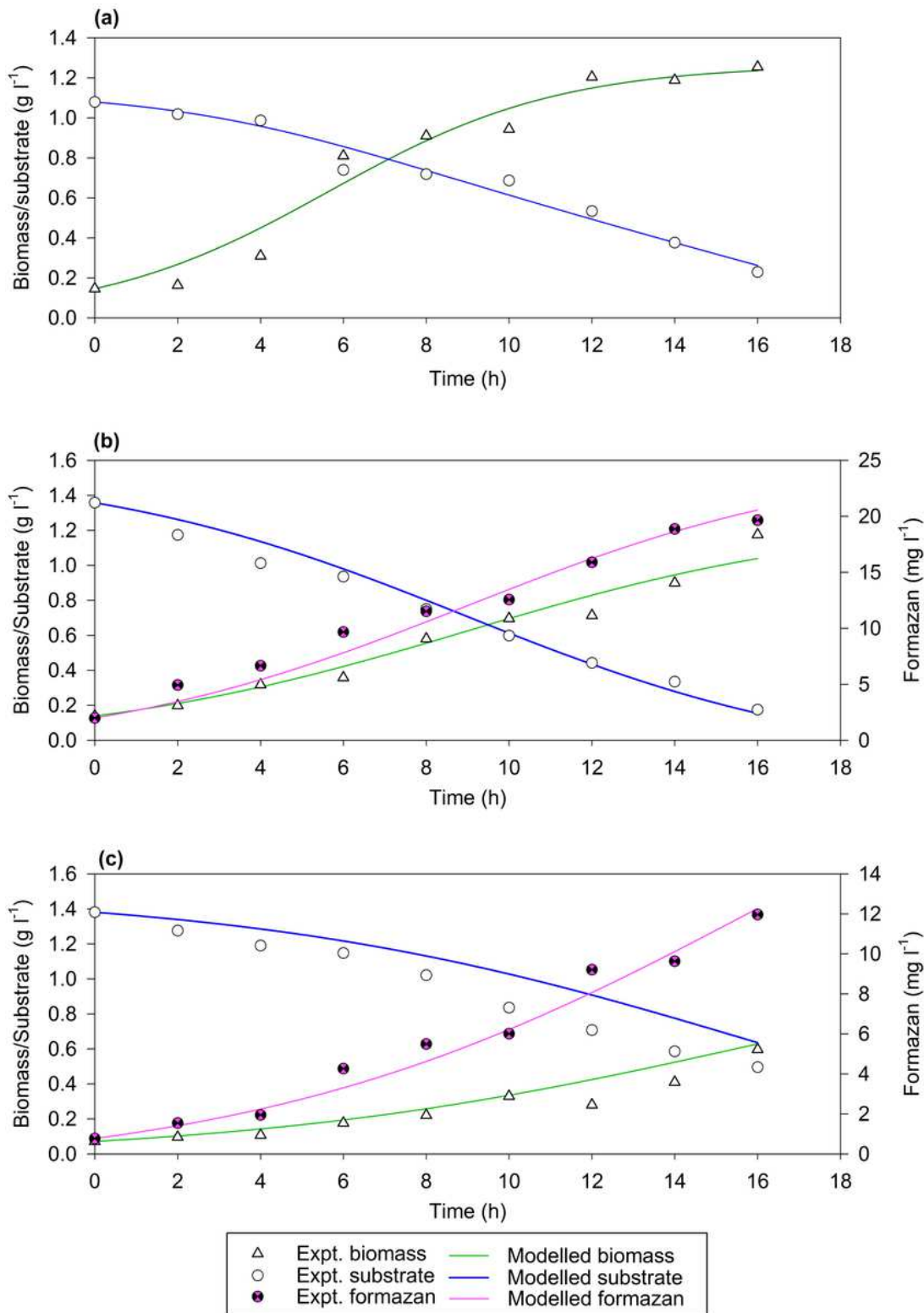


Figure 2

Experimental (symbols) and model-predicted (solid line) profiles for biomass, substrates and formazan concentration (if applicable) in batch studies involving sets with (a) no TTC or toxicant, (b) TTC but no toxicant, and (c) with TTC and toxicant.

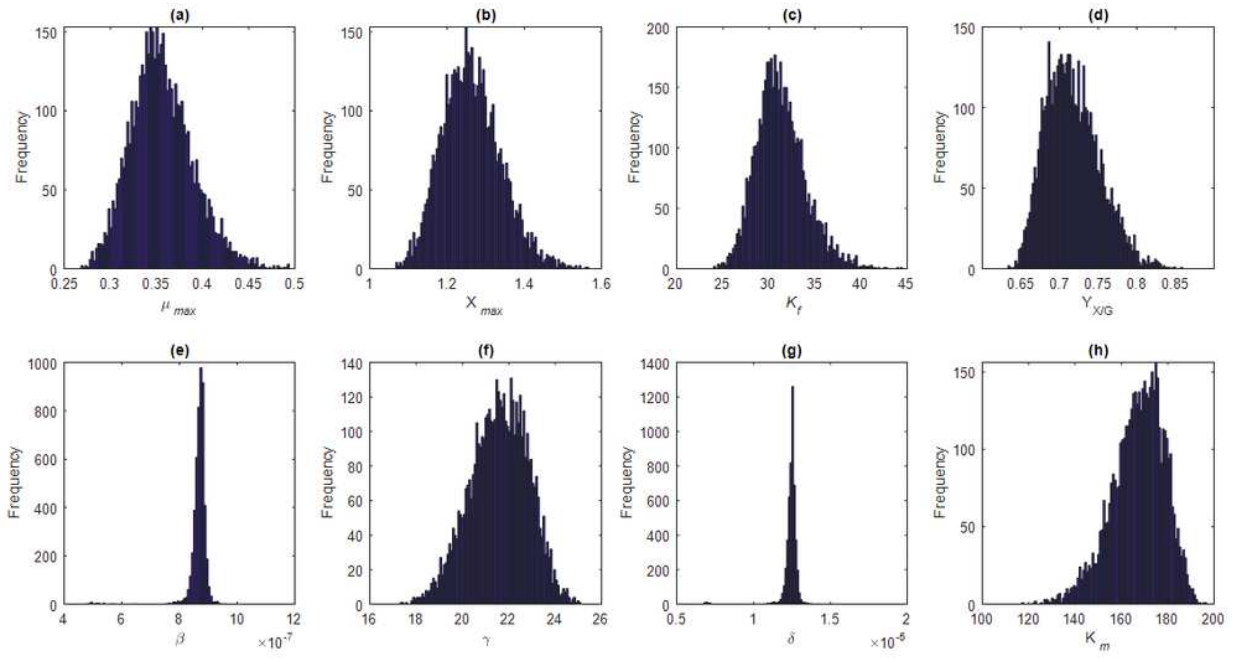


Figure 3

Distribution of bootstrap parameter estimates (N=5000) relevant to microbial growth, substrate consumption, formazan production in the proposed toxicity model.

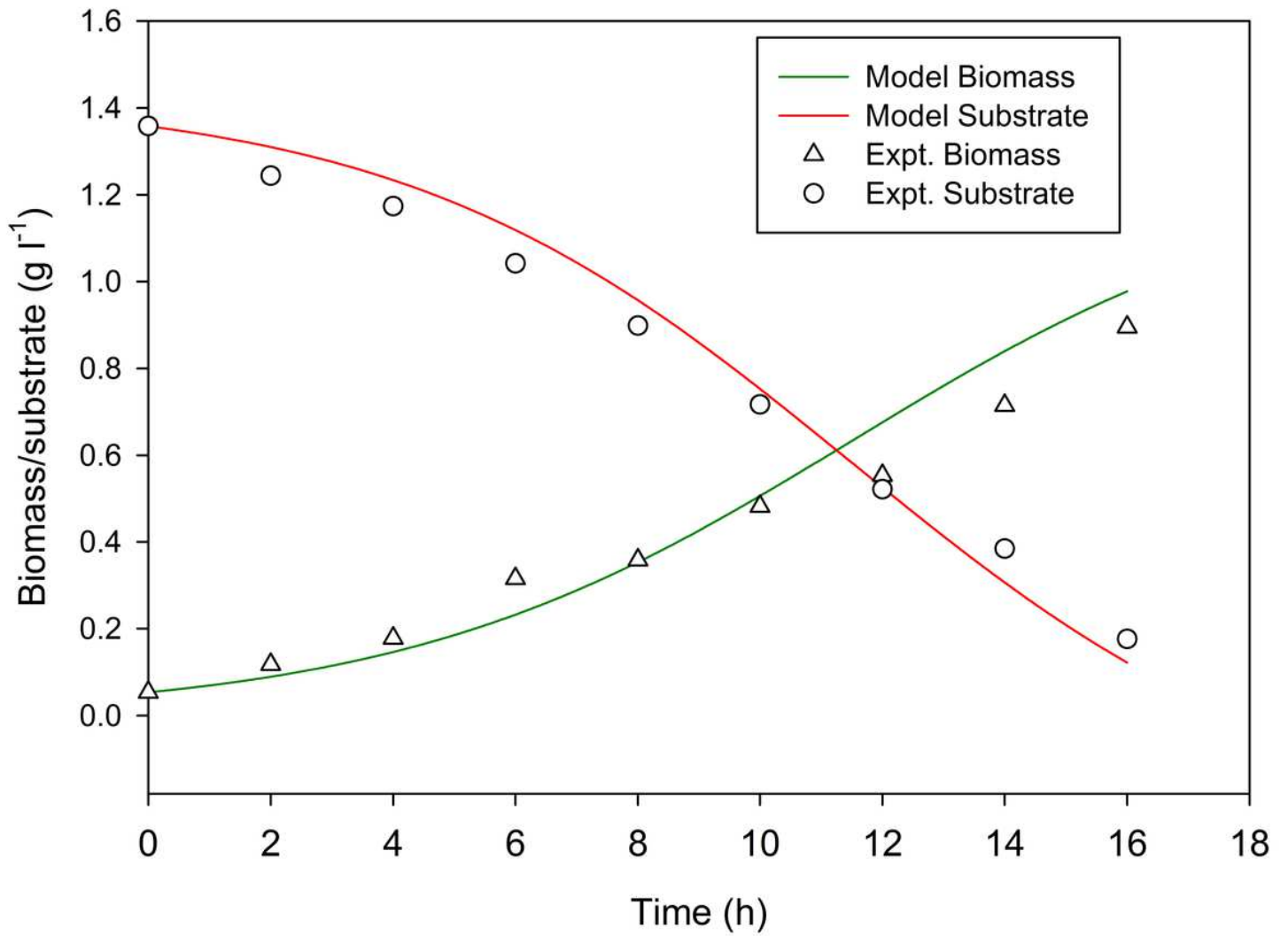


Figure 4

Relative sensitivity of parameters on (a) biomass growth, (b) substrate consumption, and (c) formazan production

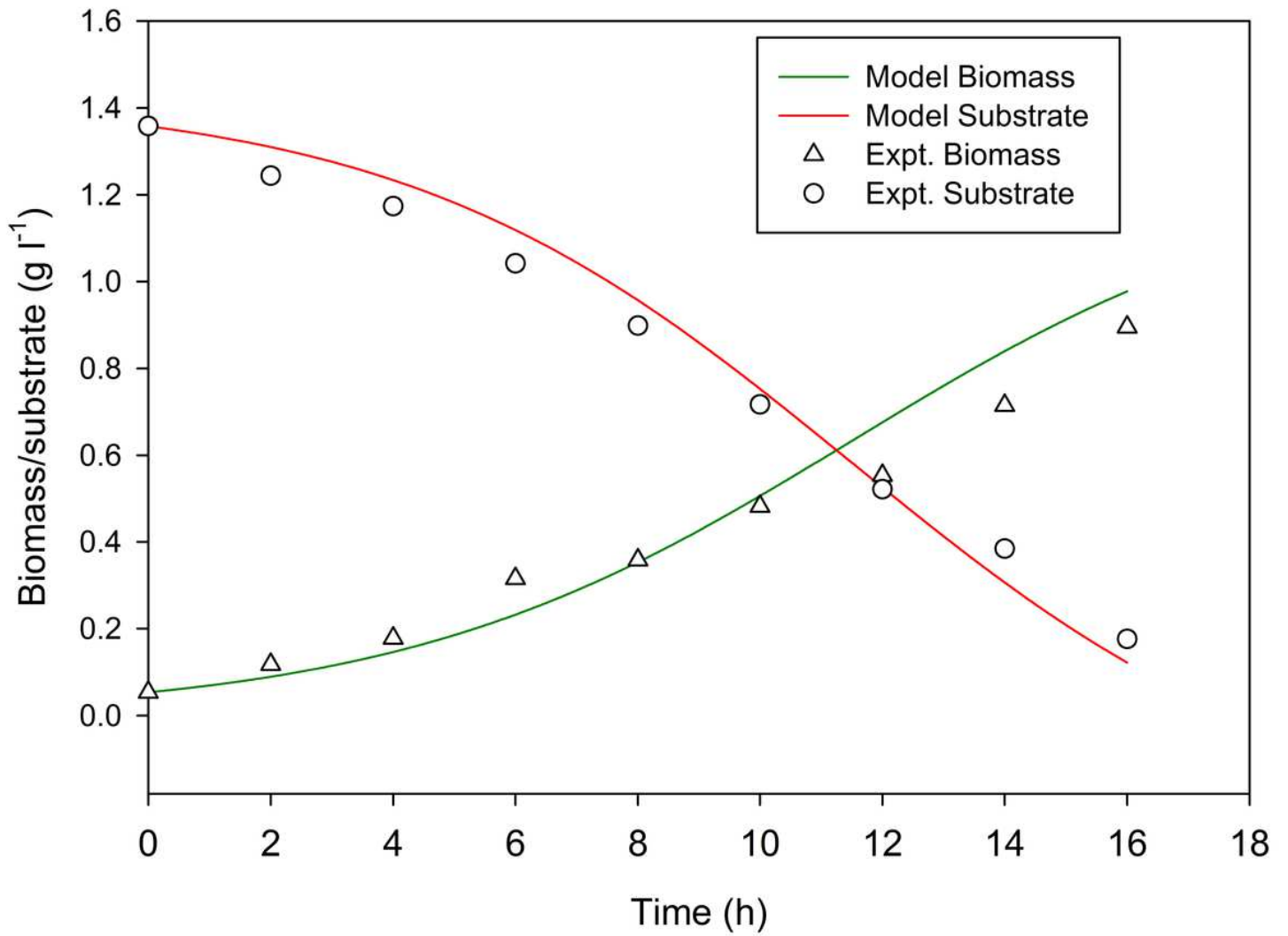


Figure 5

Experimental and modelled biomass and glucose concentration profiles in the validation of toxicity assay model, performed with 50 mg l⁻¹ Cu²⁺ in absence of TTC.