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Marcel Klinksiek, Sindi Baco, Sébastien Leveneur, Julien Legros, Christoph Held. Activity-based models to predict kinetics of levulinic acid esterification. *ChemPhysChem*, 2022, 10.1002/cphc.202200729 . hal-03825917v2

**HAL Id: hal-03825917**

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**Authors:** Marcel Klinksiak, Sindi Baco, Sébastien Leveneur, Julien Legros, and Christoph Held

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**To be cited as:** *ChemPhysChem* **2022**, e202200729

**Link to VoR:** <https://doi.org/10.1002/cphc.202200729>

# Activity-Based Models to Predict Kinetics of Levulinic Acid Esterification

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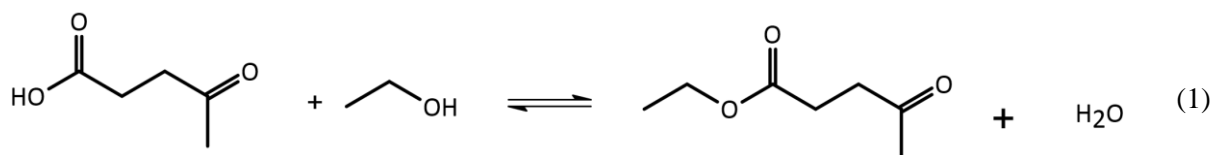
KEYWORDS: catalyst effect, ePC-SAFT advanced, GVL, proton activity, solvent effect, thermodynamics

## 1 Abstract

2 The solvent is of prime importance in biomass conversion as it influences dissolution, reaction kinetics,  
3 catalyst activity and thermodynamic equilibrium of the reaction system. So far, activity-based models  
4 were developed to predict kinetics and equilibria, but the influence of the catalyst could not be predicted  
5 by thermodynamic models. Thus, in this work, the thermodynamic model ePC-SAFT advanced was  
6 used to predict the activities of the reactants and of the catalyst at various conditions (temperature,  
7 reactant concentrations,  $\gamma$ -valerolactone GVL cosolvent addition, catalyst concentration) for the  
8 homogeneously acid-catalyzed esterification of levulinic acid (LA) with ethanol. Different kinetic  
9 models were applied, and it was found that the catalyst influence on kinetics could be predicted correctly  
10 by simultaneously solving the dissociation equilibrium of  $H_2SO_4$  catalyst along the reaction coordinate  
11 and the relating reaction kinetics to proton activity. ePC-SAFT advanced model parameters were only  
12 fitted to reaction-independent phase equilibrium data, but the key reaction properties were determined  
13 by one experimental kinetic curve for a set of temperatures, yielding the reaction enthalpy at standard  
14 state  $\Delta^R H^0 = 11.48 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$ , activation energy  $E_A = 30.28 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$  and the intrinsic reaction rate  
15 constant  $k = 0.011 \text{ s}^{-1}$  at 323 K, which is independent of catalyst concentration. The new procedure  
16 allowed an a-priori identification of the effects of catalyst, solvent and reactant concentration on LA  
17 esterification.

## 1 Introduction

2 The chemical industry is dealing with emerging environmental issues and depletion of fossil resources.  
 3 In recent years, intensive research fields have emerged to identify attractive renewable energy and  
 4 material resources <sup>[1]</sup>. Within this context, the utilization of lignocellulosic biomass has become a  
 5 potential alternative for sustainable production of chemicals and fuels <sup>[2], [3], [4], [5]</sup>. One chemical of special  
 6 attention is levulinic acid (LA), as this compound and its derived esters have a formidable potential as  
 7 a renewable feedstock for the synthesis of several chemicals for applications in fuel additives,  
 8 fragrances, solvents and pharmaceuticals <sup>[5], [6]</sup>. One ester of interest as fuel additive and a potential  
 9 biomass-derived platform molecule is ethyl levulinate (ELA) <sup>[7]</sup>. ELA is synthesized by an esterification  
 10 reaction of LA with an excess amount of ethanol. Research on esterification of levulinic acid has been  
 11 investigating catalyst screening <sup>[8]</sup> and effect of reactant molar ratio <sup>[9]</sup> and catalyst concentration <sup>[10]</sup> on  
 12 the reaction rate. However, there is a lack of predicting the LA esterification kinetics in the literature. In  
 13 this work, the esterification is considered in the liquid phase at the presence of the acid catalyst H<sub>2</sub>SO<sub>4</sub>  
 14 according to Eq. (1).



15 Motivated by the recent research focus on ELA, this work aims at a more detailed discussion on the role  
 16 of solvent and catalytic properties on the ELA reaction. For this purpose, the kinetics of LA esterification  
 17 with ethanol with an additional renewable and non-toxic solvent was studied in this work. In the  
 18 literature, one organic solvent which was found to have an impact on reaction rates is  $\gamma$ -valerolactone  
 19 (GVL) <sup>[11]</sup>. GVL has a low toxicity and can be obtained without consumptions of fossil resources <sup>[12]</sup>,  
 20 thus it is considered to be a green solvent. Further, within the esterification reaction the protonation of  
 21 the carboxyl group is the rate-determining step and needs activation either by temperature or by a  
 22 catalyst <sup>[10]</sup>. The kinetics of an acid-catalyzed esterification of LA to ELA in a temperature range of  
 23 50 to 80 °C was investigated in batch reactor by Baco et al. <sup>[13]</sup>. Although that study explored several  
 24 conditions on kinetics, still it lacks in knowledge on the catalyst properties during the reaction  
 25 coordinate, such as catalyst dissociation and molecular interactions of the catalyst. Activity-based  
 26 approaches from Lemberg and Sadowski <sup>[14]</sup> allow predicting solvent effects on the reaction equilibrium  
 27 and kinetics of esterification, but this model was limited to one catalyst concentration as catalyst effects  
 28 on the kinetics were neglected. There are several approaches in the literature to integrate the proton  
 29 concentration into kinetic models, most of them are empirical methods <sup>[15–17]</sup>. Other acknowledged  
 30 kinetic models, for example, one parametrized by the temperature and the extent of conversion are  
 31 available <sup>[18]</sup>. Overcoming such empirical models requires knowledge on catalyst interactions in the  
 32 reactant mixture of an esterification. The thermodynamic model ‘ePC-SAFT advanced’ <sup>[19]</sup> allows  
 33 modeling electrolytes in organic media by considering the change of dielectric properties of the medium  
 34 at different conditions and the related change of solvation free energy of the ions. pH is an important

1 influence factor on the reaction kinetics at various conditions since the catalyst properties (acid  
2 dissociation and proton activity) depend on the composition of a mixture. Thus, in the present work,  
3 ePC-SAFT advanced was used to predict catalyst dissociation and the respective proton activity along  
4 the reaction coordinate. This allowed predicting reaction kinetics as function of the catalyst  
5 concentration, of reactant concentration and of solvent addition.

## 6 **Thermodynamic Fundamentals**

### 8 **Modeling Activity Coefficients with ePC-SAFT Advanced**

9 ePC-SAFT advanced developed by Bülow et al. <sup>[14], [19]</sup> is the most recent extension of the original  
10 equation of state PC-SAFT from Gross and Sadowski <sup>[20]</sup>. The electrolyte Perturbed-Chain Statistical  
11 Associating Fluid Theory (ePC-SAFT) established by Cameretti and Sadowski <sup>[21]</sup> and further developed  
12 by Held et al. <sup>[14], [22]</sup> includes electrostatic long-range interactions among ions expressed by the Debye-  
13 Hückel theory to model electrolyte solutions. Based on this, an altered Born term to characterize  
14 solvation energies between charged components and the environment was added within the ePC-SAFT  
15 framework. The resulting model, ePC-SAFT advanced, calculates the dimensionless residual Helmholtz  
16 energy  $a^{res}$  of an electrolyte system as a sum of the following Helmholtz-energy contributions:

$$a^{res} = a^{hc} + a^{disp} + a^{assoc} + a^{DH} + a^{Born} \quad (2)$$

17 Classical PC-SAFT considers hard-chain repulsion of the reference system  $a^{hc}$  and perturbations to the  
18 hard chain caused by dispersive van der Waals forces and associative hydrogen-bonding forces,  
19 expressed by  $a^{disp}$  and  $a^{assoc}$ . In systems with charged species, two contributions were included  
20 additionally, namely the Debye-Hückel contribution  $a^{DH}$  to consider interionic electrostatic interactions  
21 and the modified Born term  $a^{Born}$  to describe electrostatic self-energy. Modelling electrolyte solutions  
22 requires accounting for the dipolar character of the medium. Therefore, an expression for the  
23 concentration-dependence of the relative dielectric constant is crucial for the electrostatic contribution  
24 to the solvation energy by means of the Born term. Detailed information about all contributions are  
25 described in the original PC-SAFT publication <sup>[20]</sup> and the most recent published works <sup>[14], [19]</sup>. The  
26 activity coefficient for all reacting agents refer to the pure component state. It is defined as the ratio of  
27 the fugacity coefficient  $\varphi_i$  in the mixture and the fugacity coefficient of the pure component  $\varphi_{0i}(x_i \rightarrow$   
28 1) and becomes equal to one at pure-component state, cf. Eq. (3). For ions, the rational activity  
29 coefficient  $\gamma_i^{*,x}$ . In this work, we related to the infinite dilution in pure water and it is important to not  
30 change this reference state over the reaction coordinate. This property is calculated from the ratio of the  
31 fugacity coefficient  $\varphi_i$  of a component  $i$  at any desired condition (i.e., an ion infinitely diluted in organic  
32 solvent) and the fugacity coefficient of this component infinitely diluted in water  $\varphi_i^{\infty,water}$  according to  
33 Eq. (3).

$$\gamma_i = \frac{\varphi_i(T, p, x)}{\varphi_{0i}(T, p, x_i = 1)} \quad \text{and} \quad \gamma_i^{*,x} = \frac{\varphi_i(T, p, x)}{\varphi_i^{\infty,water}(T, p, x_i = 0)} \quad (3)$$

1 The fugacity coefficients  $\varphi_i$  depend on temperature, pressure, and composition, which is explicitly taken  
 2 into account within ePC-SAFT advanced. In this work the thermodynamic activity of the proton is based  
 3 on the mole fraction-based rational activity coefficient as follows

$$a_{H_3O^+}^{*,x} = x_{H_3O^+} \cdot \gamma_{H_3O^+}^{*,x} \quad (4)$$

4 Predicting activity coefficients requires ePC-SAFT parameters. All pure-component parameters and  
 5 binary interaction parameters  $k_{ij}$  used in this work are listed in Table S1 – S3. These were determined  
 6 exclusively by fitting them to experimental phase-equilibrium data; reaction data was not used to fit any  
 7 of the ePC-SAFT parameters.

8  
 9

## 10 Reaction Equilibria

11 Thermodynamic modeling of the esterification reaction kinetics in acid-catalyzed solutions requires  
 12 simultaneously solving reaction kinetics of the esterification and of the dissociation equilibria of  $H_2SO_4$ .  
 13 In addition to the esterification reaction (Eq.(1)), the following dissociation reactions take place in the  
 14 liquid phase: first and second dissociation step of  $H_2SO_4$  (5), (6), and dissociation of levulinic acid (7).



15 The esterification of LA is highly affected by the amount of dissociated  $H_2SO_4$ . Therefore, knowledge  
 16 on the degree of dissociation of  $H_2SO_4$  is crucial for the determination of  $H_3O^+$  concentration. In this  
 17 work, only the first dissociation step (5) was considered, while reactions (6) and (7) were neglected. Due  
 18 to the significant amount of ethanol in the reaction mixture, it is not possible to measure reliably pH  
 19 values. For that reason, an activity-based method was applied to model the dissociation equilibrium of  
 20  $H_2SO_4$  in the reaction mixture. Reaction and dissociation equilibrium modeling requires the  
 21 thermodynamic equilibrium constant  $K_{th}$ , which was calculated with the mole fractions of the reactants  
 22 and products and their activity coefficients according to Eq. (8)

$$K_{th}(T, p) = \prod_i (x_i \cdot \gamma_i)^{\nu_i} = K_x(T, p, x) \cdot K_\gamma(T, p, x) \quad (8)$$

23  $K_x$  denotes the mole-fraction ratio at equilibrium, or also known as apparent equilibrium constant.  $K_x$   
 24 changes under different conditions. The dependence of  $K_x$  on reaction conditions is taken into account  
 25 by the activity coefficients  $\gamma_i$ . The resulting  $K_{th}$  depends only on temperature and pressure. Therefore,  
 26 it takes the same value with or without additional solvent. Thus, once one value for  $K_{th}$  is known, ePC-  
 27 SAFT predicted activity coefficients ( $K_\gamma(T, p, x)$ ) allow determining the equilibrium position  
 28 ( $K_x(T, p, x)$ ). Following this concept, the dissociation of  $H_2SO_4$  was predicted in this work at different  
 29 reaction compositions. Therefore,  $pK_a$  values in water were used as obtained from the literature [23], and



1 the respective activity coefficients at the different compositions were predicted by ePC-SAFT advanced.  
 2 The detailed methodology is described in the literature <sup>[13]</sup>. Further, also the  $K_{th}$  values of LA  
 3 esterification for each temperature were determined using Eq. (8) by using equilibrium mole fractions  
 4 of all listed experiments in Table S4 and the respective activity coefficients using ePC-SAFT advanced.  
 5 The equilibrium constant  $K_{th}$  for each temperature is listed in Table S5. The standard reaction enthalpy  
 6  $\Delta^R H^0$  was determined from the temperature-dependency of the  $K_{th}$  values. Addition of cosolvent  
 7 decreases the equilibrium concentration caused by dilution. However, cosolvent also shifts the reaction  
 8 equilibrium and the kinetics as such due to molecular interactions. In order to cancel out the dilution  
 9 effect, the mole fraction of the ester product was normalized to the amount of additional cosolvent  
 10 according to Eq. (9)

$$x_{ELA,norm} = \frac{x_{ELA}}{1 - x_{solvent}} \quad (9)$$

### 11 Kinetic Model I – State-of-the-Art Approach

12 Solvents might strongly influence reaction kinetics. This cannot be described by the classical  
 13 concentration-based kinetic modeling approach, Eq. (10).

$$r = k \cdot c_A \cdot c_B - \frac{k}{K_a} \cdot c_C \cdot c_D \quad (10)$$

14 For that reason Lemberg and Sadowski <sup>[14]</sup> established a thermodynamic PC-SAFT framework to  
 15 account for the molecular interactions between the reacting species and the solvent via activity  
 16 coefficients. This enables the determination of solvent-independent kinetic constants  $k$  and the  
 17 prediction of the solvent effects on reaction kinetics. Lemberg and Sadowski <sup>[14]</sup> studied the acid-  
 18 catalyzed esterification reactions of acetic acid (HAc) and propionic acid (HProp) with ethanol in the  
 19 solvents acetonitrile (ACN), tetrahydrofuran (THF) and N,N-dimethylformamide (DMF). Their model  
 20 is based on the activity-based reaction kinetic equation, and it is expressed as follows:

$$r = k \cdot \gamma_A \cdot x_A \cdot \gamma_B \cdot x_B - \frac{k}{K_a} \cdot \gamma_C \cdot x_C \cdot \gamma_D \cdot x_D \quad (11)$$

21 for an equilibrium reaction of the type  $A + B \rightleftharpoons C + D$ . In this model, the reaction rate constant  $k$  is  
 22 estimated with one experimental kinetic profile of a solvent-free reaction. Both, the activity coefficients  
 23 and the mole fractions depend on the choice of solvent, whereas the calculated rate constant  $k$  keeps  
 24 constant for each composition. This approach was also successfully used in kinetic studies of an  
 25 esterification reaction with salt influence <sup>[24]</sup>. However, in contrast to the present work, the model of  
 26 Lemberg and Sadowski was assuming constant catalyst concentration. The model performance at other  
 27 catalyst concentrations is unknown.

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## 1 Kinetic model II – Ion Effects on Reactants

2 Besides the interactions between the reacting agents, also the interactions between the acid ( $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ ) and  
3 its dissociated ions ( $\text{HSO}_4^-$ ,  $\text{H}_3\text{O}^+$ ) and the reacting agents and ions will influence the kinetics. ePC-  
4 SAFT advanced enables modeling these interactions in organic media by utilizing a modified Born term  
5 to consider electrostatic interactions of ionic compounds with their surrounding medium. In addition to  
6 that, Ascani et al. [25] successfully predicted pH values in multiphase multicomponent systems with ePC-  
7 SAFT advanced. Thus, we used this approach to calculate the activity coefficients of each ion in the  
8 reaction mixture and the ion influence on the activity coefficients of reacting agents. The resulting  
9 kinetic modeling approach is identical to Eq. (11), but the influence of the ions on the activity  
10 coefficients of the reacting agents was considered explicitly.

11

## 12 Kinetic model III – Approach Including the Proton Activity

13 Eq. (11) does not consider the influence of the catalyst concentration on kinetics. The idea of this work  
14 is to account for the catalyst by proton activity, for which proton-solvent interactions are required. ePC-  
15 SAFT advanced allows calculating proton activity, and the activity of  $\text{H}_3\text{O}^+$ -ions  $a_{\text{H}_3\text{O}^+}^{*,x}$  was calculated  
16 for each of the reaction experiments. The resulting model to predict the catalyst concentration effect on  
17 the reaction kinetic is based on relating reaction rate by the proton activity  $a_{\text{H}_3\text{O}^+}^{*,x}$  (Eq. (12)).

$$\frac{r}{a_{\text{H}_3\text{O}^+}^{*,x}} = k \cdot \gamma_A \cdot x_A \cdot \gamma_B \cdot x_B \cdot - \frac{k}{K_a} \cdot \gamma_C \cdot x_C \cdot \gamma_D \cdot x_D \quad (12)$$

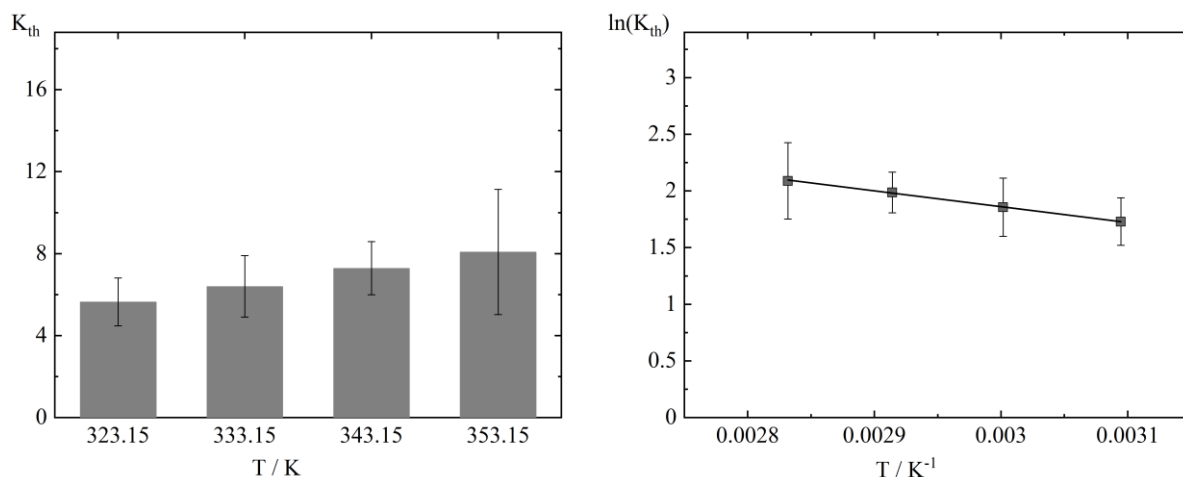
18 In a first step, and similar to the state-of-the-art modeling, the rate constant  $k$  in equation (12) was fitted  
19 to one experiment to calculate all mole fractions and activity coefficients of the reacting agents, acid,  
20 and ions. Then, the corresponding  $\frac{r}{a_{\text{H}_3\text{O}^+}^{*,x}}$  function was used for the prediction  $k$  at different conditions  
21 and solving simultaneously the dissociation equilibrium of  $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ .

22

## 23 Results and Discussion

### 24 Esterification Equilibrium

25 As it is known from literature [14], [26], [27] an additional solvent usually decreases kinetics of esterification  
26 reactions and reduces the equilibrium concentration of a reaction product. In this work, the activities of  
27 reacting agents  $a_i$  at reaction equilibrium were predicted using ePC-SAFT advanced for different  
28 conditions. The activity-based thermodynamic equilibrium constants for all temperatures listed in Table  
29 S4 were calculated according to Eq. (8), and the result is shown in Figure 1.



1  
2 *Figure 1: Left: Activity-based equilibrium constants  $K_{th}$  of LA esterification based on experimentally obtained  $K_x$*   
3 *values from Baco et al. [13] with activity coefficients predicted by ePC-SAFT advanced using parameters*  
4 *summarized in Tables S1 – S3. Right: Natural logarithmic function of  $K_{th}$  according to the Van't Hoff equation*  
5 *(Eq. S1),  $y = -1397.75x + 6.05$*

6 The results in Figure 1 show a relatively high standard deviation. This is due to the fact that the reaction  
7 experiments scatter a lot, which is caused by several reasons. The mean value of  $K_{th}$  considering each  
8 single reaction equilibrium experiment is reported in Table S5, and the average values were used as  
9 input data into the kinetic calculations. Nevertheless, the temperature dependency of the equilibrium  
10 constant according to the Van 't Hoff equation (Eq. S1) of all listed experiments in Table S4 is  
11 reasonable. The according reaction enthalpy at standard state  $\Delta^R H^0 = 11.48 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$  is in good  
12 agreement with a reaction enthalpy value of Russo et al. ( $15.14 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$  [28]). However, that the latter  
13 value is not a standard reaction enthalpy as it was obtained by using equilibrium concentrations instead  
14 of activities.

15

## 16 Reaction Kinetics

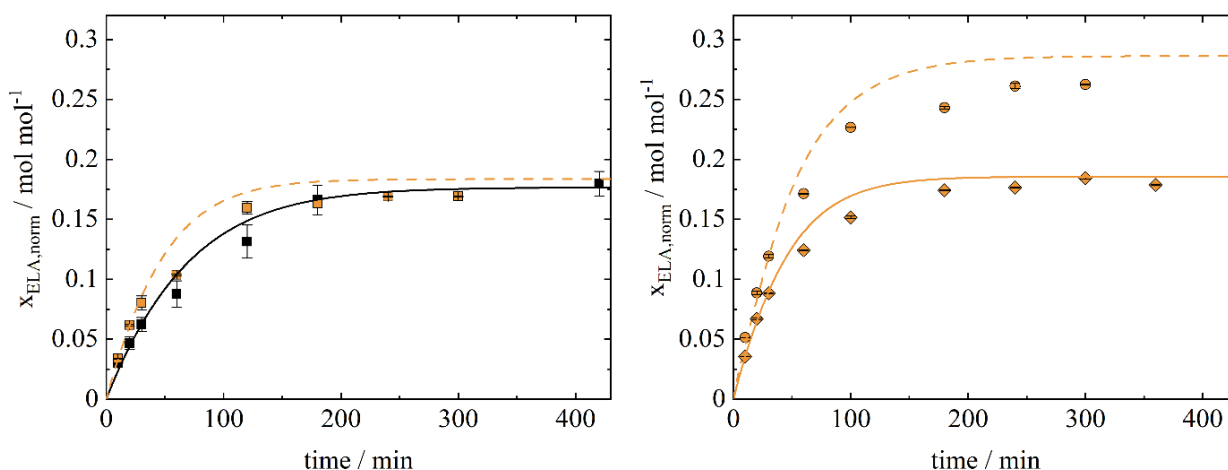
17 In a first step of this work, we applied kinetic model I from Lemberg and Sadowski [14] for the  
18 esterification of LA with EtOH. The prediction accuracy of the reaction equilibrium and kinetics of LA  
19 esterification in GVL cosolvent was validated. Further, we studied the limitations of the calculation  
20 approach and implemented a new modeling approach.

21

## 22 State-of-the-Art Kinetic Model I

23 In this section, the results of the reaction kinetics based on Eq. (11) are presented based on Lemberg and  
24 Sadowski's approach (model I). The results were obtained without accounting for the acid catalyst  
25 ( $\text{H}_2\text{SO}_4$ ) and without the ions ( $\text{H}_3\text{O}^+$ ,  $\text{HSO}_4^-$ ). Lemberg and Sadowski [14] showed that the model could  
26 precisely predict solvent effects on the esterification of acetic acid with ethanol for all examined  
27 solvents.

28



1 Figure 2: Normalized (see Eq.(9)) ethyl levulinate mole fraction of the esterification reaction in excess of EtOH  
 2 (black) and with 14 mol% of GVL (orange). Experimental data <sup>[13]</sup>: EtOH1, black squares; GVL4, orange squares;  
 3 GVL2, diamonds, EtOH:LA = 4; GVL5, circles, EtOH:LA = 2 (all conditions are listed in Table S4). Error bars  
 4 give the standard deviations out of three measurements. Lines are modeling using ePC-SAFT advanced according  
 5 to Eq. (11) using the parameters from Tables S1–S3. Solid lines:  $k$  was fitted to experimental values using Eq.  
 6 (11), dashed lines: predictions using model I.

7 In the following, it will be discussed whether the kinetic model I that is based on the activities of the  
 8 neutral components allows predicting the solvent influence of GVL on the reaction kinetics of LA  
 9 esterification. Figure 2 (left) shows the normalized ELA mole fraction over the reaction time for an  
 10 experiment with and without GVL. In Figure 2 (right), two experiments with additional amount of GVL  
 11 at different initial ratios of EtOH to LA are shown. It can be seen in Figure 2 that the predicted reaction  
 12 rates match the experimental results reasonably. This confirms that kinetic model I combined with ePC-  
 13 SAFT advanced allows predicting the GVL effect on the reaction rate and equilibrium of LA  
 14 esterification using Eq. (11). The slight deviation between the prediction and experiments at equilibrium  
 15 results from the uncertainty of the equilibrium constant, cf. Figure 1. Besides the solvent influence, the  
 16 effect of initial concentration ratios of EtOH to LA was also predicted very well, even at the presence  
 17 of GVL cosolvent (Figure 2 - right). One experimental kinetic curve was required to determine the rate  
 18 constant  $k$ , and  $k$  was then considered to be solvent-independent in the predictions. The predictions were  
 19 performed for different conditions, such as initial ratios of EtOH:LA and adding GVL cosolvent.  
 20 However, kinetic model I is only valid at constant catalyst concentration, as catalyst influence on the  
 21 reacting agents is not included in the kinetic model I. This is briefly illustrated in the SI, cf. Section S3  
 22 and Figure S1. The conventional solution to this shortcoming is to fit new rate constants  $k$  for each  
 23 experiment with a different catalyst concentration, which is not in the focus of this work.

## 25 Kinetic Model II – Influence of Ions on Reactants

26 The big drawback of the kinetic model I described in Section 0 is the inability to describe the effect of  
 27 catalyst concentration on reaction kinetics. The idea behind model II was to account for the influence of

ions originating from the catalyst on the reactant activities. Prior to this, knowledge on the dissociation equilibrium of the acid catalyst was needed. Therefore, an activity-based equilibrium constant using literature  $pK_a$  value of  $H_2SO_4$  in water <sup>[23]</sup> ( $pK_a = -3$ ) the first dissociation step of  $H_2SO_4$  was calculated. The second dissociation step of  $H_2SO_4$  was neglected. The concentrations of  $H_3O^+$  and  $HSO_4^-$  in the reaction mixtures are listed in Table S5. To summarize the results, we found that these ions only contribute to  $< 1$  mol% of the overall acid concentration at the initial reaction conditions. This result is in agreement what we found in previous work on ePC-SAFT predicted  $pK_a$  values in different solvents compared to experimental data <sup>[13]</sup>. The ability to predict the solvent-dependent acid dissociation over the reaction coordinate then allowed us modeling the activity coefficients of the reacting agents including interactions to the catalyst species. The activity coefficients calculated with and without influence of the catalyst species are presented in Figure 3.

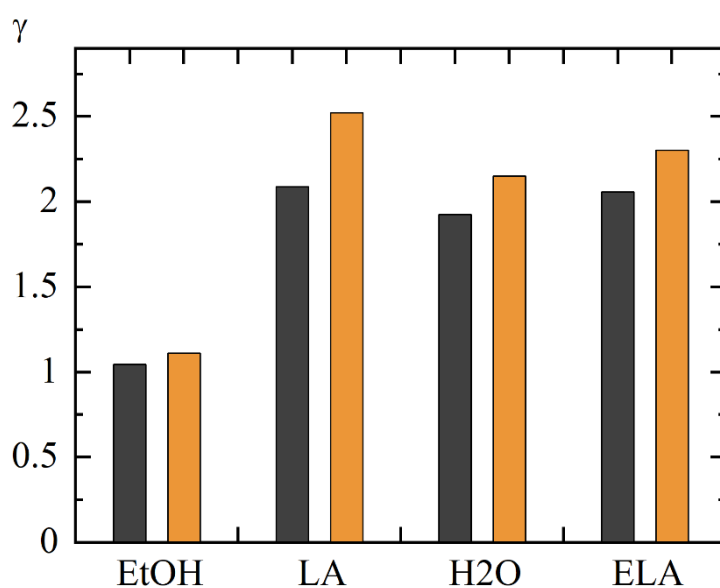


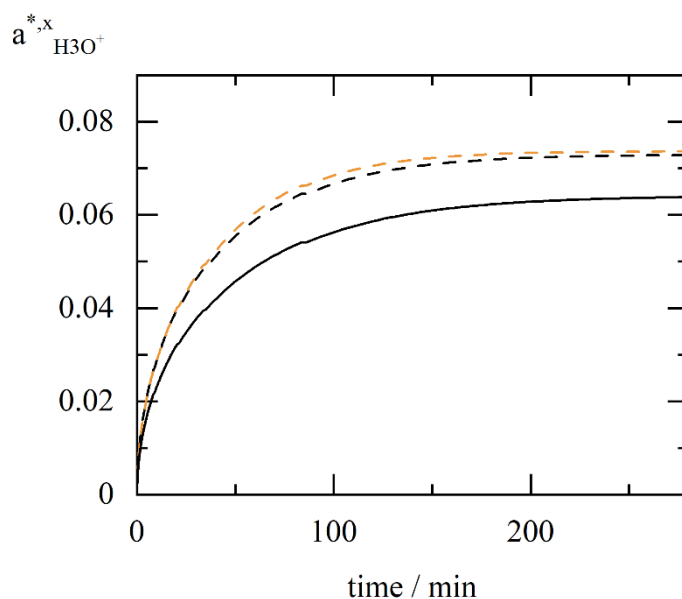
Figure 3: Activity coefficients of the reacting agents belonging to the equilibrium mole fractions of the experiment GVL4 listed in Table S4. Grey: excluding the presence of acid and ions (kinetic modeling approach I), orange: including effect of acid and ions on the activity coefficients (kinetic modeling approach II) using the ePC-SAFT parameters from Tables S1 – S3.

Figure 3 shows that the acid species (neutral  $H_2SO_4$  and ions  $H_3O^+$  and  $HSO_4^-$ ) do not strongly influence the activity coefficients of the reacting agents. As a result the equilibrium as well as the kinetics using Eq. (11) do not change much upon addition of the rather low catalyst concentration, and the predicted  $k$  values of modeling approach I and II are very similar. This is an expected result as by the very low concentration of catalyst used in the experiments (Table S4, EtOH1). To conclude, a precise kinetic model of the acid-catalyzed esterification reaction must not only account for the acid effect on the interactions of reacting agents, rather it must consider the effect of catalyst on reaction rate. Therefore, proton activity along the reaction coordinate is required.

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## 1 Kinetic Model III – Influence Proton Activity on Reaction Rate

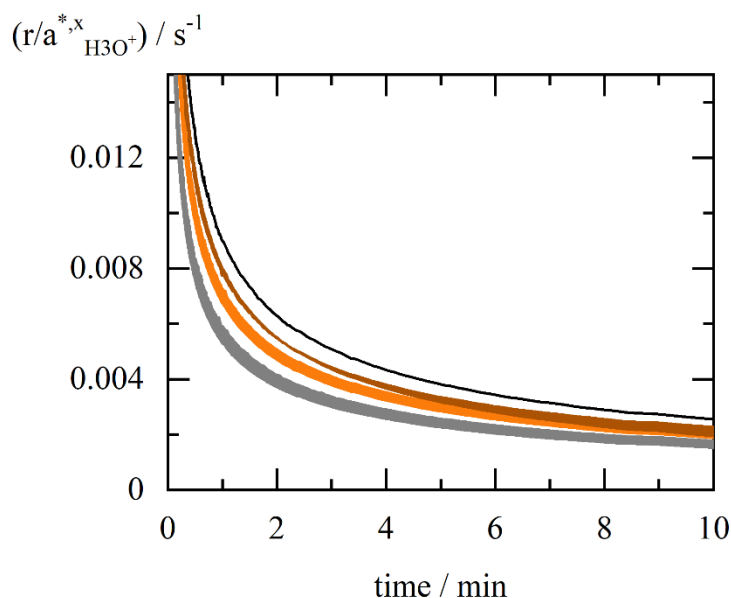
2 In this section, a new calculation approach considering the catalyst concentration and dissociation  
 3 equilibrium of the catalyst in the kinetic expression is presented. Kinetic model III accounts for  
 4 dissociation of  $H_2SO_4$  in the reaction mixture combined with the calculation of the proton activity using  
 5 ePC-SAFT advanced. In the literature, catalyst or proton concentration has already been included within  
 6 kinetic expressions [29], [30], [15], [16]. However, in this work we applied an activity-based approach instead  
 7 of a concentration-based approach to account for catalyst effects on reaction rate. In a first step, proton  
 8 activity was predicted with ePC-SAFT advanced over the reaction coordinate as shown in Figure 4.



9 *Figure 4: Proton activity ( $a_{H_3O^+}^{*,x}$ ) vs. reaction time of LA esterification of three experiments at 323 K and 1 bar.*  
 10 *Black: GVL-free with excess of EtOH; orange: 14 mol% GVL; dashed lines:  $x_{H_2SO_4} = 0.006$  (GVL4, EtOH1),*  
 11 *solid line:  $x_{H_2SO_4} = 0.003$  (EtOH6). All lines are ePC-SAFT advanced calculations using the parameters from*  
 12 *Tables S1 – S3.*

13  
 14 Figure 4 shows the proton activity of different experiments at three different catalyst concentrations.  
 15 The proton activity was calculated with ePC-SAFT advanced using the mole fraction of  $H_3O^+$  ions  
 16 (obtained from solving the dissociation equilibria) and the rational activity coefficient  $\gamma_{H_3O^+}^{*,x}$ . It can be  
 17 observed that proton activity is higher for higher initial catalyst concentrations, which is an expected  
 18 result. However, proton activity does not double upon doubling the concentration of catalyst. Further,  
 19 adding GVL solvent does not have a significant effect on the proton activity compared to GVL-free  
 20 reactions. Available values for proton activity then allowed establishing the quotient of reaction rate  
 21 over proton activity (Eq.(12)). The resulting curves of  $\frac{r}{a_{H_3O^+}^{*,x}}$  are shown in Figure 5, and the relation turns

1 out to be a promising tool for a predictive kinetic model as all the curves fall back to one line for one  
 2 isotherm.



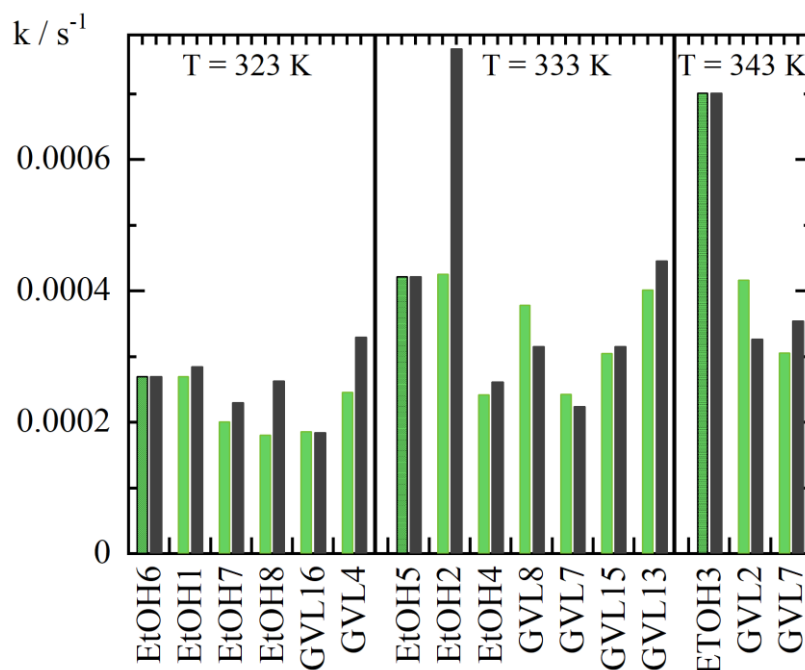
3 *Figure 5: Ratio of reaction rate  $r$  to proton activity  $a_{\text{H}_3\text{O}^+}^{*,x}$  over the reaction time for all experimental conditions*  
 4 *from Table S4 clustered at different temperatures (grey: 323.15 K, orange: 333.15 K, red: 343.15 K, black*  
 5 *353.15 K). The uncertainty is represented by the thickness of the lines. All lines are ePC-SAFT advanced*  
 6 *predictions using the parameters from Tables S1 – S3.*

7 Figure 5 shows the ratio of reaction rate  $r$  to proton activity  $a_{\text{H}_3\text{O}^+}^{*,x}$  over the reaction coordinate of LA  
 8 esterification. The graph contains each experiment listed in Table S4. Promisingly, all the curves are  
 9 equal within uncertainty at isothermal conditions despite the fact that each experiment contained  
 10 different catalyst concentration, different initial molar ratios, and w/o GVL cosolvent. This is considered  
 11 to be suitable for establishing a predictive model. Therefore, Eq. (12) is rearranged to the rate constant  
 12  $k$  (Eq. (13)).

$$k = \frac{r}{a_{\text{H}_3\text{O}^+}^{*,x}} \cdot (\gamma_A \cdot x_A \cdot \gamma_B \cdot x_B \cdot - \frac{1}{K_a} \cdot \gamma_C \cdot x_C \cdot \gamma_D \cdot x_D)^{-1} \quad (13)$$

13 Eq. (13) was used to determine the rate constants for each experiment. Compared to the procedure  
 14 mentioned before (cf. Figure 4) the rate constant was fitted only to one  $\frac{r}{a_{\text{H}_3\text{O}^+}^{*,x}}$  curve at each temperature.  
 15 That is, only one experimental kinetic curve was necessary to determine  $k$ , which was then used to  
 16 predict kinetic curves at different conditions regarding catalyst concentration of reacting agent  
 17 concentration or presence of GVL cosolvent. The modeling results for some selected rate constants  $k$   
 18 are shown in Figure 6 (all results are listed in Table S6)

19



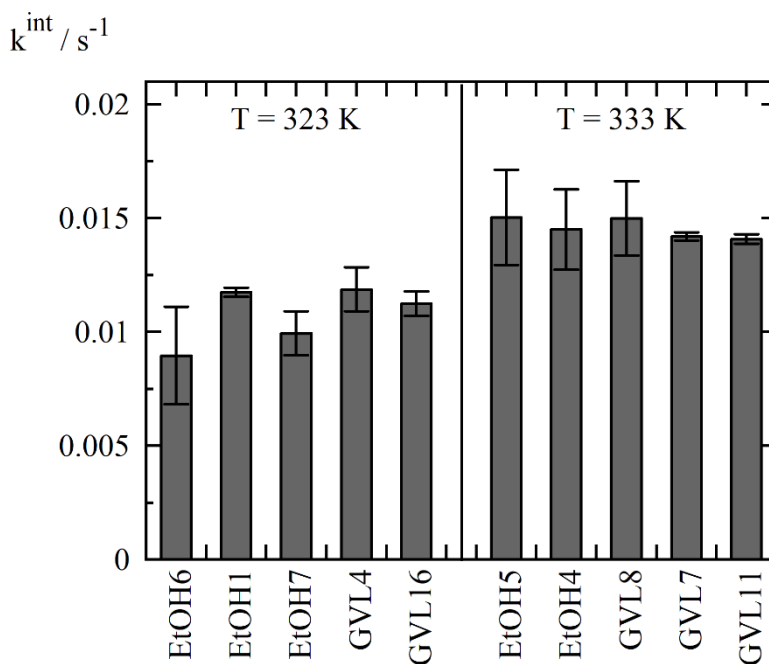
1 Figure 6: Rate constants  $k$  for selected experimental conditions listed in Table S6. Green: predicted rate constants  
 2 using kinetic model III according to Eq. (13). The  $\frac{r}{a_{\text{H}_3\text{O}^+}^{*x}}$  curves of the shaded bars (EtOH6, EtOH5, EtOH3) were  
 3 used as reference into ePC-SAFT advanced with the parameters from Tables S1 – S3. Grey: each rate constant  
 4 was fitted to a single kinetic curve using kinetic model I and the experimental data from Table S4.

5  
 6 Figure 6 compares the rate constants  $k$  between kinetic model I and kinetic model III, and the  
 7 experiments behind contained different amount of catalyst. Kinetic model I is only valid at one catalyst  
 8 concentration. Thus, the  $k$  values of kinetic model I was fitted to each kinetic curve with a new catalyst  
 9 concentration. Obviously, the  $k$  values obtained by this are in good agreement to the  $k$  values of the  
 10 kinetic model III, which is predictive in catalyst concentration. This proves the feasibility of kinetic  
 11 model III towards predicting the influence of catalyst concentration on reaction rates. In a further step,  
 12 the  $k$  values shown in Figure 6 were related to proton activity in order to obtain “intrinsic” rate constants  
 13  $k^{int}$  by multiplying with proton activity according to Eq. (14).

$$k^{int} = k \cdot a_{\text{H}_3\text{O}^+}^{*x} = r \cdot (\gamma_A \cdot x_A \cdot \gamma_B \cdot x_B \cdot \frac{1}{K_a} \cdot \gamma_C \cdot x_C \cdot \gamma_D \cdot x_D)^{-1} \quad (14)$$

14 The resulting  $k^{int}$  represents a reaction rate constant that is independent of solvent, of concentrations,  
 15 and of catalyst. The resulting  $k^{int}$  values are shown in Figure 7.





1 *Figure 7: Intrinsic rate constants for selected experimental conditions (cf. Table S4) calculated using ePC-SAFT*  
 2 *advanced according to Eq. (14). Error bars result from the experimental uncertainties shown in Figure S3.*

3 Interestingly, all the intrinsic rate constants  $k^{int}$  related with proton activity according to Eq. (14) are  
 4 equal within uncertainty for isothermal conditions. This is the reason for the result shown in Figure 6  
 5 that allows predicting the kinetics of the LA esterification at any conditions. In order to describe the  
 6 temperature dependency of the intrinsic rate constants, the Arrhenius approach was used with  $k^{int}$  as  
 7 input data, cf. Figure S4, yielding an activation energy  $E_A = 30.28 \text{ kJ mol}^{-1}$ , which fits to the literature  
 8 data from Russo et al. [28]. The deviation within the rate constants originates from experimental  
 9 uncertainties, cf. Figure S3, which then are found in the modeling results.

10 Quantitative evaluation of the  $k$  values was obtained by the average absolute relative deviation (AARD)  
 11 related to the mean value of experimental data. AARD1 relates to the ePC-SAFT advanced predictions  
 12 used by kinetic model III, Eq. (12), while AARD2 corresponds to the classically-obtained  $k$  values by  
 13 fitting to kinetic curves at different catalyst concentrations (kinetic model I, Eq. (11)):

$$AARD1 = 100 \cdot \frac{1}{NP} \cdot \sum_{n=1}^{NP} \left| 1 - \frac{x_n^{ePC-SAFT, fitted}}{x_n^{exp}} \right| \quad (15)$$

$$AARD2 = 100 \cdot \frac{1}{NP} \cdot \sum_{n=1}^{NP} \left| 1 - \frac{x_n^{ePC-SAFT, predicted}}{x_n^{exp}} \right| \quad (16)$$

14  
 15 Here,  $x_n^{ePC-SAFT}$  represents the mole fraction of ELA obtained by kinetic model I with fitted  $k$  values  
 16 (Eq. (15)) and predicted kinetic model III  $k$  values (Eq. (16)) using ePC-SAFT advanced, and  $x_n^{exp}$   
 17 denotes the respective experimental value. NP denotes the sum of the available experimental data points

1 n. The calculated AARD1 and AARD2 values based on the resulting mole fraction of ELA for each  
2 experiment are listed in Table 1.

3  
4 *Table 1: Calculated AARD for the resulting mole fraction of ethyl levulinate. AARD1 corresponds to kinetic model*  
5 *I, Eq. (11) and (15), while AARD2 corresponds to kinetic model III, Eq. (12) and (16).*

Exp.	AARD1 / %	AARD2 / %
ETOH6	10.78	-
ETOH1	6.54	6.40
ETOH7	14.52	13.96
ETOH8	5.14	11.46
GVL4	9.82	12.32
GVL16	15.39	15.04
ETOH5	7.68	-
ETOH2	9.52	35.15
ETOH4	10.21	13.57
GVL8	12.26	15.01
GVL3	17.53	18.52
GVL7	7.25	12.57
GVL13	4.73	6.06
GVL15	7.71	9.43
ETOH3	10.70	
GVL2	6.37	8.71
GVL5	11.35	14.64
Avg.	9.85	13.77

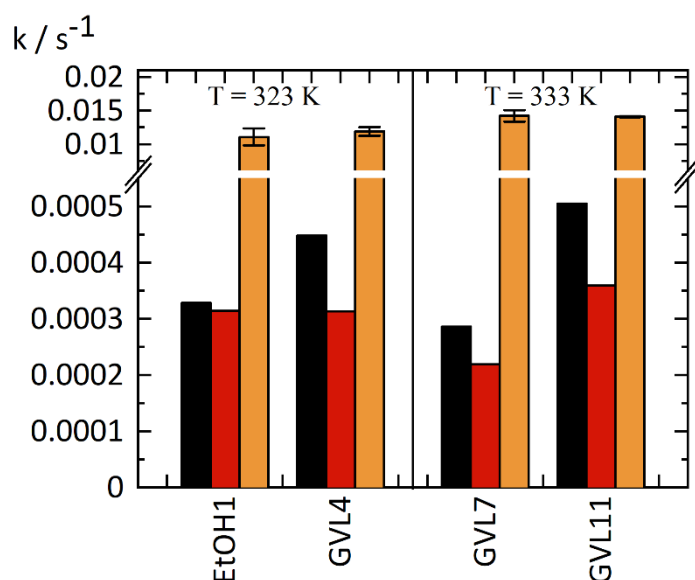
6  
7 It is evident to see from the AARD values that fitting a new kinetic constant to each of the experimental  
8 kinetic curve of LA esterification (kinetic model I) is more accurate than predicting the kinetic curves  
9 using kinetic model III, which uses only one kinetic curve for model validation and then predicts all  
10 other kinetic curves. This is an expected result. Still, the general deviation of both models to the  
11 experimental results is in the order of magnitude of 10%. Some results show (e.g., Figure S3)  
12 underpredicted kinetics at reaction times of 60 – 200 min, which results in quite high AARD values.  
13 Nevertheless, the kinetic curves are usually in good agreement with the experimental data at the very  
14 beginning of the reactions. Thus, kinetic model III proves to be feasible for the prediction of reaction  
15 rates at all reaction conditions considered in this work. Kinetic model III combines the benefits of the  
16 model developed from Lemberg and Sadowski<sup>[14]</sup> to account for the reacting agent activities and the  
17 most recent ePC-SAFT advanced development by Bülow et al.<sup>[19]</sup> to account for the proton activity.

18

19

## 1 General Importance of Activity-Based Approaches

2 This section outlines the importance and the benefits of an activity-based kinetic approach such as the  
 3 newly developed kinetic model III. In the following, the different kinetic approaches from the literature  
 4 (classical concentration based, activity-based according to Lemberg and Sadowski<sup>[14]</sup>) are compared to  
 5 the newly developed kinetic model III. Therefore, a selection of kinetic constants for experiments with  
 6 GVL solvent and with varying catalyst concentrations are shown in Figure 8.



7 *Figure 8: Rate constants for LA esterification at two different temperatures obtained by different kinetic models.*  
 8 *Black:  $k$  obtained by a concentration-based approach (Eq. (10)), red:  $k$  obtained by the activity-based approach*  
 9 *according to model I (Eq.(11)) , orange:  $k^{int}$  obtained by newly developed kinetic model III (Eq.(12)).*

10 Figure 8 illustrates the influences of GVL cosolvent and of catalyst concentration on the rate constants  
 11  $k$  for four selected experiments (EtOH1 and GVL4 at 323 K and GVL7 and GVL11 at 333 K). As  
 12 required for the kinetic model III,  $k^{int}$  must be independent of solvent and catalyst; obviously, this has  
 13 been successfully reached within our work. Further, the concentration-based approach is expected to  
 14 require  $k$  values that depend on all different conditions, such as concentration, cosolvent addition and  
 15 catalyst variation. Obviously, this expected result could be proven according to the results in Figure 8.  
 16 Another expected result is the ability of Lemberg and Sadowski's kinetic model I to predict (co)solvent  
 17 effects on  $k$ . As it can be observed, we indeed obtained constant  $k$  values for EtOH1 and GVL4, where  
 18 the only difference is the additional presence of 14 mol% of GVL cosolvent in the experiment GVL4  
 19 while keeping catalyst concentration constant. Finally, the two experiments GVL7 and GVL11 are  
 20 considered, which were conducted at different catalyst concentrations. As expected, the kinetic model I  
 21 fails in predicting the catalyst effect on kinetics as the  $k$  values do significantly depend on catalyst. Only  
 22 the newly developed kinetic model III allows using kinetic constants that do not depend on the  
 23 composition at all at constant temperature, and these values were denoted  $k^{int}$ .

## 1 Conclusion

2 In this work, we compared different kinetic models to describe the influences of GVL cosolvent and  
3 catalyst on the kinetics of LA esterification with ethanol at different temperatures. We successfully  
4 applied the thermodynamic activity-based approach Lemberg and Sadowski<sup>[14]</sup> for the prediction of  
5 solvent effects on both, reaction equilibrium and reaction rates of the esterification reaction. It turned  
6 out that yield and reaction rate was increased by using 14 mol% GVL as an additional solvent. Further,  
7 we utilized the recently developed equation of state ePC-SAFT advanced to calculate the dissociation  
8 of  $H_2SO_4$  in the reaction mixture. This enabled predicting proton activity coefficients in order to relate  
9 reaction rate to proton activity. Combining this with the existing model from Lemberg and Sadowski  
10 was successfully applied to predict kinetics as function of catalyst concentration, and the predictions  
11 were validated by experimental literature data. The approach was used to provide “intrinsic” kinetic  
12 constants, which are independent of solvent, concentrations, and catalyst. The main advantage of the  
13 presented kinetic approach is to reduce significantly the number of estimated kinetic constants. Only  
14 one experimental reaction was required at constant temperature for the prediction of the kinetics at any  
15 different condition. In contrast, state-of-the-art methods require one reaction constant per catalyst  
16 concentration. To conclude, thermodynamic modeling of both, dissociation equilibrium of the acid  
17 catalyst and activity-based treatment of the LA esterification using ePC-SAFT advanced enabled the  
18 successful prediction of the equilibrium compositions and kinetics as function of temperature,  
19 concentration, cosolvent addition and catalyst concentration.

## 21 Acknowledgement

22 This research was funded, in whole or in part, by the DFG (German Research Foundation) and the ANR (French  
23 National Research Agency) within the project MUST (Microfluidics for Structure-reactivity relationships aided  
24 by Thermodynamics & kinetics) [ANR-20-CE92-0002-01 - Project number 446436621] and HE 7165/10-1.

## 26 Conflict of Interest

27 The authors declare no conflict of interest.

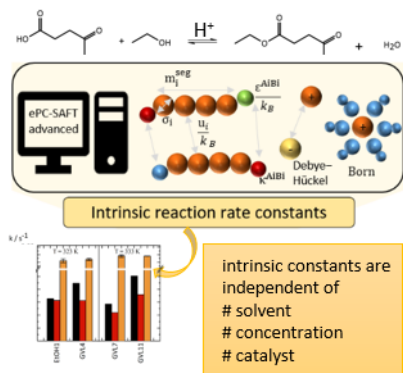
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- 31

1 **Table of contents entry**

2 The thermodynamic model ePC-SAFT advanced was used to predict the activities of the reactants and  
 3 of the catalyst at various conditions for the homogeneously acid-catalyzed esterification of levulinic  
 4 acid with ethanol. The approach provides “intrinsic” kinetic constants, which are independent of  
 5 solvent, concentrations, and catalyst.



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 7  
 8