

Sustainable lightweight self-compacting concrete with coal bottom ash as aggregate and cement replacement

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Abstract

This study aims to examine the impact of utilizing coal bottom ash (CBA) sourced from an inactive power plant on the fresh and hardened properties of lightweight self-compacting concrete (LWSCC). To evaluate the workability of the LWSCC mixtures, slump flow, L-box, and sieve segregation tests were performed. The mechanical and physical properties were assessed through dry density, compressive strength and ultrasonic pulse velocity (UPV) tests. A total of five concrete mixes were developed: a control mix and four additional mixtures in which natural coarse aggregate was fully substituted with coal bottom ash aggregate (CCBA). Additionally, Portland cement was partially replaced with coal bottom ash powder (CBAP) at levels of 15%, 20%, and 25%. The results indicated that the use of CBA as a coarse aggregate enhanced the workability of LWSCC, though workability decreased as the proportion of CBAP increased. Nonetheless, the workability of all mixes remained compliant with the standards specified by the French Association of Civil Engineering (AFGC). Minimal variations in dry density and compressive strength were observed with the incorporation of CBA; however, these values remained within the acceptable limits for structural lightweight concrete. Furthermore, the UPV test demonstrated favorable durability for all LWSCC mixtures. Strong linear correlations were identified among the various measured properties, reinforcing the conclusion that CBA serves as an effective replacement for natural coarse aggregate. Moreover, the use of 15% CBAP as a partial substitute for Portland cement proved to be a feasible option for producing sustainable LWSCC.

Keywords: Coal bottom ash, Lightweight self-compacting concrete, Workability, physical-mechanical performance, Sustainability.

1. Introduction

The growing demand for concrete, driven by population growth and expanding development, is accelerating the depletion of natural resources (Agha *et al.*, 2024). The rate at which materials are extracted for concrete production far surpasses the natural replenishment of these resources. This extensive reliance on raw materials within the construction sector poses significant challenges in terms of sustainability and economic efficiency (Ankur & Singh., 2024). In the 21st century, addressing waste reduction and advancing eco-friendly technologies has become imperative. The cement and concrete industries, in particular, face increasing criticism due to their substantial contribution to global CO₂ emissions. These emissions largely stem from the energy-intensive production of Portland cement and the large-scale extraction of natural aggregates (Aygun *et al.*, 2024). Such practices not only exacerbate environmental degradation but also raise serious concerns regarding the long-term sustainability of finite natural resources. In response to these challenges, it is crucial to explore alternative materials that promote sustainable development by reducing the consumption of natural resources and safeguarding the interests of future generations. Over the years, various industrial and agricultural wastes have been incorporated into concrete formulations to mitigate environmental impacts and lower production costs (Hamada *et al.*, 2022).

These waste materials can function as either binders or aggregates in concrete mixtures. Among these, coal bottom ash (CBA) emerges as a promising by-product available in substantial quantities worldwide, with potential applications in civil engineering (Aygun *et al.*, 2024, Hamada *et al.*, 2022, N. Singh *et al.*, 2020). CBA is generated as a waste by-product during the combustion of coal in power plants, which produce significant volumes of ash (Zainal Abidin *et al.*, 2015). The disposal of this ash presents major environmental challenges, as it is often deposited in landfills, exacerbating ecological concerns.

In Algeria, the issue is particularly pressing due to over 50 years of coal mining, resulting in the accumulation of slag heaps with an estimated volume of approximately 3.7 million cubic meters (Zaouai *et al.*, 2020). The incorporation of CBA into concrete production offers a cost-effective and environmentally sustainable solution for waste management. Simultaneously, it helps conserve natural resources and advances efforts toward sustainable development.

The existing literature indicates that coal bottom ash (CBA) can be effectively utilized in concrete, with numerous studies demonstrating satisfactory mechanical properties, including compressive, tensile, and flexural strength (Park *et al.*, 2009, Rafieizonooz *et al.*, 2016, Kim & Lee, 2011, Ankur & Singh., 2024.; M. Singh & Siddique, 2014; N. Singh *et al.*, 2018, Kurama *et al.*, 2009, Mangi *et al.*, 2019). However, research exploring CBA's potential as both a lightweight coarse aggregate and a partial cement replacement in self-compacting concrete (SCC) remains limited. Most investigations have concentrated on its application as a fine aggregate (Farhan Hamzah *et al.*, 2015; Hamzah *et al.*, 2016; Ibrahim *et al.*, 2015; Jamaluddin *et al.*, 2016.; Zainal Abidin *et al.*, 2014a, 2015b, Kumar & Singh, 2020; Meena *et al.*, 2024; Raju *et al.*, 2022).

Self-compacting concrete (SCC) is characterized by its high workability, allowing it to flow effortlessly through densely reinforced structures under its own weight, filling voids without segregation or material separation. Its stability is achieved through a high paste content and optimized particle distribution, eliminating the need for mechanical compaction (Okamura & Ouchi, 2003). A distinguishing feature of SCC compared to conventional concrete is its increased density, largely due to the high quantities of Portland cement, chemical admixtures, and aggregates used.

To address the environmental and sustainability challenges associated with SCC, the partial or complete replacement of natural aggregates with lightweight aggregates (LWA), along with the incorporation of mineral admixtures from industrial by-products, offers a practical solution. This approach facilitates the development of lightweight self-compacting concrete (LWSCC) (Nahhab & Ketab, 2020; Uysal & Yilmaz, 2011) LWSCC combines the advantages of lightweight materials in the hardened state with the desirable fresh-state properties of SCC (Renukuntla & Murthi, 2024). Replacing normal-weight gravel with lightweight aggregates in SCC formulations is a widely adopted strategy for producing LWSCC (Al-Kabi & Awad, 2024; N. Hilal *et al.*, 2024).

Previous studies have extensively explored the incorporation of various natural and artificial lightweight aggregates, as well as industrial and agricultural waste materials, in self-compacting concrete (SCC) (Ting *et al.*, 2019). For example, Hwang & Hung, (2005) investigated the use of fine sediment from reservoirs as a replacement for coarse aggregates in SCC. Similarly, Bogas *et al.*, (2012) and Nahhab and Ketab (Nahhab & Ketab, 2020) examined the inclusion of expanded clay as a coarse aggregate. Several researchers, including (Topçu & Uygunoğlu, 2010, Uygunoğlu & Topçu, 2009), Kurt *et al.*, 2016), have studied the use of pumice as a lightweight coarse aggregate. Furthermore, Wu *et al.*, (2009) and Lo *et al.*, (2007) employed expanded shale as a lightweight aggregate (LWA) in SCC. Dolatabad *et al.*, (2020) analyzed the effects of incorporating lightweight expanded clay aggregate (LECA), scoria, and perlite on the fresh and hardened properties of lightweight self-compacting concrete (LWSCC). Agricultural waste materials have also been integrated into SCC, as demonstrated by Kanadasan *et al.* (Kanadasan & Razak, 2014), Ting *et al.*, (2020), and Hilal *et al.*, (2021), who utilized palm oil clinker, oil palm shell, and walnut shells as aggregate replacements. The use of expanded polystyrene beads as lightweight aggregates has also been investigated by Medher *et al.*, (2021) and Hilal *et al.*, (2021). Additionally, Kumar *et al.*, (2024) explored the application of sintered fly ash aggregate (SFAA) as a complete substitute for natural coarse aggregates to produce environmentally friendly LWSCC mixes.

This study aimed to evaluate the feasibility of utilizing Algerian coal bottom ash (CBA) as a replacement for coarse aggregate and as a partial substitute for cement in the production of lightweight self-compacting concrete (LWSCC). The research focused on both the fresh properties namely, slump flow, filling capacity, and stability and the hardened properties, including compressive strength, dry density and ultrasonic pulse velocity (UPV).

2. Materials and methods

2.1 Materials

Cement: In this study, Ordinary Portland Cement (CEM I 42.5 N), which complies with both the Algerian standard NA 442 and the European standard EN 197-1, was utilized. The chemical composition of the cement is presented in Table 1.

Table 1 - The chemical compositions of the used cement and CBA

Composition (%)	SiO ₂	Al ₂ O ₃	Fe ₂ O ₃	CaO	MgO	SO ₃	Na ₂ O	K ₂ O	LOI
Cement	18.91	4.30	4.74	60.33	3.82	2.29	0.17	0.84	<0.5
CBA	44.78	15.79	22.90	2.47	1.43	4.37	0.16	2.38	1.2

Aggregate: The natural fine aggregate (NFA 0/3) used in this study was river sand sourced from the Bechar region in Algeria. The coarse aggregate (NCA) was obtained from crushed limestone from a quarry in Bechar, available in two size ranges: 3/8 and 8/15 mm. Coal bottom ash (CBA), collected from a decommissioned thermal power plant in Algeria, was manually crushed and further processed using a jaw crusher. After sieving, the CBA was classified into coarse aggregate fractions of 3/8 and 8/15 mm. Additionally, the finer portion of the CBA that passed through an 80 µm sieve (CBAP) was used as a partial replacement for cement (Figure 1).

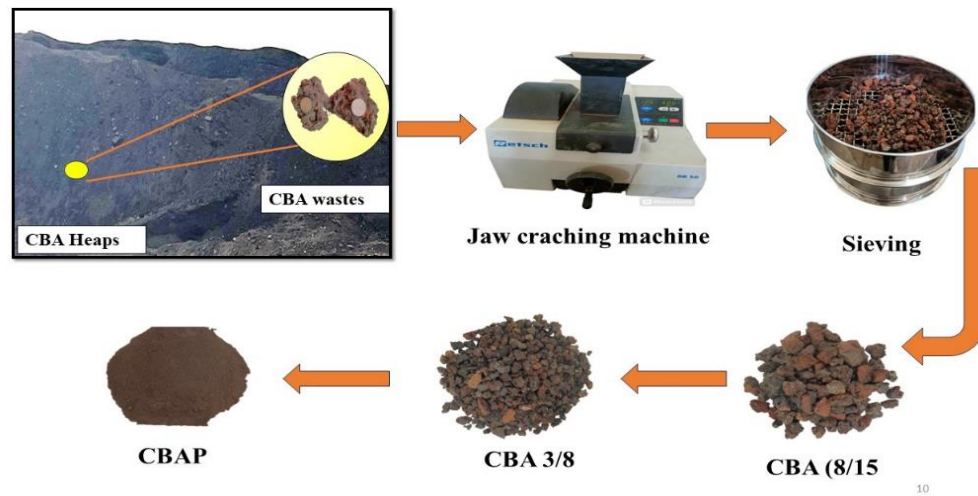


Figure 1 – Production of CBA aggregate.

The physical properties of the aggregates are provided in Table 2, while their particle size distribution is illustrated in Figure 2. The chemical composition of the coal bottom ash (CBA) was determined through X-ray fluorescence (XRF) spectroscopy, with the results summarized in Table 1. The analysis reveals that silica (SiO_2), iron oxide (Fe_2O_3), and alumina (Al_2O_3) are the predominant constituents of CBA, collectively accounting for 83.47% of its total composition. According to the ASTM C618 standard, this composition categorizes CBA as a Class "F" pozzolanic material. A comprehensive overview of the chemical properties of CBA can be found in Table 1.

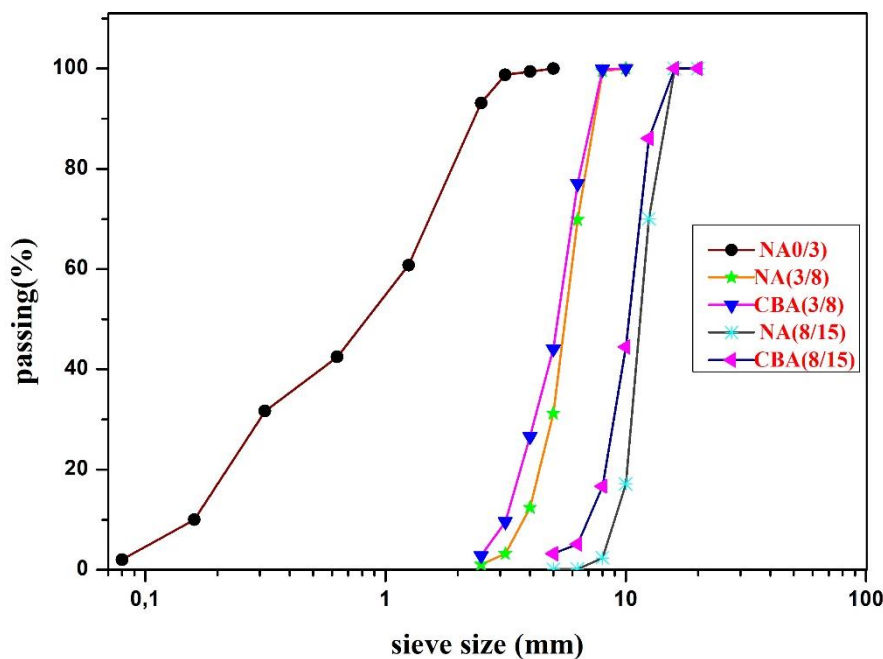
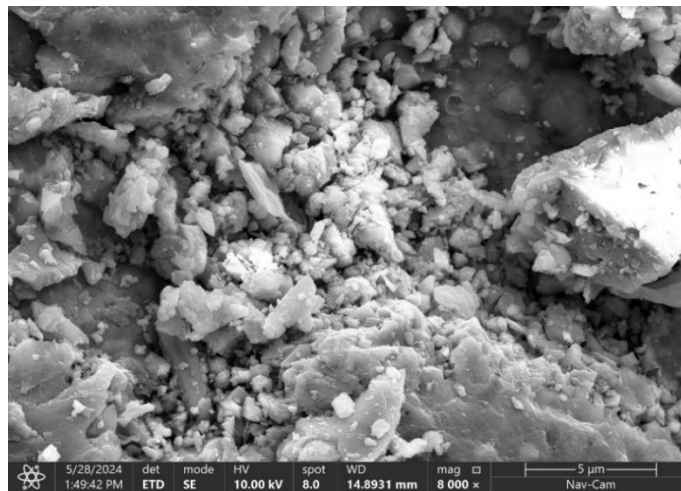
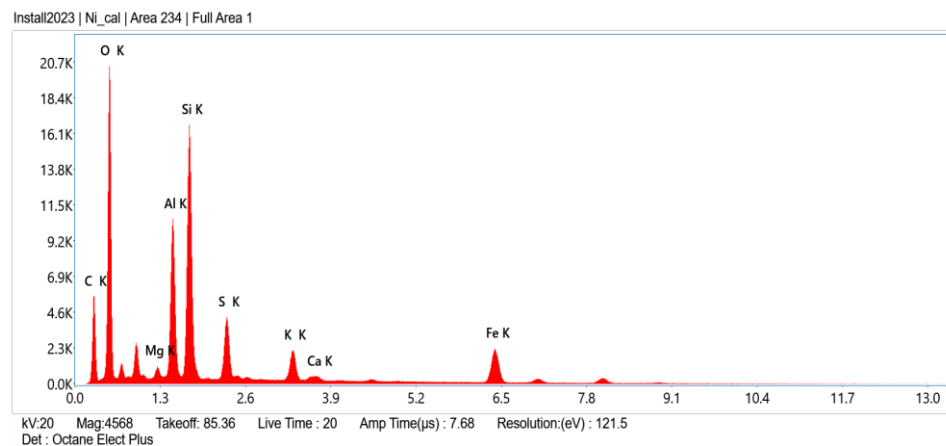


Figure 2 - Aggregates granulometric curves.

Table 2 - Physical and mechanical properties of used aggregate

Properties	0/3 NFA	3/8 NCA	3/8 CCBA	8/15 NCA	8/15 CCBA
Bulk density (g/cm ³)	1.6	1.39	0.70	1.40	0.66
Absolute density (g/cm ³)	2.5	2.66	1.93	2.67	1.81
Fineness modulus	2.53	/	/	/	/
Sand equivalent (%)	80.3	/	/	/	/
Water absorption (%)	1.62	0.85	7	0.95	8
Los Angeles coefficient (%)	/	21.56	27.6	20.72	27.9

Figure 3 presents a scanning electron microscopy (SEM) image of the coal bottom ash (CBA), which reveals irregular and porous particles with a complex surface texture. Additionally, energy dispersive spectroscopy (EDS) was employed to analyze the elemental composition of CBA at a microscopic level. As depicted in Figure 4, the primary elements identified in CBA include oxygen, aluminum, and silicon.

**Figure 3 - CBA Scanning electron microscope image.****Figure 4 - CBA EDS analysis.**

Superplasticizer and mixing water : To achieve optimal workability, the superplasticizer "MAX SUPERFLOW S180," manufactured by the Algerian company "Technachem," was utilized in this study. This superplasticizer complies with NF EN 934-2 standards. The mixing water was obtained from the treated drinking water supply system of Bechar.

2.2. Mix proportion of SCC

Following the guidelines established by (AFGC, 2008), an initial reference mix without coal bottom ash was prepared. Subsequently, the natural coarse aggregate was completely replaced with coal bottom ash (CBA), and coal bottom ash powder (CBAP) was incorporated in varying proportions, ranging from 15% to 25% in 5% increments. The coal bottom ash used in these mixes was in a Saturated Surface Dry (SSD) condition. The different mixes were designated as CSCC-0%, CSCC-15%, CSCC-20%, and CSCC-25%, reflecting the percentage of CBAP replacement. The quantities of materials used in each mix are detailed in Table 3.

Table 3 - SCC composition.

Composition	RSCC	CSCC-0%	CBASCC-15%	CBASCC-20%	CBASCC-25%
Cement (kg/m ³)	520	520	442	416	390
CBAP (kg/m ³)		/	78	104	130
NFA (kg/m ³)	900	900	900	900	900
NCA 3/8 (kg/m ³)	150	/	/	/	/
CCBA3/8 (kg/m ³)	/	111.36	111.36	111.36	111.36
NCA 8/15 (kg/m ³)	580	/	/	/	/
CCBA (kg/m ³)		394.65	394.65	394.65	394.65
Water (kg/m ³)	256	256	260	260	260
Superplasticizer (%)	2%	2%	2.1%	2.3%	2.4%
W/C	0.48	0.48	0.50	0.50	0.50

2.3 Tests on fresh and mechanical properties

To confirm the classification of the concrete mixture as self-compacting concrete (SCC), its fresh properties were assessed, as shown in Figure 5. The evaluations included the slump flow test, the L-box blocking ratio test, and the segregation resistance test. All testing procedures were carried out in compliance with the standards established by the AFGC.



Figure 5 - Fresh state testes: (a) Slump flow test, (b) L-Box test, (c) Sieve stability test.

The hardened properties of the concrete were evaluated by determining the dry density in compliance with EN 12390-7. Compressive strength was measured after 7, 28, and 91 days of curing, in accordance with EN 12390-3 standards. Additionally, ultrasonic pulse velocity (UPV) was assessed using the direct transmission method, as stipulated in EN 12504-4 (Figure 6).

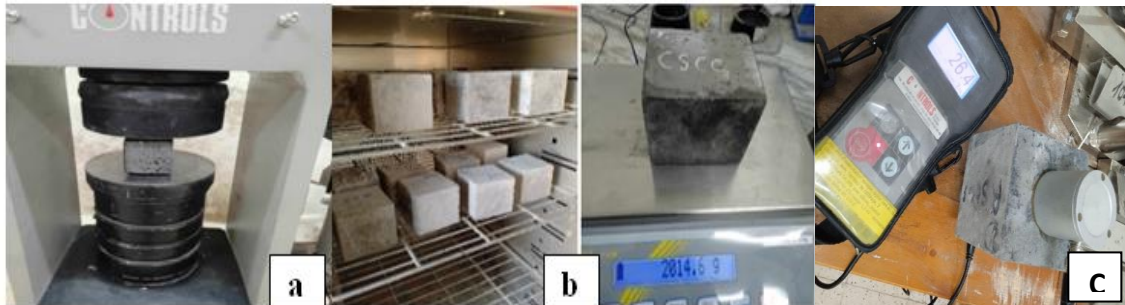


Figure 6 - Hardened state testes: (a) Compressive strength, (b) Dry density, (c) UPV test.

3. Results and discussion

3.1 SCC fresh state results

The experimental results for fresh-state SCC revealed that all concrete mixtures exhibited satisfactory workability and stability, meeting the requirements set by AFGC standards. The slump flow values ranged from 727 mm to 766 mm (Figure 7). The incorporation of coal bottom ash (CBA) as a coarse aggregate in a saturated surface dry (SSD) condition improved the workability relative to the reference mix. Nevertheless, as the proportion of coal bottom ash powder (CBAP) increased, a notable decrease in the flowability of the mixtures was observed. This reduction in slump flow is attributed to the high porosity of CBA, which resulted in increased fluid absorption as its content increased (Zainal Abidin et al., 2014).

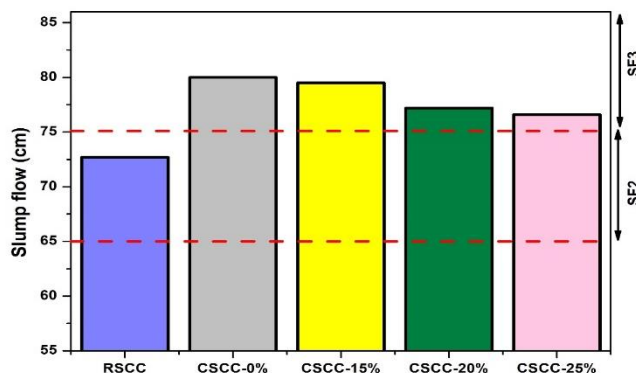


Figure 7 - Effect of CCBA and CBAP on SCC slump flow.

Regarding the passing ability, the L-box blocking ratio ranged from 0.82 to 0.94 (Figure 8), indicating a slight decline with the use of CBA as a coarse aggregate and higher levels of CBAP incorporation. This decrease is primarily due to the irregular shape of the CBA particles, which increases inter-particle friction, consequently reducing the viscosity of the SCC mixtures (Jamaluddin *et al.*, 2016.; Zainal Abidin *et al.*, 2014).

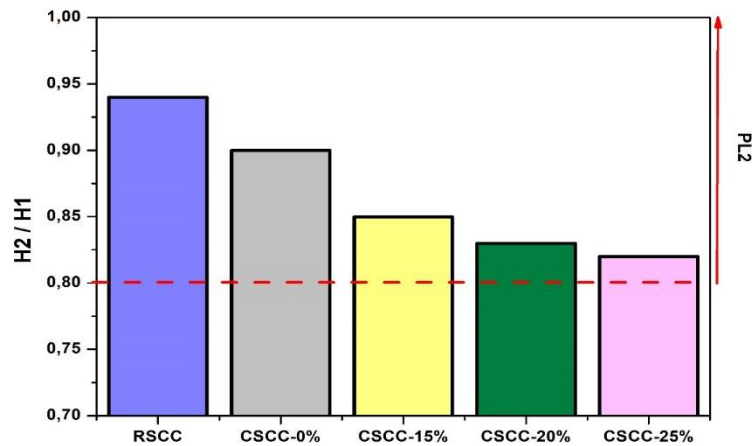


Figure 8 - Effect of CCBA and CBAP on SCC passing ability.

The results of the sieve stability test ranged from 4% to 9.24% (Figure 9), displaying a trend consistent with that observed in the L-box test. Sieve segregation decreased with an increase in the CBA content.

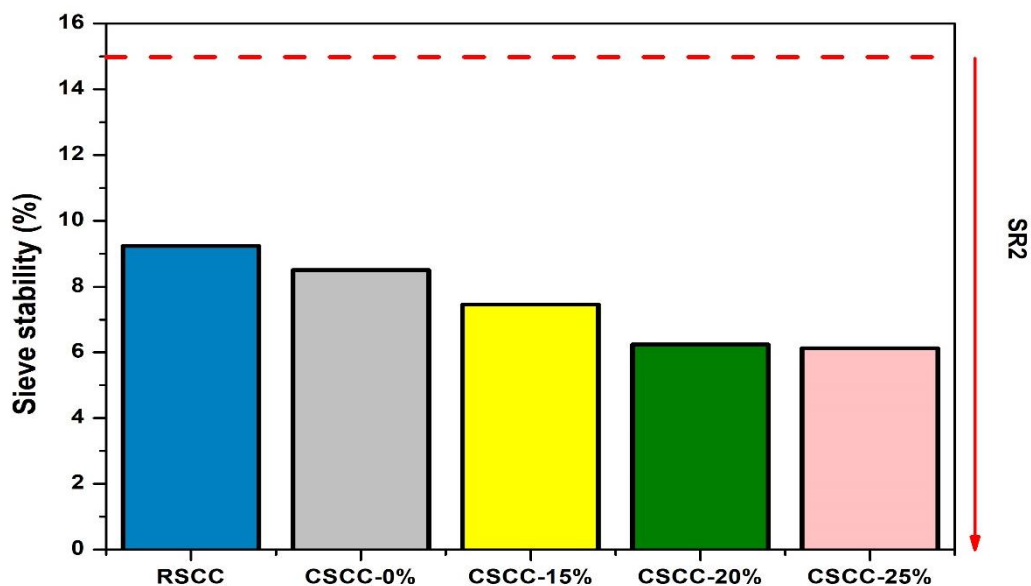


Figure 9 - Effect of CCBA and CBAP on SCC segregation resistance.

3.2 SCC Hardened state results

Compressive strength: The compressive strength results for concrete samples at 7, 28, and 90 days are illustrated in Figure 10. The data reveals that the use of CBA as a coarse aggregate led to more porous concrete, which resulted in an approximate 14% reduction in compressive strength at 28 days. Additionally, an increase in the proportion of coal bottom ash powder (CBAP) in the mix further reduced compressive strength. Notably, at 90 days, the CBASCC-15% mix attained nearly the same compressive strength as the CSCC-0% mix, which may be attributed to the initially slower reactivity of CBAP, with more pronounced strength gains occurring over longer curing durations (Cheriaf *et al.*, 1999; N. Singh *et al.*, 2020).

These findings align with previous research outcomes (Kim & Lee, 2011; Kumar & Singh, 2020; Meena *et al.*, 2024).

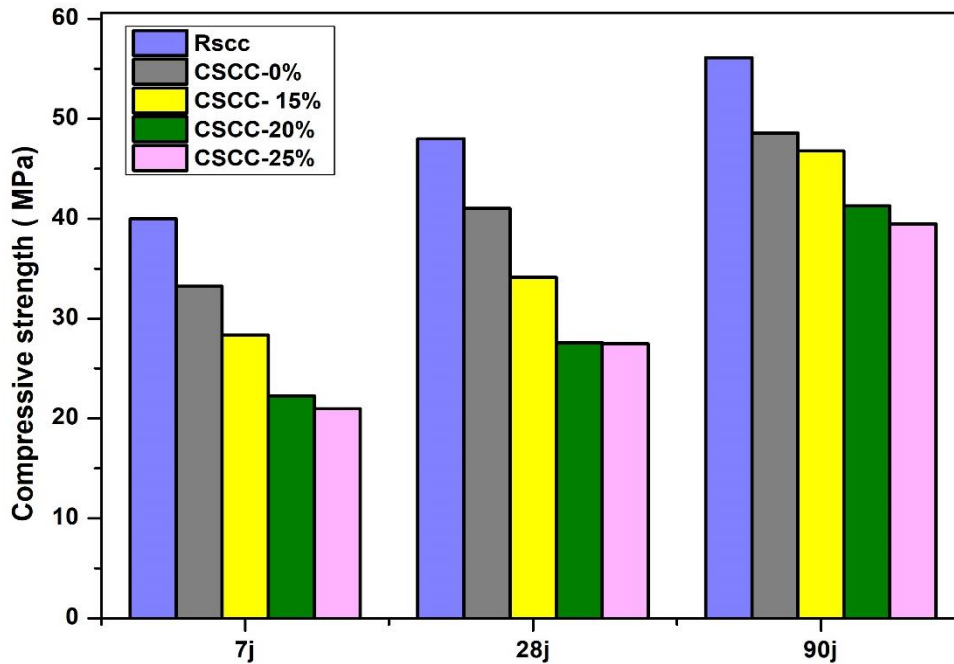


Figure 10 - Effect of CCBA and CBAP on SCC compressive strength.

Dry density: Figure 11 presents the dry density of concrete after 28 days of curing. The results indicate that the incorporation of CBA as both an aggregate and a partial cement replacement in SCC reduces the dry density to 1811.85 kg/m³, which is below the 2000 kg/m³ threshold, thereby classifying it as lightweight self-compacting concrete. This decrease in density is attributed to the lower specific gravity of CBA aggregates compared to conventional aggregates (Raju *et al.*, 2022; M. Singh & Siddique, 2014).

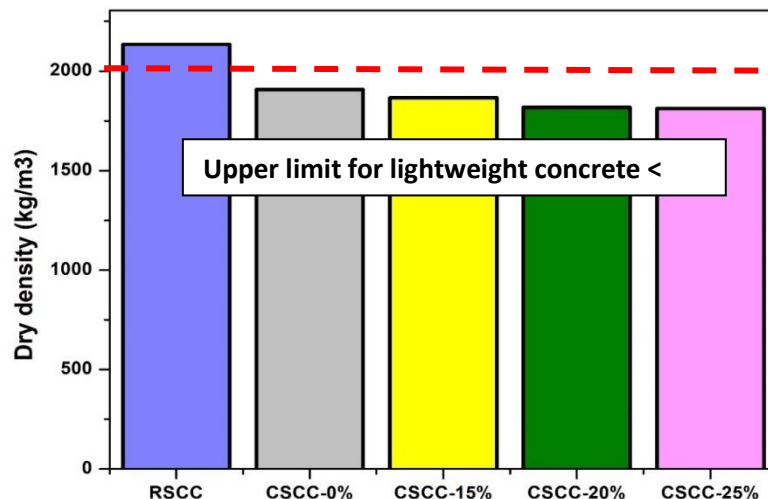


Figure 11 - Effect of CCBA and CBAP on the dry density of SCC.

Ultrasonic pulse velocity: The pulse velocity test results are depicted in Figure 12. After 28 days of curing, the pulse velocity values decreased from 4696 m/s to 3058 m/s when coal bottom ash was used to replace both the coarse aggregate and cement in SCC. These results suggest that the concrete quality conforms to the standards outlined in ASTM C597. The findings are consistent

with the compressive strength results observed after 28 days of curing. The reduced pulse velocity values are attributed to the porous nature of the coal bottom ash (Kumar *et al.*, 2024; Meena *et al.*, 2024).

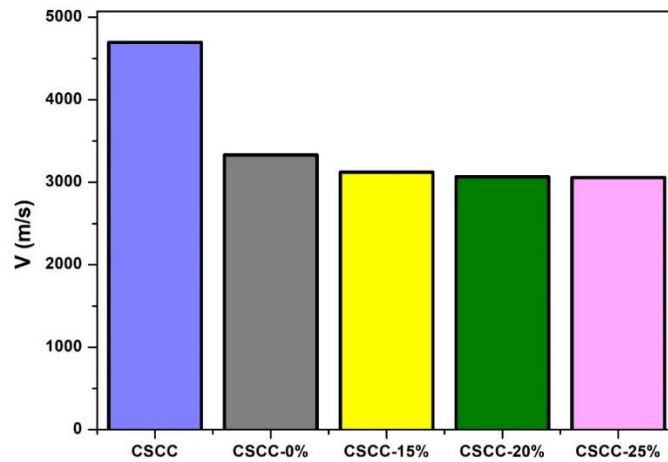


Figure 12 - Ultrasonic pulse velocity of SCC at 28 days.

Dry density, compressive strength and UPV correlations: In this study, a correlation was established between the concrete density and both its compressive strength and ultrasonic pulse velocity (UPV) for SCC mixtures after 28 days of curing, as shown in Figure 13. These relationships were substantiated by high R^2 values of 0.93 for compressive strength and 0.96 for UPV, indicating a strong linear association. The findings reveal that compressive strength decreases as dry density decreases, while it increases with higher density. Additionally, Figure 14 illustrates a linear relationship between dry density and UPV, demonstrating that UPV decreases as the dry density decreases and increases as the density rises (Atyia *et al.*, 2021).

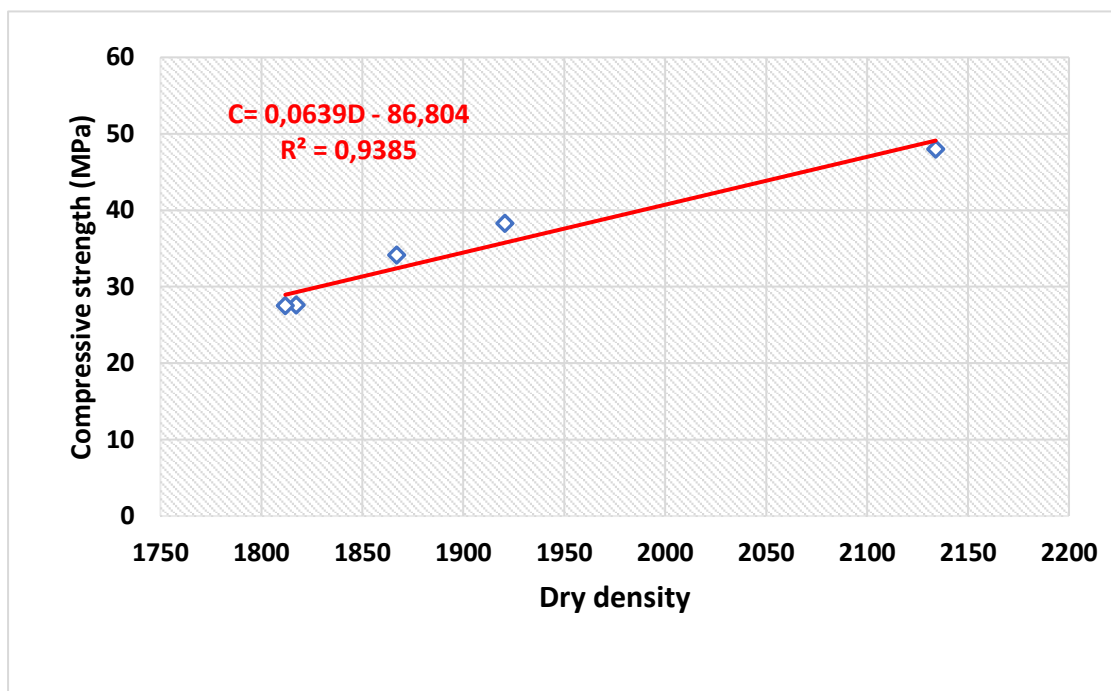


Figure 13 - Dry density and compressive strength correlation.

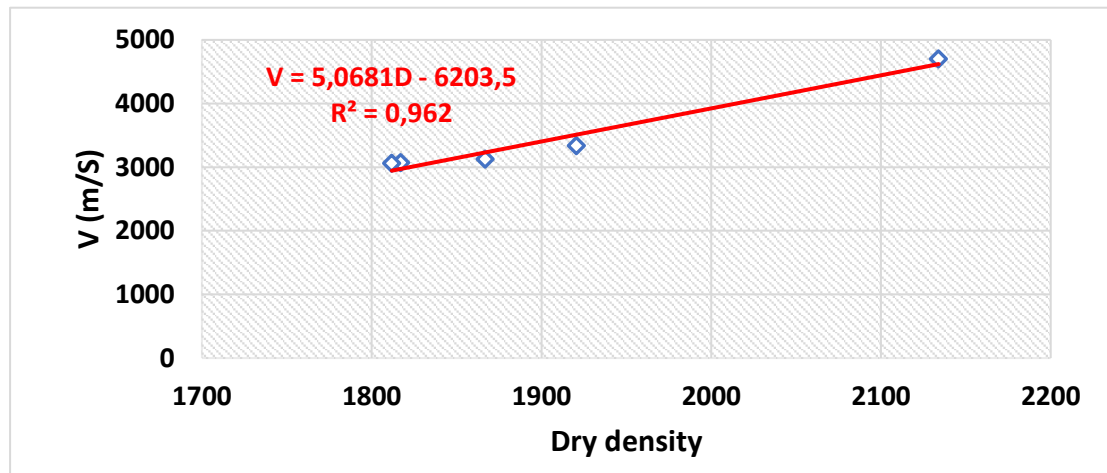


Figure 14 - Correlation between dry density and UPV.

4 Conclusions

This study assesses the influence of coal bottom ash (CBA) on the fresh properties and mechanical performance of self-compacting concrete (SCC). Based on the experimental findings, the following conclusions can be drawn: A) The evaluation of fresh concrete properties indicates that the use of CBA as a coarse aggregate enhances the workability of SCC. However, substituting cement with CBA powder leads to a reduction in workability as the replacement level increases from 15% to 25%. Despite this decline, the resulting workability remains adequate for SCC applications. - Oven dry density measurements demonstrate that incorporating CBA as both a lightweight aggregate and a partial cement replacement reduces the dry density of SCC to below 2000 kg/m³, thereby meeting the classification criteria for lightweight self-compacting concrete as specified by EN 206-1 standards. B) The inclusion of CBA as a lightweight aggregate in SCC led to reductions in both compressive strength and ultrasonic pulse velocity (UPV) after 28 days of curing, primarily due to the porous nature of CBA. However, replacing 15% of Portland cement with CBA powder produced compressive strength values comparable to the control mix (CSCC-0%) over time, which is attributed to pozzolanic activity observed at 90 days. Thus, the reduction in compressive strength and UPV is associated with the reduced density of the concrete. C) A strong correlation was observed between compressive strength and UPV with dry density, as evidenced by R² values of 0.93 and 0.96, respectively. This research highlights the potential of reusing CBA waste as both a coarse aggregate and a cement substitute in SCC to mitigate environmental impact. The findings suggest that CBA is a promising material for concrete production; however, further studies are recommended to explore its long-term effects and other mechanical and durability-related properties.

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