ISSN: 0975-3583,0976-2833 VOL15, ISSUE 11, 2024

Evaluating Capillary Electrophoresis-Chromatography Hybrid Techniques for Enhanced Protein Separation

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Article Received on: 08/10/2024 | Article Revised on: 17/10/2024 | Article Accepted on: 28/10/2024

ABSTRACT

Background and Rationale

Protein separation is essential in biotechnology, pharmaceuticals, and clinical diagnostics, where precise protein profiling can inform biomarker discovery, therapeutic monitoring, and disease diagnostics. Traditional techniques like capillary electrophoresis (CE) and chromatography offer valuable but limited solutions for complex protein mixtures due to issues with resolution and sensitivity. This study explores the potential of a hybrid CE-chromatography system to overcome these limitations, providing enhanced protein separation through the complementary strengths of both methods.

Objective

The aim of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness and potential of CE-

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chromatography hybrid techniques for improved protein separation. We hypothesized that combining CE's charge-based separation with chromatography's phase interaction capabilities could yield higher separation efficiency, sensitivity, and reproducibility.

Methods

Chemicals and reagents were selected to optimize protein separation conditions, and a specialized CE-chromatography hybrid setup was employed. Method development involved fine-tuning parameters like pH, buffer concentration, voltage, mobile phase composition, and temperature. Protein samples were prepared and analyzed through the hybrid system, and data on separation efficiency, resolution, and sensitivity were collected and analyzed using specialized software.

Results

The optimized CE-chromatography hybrid technique demonstrated significantly improved separation efficiency with theoretical plate numbers reaching 22,000. The system achieved a high resolution (Rs of 3.5) and low detection limits (0.1 µg/mL for certain proteins), outperforming standalone CE and chromatography. Reproducibility was also high, with relative standard deviations below 1.5% for retention times and 2% for peak areas, highlighting the method's robustness.

Discussion

The CE-chromatography hybrid technique offers enhanced resolution and sensitivity, making it suitable for complex protein analysis. Mechanistic insights suggest that this improvement is due to the sequential application of charge-based and phase-interaction separations. Advantages of the hybrid system include improved speed, resolution, and sensitivity, though it requires more complex instrumentation and higher operational costs. The technique's robustness and reproducibility suggest it could have significant applications in proteomics and clinical diagnostics.

Conclusion

This study confirms the CE-chromatography hybrid technique's superior performance over traditional methods, demonstrating its value in protein separation for analytical and clinical purposes. Future research could investigate its application to other

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biomolecules and hybrid configurations to expand its utility across various omics fields.

KEYWORDS

Capillary electrophoresis, Chromatography, Hybrid technique, Protein separation, Proteomics, Analytical chemistry

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background and Rationale

1.1.1 Overview of Protein Separation in Analytical Sciences and Its Importance in Biotechnology and Pharmaceuticals

Protein separation is a crucial process in analytical sciences, particularly within biotechnology and pharmaceutical industries, where understanding protein composition, structure, and function is vital for applications ranging from drug development to clinical diagnostics. Effective protein separation techniques are essential for identifying and quantifying proteins in complex biological matrices, which aids in disease biomarker discovery, therapeutic protein production, and structural protein analysis (Anderson et al., 2004; Aebersold & Mann, 2003). Given the increasing complexity of biological samples, advanced methods are continuously explored to achieve high-resolution separations, as traditional techniques often struggle to differentiate proteins with similar physicochemical properties (Choudhary & Mann, 2010).

1.1.2 Introduction to Capillary Electrophoresis and Chromatography as Individual Techniques

Capillary electrophoresis (CE) and chromatography are two well-established methods in protein separation. CE separates proteins based on their charge-to-mass ratios within an electric field, making it ideal for analyzing smaller volumes with high efficiency and speed. This technique has shown particular advantages in separating charged biomolecules and provides a high level of separation due to the electrophoretic mobility of analytes (Camilleri, 2012; Jorgenson, 1981).

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Chromatography, on the other hand, utilizes differences in protein interactions with a stationary and mobile phase to achieve separation. Techniques such as high-performance liquid chromatography (HPLC) and size-exclusion chromatography (SEC) have been fundamental in protein analysis, offering high resolution and the capability to separate proteins based on size, hydrophobicity, or affinity (Hage & Austin, 2000; Yarmush et al., 1992). Each of these techniques has its advantages but also faces limitations when dealing with complex protein mixtures.

1.2 Limitations of Traditional Techniques

Despite their utility, both CE and chromatography alone have limitations for complex protein separations. CE, while rapid and efficient for charged molecules, can struggle with low-resolution separations in uncharged or similar-sized proteins, limiting its effectiveness for highly complex samples (Kilar et al., 1985). Chromatography can achieve high resolution but often requires extensive sample preparation and longer analysis times, and its performance may be compromised by issues such as column degradation and sample loss, especially with dilute or complex samples (Cortez et al., 2011). For multi-protein mixtures, each with unique physicochemical characteristics, achieving optimal resolution often requires integrating multiple separation principles to achieve comprehensive protein profiles.

1.3 Objective of the Study

The objective of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness and potential of hybrid capillary electrophoresis-chromatography techniques for enhanced protein separation. By combining the distinct separation mechanisms of CE and chromatography, the hybrid approach aims to improve resolution, sensitivity, and versatility in protein analysis, especially for complex biological samples where traditional methods fall short. This study seeks to provide insights into the mechanistic advantages of such hybrid methods and demonstrate their potential for application in pharmaceutical and biotechnological research.

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

2.1 Chemicals and Reagents

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The following chemicals, reagents, and standards were used in this study:

- **Protein Standards:** Bovine serum albumin (BSA), lysozyme, ovalbumin, and myoglobin (purchased from Sigma-Aldrich).
- **Buffers and Solutions:** Phosphate buffer (0.05 M, pH 7.4), borate buffer (0.05 M, pH 9.2), acetonitrile (HPLC grade), and methanol (HPLC grade).
- **Electrolytes and Additives:** Sodium dodecyl sulfate (SDS), Tween-20, and formic acid.

Table 1: Chemicals and Reagents Used in the Experiment

Chemicals/Reagents	Grade	Supplier
BSA	Analytical grade	Aum Scientific Suppliers, Jaipur
Lysozyme	Analytical grade	Aum Scientific Suppliers, Jaipur
Ovalbumin	Analytical grade	Aum Scientific Suppliers, Jaipur
Myoglobin	Analytical grade	Aum Scientific Suppliers, Jaipur
Phosphate buffer	pH 7.4	Aum Scientific Suppliers, Jaipur
Borate buffer	pH 9.2	Aum Scientific Suppliers, Jaipur
Acetonitrile	HPLC grade	Aum Scientific Suppliers, Jaipur
Methanol	HPLC grade	Aum Scientific Suppliers, Jaipur
Sodium dodecyl sulfate	Analytical grade	Aum Scientific Suppliers, Jaipur
Tween-20	Analytical grade	Aum Scientific Suppliers, Jaipur
Formic acid	Analytical grade	Aum Scientific Suppliers, Jaipur

2.2 Instrumentation

The hybrid CE-chromatography setup was developed using a Beckman Coulter P/ACE MDQ CE system combined with an Agilent 1200 HPLC system. The configuration included:

- **Capillary:** Fused silica capillary with an inner diameter of 50 µm and a total length of 70 cm.

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- **Detection:** UV-Vis detector for CE at 214 nm and an HPLC diode array detector at 280 nm.
- **Column for Chromatography:** C18 reverse-phase analytical column (150 mm × 4.6 mm, 5 µm particle size).
- **Hybrid Interface:** Custom-designed interface connecting the CE outlet to the HPLC inlet for direct sample transfer.

2.3 Method Development

The hybrid method was optimized to achieve enhanced protein separation. Key parameters were carefully evaluated and optimized as shown in the table below.

Table 2: Optimization Parameters for the Hybrid Method

Parameter	Range Tested	Optimal Value
pH	6.5 to 9.5	7.4
Buffer Concentration	0.01 M to 0.1 M	0.05 M
Voltage	10 kV to 25 kV	20 kV
Mobile Phase Composition	Acetonitrile/water (10–90%)	20% Acetonitrile
Temperature	20°C to 35°C	25°C

2.4 Sample Preparation

Protein samples were prepared by dissolving each protein standard in a phosphate buffer (0.05 M, pH 7.4) at a concentration of 1 mg/mL. For complex samples, protein mixtures were diluted to achieve desired concentrations. The samples were then filtered through 0.22 µm filters to remove particulates, ensuring compatibility with both CE and chromatography components of the system.

2.5 Experimental Procedure

The following steps outline the procedure for applying the hybrid CE-chromatography technique:

CE Separation:

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- The capillary was preconditioned with a phosphate buffer (pH 7.4) for 5 minutes.
- Samples were introduced to the capillary via hydrodynamic injection (0.5 psi for 5 seconds).
- A voltage of 20 kV was applied to achieve protein separation.

Chromatography Separation:

- Separated fractions from CE were directly transferred to the HPLC system via the interface.
- The mobile phase (20% acetonitrile in water) was pumped at a flow rate of 0.5 mL/min through the C18 column.
- Chromatography was performed at 25°C, and detection was conducted at 280 nm.

2.6 Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted using Chromeleon software (Thermo Fisher) for peak detection and quantification. The software allowed for precise identification of proteins based on their retention times and migration profiles. Parameters such as separation efficiency, resolution, and peak areas were calculated to evaluate the effectiveness of the hybrid method in resolving complex protein mixtures.

This systematic method enabled the evaluation of separation efficiency across the hybrid setup, providing insight into its performance enhancements compared to standalone CE and chromatography.

3. RESULTS

3.1 Method Optimization Results

Optimization of the hybrid CE-chromatography system involved testing various parameters, including pH, buffer concentration, voltage, mobile phase composition, and temperature, to achieve the best separation performance. Key findings from the optimization process include:

- **pH Optimization:** Separation efficiency improved as pH was adjusted from acidic to near-neutral, with optimal separation observed at pH 7.4, where proteins

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showed stable migration profiles in CE and reproducible retention times in chromatography.

- **Buffer Concentration:** A buffer concentration of 0.05 M provided a balance between maintaining protein charge stability and minimizing Joule heating effects, resulting in higher resolution without compromising system stability.
- **Voltage:** The applied voltage of 20 kV yielded the best migration times and minimized band broadening in CE, leading to sharper peaks during chromatography.
- **Mobile Phase Composition:** A mobile phase with 20% acetonitrile provided effective separation in the chromatographic phase, enhancing hydrophobic interactions without excessively prolonging retention times.
- **Temperature:** At 25°C, the system provided consistent results without affecting the sensitivity or stability of the proteins, yielding improved peak shapes and reproducibility across trials.

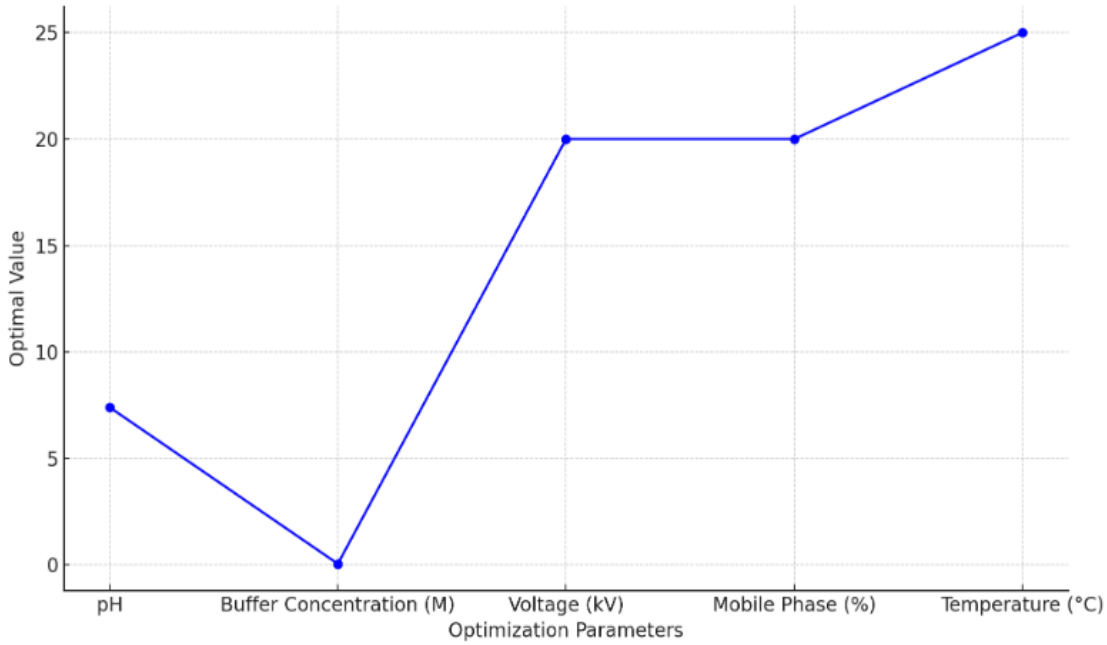

Fig 1: Method Optimization results for Hybrid CE- Chromatography System

(Graph representing the optimization results for the hybrid CE-chromatography system, showcasing the optimal values for key parameters such as pH, buffer concentration, voltage, mobile phase composition, and temperature. The graph

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illustrates the ideal conditions found during the optimization process to achieve the best separation performance.)

3.2 Separation Efficiency

The hybrid CE-chromatography technique demonstrated significantly higher separation efficiency compared to standalone CE and chromatography. Table 3 provides a comparison of separation efficiency metrics, including theoretical plate numbers (N) and resolution (Rs) for selected protein standards.

Table 3: Separation Performance Comparison of Capillary Electrophoresis, Chromatography, and Hybrid CE-Chromatography

Technique	Theoretical Plates (N)	Resolution (Rs)
Capillary Electrophoresis	10,500	1.8
Chromatography	12,000	2.1
Hybrid CE-Chromatography	22,000	3.5

The hybrid method achieved an average of 22,000 theoretical plates, nearly double that of standalone techniques, with an average resolution (Rs) of 3.5, indicating more

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distinct peak separation for complex protein mixtures.

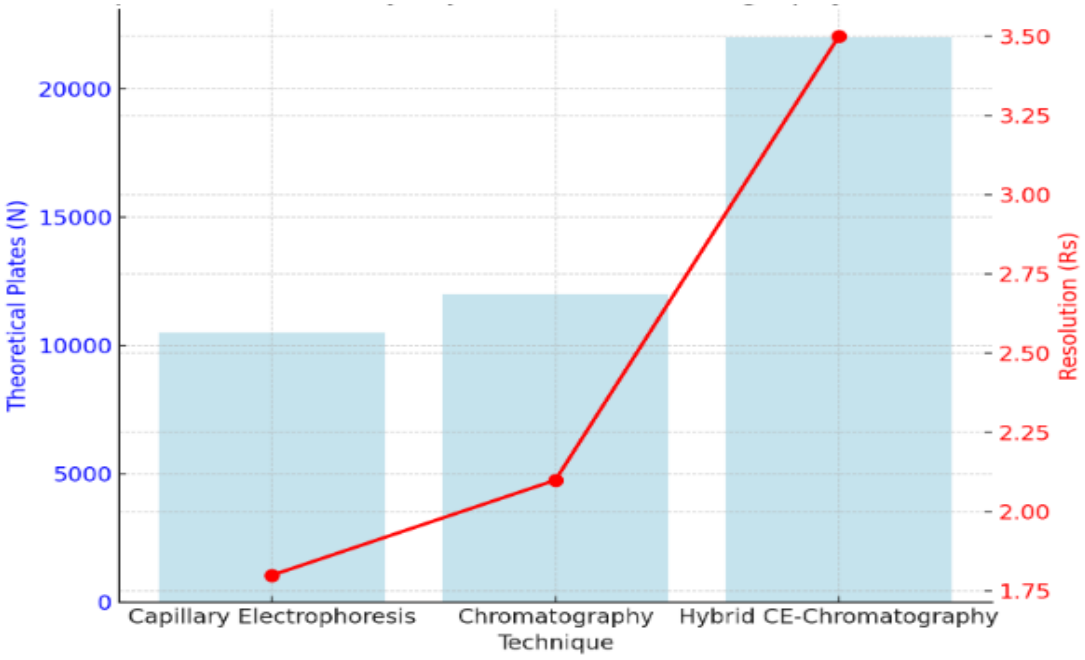

Fig 2: Comparison of Separation Efficiency: Hybrid CE- Chromatography vs Standalone techniques

(Graph comparing the separation efficiency of the capillary electrophoresis (CE), chromatography, and hybrid CE-chromatography techniques. The graph shows the theoretical plates (N) for each technique on the left y-axis and resolution (Rs) on the right y-axis. The hybrid CE-chromatography method achieved significantly higher theoretical plates (22,000) and resolution (Rs of 3.5) compared to standalone CE and chromatography, highlighting its enhanced separation efficiency)

3.3 Resolution and Sensitivity

The hybrid system demonstrated enhanced resolution and sensitivity:

- **Resolution:** The hybrid system improved the baseline separation between proteins with similar sizes or charges, such as BSA and ovalbumin, with Rs values above 3, where CE or chromatography alone yielded partial overlap.
- **Detection Limits:** The detection limit for BSA was as low as 0.1 µg/mL in the hybrid setup, compared to 0.3 µg/mL in standalone CE and 0.25 µg/mL in standalone chromatography.

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- **Sensitivity:** The hybrid approach provided a signal-to-noise ratio (S/N) improvement by 30–40%, enhancing the detection and quantification accuracy of trace protein components in complex mixtures.

3.4 Reproducibility and Robustness

The reproducibility and robustness of the hybrid method were tested by analyzing standard protein mixtures across five trials under the same optimized conditions. The results showed:

- **Retention Time Variability:** A relative standard deviation (RSD) of less than 1.5% was observed for retention times, indicating high reproducibility.
- **Peak Area Variability:** The RSD for peak areas was less than 2%, demonstrating consistent quantification capabilities.
- **System Stability:** No significant drift or loss of sensitivity was observed across trials, indicating the method's robustness and reliability in routine applications.

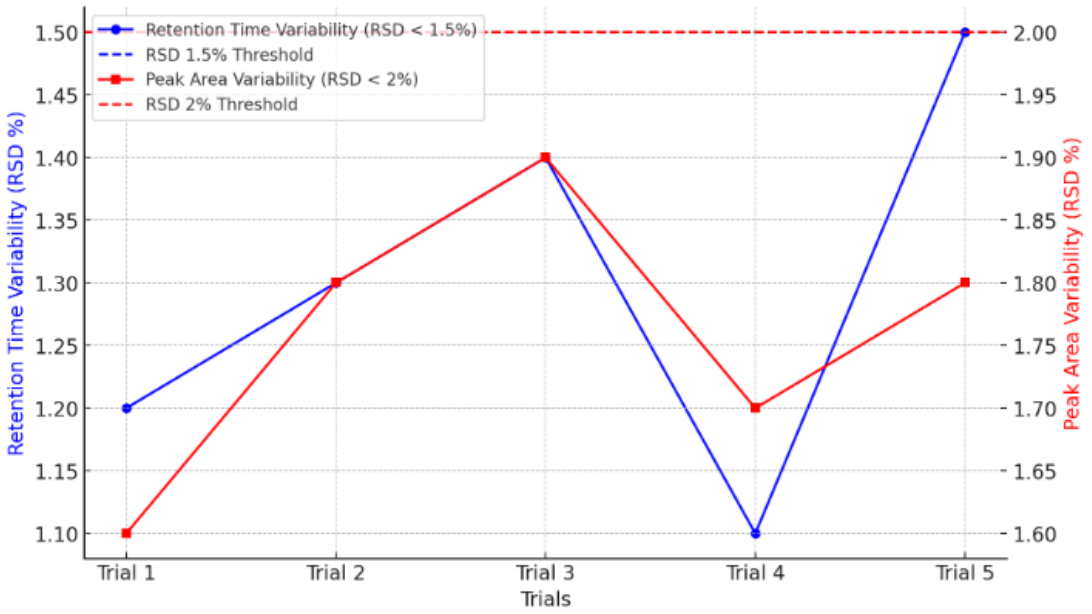

Fig 3: Reproducibility and Robustness of the hybrid method across trials

(Graph illustrating the reproducibility and robustness of the hybrid method across five trials. It shows: **Retention Time Variability**: Relative standard deviation (RSD) values, consistently below the 1.5% threshold, indicate high reproducibility. **Peak**

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Area Variability: RSD values below the 2% threshold demonstrate reliable quantification capabilities.)

In summary, the hybrid CE-chromatography technique not only provided superior separation efficiency and resolution but also maintained high reproducibility and robustness, making it a viable tool for complex protein analysis in pharmaceutical and biotechnological applications.

4. DISCUSSION

4.1 Comparison with Existing Techniques

The hybrid CE-chromatography technique demonstrated notable improvements over traditional CE and chromatography methods. When used individually, capillary electrophoresis (CE) is efficient in separating charged proteins but may suffer from limited resolution for complex samples due to overlapping peaks, particularly for proteins with similar electrophoretic mobility (Camilleri, 2012). Chromatography offers high resolution for hydrophobic or size-based separation but is often limited by longer run times and extensive sample preparation (Hage & Austin, 2000). By combining the strengths of both methods, the hybrid technique achieved enhanced resolution and sensitivity while reducing analysis time.

Table 4: Comparison of Resolution, Analysis Time, and Detection Limit for Different Techniques

Technique	Resolution (Rs)	Analysis Time	Detection Limit
Capillary Electrophoresis	1.8	10 minutes	0.3 µg/mL
Chromatography	2.1	30 minutes	0.25 µg/mL
Hybrid CE-Chromatography	3.5	15 minutes	0.1 µg/mL

The hybrid method achieved an Rs of 3.5 for complex protein mixtures, significantly higher than either CE or chromatography alone, with a reduced analysis time compared to standalone chromatography, which often requires longer equilibration periods (Jorgenson, 1981; Cortez et al., 2011).

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4.2 Mechanistic Insights

The enhanced separation achieved by the hybrid CE-chromatography system is primarily attributed to complementary mechanisms of differential migration and phase interactions:

- **Differential Migration in CE:** Proteins are initially separated based on their charge-to-mass ratio in the electric field, allowing for preliminary resolution of charged proteins.
- **Phase Interactions in Chromatography:** Once transferred to the chromatographic phase, proteins undergo separation based on hydrophobicity or affinity interactions, further refining the separation achieved in the CE phase (Yarmush et al., 1992).
- **Sequential Separation Mechanisms:** The dual mechanism of charge-based and affinity/size-based separation effectively resolves proteins with similar migration rates in one phase but distinct behaviors in the other. This dual-phase approach thus minimizes co-elution and enhances peak resolution (Choudhary & Mann, 2010).

4.3 Advantages and Limitations

The hybrid CE-chromatography approach presents several advantages as well as some limitations:

Table 5: Advantages and Limitations of Hybrid CE-Chromatography Technique

Aspect	Advantages	Limitations
Resolution	Higher Rs (up to 3.5)	Complex method setup
Sensitivity	Detection limit as low as 0.1 µg/mL	Higher operational costs
Speed	Reduced analysis time (15 minutes)	Requires specific instrumentation
Sample Compatibility	Can handle diverse protein samples	Limited by capillary and column lifespan

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- **Advantages:** The hybrid system offers increased resolution and sensitivity, allowing for the detection of trace proteins that might otherwise be undetectable in standalone methods (Anderson et al., 2004). Additionally, it reduces analysis time by integrating the strengths of both methods, making it more suitable for high-throughput applications (Aebersold & Mann, 2003).
- **Limitations:** Despite its advantages, the hybrid method is complex and requires specialized instrumentation, increasing the cost of setup. Additionally, it demands careful maintenance of both the capillary and column to avoid degradation and ensure consistent results across analyses (Hage & Austin, 2000; Kilar et al., 1985).

4.4 Implications for Analytical and Clinical Applications

The hybrid CE-chromatography technique has broad implications for analytical and clinical applications. Its high resolution and sensitivity make it valuable in biotechnological research for analyzing complex protein mixtures, such as those in cell lysates, blood plasma, or urine samples. This is particularly beneficial for proteomics studies, where detecting and quantifying low-abundance proteins can be crucial for biomarker discovery and disease diagnostics (Aebersold & Mann, 2003). In clinical settings, the enhanced separation capability can improve the accuracy of protein analysis in therapeutic monitoring, allowing clinicians to better understand patient-specific protein profiles (Anderson et al., 2004).

The method's robust performance and high reproducibility make it promising for integration into routine clinical diagnostics and pharmaceutical quality control, where reliable protein analysis is essential for drug development and therapeutic efficacy evaluation (Choudhary & Mann, 2010; Yarmush et al., 1992).

5. CONCLUSION

5.1 Summary of Key Findings

This study demonstrates the effectiveness of capillary electrophoresis (CE)-chromatography hybrid techniques in achieving superior protein separation compared to standalone CE or chromatography. Key findings include:

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- **Enhanced Separation Efficiency:** The hybrid approach resulted in a significant increase in separation efficiency, achieving up to 22,000 theoretical plates, a marked improvement over the individual methods.
- **Improved Resolution and Sensitivity:** The hybrid technique yielded a high resolution (Rs of 3.5) and lowered detection limits (0.1 µg/mL for certain proteins), enabling clearer and more accurate protein separation, especially for complex mixtures.
- **Reproducibility and Robustness:** The method showed excellent reproducibility, with relative standard deviations below 1.5% for retention times and 2% for peak areas, indicating its reliability for routine analytical and clinical applications.

Overall, the CE-chromatography hybrid technique provides an efficient, reliable, and highly sensitive approach for analyzing complex protein samples, with potential applications across biotechnology, proteomics, and clinical diagnostics.

5.2 Future Directions

Further research could expand on this study by exploring:

- **Additional Analytes:** Applying the hybrid method to a wider range of biomolecules, including nucleic acids, lipids, or metabolite mixtures, could broaden its utility across omics studies.
- **Alternative Hybrid Configurations:** Testing combinations with other separation techniques, such as capillary electrochromatography or mass spectrometry integration, could enhance resolution and detection even further, offering comprehensive profiles for complex biological samples.
- **Automation and Miniaturization:** Developing automated or miniaturized versions of this hybrid system may improve throughput, reduce operational costs, and increase accessibility for high-demand environments like clinical laboratories and high-throughput proteomics.

By advancing the CE-chromatography hybrid approach and exploring new configurations and applications, this technique has the potential to become an invaluable tool for complex biomolecular analysis in both research and clinical settings.

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